

Flathead County
Board of Commissioners
(406) 758-5503



Brad W. Abell
Randy L. Brodehl
Pamela J. Holmquist

July 17, 2023

Montana DNRC

Subject: Status Update - Flathead County's Efforts to Build a Regional Septage Treatment Plant

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to provide an update on Flathead County's ongoing efforts to establish a regional septage treatment plant in collaboration with the local municipalities and area water and sewer districts.

Following a "no" vote by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners to move forward with the acquisition of 35 acres in Lower Valley, we have diligently examined several other properties for their suitability as a location for the facility. After careful consideration, we shortlisted three potential sites, each possessing unique advantages that aligned with our objectives. Over the past few months, we have been further vetting these locations.

90 acres in Columbia Falls: Situated in an industrial zoned commercial park in Columbia Falls, with a central location, and a dedicated truck route, this property appeared to be a promising option. Flathead County staff had multiple meetings with the Columbia Falls City Manager and Public Works staff in April and May. Our project engineer, HDR worked with Columbia Falls to evaluate their treatment plant's capacity and projected growth in the region. It was confirmed in May that their wastewater treatment plant does have the capacity to accept the effluent from our facility without inhibiting future growth in Columbia Falls. Flathead County ordered a Phase I Environmental Assessment due to concerns regarding the past historical use of this property. On June 19th, Flathead County received the completed Phase I. The report noted several concerns including unstable soil, inappropriate storage of hazardous materials, soil staining around the hazardous materials, and an active opencut mining permit that had a reclamation release request denied by DEQ. A Phase II Assessment was recommended. Due to the extent of environmental concerns and significant, expensive, and time-consuming remediation efforts required prior to building, this property in Columbia Falls was removed from consideration.

100 acres south of Kalispell: Located on the south end of Kalispell, this property offers ample space for the construction of the septage treatment plant as well as a potential future Regional Detention Facility. Its proximity to major transportation routes provides easy access for transportation of waste materials and reduces neighborhood traffic concerns. It is also near Kalispell wastewater infrastructure, so effluent from the facility could be discharged to the Kalispell wastewater treatment plant. Additionally, the property is situated away from residential areas, minimizing potential

concerns about odor or noise pollution. Over the last two months, Flathead County staff has had multiple conversations with Kalispell's City Manager, Public Works Director, and Wastewater Treatment Plant Facility Manager to discuss logistics of capacity, permitting, and impact fees if the septage treatment plant was to discharge into Kalispell's system. It appears to be feasible, but the logistics are still being worked out. The downside of this property is that it is priced at nearly \$15 million. If we were to acquire this property, it would leave inadequate funding for construction of the facility. Flathead County is working with a realtor to potentially negotiate down the purchase price. If unsuccessful, Flathead County would have to secure additional funding, or remove this property from consideration.

Wiley Dike Property: In March, the Commissioners voted down the purchase of this property, but it has resurfaced as the most viable location for several reasons. It is for sale, it is within budget, and Lakeside Water and Sewer District continues to be a willing partner with Flathead County to dispose of the facility's effluent. In May, Flathead County hired an appraiser to update the appraisal on the Wiley Dike property. This puts the County in position to move forward with another buy/sell for this property quickly if the Commissioners reconsider the purchase.

In addition to further evaluating property options for the septage treatment facility, the following have all taken place in the past three months:

- HDR continues to further develop plans for the septage treatment facility. Specifically, HDR has conducted additional septage sampling and testing to finetune the treatment process to include a pre-settling step. HDR also further evaluated varying compost ratios. Both adjustments should reduce operating costs that will be reflected in the next updated business plan.
- Flathead County has engaged in productive discussions with two municipalities (Kalispell and Columbia Falls) regarding potential partnerships with their wastewater treatment plants.
- We have met with the area's largest biosolid composter to discuss opportunities for collaboration rather than competition.
- We have explored new innovative technologies that have shown promise as solutions for septage treatment in other parts of the Country.

In April, the County hired SWT Engineering to evaluate an Anaerobic Digester at the County Landfill. SWT determined it was not a feasible application of the technology due to Solid Waste permit restrictions, no on-site liquid treatment, no ability to manage additional off gas, and limited available land.

In July, County staff and Commissioners met with Sedron Technologies regarding their Varcor system that treats septage and biosolids in Sumner, WA. This technology requires a smaller facility footprint that would open up more location opportunities, but their CEO determined that the Varcor system would not be economical at our scale. The time and expense required to leverage this technology will not align with ARPA and state spending constraints.

We greatly appreciate the support and guidance provided by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation throughout this process. Your expertise and assistance are invaluable to the successful implementation of this project. We also appreciate your patience as Flathead County thoroughly vets all viable options, so the property that ultimately is selected for this project is justified.

Should you require any further information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at pmelnick@flathead.mt.gov. We look forward to the continued collaboration and progress towards building a regional septage treatment facility that will benefit Flathead County and its residents for years to come.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

OFFICE OF FLATHEAD COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



Pete Melnick, County Administrator