

Chapter 2: Regional Context

I. Geography

A. Land Area

Flathead County is located in the northwestern corner of Montana and is the third largest county in State encompassing approximately 5,252 square miles. It stretches almost 100 miles from the border with Canada on the north to its southernmost boundary with Missoula County. Flathead County is another 100 miles at its widest point from the Continental Divide on the east to Lincoln County on the west.

In land area, the county is larger than the state of Connecticut.

Most development is located in the valley, an area of approximately 15 miles wide and 20 miles long surrounded by mountains on the north, west and east sides and bordered by Flathead Lake to the south.

B. Natural Features

There are over 40 lakes and 3 major river systems comprising 158 square miles of water. The largest water body is Flathead Lake extending from Flathead County into Lake County and encompassing nearly 200 square miles of surface area and 185 miles of shoreline. Flathead Lake is the largest natural freshwater lake between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean and is a barometer of the ecological health for the entire Flathead watershed.

Among some of the major contributing waters to Flathead Lake are Whitefish Lake and the Stillwater and Whitefish Rivers, the North Fork, Middle Fork, South Fork and the main stem of the Flathead River and Swan River and Swan Lake. The Flathead River Basin's lakes range in size and character from nearly inaccessible alpine lakes of only several surface acres to such other significant large water bodies as Swan, McDonald, Whitefish, Tally, and the Little Bitterroot Lakes.

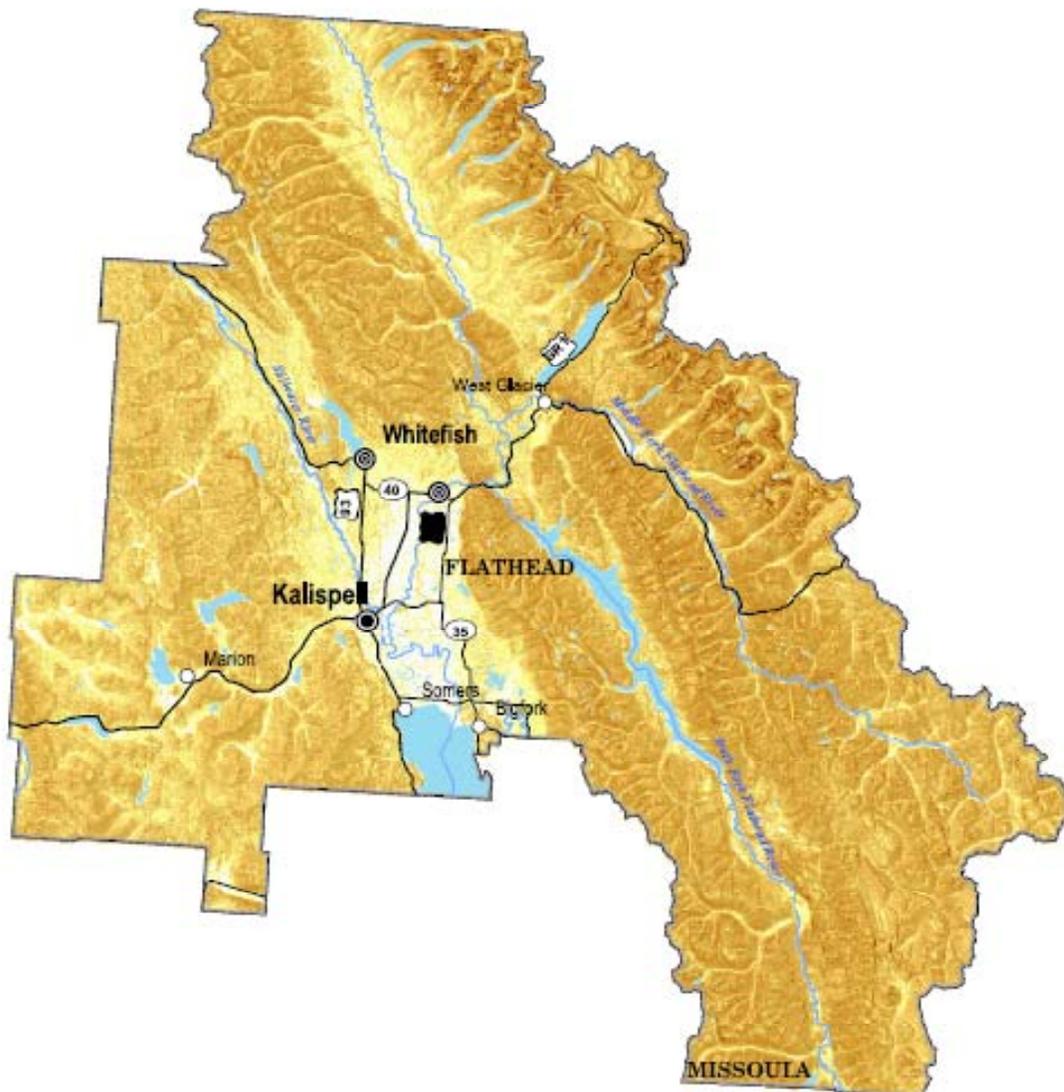
Figure 1: Flathead Lake



Approximately 10-15% of the valley area of Flathead County is designated as 100-year floodplain. An additional 10-15% of the valley bottom is designated or as 500 year floodplain. Most of the floodplain is located along the Flathead River corridor, between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake. Areas of 100-year floodplain are also present along the Stillwater and Whitefish Rivers

Elevations in the County range from Mount Stimson in Glacier National Park at 10,142 feet to 2,893 feet at Flathead Lake. Most steep slopes occur in the public and corporate timberlands surrounding the valley bottom, as well as in Glacier National Park.

Map 1: Flathead County- Slopes and Major Water Features



Source: State of Montana, Natural Resource Information System

C. Public Land

The Federal government manages approximately 78.6% of the total land in Flathead County. The USDA Forest Service is responsible for management of National Forests (including wilderness areas) and Flathead County contains portions of four National Forests and two Wilderness Areas. Flathead National Forest (including portions of the Great Bear and Bob Marshall Wilderness Areas) has approximately 1,875,5452 acres within Flathead County that contribute nearly 55% of the total county acreage. Other National Forests that have lands within Flathead County are Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo (totaling approximately 115,3903 acres). Combined, the National Forests and Wilderness Areas contribute approximately 59% of the total acreage of Flathead County.

Federal land also includes Glacier National Park. The Park is approximately 1,008,3064 acres, are split between Flathead County and Glacier County. Approximately 635,214 acres of Glacier National Park contribute 19% of the total land mass of Flathead County. Other Federally managed lands in Flathead County include the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (7,885 acres), Swan River National Wildlife Refuge (1,568 acres) and the Flathead, Batavia, McGregor Meadows, Smith Lake and Blasdel Waterfowl Production Areas (totaling 5,189 acres). Combined, Wildlife Refuges and Waterfowl Production Areas contribute an additional 14,642 acres of land in Flathead County.

The State of Montana manages a substantial acreage within Flathead County. Lands managed by the DNRC Trust Lands Management System account for approximately 129,670 acres of Flathead County. Fish, Wildlife and Parks manages another approximately 3,208 acres.

D. Open Space

Other open space in the valley consists of private timber land, conservation easements, and agricultural land. The three largest corporate timber landowners, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber, Plum Creek and Montana Forest Products together account for approximately 9.2% (310,000 acres) of the total land area in Flathead County. Land owned by the three largest corporate timber operations represents approximately 52.7% of the private land in Flathead County.

The three organizations that manage the majority of conservation easements in the County include the Montana Land Reliance, Flathead Land Trust and the Nature Conservancy. There are over 21,000 acres of conservation easements recorded with the County Clerk. Easements protect critical riparian areas, wetlands, wildlife habitat and prime farmlands.

In 2007, approximately 40% of the private land (251,597 acres) in Flathead County was being farmed. There were approximately 1,094 individual farms, with the majority of these farms being less than 179 acres in size.

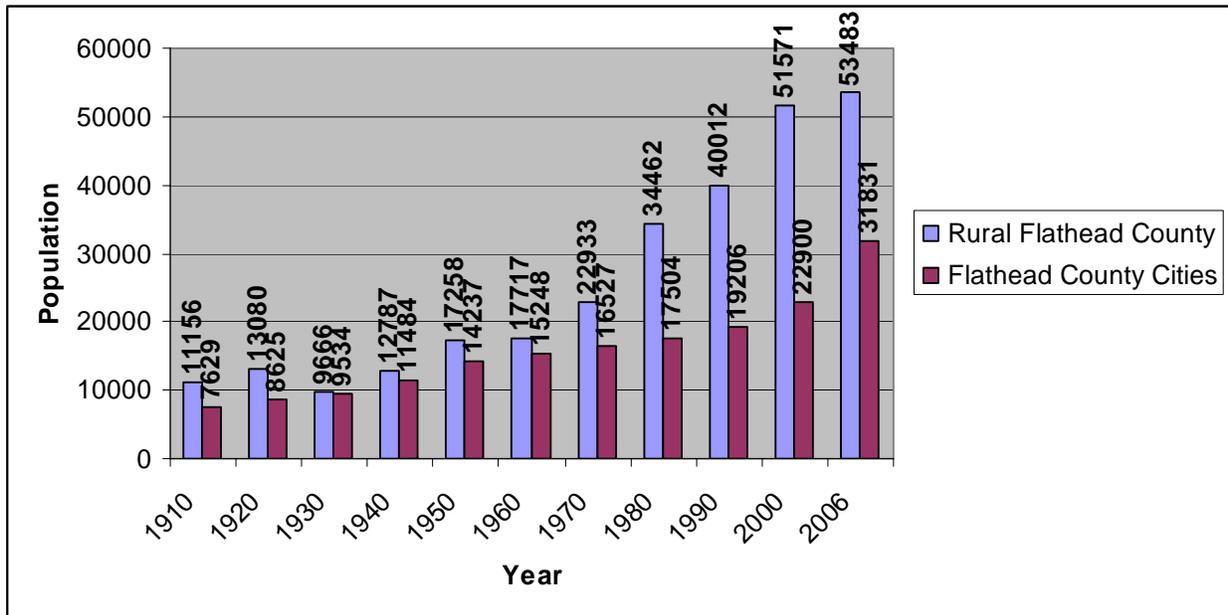
E. Transportation

There are no Interstate Highways in the County. The two major US Highways include US 93 the main north-south arterial and US 2 the main east-west arterial. The highways intersect in the City of Kalispell. Other major arterials include Montana Highway 40 and Montana Highway 260. Glacier International airport provides commercial passenger service while private aircraft can land at Kalispell City Airport and other landing strips.

F. Settlement Patterns

There are three incorporated municipalities in Flathead County: Columbia Falls, Kalispell and Whitefish. As indicated in Figure 1, approximately 63% of the population in Flathead County, however, lived outside of the cities in 2006, the most recent year for which data is available.¹ Growth in the cities has increased notably since 2000. The cities have had far more growth than rural Flathead County, especially Kalispell and Whitefish, which have grown 36.6% and 53.5% respectively, compared to a 3.7% growth rate in rural Flathead County. Flathead County has had an overall growth rate of 14.6%.

Figure 1: Population Growth in Flathead County



Source: U.S. Census of the Population

Kalispell is the county seat and with an estimated 2006 population of 19,432 it has the largest population of the three cities. Whitefish had an estimated population of 7,723 and Columbia Falls had a population of 4,676 in 2006.

The U.S. Census recognizes eight additional communities in Flathead County as Census Designated Places (CDPs): Bigfork, Evergreen, Lakeside, Somers, Hungry Horse, Martin City, and Coram. Almost 16% of the population of rural Flathead County is located in CDPs. Table 1 shows the population increases from 1990 to 2000 in CDPs, cities, undesignated rural areas of Flathead County, and the county overall.

Table 1: Population Growth in Flathead County

| | Population 2000 | Population 1990 | Increase 1990 - 2000 | Percent Increase 1990 - 2000 |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Bigfork CDP</i> | 1,421 | 775 | 646 | 83.4% |
| <i>Coram CDP</i> | 337 | 257 | 80 | 31.1% |
| <i>Evergreen CDP</i> | 6,215 | 4,109 | 2,106 | 51.3% |
| <i>Hungry Horse CDP</i> | 934 | 507 | 427 | 84.2% |
| <i>Lakeside CDP</i> | 1,679 | 949 | 730 | 76.9% |
| <i>Martin City CDP</i> | 331 | 305 | 26 | 8.5% |
| <i>Somers CDP</i> | 556 | 317 | 239 | 75.4% |
| <i>Total in CDPs</i> | 11,473 | 7,219 | 4,254 | 58.9% |
| <i>Total in Rural County (outside of cities and CDPs)</i> | 40,048 | 32,793 | 7,255 | 22.1% |
| <i>Total in Cities</i> | 22,900 | 19,206 | 3,694 | 19.2% |
| <i>Total in County (including cities and CDPs)</i> | 74,471 | 59,218 | 15,253 | 25.8% |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of the Population

Several other communities throughout the county that are not designated as CDPs are experiencing growth as well. These communities include Marion, Kila, Ferndale, Creston and West Glacier. The more remote communities such as Polebridge, Olney and Essex have not experienced the rapid growth that the more accessible communities in the county are currently undergoing.

G. Population Density

For the most part, high-density development is occurring close to local services, such as public utilities, maintained streets, hospitals and medical facilities and shopping. It is often cost effective for developments that are within a reasonable distance to a municipal water and sewer supply, to annex into the municipality to receive these services, allowing for a higher density, than would be allowed in a rural area. This type of growth is occurring adjacent to and near the three municipalities of Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Kalispell has seen dramatic expansion on the north and west, Whitefish to the south and east and Columbia Falls is expanding to the west.

Development in the rural areas of the county has also been fast paced over the past two decades. A naturally occurring pattern is that the closer to local services that a development is, the higher the density. Rural residential development requires at least one acre per residence if on a private water and sewer system. There are several public Sewer and Water Districts throughout the county that will accommodate higher density. Several rural areas where services are available are experiencing development pressure and increasing population. Among these areas are the communities located on or near Flathead Lake and include Bigfork, Lakeside and Somers.

II. Socio-Demographic Information

A. Seasonal Population

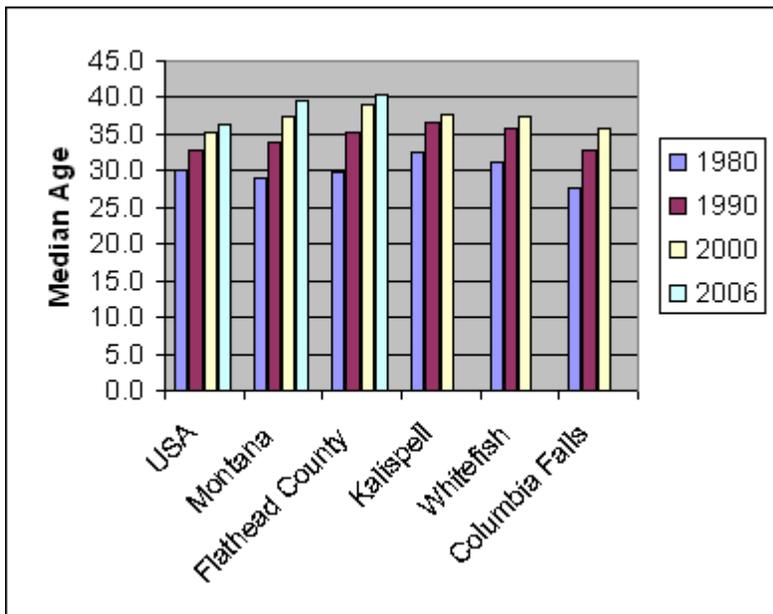
Due to its proximity to abundant natural amenities, Flathead County attracts a significant numbers of seasonal residents. The U.S. Census identifies housing units expressly dedicated for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. The 1990 Census indicates that there were 2,517 housing units in Flathead County that were occupied for occasional use. In 2000, that number rose to 3,570, a 42% increase. During the same period, the total number of housing units in the county increased by 29%.

B. Demographics

The median age for the County is on the rise. In 1980, the median age for Flathead County was 29.7 years. Census 2000 data determined the median age of the population in Flathead County to be 39 years. The 2006 Community Survey determined the median age to be 40.3 years. Since 1980, the median age in Flathead County has increased by over 10 years.

Between 1990 and 2000, every age bracket except 25 to 34 experienced an increase in population. Between 2000 and 2006 however, the 25 to 34 bracket saw an increase, but a decrease occurred in the 35 to 44 bracket. The largest population gain and percent increase occurred in the 45 to 55 age bracket which has seen a 125.3% increase since 1990. The second largest increase occurred in the 55 to 64 age bracket at 110.3%, followed by the 85 and over age bracket at 84.8%.

Figure 2: Comparison of Median Age for Selected Areas

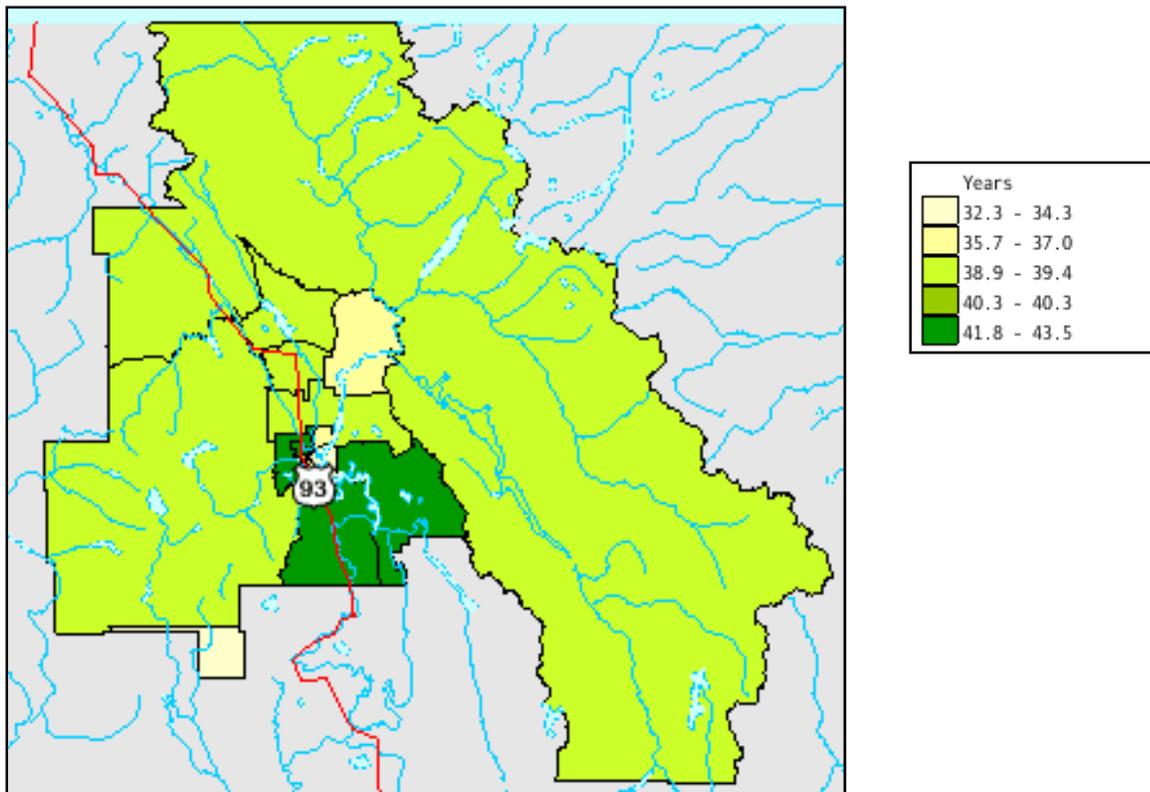


Source: U.S. Census

Map 3 shows the median age in Flathead County as designated by census tracts in Flathead County. It is notable that the median age is above the average in the southern portion of the county (Bigfork, Lakeside, and Somers), and lower than the average in the area around Columbia Falls.

Trends show that the population over 65 is generally healthier than previous generations. They are staying more active and demanding opportunities and facilities to maintain an active, healthy lifestyle. This age group typically prefers fitness activities as opposed to competitive sports.

Map 2: Median Age by Census Tract



Source: U.S. Census

C. Household Characteristics

Family households comprise almost 70% of households in the County compared to 64% of households statewide. Average household size in the County was 2.69 compared to 2.49 statewide. From the year 2000 to 2006 the average household and family size increased significantly. This is a reversal of a trend over the past 25 years towards smaller household size. This may reflect the cyclical nature of population trends and the increase in a family demographic with young children that are part of the echo boom – the children and grandchildren of baby boomers.

Table 2 : Household Characteristics - Flathead County

| | Number: 2006 | Percent of Total: 2006 | Number: 2000 | Percent of Total: 2000 | Percent Change: 2000 - 2006 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Total Households | 31,409 | ** | 29,588 | ** | 6.2% |
| Family Households | 21,699 | 69.1% | 20,425 | 69.0% | 6.2% |
| Family Households - Married Couple | 18,287 | 58.2% | 16,841 | 56.9% | 8.6% |
| Non-Family Households | 9,710 | 30.9% | 9,163 | 31.0% | 6.0% |
| Households with individuals under 18 | 9,709 | 30.9% | 10,205 | 34.5% | -4.9% |
| Households with individuals 65 + | 7,002 | 22.3% | 6,577 | 22.2% | 6.5% |
| Average Household Size | 2.69 | ** | 2.48 | ** | 8.5% |
| Average Family Size | 3.25 | ** | 2.97 | ** | 9.4% |

Source: U.S. Census

D. Disability

The most recent information available from the U.S. Census states that 15.8% of the population five years and over is disabled. This statistic jumps to 42.4% of the population when range is reduced to those 65 and over. The U.S. Census includes the following categories for disabilities.

- Sensory Disability - blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment
- Physical Disability - A condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying
- Mental Disability - learning, remembering, or concentrating
- Self-care Disability - dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home
- Mobility Disability - going outside the home alone to shop or visit a doctor's office
- Employment Disability - working at a job or business

The population over 65 is more likely to experience disabilities related to sensory, physical, self-care and mobility. Since this age group is among the fastest growing age cohort in the County, there will be a larger part of the population with these characteristics.

Disabilities, however, are not related solely to an aging population. Parks facilities should be designed and maintained to allow for the highest accessibility possible no matter the age.

III. Implications for Park Planning

1. The large geographic area of the County translates to long driving distances and spread out services. This increases the costs for maintenance and programming due to drive time for staff, fuel costs, and wear on vehicles.
2. Natural features such as lakes offer opportunities for water recreation but private development is limiting public access.
3. River systems with floodplains have ecological value that should be preserved through conservation parks to enhance water quality, wildlife habitat, and riparian systems. Such parks can provide natural recreation areas and provide connections between parks.
4. The extensive public lands offers ample opportunity for wilderness, hiking, camping, and other outdoor activities. Agencies that manage public lands are potential partners for development of county parks where agencies share common goals and to provide connections or access to these public lands.
5. Open space and the rural landscape is the dominant characteristic of the County and should be enhanced with a park system.
6. The majority of the population in the county lives in the unincorporated areas. This population will demand park and recreation services from the county that would otherwise be provided for by municipalities in other counties in the State.
7. Population growth in the County has been concentrated in the valley in areas that has infrastructure to support denser populations. Remote areas such as Olney, Essex and Polebridge have not experienced the high growth and are not placing as significant demands as other unincorporated areas.
8. There is a large seasonal population that increases the summer population and places demands on the park system that may not be reflected in the population numbers.
9. The population is aging and active seniors demand more fitness oriented activities.
10. As the rate of people with disabilities increase, park facilities should be designed with this population in mind.
11. Population trends are cyclical and long-term planning should account for this and design parks for all ages and abilities.