DUST & WONDER TRAIL

Final Report

Travel Nevada | 3D Destination Development Program

October 8, 2024 – October 8, 2026

1. Executive Summary

The Dust & Wonder Trail was developed to connect Carson City, Carson Valley, Silver City, Gold Hill, and Virginia City through art, history, and culture. Supported by a $631,350 award through Travel Nevada's 3D Destination Development Program, the initiative set out to transform the region's extraordinary cultural and historic resources into a cohesive visitor experience.

Over two years, the project established a regional nonprofit organization, developed a recognizable cultural tourism identity and digital platform, commissioned significant public artworks, and brought together artists, historians, cultural organizations, tourism partners, property owners, and local governments.

At the heart of the Trail is a collection of interpretive railroad spike sculptures using multilingual storytelling to connect visitors with the people, places, and events that shaped Northern Nevada. Complementing these installations are large-scale murals, site-specific sculptures, and *DRIVEN - A Monument to Connection*, an ambitious, world’s tallest, 69-foot railroad spike monument envisioned as the Trail's signature landmark.

By the grant's conclusion on October 8, 2026, all awarded funds had been expended, establishing a substantial collection of public art and the organizational and digital

infrastructure to support it. Installation, final site preparations, and the official public launch will continue through separately funded efforts.

The result is more than a collection of artworks. Dust & Wonder has established the foundation for a permanent cultural tourism corridor connecting communities, encouraging regional exploration, and bringing greater recognition to the people and stories that define Nevada.

2. Building a Regional Cultural Corridor

Northern Nevada possesses an extraordinary concentration of historic sites, museums, cultural organizations, creative communities, and landscapes. Yet these resources are often experienced as separate destinations despite their deeply interconnected histories.

Dust & Wonder connects seven communities across four counties through a shared regional identity while celebrating the distinctive character of each destination. Visitors exploring Virginia City's mining history can discover Carson Valley's agricultural heritage, Carson City's railroad and statehood history, and the smaller communities that helped shape the Comstock.

Public art provides the invitation to explore. Each installation serves as a waypoint, drawing attention to an existing cultural or historic resource while encouraging visitors to continue their journey.

A major accomplishment of the grant was establishing the organizational and digital infrastructure to support this vision.

Dust & Wonder Trail was incorporated as a nonprofit organization and received federal 501(c)(3) recognition. Regional leadership developed its mission, vision, values, governance framework, fundraising strategy, and administrative systems while

establishing relationships with tourism agencies, cultural institutions, and community stakeholders.

Working with the Estipona Group, the project developed its branding and digital strategy, creating a platform designed to connect visitors with cultural attractions, artists, organizations, events, and curated regional experiences.

The digital platform, dustandwonder.org, is now live. Additional photography and site-specific content are being incorporated as sculptures are installed, with an official public launch planned as the physical Trail becomes visitor ready.

Together, these accomplishments establish a recognizable regional identity and a foundation for continued cultural tourism development.

3. Public Art and Destination Development

Public art is the most visible expression of Dust & Wonder, transforming the regional vision into permanent experiences within the communities it serves.

- Four-foot Interpretive Railroad Spike Sculptures

The railroad spike was selected as the Trail's unifying symbol for its connection to the Virginia & Truckee and Transcontinental Railroads and the generations of workers whose labor helped shape the American West.

Individually modest, railroad spikes made possible a transportation network that connected communities, industries, and people across enormous distances. The symbol reflects the project's larger purpose: recognizing the individual contributions that collectively built Nevada.

Reno-based artist Jeff Schomberg fabricated 27 interpretive railroad spike sculptures across the combined Dust & Wonder and Points of Unity initiatives.

Nine were supported through the separate America250 Points of Unity award in Carson City. Eight have been installed, with the ninth awaiting completion of a park renovation.

The remaining 18 sculptures have been fabricated and have been delivered, awaiting installation at sites throughout the region. Their installation will proceed independently of the completed grant.

Each sculpture features a site-specific word translated into three additional languages, a concise interpretive narrative, and a QR code connecting visitors to expanded digital content.

Together, they create a recognizable visual identity while allowing every location to tell its own story.

- Twelve-Foot Interpretive Railroad Spike Sculptures

Carson City artist Seth Johnson created three 12-foot steel railroad spike sculptures for Virginia City Depot, Eastgate Depot in Carson City, and Minden Mill.

Layers of steel form an open, dimensional silhouette, with repeating lines and negative space evoking the repetition and structure of railroad tracks. These larger artworks expand the interpretive concept through two themes on opposing faces, multilingual text, and more extensive historical narratives.

At the V&T Depot, the stories explore the industrial soundscape of the Comstock and the legacy of railroad preservation. At Minden Mill, water and renewal connect agricultural development, industry, and transportation. At Eastgate Depot, gateway and departure celebrate the railroad's historic importance and its continuing ability to connect people and places.

The sculptures have been fabricated, with final finishing and installation preparations continuing beyond the grant period.

Additional Public Art Commissions

Dust & Wonder supported several significant site-specific commissions designed to strengthen cultural destinations and broaden the Trail's artistic appeal.

- Carson Valley Cinemas Mural

Muralist Rafael Blanco completed a large-scale, community-influenced mural covering three sides of the Carson Valley Cinemas building. Acquired by Douglas County, the property is undergoing a long-term transformation into an arts and culture community center.

Completed over two weeks, the mural introduces a significant new public art attraction while drawing attention to the building's future cultural role.

The project was also documented by filmmaker Oscar Guerra for *WALLS*, a six-episode documentary series planned for PBS, offering an opportunity to introduce Carson Valley and the Dust & Wonder region to a broader audience.

- *Rabbit Man* at St. Mary's Art Center

Artist Dale Rogers created *Rabbit Man*, a distinctive steel sculpture commissioned for St. Mary's Art Center in Virginia City.

The artwork is the first planned installation for the institution's new sculpture garden, extending the visitor experience beyond the historic building. The sculpture has been delivered and awaits completion of its foundation before installation.

- Silver City Schoolhouse Obelisk

Dust & Wonder invested $5,000 in the design of a proposed obelisk sculpture for the Silver City Schoolhouse, commissioned through Hidden Spring Design.

This investment advances the project's development and provides a foundation for community-led fundraising toward fabrication and installation.

- *DRIVEN: A Monument to Connection*

The Trail's most ambitious undertaking is *DRIVEN*, a 69-foot railroad spike monument designed and fabricated by Carson City artist Seth Johnson.

Its height commemorates 1869, the year the Virginia & Truckee Railroad began service and the Transcontinental Railroad was completed. It is also the year that work began on the Sutro Tunnel, built to drain, ventilate, and access the deep silver and gold mines of the Comstock Lode.

Planned for the Nevada State Railroad Museum in Carson City, *DRIVEN* will serve as a regional landmark and interpretive gateway, connecting stories of mining, transportation, innovation, labor, and the diverse communities that shaped Nevada.

The monument was publicly previewed to an international audience at Burning Man in 2026, providing an early opportunity to experience its extraordinary scale.

Remaining construction and installation activities will be funded independently of the completed 3D award.

Although permanent installation remains ahead, *DRIVEN* represents a significant artistic and engineering accomplishment. It establishes a landmark that will attract national and international attention to the entire regional Trail.

4. Historical Interpretation and Cultural Representation

Historical interpretation and cultural representation are among the defining accomplishments of the Dust & Wonder Trail.

The project was founded on the belief that understanding Nevada's history requires looking beyond familiar landmarks and celebrated figures to recognize the many people and communities whose experiences shaped the region.

The Comstock Lode, Virginia & Truckee Railroad, and Transcontinental Railroad transformed the American West. Yet their histories extend far beyond mining fortunes, industrial achievements, and famous names.

They are also stories of Indigenous communities, immigrant workers, families, craftspeople, entrepreneurs, railroad employees, and individuals whose contributions have not always received equal recognition.

Dust & Wonder brings these stories into the public landscape through contemporary art.

Each small sculpture begins with a single English word reflecting the significance of its location. That word is translated into three additional languages selected according to the site's historical and cultural context.

Languages represented throughout the Trail include Wašiw, Numu, Newe, Chinese, German, Spanish, Italian, and others.

These translations are more than decorative elements. They acknowledge the cultural diversity of Nevada's history and the knowledge, labor, traditions, and perspectives that different communities contributed to its development.

The project worked with cultural and historical partners, including the Washoe Tribe, Stewart Indian School, and the 1882 Foundation, to inform language selection and historical interpretation.

The accompanying narratives were developed to move beyond conventional historical markers. Rather than simply identifying a building or recounting a date, each story introduces the human experiences associated with a place.

At Stewart Indian School, *BRAVE* acknowledges the survival of Indigenous culture and language through the history of federal boarding-school policies.

At Carson City's former Chinatown, *RESILIENT* recognizes a community that endured discrimination while contributing significantly to the region's development.

At the Dat So La Lee House, *BASKET* celebrates the artistry and cultural legacy of Washiw basket maker Louisa Keyser.

At Donovan Mill, *INNOVATION* explores the continual improvements that transformed mining and milling technology.

At Gold Hill Depot, *BROTHERS* honors Hosea and Ethan Grosh, whose recognition of silver-bearing ore preceded the Comstock's extraordinary development.

Together, these stories connect industrial history with cultural identity, artistic achievement, community development, and individual lives.

Each sculpture includes a QR code linking visitors to expanded digital interpretation, allowing the brief narratives displayed on the artworks to serve as introductions to deeper exploration.

This collection represents a lasting investment in accessible, place-based historical education while strengthening the cultural depth of the regional visitor experience.

5. Community Partnerships and Collaboration

Creating a regional trail across multiple communities requires an extensive network of partnerships.

Throughout the grant period, Dust & Wonder collaborated with local governments, destination marketing organizations, museums, historic preservation representatives, cultural institutions, property owners, artists, community organizations, and residents.

These relationships were essential to identifying meaningful locations, developing historically appropriate interpretation, securing permissions, and establishing long-term partnerships with participating sites.

In Virginia City, Gold Hill, Silver City, and Carson Valley, proposed installations prompted extensive discussions regarding historic compatibility, placement, public safety, preservation requirements, and community expectations.

These conversations required patience, flexibility, and a willingness to adapt plans while respecting the character and priorities of each community.

The process reinforced an important principle: regional destination development succeeds through collaboration, not through imposing a uniform approach on communities with distinct histories and identities.

The nonprofit's establishment also created a framework through which regional partners can continue working together beyond the grant period.

What began as a funded initiative has become a collaborative platform capable of supporting future public art, cultural programming, and regional tourism development.

6. Tourism and Economic Development Impact

Dust & Wonder addresses an important destination-development opportunity: encouraging visitors to experience Northern Nevada as a connected cultural region rather than a collection of unrelated attractions.

Its public art, digital interpretation, and shared branding create opportunities to introduce travelers to museums, historic sites, galleries, downtown businesses, restaurants, lodging properties, and lesser-known destinations.

Unlike a single festival or seasonal event, the Trail is designed to offer a year-round experience that visitors can explore at their own pace.

The project has already generated direct economic activity through commissions and professional services involving artists, designers, fabricators, marketing professionals, technology developers, and other creative businesses, including Nevada-based professionals.

As the Trail becomes fully operational, anticipated long-term benefits include:

- Greater awareness of the region's cultural and historic attractions.
- Increased visitor movement between participating communities.
- Opportunities for longer stays and additional overnight visitation.
- Expanded exposure for artists, museums, galleries, and cultural organizations.
- Additional spending opportunities for hospitality and retail businesses.
- Stronger regional marketing, partnerships, and cross-promotion.

These represent the Trail's intended long-term economic benefits. Because several installations and the official public launch remain pending, measurable increases in visitation and visitor spending cannot yet be attributed to the completed grant period.

The original regional destination-development strategy established a goal of increasing visitation to corridor sites by 10% from the 2024 benchmark by 2034.

The infrastructure developed through Dust & Wonder provides a foundation for pursuing that objective while strengthening the region's identity as an arts, culture, and heritage destination.

7. Challenges, Adaptation, and Lessons Learned

Dust & Wonder demonstrated both the opportunities and complexities of developing permanent public art across multiple historic communities.

The greatest challenges involved coordinating artists, property owners, public agencies, historic preservation review, permitting, engineering, and installation requirements across several jurisdictions.

Unlike temporary exhibitions, permanent public art requires careful consideration of location, ownership, public safety, historic compatibility, physical site conditions, and long-term stewardship.

The ambitious project schedule required fabrication and historical interpretation to advance alongside community consultation and approval processes.

Establishing a regional nonprofit during the same period added responsibilities involving governance, financial management, fundraising, marketing, and organizational sustainability.

These demands required considerable staff and volunteer time, but they also produced valuable lessons for future destination-development initiatives.

The experience demonstrated the importance of beginning site approvals early, establishing clear responsibilities among partners, building flexibility into project schedules, and planning separately for fabrication, installation, and ongoing operations.

Historical interpretation also proved to be an evolving collaborative process requiring careful research, cultural consultation, and responsiveness to local knowledge.

The complexity of the project was significant, but so was the value of the partnerships created through the process.

8. Grant Completion and Long-Term Stewardship

The 3D Destination Development grant concluded on October 8, 2026, with all awarded funding expended before the end of September.

The investment supported Dust & Wonder's organizational development, branding, digital platform, historical interpretation, and public art commissions.

The funded fabrication and commissioning activities reached their respective grant-funded milestones. Physical installation and public activation of several artworks will continue beyond the reporting period.

Installation was not an eligible grant expense and is being addressed separately through project partnerships and additional resources.

For *DRIVEN*, remaining foundation construction, base completion, and installation expenses will likewise be funded independently of the completed award.

The digital platform is live at dustandwonder.org, with additional site photography and interpretive content being incorporated as installations progress. Its official public launch will follow as the physical Trail becomes visitor ready.

Long-term stewardship will include maintaining digital resources, supporting historical accuracy, coordinating with property owners, and developing the fundraising and partnerships necessary to sustain the initiative.

The result is more than a series of individual artworks. Dust & Wonder has established the foundation for a permanent cultural tourism corridor designed to connect communities, encourage regional exploration, and bring greater recognition to the people and stories that define Nevada.

9. Conclusion - An Investment That Connects

Dust & Wonder began with a simple idea: that art, history, and culture could bring Northern Nevada's communities closer together while creating new reasons for visitors to explore the region.

Over two years, that vision became a recognizable cultural tourism identity, a regional nonprofit organization, a digital visitor platform, a collection of interpretive sculptures, significant public art commissions, and an expanding network of partnerships.

The project has supported Nevada's creative economy, brought attention to historic and cultural destinations, and established new ways of sharing the region's diverse stories.

Its lasting value lies not only in the individual artworks, but in the connections, they create between communities, visitors and historic places, and Nevada's past and future.

As installation and public activation continue, the Trail will grow into the regional visitor experience envisioned at its inception.

What began as an investment in destination development has become an investment in how Nevada remembers its past, connects its communities, and welcomes its future.