



# Flathead County Growth Policy



Adopted March 19, 2007

Res # 2015A

Updated May 21, 2024

Res # 2015AE



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**Flathead County Commissioners:**

Dale Lauman – Chair Cal Scott	Jim Dupont	Pam Holmquist
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**Flathead County Planning Board:**

Marie Hickey-AuClaire - Chair	Jim Heim	Gordon Cross
Jeff Larsen	Gene Shellerud	Frank Dekort
Charles Lapp	Bob Keenan	Marc Pitman
Greg Stevens	Ron Schlegel	Bob Faulkner

**Flathead County Administrator:**

Mike Pence

**Flathead County Planning and Zoning Staff:**

BJ Grieve- Director	Allison Mouch	Alex Hogle
Mary Fisher	Donna Valade	Bailey Minnich

**Cover Photo**

Trevor Eagleton

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**RESOLUTION  
OF THE FLATHEAD COUNTY PLANNING BOARD  
RECOMMENDING THE FLATHEAD COUNTY GROWTH POLICY**

WHEREAS, the Flathead County Board of Commissioners created a Planning Board in order to promote the orderly development of the unincorporated areas of Flathead County pursuant to 76-1-101, M.C.A.; and

WHEREAS the jurisdictional area of the Flathead County Planning Board encompasses all areas within Flathead County excluding the City of Kalispell, the City of Whitefish City-County Planning Board jurisdiction and the City of Columbia Falls City-County Planning Board jurisdiction; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Commissioners adopted the Flathead County Growth Policy on March 19, 2007 by Resolution No. 2015A; and

WHEREAS, Chapter 9, Part 6, "Implementation Strategy" of the Growth Policy provides that the Growth Policy should be updated, at a minimum, every five years; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to 76-1-106, M.C.A. and Flathead County Resolution No. 2015P, the Flathead County Board of County Commissioners requested that the Flathead County Planning Board update the Flathead County Growth Policy pursuant to the approved work plan; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to 76-1-306 and 76-1-601, M.C.A., the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Staff assisted in preparing a growth policy update; and

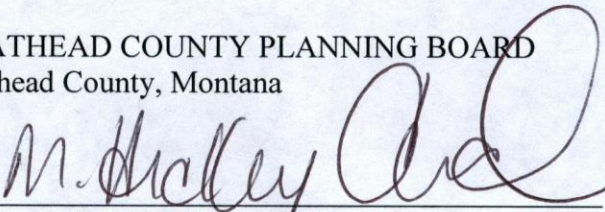
WHEREAS, pursuant to 76-1-603, M.C.A., the Flathead County Planning Board did hold 29 public workshops from October 20, 2010 to April 25, 2012 to engage the public, receive comments and review recommendations and suggestions made regarding the growth policy update; and

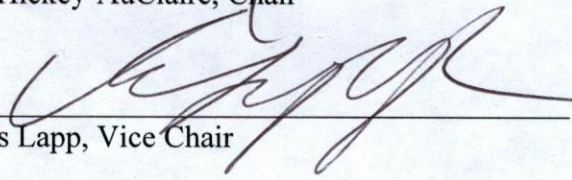
WHEREAS, pursuant to 76-1-602, M.C.A., the Flathead County Planning Board did hold two public hearings on the growth policy update, one on February 15, 2012 after which additional workshops were held to further revise the first final draft and one on June 13, 2012 after which discussion was continued to July 11, 2012 in order to allow adequate time to read and consider all comments.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that after a lengthy public process to update the Flathead County Growth Policy and consideration of all public testimony and written materials submitted through the close of the public hearing on June 13, 2012, and pursuant to 76-1-603, M.C.A., the Flathead County Planning Board does hereby recommend for approval to the Flathead County Board of Commissioners the updated Flathead County Growth Policy attached hereto and amended as shown on attached Exhibit A.

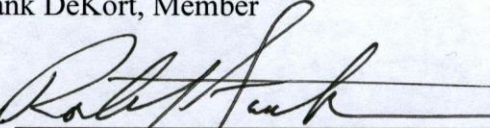
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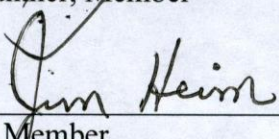
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Flathead County, Montana

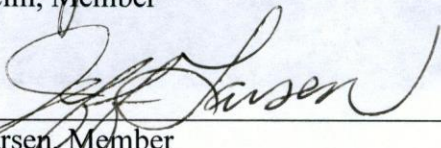
By:   
Marie Hickey-AuClaire, Chair


By:   
Charles Lapp, Vice Chair

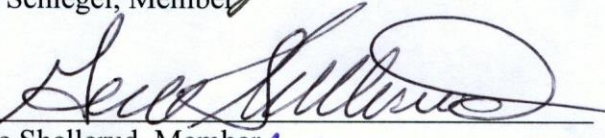
By: \_\_\_\_\_  
Frank DeKort, Member

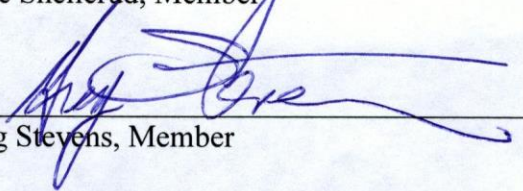
By:   
Robert Faulkner, Member

By:   
Jim Heim, Member

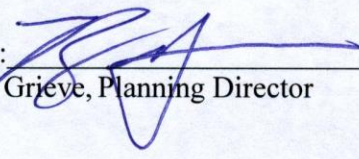
By:   
Jeff Larsen, Member

By:   
Ron Schlegel, Member

By:   
Gene Shellerud, Member

By:   
Greg Stevens, Member

ATTEST:

By:   
BJ Grieve, Planning Director

**EXHIBIT A**

Reinstate policy 41.3 as follows:

P.41.3        Encourage maintaining and managing riparian areas in accordance with Montana state and federal laws.

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**RESOLUTION NO. 2015R**

WHEREAS, on March 19, 2007, the Flathead County Board of Commissioners adopted the Flathead County Growth Policy (Growth Policy) by the adoption of Resolution No. 2015 A;

WHEREAS, pursuant to Section 76-1-601(3)(f)(iii), M.C.A., and Chapter 9, Part 6, of the Growth Policy, the Growth Policy needs to be updated every five years;

WHEREAS, on October 20, 2010, the Flathead County Planning Board (Planning Board) held a public workshop to gather public comment to identify areas of the Growth Policy that should be updated;

WHEREAS, on January 3, 2011, the Board of Commissioners requested the Planning Board update the Flathead County Growth Policy by the adoption of Resolution 2015 P;

WHEREAS, throughout 2011, the Planning Board held twenty-one public workshops on updating the Growth Policy;

WHEREAS, on February 15, 2012, the Planning Board held a public hearing, pursuant to Section 76-1-602, M.C.A, on the proposed updates to the Growth Policy and, during the next several weeks, the Planning Board held four additional public workshops during which further revisions to the proposed updated Growth Policy were made;

WHEREAS, on June 13, 2012, the Planning Board held a second public hearing, pursuant to Section 76-1-602, M.C.A, on the final draft of the proposed updates to the Growth Policy;

WHEREAS, throughout the above-described period of time, notices of public workshops and hearings were published in the newspaper, articles pertaining to the workshops and hearings appeared in the newspaper, and drafts of proposed updates to the Growth Policy were continually posted on the County Website and made available in the Planning and Zoning Office;

WHEREAS, on July 11, 2012, the Planning Board adopted a Resolution, pursuant to Section 76-1-603, M.C.A., which recommended the Board Commissioners adopt the updated Growth Policy forwarded to the Board of Commissioners by the Planning Board;

WHEREAS, on August 29, 2012, the Board of Commissioners determined that the updated Growth Policy recommended by the Planning Board should be adopted for the jurisdictional area of the Planning Board, passed a resolution of intent to adopt the updated Growth Policy, and gave notice that it would consider written public comments received prior to October 1, 2012, by the adoption of Resolution No. 2015 Q; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Commissioners has considered all the written comments and information received since the adoption of the resolution of intent.



NOW THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY RESOLVED, by the Board of Commissioners of Flathead County, Montana, pursuant to Section 76-1-604, M.C.A., that it hereby adopts the updated Flathead County Growth Policy recommended by the Flathead County Planning Board and which is attached hereto.

Dated this 12<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2012.



ATTEST:

Paula Robinson, Clerk

By Diana Kille

Deputy

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
Flathead County, Montana

By Dale W. Lauman  
Dale W. Lauman, Chairman

By Pamela J. Holmquist  
Pamela J. Holmquist, Member

By Calvin L. Scott  
Calvin L. Scott, Member

**AMENDMENTS**

<b>Res. #</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Chapter(s), Part(s) Amended</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
2015 H	10/20/08	Chapter 11 Policies & Part 1, Appendix C Part 1, Designated Land Uses 2006 Map.	Amending the Growth Policy to remove references to the Interlocal Agreement with the City of Whitefish after Resolution #1783B (03/13/08) rescinded the Commissioner’s consent to that agreement.
2015R	10/12/12	Growth Policy 5-Year Update	Conducted 5-year update for accuracy and consistency with M.C.A.
2015U & 677Q	09/01/15	Chapter 11 Table 11.1, Chapter 11 Policies & Part 1, Appendix C Part 1, Designated Land Uses Map.	Amending the Growth Policy to remove references to the Interlocal Agreement with the City of Whitefish, Whitefish City-County Master Plan, add the Big Mountain, Big Mountain West and South Whitefish to the table of existing plans and update the designated land use map.
2015Y	07/28/20	Chapter 11 Table 11.1	Amending the Growth Policy to remove the Columbia Falls City-County Master Plan and the City of Kalispell City-County Master Plan
2015AA	08/31/23	Chapter 3	Update Demographics and Housing information pursuant to 2020 US Census
2015AE	05/21/24	Chapters 4 and 5	Update Parks and Recreation changes that have occurred since adoption. Update Economics sections with up-to-date economic data for the surrounding area.

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**APPENDIX ‘A’ – BASELINE ANALYSIS**

**APPENDIX ‘B’ – PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT SUMMARY**

**APPENDIX ‘C’ – IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **CHAPTER 1: THE CHARACTER OF FLATHEAD COUNTY**

The character of a community may be defined as the unique cultural and physical attributes of a particular location. Nowhere else in the world looks and feels the same as downtown Bigfork or rural Marion. The irony is that growth fueled by the attractive character of our community is the same growth that can ultimately change it. High density residential development has the potential to change the character of a rural area and create safety and health hazards if not properly guided. Similarly, low density development in areas well suited for development can be an inefficient use of land resources. Some responsible developments mitigate these impacts and others do not. A growth policy should establish goals and policies that build a foundation for safe and healthy growth that preserves Flathead County's most valued characteristics.

### **CHAPTER 2: LAND USES**

One of the single largest impacts of growth in any community is change to land uses. Many land uses are converted as access, infrastructure, visibility and other factors make certain uses more or less desirable. Changes in land use are an inevitable result of growth and can fuel multiple segments of an economy. However, without careful planning, some land uses can have unintended deleterious impacts to the surrounding area. This is especially true in communities with increasing populations and decreasing space or "buffers" between uses. The Flathead County Growth Policy seeks to allow the market to benefit naturally from the desirable impacts of growth and land use changes while protecting the community from the accompanying undesirable impacts to public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare (76-1-106, M.C.A.).

### **CHAPTER 3: DEMOGRAPHICS AND HOUSING**

Conventional approaches to community planning examine population change over time, analyzing past and current population growth patterns to better predict future trends. Analysis of population incorporates not only the increase or decrease in the number of people, but also the gender, age, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the population. Understanding these population attributes allows communities to anticipate and plan for the future needs of its residents.

One of the basic needs for a growing population is housing. Housing is a fundamental element in the way communities grow and develop. The location and density of new housing are major drivers of transportation patterns, access to public services, and energy consumption. Housing is a prominent feature of the built environment, an investment and consumptive good, a symbol of personal history and familial connections, and a determinant of social interaction and achievement. A home is the largest purchase an individual is likely to make in a lifetime.

## CHAPTER 4: PARKS & RECREATION

Public parks, trails, and recreation offer countless values to Flathead County residents and visitors. Public parks, trails, and open spaces provide the opportunity to be physically active and fit. Having close-to-home access to quality places to recreate is one of the most important factors in determining whether people are active and will continue to stay that way. Flathead County formally adopted a Parks and Recreation Plan [Resolution No. 2015L] as an element of the Growth Policy. The Parks and Recreation Plan considers a number of factors related to parks and recreation master planning throughout Flathead County, including population growth, facilities maintenance, and the future needs and desires of the community. The Parks and Recreation Plan is referenced heavily throughout this chapter, as it provides a more detailed analysis and comprehensive evaluation as an extension of the Growth Policy document.

## CHAPTER 5: THE FLATHEAD ECONOMY

When the Growth Policy was originally adopted in 2007, the Flathead Valley and its economy were experiencing significant growth and development. Traditionally characterized by its diversity, northwest Montana's economy was stable and growing; a 2004 report on the "State of the Rockies" identified Flathead County as having the most balanced employment composition in the Rocky Mountain West, with no one sector of the economy prevailing over another. That all changed in 2008, when the economic recession affecting the rest of the country began to significantly impact Montana's economy. Numerous reports in the years since have characterized Flathead County as one of the hardest hit economies in the state, with some of the highest long-term unemployment rates and a significant reduction in economic diversity. And while the effects of the recession continue to be felt today, the Flathead Valley is beginning a slow recovery, building upon the natural resources and scenic qualities that have traditionally been part of the economic landscape while embracing new opportunities and supporting those economic sectors that have remained resilient throughout the recession.

The county's natural environment has always been one of its chief economic assets, contributing significantly to the high quality of life that draws visitors as well as potential employers and future residents to the Valley. This quality of life is characterized by natural scenic beauty, clean air and water and access to outdoor and recreational opportunities. Region specific export products such as Flathead cherries and timber products, as well as the tourism draw of Glacier National Park and Flathead Lake are prime examples of how Flathead County's natural environment has contributed significantly to the local economy.

Rapid population growth between 2000 and 2005 served as a major driver in the county's economic vitality during the first half of the decade. The population of older, working, financially established adults rapidly increased during this time period, as those in their early 40's to late 50's chose to relocate to Flathead County. The number of older, non-working adults and retirees requiring access to social and medical services without income attachment grew significantly during this time period, and continues to be a driving economic factor today. Although population growth continued during the second half of

the decade - primarily between 2005 and 2007- the national recession that began in 2008 had a dramatic affect on the rate of growth and overall composition of the population, particularly its civilian labor force. This is not, however, the first time Flathead County has found itself in an economic recession. Cyclical changes related to the evolving needs of a local and regionally connected population will continue to influence and drive the economy. Planning in a way that will encourage and sustain future economic growth in the face of cyclical change is one approach to the current economic situation facing the Flathead Valley.

## **CHAPTER 6: TRANSPORTATION**

The quality and quantity of a transportation system can define a community. It can draw residents together or create barriers to separate them. A transportation element used in conjunction with other Growth Policy elements will shape Flathead County's community character, economic health, and quality of life. Not only does transportation provide for mobility of people and goods, it also influences patterns of growth and development. A quality transportation system enables prompt emergency services (i.e.: sheriff, fire and medical, etc.) to protect the public's safety and welfare. Transportation planning requires developing strategies to manage the transportation system as a way to advance the county's long term goals and shape future growth. Ideally the transportation system, or at least individual components impacted by a development proposal, should be in place as subdivision and private development occurs.

Chapter 6 is intended to provide information on future transportation needs in the context of projected growth and development. A transportation system must be flexible and capable of adapting to a growing and changing population. Transportation planning examines travel patterns and trends and creates policies that meet mobility needs without creating adverse impacts to the general character of the community or the environment. Transportation planning identifies appropriate modes of travel to support development decisions. Modes of travel in Flathead County include motor vehicle, pedestrian, bicycle, airplane, train and mass transit. Glacier Park International Airport is specifically referenced due to its regional economic importance.

## **CHAPTER 7: PUBLIC FACILITIES & SERVICES**

Public facilities and services play a vital role in the health, safety and general welfare of a community. Successful communities provide education, law enforcement, emergency, health and other services. Very successful communities provide these services efficiently and effectively while fairly distributing the cost burden to those who benefit, either directly or indirectly. Communities experiencing rapid growth and increasing demand for services while relying solely on property taxes for revenue generation will be less likely to provide those services efficiently and effectively. Many participants in the 2005-2006 scoping meetings held throughout Flathead County (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary) indicated a desire for increased levels of public facilities and services, such as more police officers and better schools. Setting goals for maintaining or increasing the level of services and facilities enjoyed by the residents of Flathead County, while exploring



ways to fairly share the cost burden among those who use those services (such as visitors and part-time residents), is appropriate for a growth policy.

## CHAPTER 8: NATURAL RESOURCES

The vitality of Flathead County is inextricably connected to the abundance of its natural resources. From the aboriginal tribes to the early settlers, prevalent natural resources have been utilized to sustain lives and livelihoods. In 21<sup>st</sup> century Flathead County, industries such as timber harvest, milling, mining, farming and ranching have shared a balance with real estate development, tourism and outdoor recreational activities. In the past as well as today, the County depends on the availability and utilization of natural resources.

The Montana State Constitution declares all citizens are entitled to clean air and water; this growth policy affirms this entitlement for residents of Flathead County. Air and water are two basic elements of a complex environmental system. The water cycle encompasses all the aspects of water quality, flooding and drought, while carbon and oxygen cycles affect air quality. There are many other nutrient cycles that directly or indirectly impact the quality – and in some cases quantity - of the county’s natural resources. Development and human interaction can alter these cycles and create imbalance. Location of development is a key consideration when addressing environmental concerns. This growth policy seeks ways to protect the environment by adequately mitigating development impacts where practicable and restricting development in areas of high sensitivity.

Flathead County has an abundance of natural resources, with over 40 lakes and 3 major rivers surrounded by or adjacent to public lands. Flathead Lake extends from Flathead County into Lake County, 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, serving as a barometer of the ecological health for the entire Flathead watershed. The surrounding mountains are primarily forest lands managed by the federal and state government. Glacier National Park was established in 1910 and has become Flathead County’s most popular tourist destination. The park is split between Flathead County and Glacier County and encompasses approximately 1,008,306 acres which include over 200 lakes and streams and over 700 miles of hiking trails<sup>1</sup>.

Private timberlands generate positive contributions to Flathead County’s economy through timber production as well as the maintenance of healthy forests, watershed protection, wildlife habitat and other aspects of public value. Flathead County’s valley floor is open as a result of extensive logging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore able to accommodate a variety of agricultural uses, extractive industries and residential and commercial development. The main tributaries that flow through the valley floor - the Flathead, Whitefish, Stillwater and Swan Rivers - have created areas of prime agricultural soils and critical riparian habitat.

Flathead County has a long history of beneficial utilization of its natural resources. Agriculture and timber production have historically provided a solid economic base for

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<sup>1</sup> National Park Service, Glacier National Park webpage; <http://www.nps.gov/glac/index.htm>

residents and a record of stewardship that has effectively preserved the abundant natural resources enjoyed today. These resource industries are based on the sustained production of essential products and effective management of the natural resources necessary for their creation. Their role in the protection of natural resources is recognized, as is the importance of their continued presence.

Flathead County Growth Policy public input meetings held between 2005 and 2006 generated an overwhelming response from participants about the preservation of natural resources. In particular, participants wanted goals and policies to protect water resources, open space, scenic views, air quality and wildlife habitat (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). The majority of comments expressed concern about the degradation of natural resources from commercial and residential development, agricultural uses and extractive industries. The goals and policies that follow were developed from a public involvement process and are intended to promote and protect the public health, safety, and welfare of Flathead County directly dependent on natural resources.

## **CHAPTER 9: SAND & GRAVEL RESOURCES**

Sand and gravel are important natural resources found throughout Flathead County. While large amounts of gravel are located throughout the Flathead valley, sand is a resource that is more limited in this area of the state. Sand and gravel resources provide the foundation upon which our infrastructure is built, defining where, how and to what extent development occurs. Our roads, bridges and highways are all constructed using gravel; the houses we live in, buildings we work in and sidewalks we walk on utilize the resource as well. Access to local gravel resources reduces costs associated with transportation and processing fees, thereby reducing the overall cost of development. The potential for local extraction of sand and gravel resources also affects the overall economic climate by providing jobs and serving local construction industries. Developing an awareness of where sand and gravel resources are currently located and what types of activities (extraction, processing, and transportation) are occurring in these locations is important for a variety of reasons. Continued growth and development in areas of the County where sand and gravel resources are currently found will result in continued land use conflicts and may limit the availability of these types of resources into the future.

In 2009, a senator from Flathead County sponsored a legislative bill (Senate Bill No. 486) requiring communities provide an inventory of sand and gravel resources within their jurisdiction. By requiring local governments to identify these resources, this information was intended to provide a base upon which future land use policies could be developed to encourage the separation of incompatible uses while ensuring an economically viable source of gravel to facilitate and support future development.<sup>2</sup> Changes resulting from this proposal during the 2009 Legislative session now require all Growth Policies to include a description of sand and gravel resources. As part of Flathead County's Growth Policy

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<sup>2</sup> Montana's Growth Policy Resource Book. Montana Department of Commerce Community Development Division. April 2009; pg.33.

Update for the year 2012, this chapter has been added to address these additional requirements and comply with Section 76-1-601 MCA.

Mapping the location and extent of these resources will serve to inform future land use planning efforts in Flathead County and will help ensure the continued availability and accessibility of sand and gravel for the County's future growth and development needs. Due to the limited data available, this chapter is not intended to be an evaluation of existing materials or a directive on where future sand and gravel extraction should necessarily occur. Pursuant to Section 76-1-601(3)(viii) MCA, this chapter intends to identify existing sand and gravel resources located within the planning jurisdiction of Flathead County. This will encourage the development of corresponding goal(s) and policies that may aid in future data collection and planning efforts involving sand and gravel resources.

## **CHAPTER 10: IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY**

A Growth Policy is a non-regulatory document created to “ensure the promotion of public health, safety, morals, convenience or order or the general welfare, and for the sake of efficiency and economy in the process of community development” (76-1-106 M.C.A.). A Growth Policy does so by working with community members to identify a collective vision and develop goals and policies to support and implement that vision over time. The Flathead County Growth Policy has fifty goals and over two hundred supporting policies that do just that. Some of those policies may be implemented by the Planning Office in the normal course of business, as land use applications undergo review. However, there are over one hundred policies that call for specific actions beyond the scope of daily application processing activities undertaken by the Planning Office. These policies call for things such as agreements with other governmental bodies, identification of lands suited for particular purposes, new countywide plans and new or expanded regulations. This chapter organizes those policies into categories and calls for the creation of an implementation plan by the County Commissioners and Planning Board. The Implementation Plan would achieve the goals of the growth policy in a reasonable timeframe. Land use maps are an integral part of the implementation strategy, and their recommended use is explained in this chapter. Existing instruments including subdivision and zoning regulations as well as neighborhood plans act as logical extensions of this strategy. New instruments should also be considered, and specific measures are suggested in this chapter. Public participation is one of the most important components of any implementation strategy; no new policies, plans, maps or regulations should be formally adopted until they have been publicly reviewed by the Planning Board and their recommendation forwarded to the County Commissioners in the manner set forth herein.

It is important to remember a Growth Policy is not a miracle cure for the ills of a growing community. Even the best Growth Policy has no impact if it cannot be implemented. In keeping with Chapter 1 of this document, regulations should protect public health and safety with minimal impact on personal freedoms. Implementing the Flathead County Growth Policy must achieve a balance. This chapter discusses various aspects of implementing the Flathead County Growth Policy and proposes techniques that are a reasonable “middle ground” between many competing interests.

The implementation tools described in this chapter are reasonable and appropriate suggestions for Flathead County based on numerous suggestions received from the public during the development of this Growth Policy document (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary).

## **CHAPTER 11: NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS**

Montana state law allows any county or municipality in Montana to prepare a growth policy, pursuant to 76-1-106(1) M.C.A. While the growth policy is designed to be a comprehensive policy document, it may contain more site specific neighborhood plans pursuant to 76-1-601(4). Each neighborhood plan must be consistent with the growth policy. Land use decisions guided by a neighborhood plan should reflect a community's vision of how they intend to grow in the future. In the absence of a neighborhood plan, land use decisions are guided by the growth policy and existing regulatory documents, as applicable. The intent of this chapter is to provide a general framework to facilitate the preparation, revision and update of neighborhood plans in Flathead County.

## **CHAPTER 12: STATEMENT OF COORDINATION**

The Growth Policy does not have sole jurisdiction over all lands within Flathead County; there are multiple planning jurisdictions present throughout the County. Lands under the jurisdiction of the National Forest Service, National Park Service, Salish-Kootenai Confederated Tribes, or cities of Whitefish, Columbia Falls and Kalispell are not subject to the goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. However, growth in one area of Flathead County has the potential to impact other areas of the valley as people, goods and services move between jurisdictions. It is essential that Flathead County have a plan for coordinating with other jurisdictions on land use issues pertinent to protecting the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare in the process of community development (76-1-106 M.C.A.).

## PREFACE

### PART 1: Severability Clause

If any provision of this Growth Policy is held invalid, such invalidity shall not affect other provisions which can be given effect without the invalid provision, and to this end the provisions of this Growth Policy are declared to be severable.

### PART 2: Enabling Legislation

Section 76-1-601 of Montana Code Annotated (M.C.A.) establishes the ability for all county and municipal jurisdictions in the state of Montana to prepare a growth policy, if requested by the governing body. Montana state law also states that, if requested by the governing body, the Planning Board shall prepare the Growth Policy (76-1-106, M.C.A.). The planning board may delegate to staff hired by the governing body the authority to perform “ministerial acts” (76-1-306, M.C.A.) such as drafting a growth policy. The Flathead County Planning Board worked on a growth policy from 2002 until the fall of 2004 when the monthly workload of subdivision and zoning review became too burdensome to continue both efforts. Between the fall of 2004 and October 1, 2006 the Flathead County Planning Board worked with planning staff and the advisory “Long Range Planning Task Force” to create the Flathead County Growth Policy (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). On September 18, 2006, the Flathead County Commissioners passed Resolution #1976 which reiterated their desire to have the Flathead County Planning Board prepare a growth policy, pursuant to Section 76-1-601, M.C.A for adoption by the Board of Commissioners.

### PART 3: Format of the Document

The Flathead County Growth Policy is a document created to provide guidance for growth in Flathead County. The growth policy has no regulatory authority and is instead designed as a conceptual foundation for future land use decisions and is a basis for future regulations. There are words in this document that are restrictive or regulatory in nature that are not intended to be so literally interpreted as far as the intentions of a Growth Policy. Words such as "Limit", "Prohibit", "Require", "Restrict", but not limited to just those, are used in this document only as guidance in the development of other County Zoning or Subdivision Regulation documents. It is therefore critical that a growth policy be a public document, created by the public who choose to participate in the process, and used to serve the public. Montana law clearly states that a growth policy should be prepared “To ensure the promotion of public health, safety, morals, convenience or order or the general welfare and for the sake of efficiency and economy in the process of community development...” (76-1-106, M.C.A.). However, a delicate balance must be achieved to comply with the requirements of state law and also respect the custom and culture of freedom and private property rights in Flathead County. This document attempts to achieve such a balance.

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*Pursuant to 76-1-605(2)(a) M.C.A., a growth policy is not a regulatory document and does not confer any authority to regulate that is not otherwise specifically authorized by law or regulations adopted pursuant to the law.*

The Flathead County Growth Policy is divided into eleven chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the most important elements of life in Flathead County that were identified during the public engagement process. The identified elements of the public's vision are used to guide the entire document. Chapters 2 through 8 present existing characteristics, projected trends and goals and policies in a format that complies with the topics required by 76-1-601, M.C.A. Chapter 9 outlines an implementation strategy for the reasonable and fair use of the policies and goals set forth in all chapters. Chapter 9 also contains a statement of compliance with state subdivision regulations as required by 76-1-601(3)(h), M.C.A. The purpose, scope and format of neighborhood plans are addressed in Chapter 10. Neighborhood plans are an important tool for local planning at a level of detail that does not appear in the county-wide growth policy. Chapter 11 sets forth goals and policies for successful coordination with other jurisdictions within Flathead County. Detailed appendices documenting the existing characteristics in Flathead County in 2006 and the public involvement process in creating the growth policy follow Chapters 1-11. It is also envisioned that additional elements such as neighborhood plans will be appended as part of the Growth Policy.

All sections are presented in a discussion format that briefly covers the existing characteristics and projected trends. Maps are provided only for illustrative and educational purposes. Maps in the Flathead County Growth Policy should not be interpreted as regulatory. If a more detailed discussion or presentation of data is warranted by the topic, it is found in Appendix A: Baseline Analysis. A summary of public involvement throughout the growth policy process is found in Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary.

Successful preservation of public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, and general welfare and compliance with Chapter 1 guide the goals. The policies are suggestions for reaching the goals. Goals and policies are listed in each chapter that will guide Flathead County towards a safe and healthy future consistent with both the vision of the residents and the rights and freedoms of individuals.

#### **PART 4: User's Manual**

The Growth Policy is a comprehensive planning document that applies to all of Flathead County, excepting the incorporated cities of Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls and their respective inter-local agreement areas. The document was developed in conformance with statutory requirements set forth under Title 76, Chapter 1, Part 6 of the Montana Code Annotated (M.C.A.). Like any comprehensive plan, the Growth Policy is a living document that provides a tangible representation of what Flathead County is like today, and what the County wishes to be like in the future. As such, the Growth Policy is *not* a regulatory document (pursuant to Section 76-1-605). There are words throughout that are restrictive or regulatory in nature, but are not intended to be so literally interpreted as far as the intentions of a Growth Policy. Words such as "Limit", "Prohibit", "Require", "Restrict", but not limited to just those, are used in this document only as guidance in the

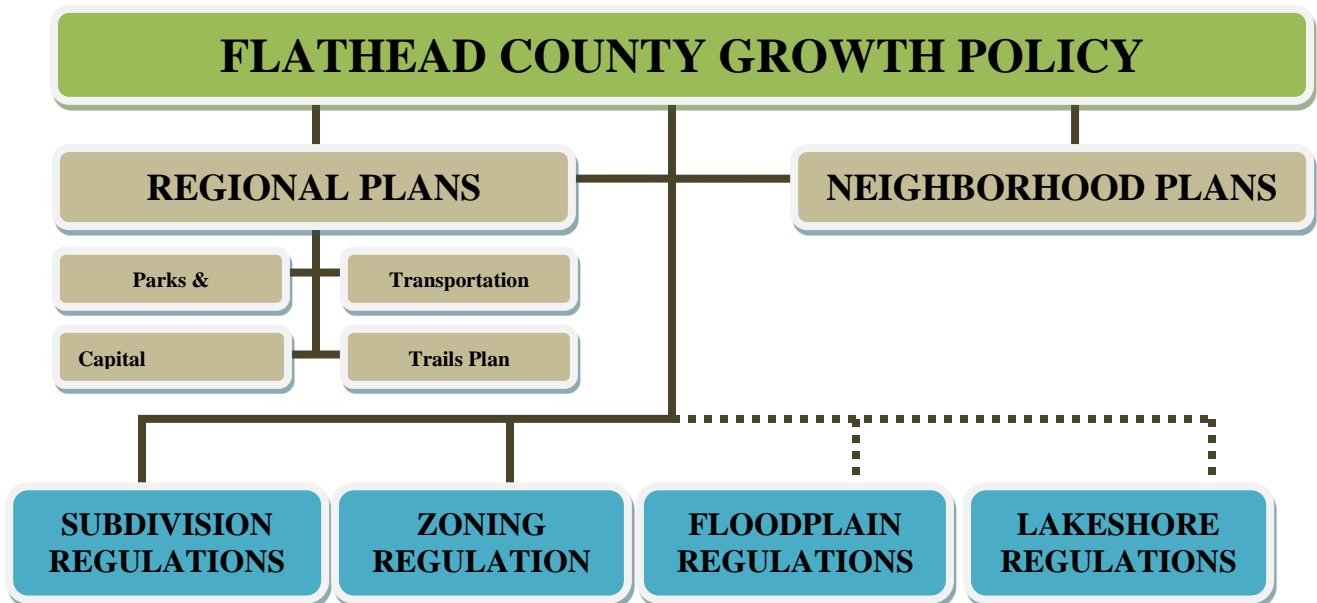
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*Pursuant to 76-1-605(2)(a) M.C.A., a growth policy is not a regulatory document and does not confer any authority to regulate that is not otherwise specifically authorized by law or regulations adopted pursuant to the law.*

development of other County Zoning or Subdivision Regulation documents. As such, the Growth Policy provides a foundation upon which future regulations may be based.

The intent of this User’s Manual is to help readers of the Flathead County Growth Policy better understand what the comprehensive planning document can and cannot do, and its relationship to other non-regulatory plans and regulations. A comprehensive plan gives overall guidance and provides a method for achieving an end.<sup>3</sup> Plans such as this are inherently non-regulatory; as a stand-alone document, a plan has no authority to restrict land use or permit development. A comprehensive plan provides the groundwork upon which regulations may be based. Regulatory documents such as the County’s Subdivision or Zoning Regulations must be created in accordance with the Growth Policy<sup>4</sup>, and serve as a means of implementing specific goals, policies and concepts introduced by the comprehensive plan. These and other regulatory documents are identified as regulatory implementation methods in Appendix C, Part 2 of the Growth Policy. These documents have not been adopted as part of the Growth Policy, but are separate regulatory entities administered by the County.

Picture the Growth Policy as an “umbrella” document providing guidance to all other plans and regulations administered by the County. The following diagram provides a visual representation of the Growth Policy’s relationship to both regulatory and non-regulatory documents administered throughout Flathead County. Items shaded **green** or **tan** are **non-regulatory** planning documents; items shaded **blue** are **regulatory**. Dotted lines indicate regulatory documents established under alternate provisions of the M.C.A. but that also implement specific goals, policies and text found within the Growth Policy document.



<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plan>

<sup>4</sup> M.C.A. Section(s) 76-1-605(c) and 76-1-606

*Pursuant to 76-1-605(2)(a) M.C.A., a growth policy is not a regulatory document and does not confer any authority to regulate that is not otherwise specifically authorized by law or regulations adopted pursuant to the law.*

Two non-regulatory extensions of the Growth Policy “umbrella” identified above are regional and neighborhood plans. In Flathead County, regional plans tend to focus on a specific planning issue, such as parks or transportation, providing a higher level of analysis and guidance for future land use and development decisions based on the particular topic. Neighborhood plans look at smaller geographical areas within the County, allowing community members to develop a more detailed vision for their neighborhood based upon the broader principles identified within the Growth Policy. Neighborhood plans are addressed specifically under Chapter 10 of the Growth Policy; regional plans are discussed throughout the document as appropriate and identified in Appendix C, Part 2 as non-regulatory implementation methods.

As previously stated, the Growth Policy as a stand-alone document is *non-regulatory* and does not confer any authority to regulate that is not otherwise specifically authorized by law or by regulations that have been adopted pursuant to the law [M.C.A. Section 76-1-605(2)(a) and (b)]. The Growth Policy guides how regulatory documents are created and/or updated<sup>5</sup> but cannot serve as the sole basis upon which to approve or deny a land use application. This approach has been established through case law<sup>6</sup>, a review of which indicates a County would be better served by giving due consideration to the Growth Policy, but cannot deny an application based solely on an application’s inability to comply with the document. Most land use applications submitted to the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office are therefore reviewed for their compliance with the Growth Policy using the following regulations:

### Flathead County Subdivision Regulations

Subdivision regulations adopted pursuant to Title 76, Chapter 3 must be made in accordance with the Growth Policy [per Section 76-1-606 M.C.A.]. The current Flathead County Subdivision Regulations have been adopted under this provision, in conformance with the Growth Policy. The regulations are intended to provide standards and procedures for the review of subdivision and other land division applications within the County. All subdivision applications are reviewed for their general conformance with goals and policies identified in the Growth Policy, pursuant to Section 76-3-504(q)(ii) and for informational purposes only. Since the subdivision regulations themselves are an implementation of the goals and policies established by the document, if a proposed development complies with the review criteria and provisions of the subdivision regulations themselves, it is inherently compliant with the Growth Policy. This ensures proponents or opponents of a proposed development cannot rely solely upon those goals and policies that support their position in the review.

### Flathead County Zoning Regulations

The creation of new zoning districts, as well as amendments to existing zoning maps or text, requires compliance with the Growth Policy and/or applicable neighborhood plans. Section 76-2-203(1)(a) M.C.A. specifically states that zoning regulations *must* be made in

<sup>5</sup> M.C.A. Section(s) 76-1-605(c) and 76-1-606

<sup>6</sup> Little v. Board of County Commissioners (1981), 193 Mont. 334, 631 P.2d 1282

*Pursuant to 76-1-605(2)(a) M.C.A., a growth policy is not a regulatory document and does not confer any authority to regulate that is not otherwise specifically authorized by law or regulations adopted pursuant to the law.*



accordance with the growth policy, as part of the required review criteria for any zoning request. The Growth Policy provides the foundation upon which zoning can be based, pursuant to Section 76-2-201 M.C.A.; in addition to goals and policies made for the purpose of promoting public health, safety, morals and general welfare, the Growth Policy designates appropriate land uses for areas of the County, upon which new zoning (or amendments to existing zoning) can be based.

### Flathead County Floodplain Regulations

The County Floodplain Regulations specifically apply to areas of the County within the special flood hazard areas identified by the FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs). Much like the subdivision or zoning regulations, the floodplain regulations are an implementation tool identified within Appendix C of the Growth Policy. However, the regulations were passed by Resolution No. 522 in 1984, to comply with the provisions of Title 76, Chapter 5 regarding the Montana Flood Plain and Floodway Management Act. The administration of floodplain regulations ensures the County meets the requirements for continued participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Participation in the NFIP allows residents of Flathead County to obtain flood insurance; without these regulations, Flathead County would no longer be eligible to participate in the program, thus limiting residents' ability to insure their properties – a requirement of many home loans. While mandated by a separate chapter of M.C.A. from that which regulates land use, this document is linked to the Growth Policy because of the Growth Policy's consideration of and specific goals and policies related to floodplain, water quality and the natural riparian resources available to the residents of Flathead County.

### Flathead County Lake & Lakeshore Protection Regulations

Although not specified as a component of Title 76 M.C.A., the Lake and Lakeshore Protection Regulations are identified within the Flathead County Growth Policy as an implementation tool, serving to promote public health and safety, maintain water quality and preserve public water bodies and natural resources available the citizens of Flathead County. This document was originally adopted under the authority of Section 75-7-207 M.C.A. on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1982 and regulates development activities within twenty (20) horizontal feet of the perimeter of designated lakes (known as the Lakeshore Protection Zone), as well as activities occurring within water bodies having a minimum surface area of twenty (20) acres at least six (6) months out of the year.

## PART 5: History of Land Use and Growth in Flathead County

Complex growth and land use issues have a long and constantly evolving history in Flathead County. In 1855, the Bitterroot Salish, Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai tribes signed the Treaty of Hellgate, ceding 22 million acres of land that included what is now Flathead County to the federal government in exchange for retaining the Flathead Indian Reservation. Soon afterwards, news of gold in British Columbia brought the first permanent settlers to Flathead County where agricultural lands and timber reserves were abundant. Homesteaders were able to acquire property from the federal government in

exchange for making the land productive. The Timber and Stone Act of 1878 allowed wealthy individuals and corporations to purchase large amounts of federal land, and the combination of homesteading and purchases from the federal government created what is now approximately 587,431 acres of private property in Flathead County.

The first mapping of the Flathead Valley occurred in the early 1870s. At that time, Montana was not yet a state, but the area that is now the State of Montana had a population of about 2,500. There were very few people living in the Flathead area until the first significant immigration of white settlers to northwest Montana which occurred in 1883, following the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad line to Ravalli, north of Missoula. The Flathead and Lewis and Clark Forest Reserves were created in 1897 out of what is now a major portion of Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest. The Forest Service, created in 1905, took over the management of these lands from the General Land Office. Glacier National Park was established five years later in 1910. For a complete history of growth in Flathead County in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

The population of Flathead County has grown in every decade but one. In 1900, the population of Flathead County was approximately 9,375 and with the exception of 1920 to 1930, that number has grown throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Timber, agriculture, manufacturing and tourism have all contributed to growth in Flathead County over the last 100 years, and the Flathead economy continues to grow and diversify in 2006.

All growth historically has had impacts on the local community. The scale and speed of growth determines the impacts that are likely to occur. Some recent impacts of growth are positive, such as jobs, housing and increased property value. Other impacts, such as traffic, delayed emergency response times or incompatible land uses have been seen by residents as negative. Since 2002, when the Flathead County Planning Board first began work on the growth policy, numerous public meetings have been held throughout Flathead County to react to how residents feel about growth. The Flathead County Planning Board, along with the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office and the Long Range Planning Task Force have used the information gathered at public meetings, as well as hundreds of letters and surveys received between 2003 and October of 2006 (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary), to determine the seven primary elements that are most important to the residents of Flathead County.

## **PART 6: Individual Private Property Rights in Flathead County**

Preserving and protecting the fundamentals of private property rights for the residents of Flathead County remains important in the creation of this Growth Policy as well as the administration of all land use regulations throughout the jurisdiction. As a property owner in Flathead County, you can reasonably expect the following:

1. A land owner has the right to make a land use application to the County and have that land use application reviewed according to the statutory requirements in a timely manner in accordance with due process.

2. That all rules and regulations established by the governing body shall be followed in accordance with state law.
3. That all meetings of Boards and Committees appointed by the local governing body will abide by open meeting, record retention, Americans with Disabilities Act laws and regulations established or adopted by the State of Montana.
4. That open and accountable service will be provided by the Flathead County Planning & Zoning Office as well as all departments of County government.
5. That all landowners will receive fair and equal treatment during their interaction with the County and during the review and processing of all land use applications.

Property rights are protected individual rights that guarantee a property owner's right to use his or her property as he or she wishes, limited only by a reasonable, lawful and compelling public need. Because of the increasing emphasis by the Montana courts on the "regulatory" nature of Growth Policies, any regulatory requirements that apply to the use of private property using this Growth Policy or its' amendments as its' lawful basis must meet the following requirements:

1. Must be carefully drafted to ensure the highest probability of meeting the constitutional tests of; a) ensuring substantive due process, b) providing procedural due process, c) ensuring equal protection, and d) avoid a "taking".
2. Must recognize that a key element to the custom and culture as well as the general welfare of Flathead County and its' citizens and property owners, is a strong commitment to protecting individual property rights.
3. Must be reasonably related to and must actually further the public health, safety or general welfare.
4. Must not unreasonably discriminate between similarly situated land or uses.
5. Must not be arbitrary or capricious either on its' face or as applied to a particular property and should go no farther than is required to achieve its' legitimate objective.
6. Must not have the effect of excluding racial, minority, or economic groups from the jurisdiction and must guarantee representation for all property owners.

In the event of a conflict between the provisions in this part and any other provision in this Growth Policy and its' amendments, this part shall control.

## CHAPTER 1: THE CHARACTER OF FLATHEAD COUNTY

### Introduction

The character of a community may be defined as the unique cultural and physical attributes of a particular location. Nowhere else in the world looks and feels the same as downtown Bigfork or rural Marion. The irony is that growth fueled by the attractive character of our community is the same growth that can ultimately change it. High density residential development has the potential to change the character of a rural area and create safety and health hazards if not properly guided. Similarly, low density development in areas well suited for development can be an inefficient use of land resources. Some responsible developments mitigate these impacts and others do not. A growth policy should establish goals and policies that build a foundation for safe and healthy growth that preserves Flathead County's most valued characteristics.

### PART 1: Seven Elements of the Public's Vision

Identifying the most valued characteristics of Flathead County and creating goals, policies and regulations to guide growth is important to future generations of Flathead County residents. The public involvement process that informed the creation of the original Growth Policy document and took place between 2002 and 2007 identified seven primary objectives for the future of Flathead County (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary).

#### 1. Protect the Views

One characteristic that residents of Flathead County cherish is the view. Views of mountains, lakes, forests, wildlife, and open spaces are cited as characteristics residents of Flathead County would not change. "Scenic resources" are valued throughout the county regardless of age, gender or location.

The Flathead County Growth Policy sets goals to protect views of mountains, forests, lakes and rivers enjoyed from public spaces and to protect the "wide open spaces" feel of rural Flathead County. Policies encourage growth that is non-detrimental to scenic resources and foster development opportunities that do not rob future generations of daily enjoyment of open spaces.

#### 2. Promote a Diverse Economy

The character of Flathead County's economy was frequently identified as an important opportunity for improvement. Residents of Flathead County desire a diverse economy that respects our heritage as a primary producer and promotes development of other sectors of the economy not traditionally found in rural Montana. Residents envision low unemployment and well-paying jobs. The cost of living and home ownership should be affordable to the median income.

One of the ways the Growth Policy influences economic diversity is by setting goals and policies to keep the jurisdiction attractive to present and future economic engines. Maintaining and promoting the unique character of Flathead County through the Growth Policy insures that Flathead County will continue to attract economic engines seeking the “western rural lifestyle” and offering well-paying jobs to a qualified workforce. Supporting this public vision is of particular importance following the economic recession that began in 2008 and had a profound effect on the County as well as the state of Montana.

### **3. Manage Transportation**

Increasing traffic and decreasing quality of roads were cited frequently as negatively impacting the character of Flathead County. Residents who participated in scoping meetings documented how increasing traffic reminded them of a growing suburban community and how a growth policy should address traffic volume, flow and safety.

As the population of any area increases, so will traffic volume, and no single factor creates or remedies traffic. The Growth Policy addresses traffic by examining a variety of public facilities and local services that impact the entire transportation network in the community. Land use patterns that impact traffic flow and volume are also reviewed. The Growth Policy identifies goals for locating and designing roads that mitigate traffic flow and safety issues.

### **4. Maintain the Identity of Rural Communities**

Preserving the rural lifestyle is a primary goal identified by many Flathead County residents. The ability to live “the simple life” and own land in a safe, quiet, and environmentally pristine neighborhood away from cities is a characteristic many residents value.

Preventing communities from growing together and losing their unique identities was another concern of many scoping meeting participants. The concern of seeing Flathead County turn into one continuous sprawling development was expressed in a variety of ways. Many residents of Flathead County do not want to see strip malls, used car lots, mini storage, warehouse stores, lumber yards, and other visually dominating land uses disrupt the perception of driving between unique rural communities.

The Growth Policy develops goals for protecting both the identity of individual communities and the overall rural character of Flathead County. Policies to achieve the goals balance the economic importance of growth and development with the need to protect the same characteristics that attract growth.

### **5. Protect Access to and Interaction with Parks and Recreation**

Outdoor recreational opportunities are a characteristic that defines the feel of Flathead County to many residents. From silent sports to motor sports, continued access to public lands and water bodies is a concern raised by many scoping meeting participants.

The Flathead County Growth Policy addresses the impact that growth can have on access to recreation as well as the quality of the forest, water bodies and parks that are the foundation of recreation in Flathead County. Goals for public recreation facilities and services offered by Flathead County are addressed.

## **6. Properly Manage and Protect the Natural and Human Environment**

A theme commonly expressed was responsible management of the natural and human environment. Air and water quality were mentioned frequently as well as co-habitation of people and wildlife being qualities that make Flathead County unique and desirable. Many residents expressed a desire to protect the lakes, rivers, ponds, groundwater and air for future generations. Residents also enjoy frequent interaction with and access to wildlife as a defining characteristic of Flathead County. Commercial use of timber was a resource characteristic that many residents wish to see preserved.

The Flathead County Growth Policy sets goals for achieving successful management of the natural and human environment while guiding continued growth and development. Protecting the cultural resources and heritage of Flathead County, while limiting interference with private land management opportunities, is a goal of the document.

## **7. Preserve the Rights of Private Property Owners**

A large number of meeting attendees cited protection of private property rights as a major concern. Few people specifically defined those rights, but it can be assumed all owners of private property have the same bundle of rights. As lots get smaller through subdivision, neighbors get closer. A balance must be achieved between zero regulation, which allows one landowner's use of land to impact the use, enjoyment and value of a neighbor's, and overregulation, which could be defined as regulation beyond goals outlined in the growth policy.

The Flathead County Growth Policy seeks to achieve that balance by respecting the cultural heritage of private property ownership in Montana and protecting the same rights of all residents. The addition of text describing private property rights and what they mean for residents of Flathead County has been included as part of the Growth Policy update, to provide additional guidance on this priority [see *Preface - Part 4*, pp. xxvi].

## **PART 2: How the Vision Guides the Growth Policy**

A plan created solely to comply with state law does not serve entirely the needs of a community. The seven elements outlined above are used to tie aspects of the Growth Policy together and guide the goals of the Growth Policy by maintaining a community context to all state-mandated criteria. The vision is not all inclusive; it represents the seven elements that the public prioritized. The goals proposed for each chapter are crafted to both achieve success in the categories required by state law and to preserve and protect the quality of life that makes Flathead County a wonderful place to live now and in the future.

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## CHAPTER 2: LAND USES

### Introduction

One of the single largest impacts of growth in any community is change to land uses. Many land uses are converted as access, infrastructure, visibility and other factors make certain uses more or less desirable. Changes in land use are an inevitable result of growth and can fuel multiple segments of an economy. However, without careful planning, some land uses can have unintended deleterious impacts to the surrounding area. This is especially true in communities with increasing populations and decreasing space or “buffers” between uses. The Flathead County Growth Policy seeks to allow the market to benefit naturally from the desirable impacts of growth and land use changes while protecting the community from the accompanying undesirable impacts to public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare (76-1-106, M.C.A.).

### Goal

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- G.1 Maintain communication and coordination on issues of land use planning with Federal, State and Tribal leaders for the benefit of all jurisdictions.

### Policies

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- P.1.1 Attempt to develop cooperative agreements with Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park on issues including, but not limited to, local economies, adjacent land development, road status changes, access to public lands, land use planning documents, public hearings, and noxious weed alleviation and control.
- P.1.2 Attempt to develop an intergovernmental agreement to codify jurisdiction issues with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes on their land.
- P.1.3 Attempt to develop cooperative agreements with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation on issues including, but not limited to, land use conversion, adjacent land development, land use planning documents, public hearings, trust land uses, public access for recreation, land acquisition and state exchanges of trust land with private and federal entities. Attempt to develop cooperative agreements with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks on issues including, but not limited to, public access for recreation, recreation programs and fishing access sites, among others.
- P.1.4 Attempt to develop strategies for the County to provide meaningful advice on land use issues to the appropriate Federal, State and Tribal agencies so the County can influence decisions, which are of vital interest to County residents on the 78.6% of land in the County controlled by those agencies.



- P.1.5 Communication and coordination between MT DNRC Trust Lands staff and the county will allow for local and regional planning that respects the revenue generating needs and realizes the best use, be it development or recognized conservation opportunities.

**Goal**

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- G.2 Preserve the rights of property owners to the use, enjoyment and value of their property and protect the same rights for all property owners.

**Policies**

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- P.2.1 Create land use regulations that are directly linked to the vision outlined in the Growth Policy.
- P.2.2 Regulatory and fiscal implementation of the Growth Policy should protect the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare in the process of community development (76-1-106, M.C.A.).
- P.2.3 Recognize the potential for imprecisely surveyed parcels throughout Flathead County as a result of the original surveying methods used by the General Land Office. As a result, respect private property rights by allowing minimum lot sizes that enforce the spirit of density guidelines without punishing those who own slightly less than standard acreage units.

**Goal**

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- G.3 Preserve the cultural integrity of private and public agriculture and timber lands in Flathead County by protecting the right to active use and management and allowing a flexibility of private land use that is economically and environmentally viable to both the landowner and Flathead County.

**Policies**

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- P.3.1 Develop an educational brochure that explains active use and management of timber lands and the impacts adjacent landowners can expect. Promote the document by distributing it to home buyers in Flathead County.
- P.3.2 Evaluate land uses and trends in agricultural and timber lands, and present ideas through research and discuss tools that could be used to encourage suitable development.
- P.3.3 Maintain flexibility of land use options to forest and agriculture land owners by focusing on mitigating the negative impacts of development.

- P.3.4 Develop equitable and predictable impact-mitigation for converting rural timber and agriculture lands to residential real estate.
- P.3.5 Identify reasonable densities for remote, rural development that do not strain the provision of services or create a public health or safety hazard.
- P.3.6 Identify and maintain benefits of private forest lands, including harvesting natural resources, water quality protection, wildlife habitat and traditional recreational values and ensure that conversion of private forest lands preserves as many of these benefits as is possible.
- P.3.7 Adopt techniques that mitigate the threat to public health and safety created by various developments near the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)
- P.3.8 Encourage federal and state agencies to actively manage timber lands to reduce fire hazard and increase positive local economic impacts of timber harvesting.

### **Goal**

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- G.4 Preserve and protect the right to farm and harvest as well as the custom, culture, environmental benefits and character of agriculture and forestry in Flathead County while allowing existing landowners flexibility of land uses.

### **Policies**

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- P.4.1 Develop an educational brochure that explains agriculture and agricultural practices and the impacts adjacent landowners can expect. Promote the document by distributing it to home buyers in Flathead County.
- P.4.2 Identify lands most suited to agriculture (appropriate soils, access to water, shape and size of parcels, etc.).
- P.4.3 Identify a desirable gross density for rural residential development that retains land values, preserves the agricultural character of the community and allows for efficient provision of government services (law enforcement, fire protection, transportation, etc.)
- P.4.4 Identify and encourage subdivision layouts that retain the value of land without negatively impacting the rural character and agricultural activities.
- P.4.5 Develop equitable and predictable impact-mitigation for converting agricultural lands to residential uses.

- P.4.6 Develop proposals for community-based incentives for farmers and forest landowners to maintain farms/forest in order to share the cost of preserving the custom, culture, and character of agriculture in Flathead County
- P.4.7 Create an agricultural/private timber lands board, with significant representation from the agricultural/timber community and the Flathead County Planning Board, to propose plans for conserving working farms and ranches, clean water and key wildlife habitat.
- P.4.8 If allowable, develop and adopt a Right to Farm/Harvest Ordinance and other policies as needed to support the viability of the agriculture/forestry industry in Flathead County.

**Goal**

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- G.5 Adequate industrial land in areas that are close enough to goods and services to be efficient but far enough from other uses to offset objectionable impacts to the human and natural environment.

**Policies**

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- P.5.1 Match requirements of industrial land uses (such as human resources, adequate water supply, suitable road networks) and areas of Flathead County where those requirements can best be met.
- P.5.2 Promote industrial parks and centers that take advantage of infrastructure and minimize impacts to the environment or adjacent land uses.
- P.5.3 Identify trends in industrial land uses and determine the amount of land needed in the future at a variety of growth rates. Utilize these figures when determining land use regulations.
- P.5.4 Identify “objectionable impacts” of industrial uses and determine desirable distance thresholds and buffers from other land uses.
- P.5.5 Restrict industrial uses that cannot be mitigated near incompatible uses such as residential, schools and environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands, floodplains, riparian areas, areas of shallow groundwater, etc.

**Goal**

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- G.6 Adequate commercial land that is safely accessible and efficiently serviceable.

**Policies**

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- P.6.1 Encourage internal, interconnected roads for commercial development and frontage roads where appropriate.
- P.6.2 Restrict commercial development in unsafe, inaccessible, remote rural areas.
- P.6.3 Provide ample commercial land designation to promote affordability.
- P.6.4 Require traffic impact analysis for all major commercial projects on major highways and arterials.
- P.6.5 Conserve resources and minimize transportation demand by encouraging redevelopment and infill of existing commercial areas in the county.

**Goal**

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- G.7 Consider existing community character in commercial land development.

**Policies**

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- P.7.1 Determine commercial development features that support the seven elements of the Flathead County Vision detailed in Chapter 1: The Character of Flathead County.
- P.7.2 Develop regulations that promote P.7.1 and mitigate the negative impacts of commercial development.
- P.7.3 Encourage small-scale, impact-mitigated and compatible commercial developments in accessible, developing rural areas with good access and away from urban areas.
- P.7.4 Identify existing areas that are suitable for impact-mitigated commercial uses.
- P.7.5 Encourage commercial development that is visually and functionally desirable.
- P.7.6 Encourage mixed use developments that share infrastructure requirements such as parking, pedestrian facilities, etc. and reduce traffic by promoting live/work situations where appropriate in Flathead County.

**Goal**

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- G.8 Safe, healthy residential land use densities that preserve the character of Flathead County, protect the rights of landowners to develop land, protect

the health, safety, and general welfare of neighbors and efficiently provide local services.

**Policies**

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- P.8.1 Create reasonable, flexible and predictable development guidelines based on accurate, fair and reasonable criteria.
- P.8.2 Identify required criteria for various densities that support the seven elements of the public's vision outlined in Chapter 1.
- P.8.3 Create maps that spatially represent the criteria identified in P.8.2.
- P.8.4 Set clear standards for amending development guidelines.

**Goal**

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- G.9 Define, identify and list desirable characteristics of open space preservation.

**Policies**

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- P.9.1 Identify open spaces that serve a critical role in public and environmental health, safety and general welfare.
- P.9.2 Create regulatory incentives for the preservation and protection of open spaces during the development process.
- P.9.3 Consider and develop specifications for various buffers to protect open spaces.

**Goal**

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- G.10 Restrict development on lands that pose an unreasonable risk to the public health, safety and general welfare of all Flathead County residents.

**Policies**

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- P.10.1 Discourage high density development within the 500-year floodplain.
- P.10.2 Discourage development within the 100-year floodplain that displaces floodwaters to neighboring properties.
- P.10.3 Encourage impact-mitigated development in areas of shallow groundwater. Use test holes or bore holes and best available data to determine areas of shallow groundwater.

- P.10.4 Restrict development directly on lands with steep slopes.
- P.10.5 Protect wetlands and riparian areas. See Goal 38 and Policies 38.1 through 38.4.
- P.10.6 Develop reasonable and fair criteria for identifying and preserving structures, artifacts and areas with cultural and historical significance to the residents of Flathead County. Such criteria shall not be used to prohibit development, but rather to encourage development that incorporates and protects these areas for future generations.
- P.10.7 On lands that contain areas both suitable and unsuitable for development, encourage open space development design techniques to cluster dwellings away from hazardous and/or unsafe areas.

**Goal**

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- G.11 Protection of scenic resources available to both residents and visitors.

**Policy**

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- P.11.1 Identify critical gateway areas that provide lasting impressions of Flathead County to both residents and visitors.
- P.11.2 Identify development impacts that threaten gateway areas and develop land use guidelines that mitigate these impacts without prohibiting development.
- P.11.3 Determine road and recreational waterway corridors with scenic resources that are valued by both residents and visitors.
- P.11.4 Create incentives for developments that consider the scenic settings, incorporate design and construction standards that harmonize and complement the local views, and where possible, provide incentives for excellent architectural design.
- P.11.5 Develop guidelines to ensure that lighting should not destroy the reasonable enjoyment by all residents of the night skies.

**Goal**

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- G.12 Mineral resource extraction that is safe, carefully planned, environmentally sound and appropriately segregated from incompatible land uses.

**Policies**

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- P.12.1 Identify areas of known sand and gravel resources.

- P.12.2 Identify areas of significant mineral resource deposits and develop accurate maps reflecting these areas.
- P.12.3 Create land use policies that segregate existing and future gravel extraction operations from incompatible land uses.
- P.12.4 Develop policies to mitigate the impacts of mineral resource extraction. These may include road maintenance, dust abatement or vegetative buffers.
- P.12.5 Designate areas where mineral resource extraction is most appropriate and will have the least impact on other resources and land uses.
- P.12.6 Restrict sand and gravel operations in areas that pose a threat to water quality.
- P.12.7 Encourage progressive reclamation of mineral extraction operations.
- P.12.8 Require compliance with existing local, state and federal laws regarding oil, gas, and mineral exploration or production.

**Goal**

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- G.13 An efficient, safe and accessible airport system to serve the dynamic needs of a rapidly growing economy.

**Policy**

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- P.13.1 Utilize future expansion plans of Glacier International Airport to create a land use designation that protects both the economic significance of the airport and the safety of neighbors and passengers.
- P.13.2 Provide development predictability to landowners neighboring the airport by designating growth areas.
- P.13.3 Abide by all applicable FAA guidelines for safety around airfields.
- P.13.4 Encourage the development of an airport-appropriate industrial/business center to provide convenient access to Glacier International Airport and serve a growing economy.
- P.13.5 Coordinate and cooperate with GPI on the Glacier Park International Airport Master Plan.

## Goal

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- G.14 Solid waste collection facility operation and landfill expansion free from land use conflicts with adjacent property owners.

## Policies

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- P.14.1 Identify a 1,320 foot buffer surrounding the landfill and designate this area only for those land uses compatible with current and future landfill activities. Compatible use types such as industrial should be encouraged in this buffer.
- P.14.2 Identify all suitable solid waste disposal options available to the County and implement a strategy to assure capacity is secured to meet future demands.
- P.14.3 Aesthetically screen satellite refuse collection sites (green boxes) and licensed junk vehicle collection sites to reduce the spread of litter and mitigate objectionable views.
- P.14.4 Encourage visually screened, wildlife resistant, centralized collection sites or contract hauling in new subdivisions.
- P.14.5 Consider existing, adjacent or nearby private or public solid waste collection facilities during the development process.

## PART 1: Federal, State and Tribal Lands (see Goal 1)

Flathead County is the third largest county in Montana encompassing approximately 3,262,720 acres or 5,098 sq. miles<sup>7</sup>. The land in Flathead County is managed by federal, state, local and tribal governments, as well as private property owners (See Map 2.1).

The federal government manages approximately 71.7% of the total land in Flathead County. The USDA Forest Service is responsible for management of National Forests. 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 1,875,545<sup>8</sup> acres within Flathead County that comprise nearly 57% of the total county acreage. Other National Forests that have lands within Flathead County are Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo (totaling approximately 115,390<sup>9</sup> acres). Combined, the National Forests and Wilderness Areas comprise approximately 59% of the total acreage of Flathead County.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau State & County Quick Facts; Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) – Montana State Library. Please note, this calculation includes only includes land area, exempting approximately 101,120 acres of water area in Flathead Lake.

<sup>8</sup> Montana Natural Resource Information System

<sup>9</sup> Montana Natural Resource Information System



National Forests are not the only land in Flathead County managed by the federal government. Totalling approximately 1,008,306<sup>10</sup> acres, Glacier National Park is split between Flathead County and Glacier County. Approximately 635,156<sup>11</sup> acres of Glacier National Park comprise 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<sup>12</sup>), Swan River National Wildlife Refuge (1,568 acres<sup>13</sup>), and the Flathead, Batavia, McGregor Meadows, Smith Lake and Blasdel Waterfowl Production Areas (totaling 5,189 acres<sup>14</sup>). Combined, Wildlife Refuges and Waterfowl Production Areas comprise 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 Division account for approximately 130,953 acres of Flathead County. The Federal Government granted these lands to the state under the Enabling Act at the time of Montana statehood in 1889. The lands were granted for the sole purpose of generating income for support of the common schools and other public institutions. The Enabling Act mandated that the lands, along with their proceeds and income, would be held in trust for the beneficiaries. As a means of generating revenue, a stipulation in the Enabling Act prohibited the state from disposing of an interest in these lands unless full market value is received. “Disposal of an interest” is considered to be the sale or exchange of the lands, or the granting of any use of them through issuance of a lease, license or easement, if such use is deemed to have a compensable value. Recreational use has been deemed to have a compensable value. The Land Board, whose members are the Governor, Secretary of State, State Auditor, Attorney General and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, oversees use of these lands and its responsibility is to assure that the mandate is met. Fish, Wildlife and Parks manages another approximately 3,235 acres<sup>15</sup> in Flathead County (See Chapter 4, Part 3).

The Flathead Indian Reservation comprises approximately 28,296 acres<sup>16</sup> of Flathead County. Approximately 24,315 acres of this total are owned by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and are not under the jurisdiction of the Flathead County Growth Policy. An estimated 3,024 acres of the Flathead Indian Reservation within Flathead County are non tribal owned private fee lands.<sup>17</sup> Any non tribal owned fee lands not owned by members of any Indian tribe would be under the jurisdiction of the Flathead County Growth Policy. An additional 2,520 acres of Flathead County within the Flathead Reservation are state owned lands.

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<sup>10</sup> National Park Service, Glacier National Park

<sup>11</sup> Montana Natural Resource Information System, February 2011

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.fws.gov/bisonrange/losttrail/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.fws.gov/bisonrange/swan/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fws.gov/bisonrange/wmd/>

<sup>15</sup> Natural Resource Information System, February 2011; Fish, Wildlife and Parks land ownership

<sup>16</sup> Natural Resource Information System, February 2011; Tribal and BIA land ownership

<sup>17</sup> Some of these lands could be owned by individual Tribal members.

Of the total 3,262,720 acres (or 5,098 sq. miles)<sup>18</sup> that make up Flathead County, approximately 2,564,498 acres (78.6%) are managed by federal, state or tribal interests and are not subject to the goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. The remaining 698,222 acres (approximately 21.4%) are managed by private landowners.<sup>19</sup>

## **PART 2: Private Property Rights (see Goal 2)**

During the scoping meetings of November 2005 through January of 2006, a number of Flathead County residents referenced protection of private property rights as a goal (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). Lands held by private owners are subject to the goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. It is appropriate to establish a goal of protecting the rights of private property owners. All private property ownership comes bundled with certain rights and responsibilities.

The majority of comments addressing property rights indicated that landowners should be able to do what they want on their property as long as it doesn't negatively impact neighbors, the environment, or the safety of the public. Conversely, some residents identified the desire to protect their property rights from the impacts of incompatible adjacent land uses. Some growth can and does negatively impact neighbor's property rights, the environment and/or public safety. The Growth Policy can be used to address these negative impacts, thereby preserving the use, enjoyment and value of all property well into the future. A discussion of property rights and what can be expected by the residents of Flathead County has been added to the Growth Policy as part of the 2011/2012 update process, and can be found in Part 6 of the Preface.

## **PART 3: Forest Land Uses (see Goals 3 and 4)**

Proactive forest management creates healthy forest ecosystems through practices including planting, thinning, and harvesting of forest vegetation. Proper management of forests protects the cultural integrity of Flathead County and promotes the health and safety of residents by reducing the risk of wildfires and contributing to the local economy. Forest land uses in Flathead County are divided into two types- public and private. "Forest land" means privately owned land being held and used primarily for the continuous purpose of growing and harvesting trees of a marketable species.

Public forest lands include federal and state lands on which contract harvesting takes place. The USDA Forest Service will auction portions of the Flathead National Forest to timber interests for harvests. In 2006, 29 million board feet were auctioned to private timber companies; by 2010 that number increased to over 43 million board feet harvested and auctioned. Since 2000, 337.5 million board feet have been harvested from lands owned by the USDA Forest Service (see Figure 2.1).<sup>20</sup> The State of Montana also manages forests

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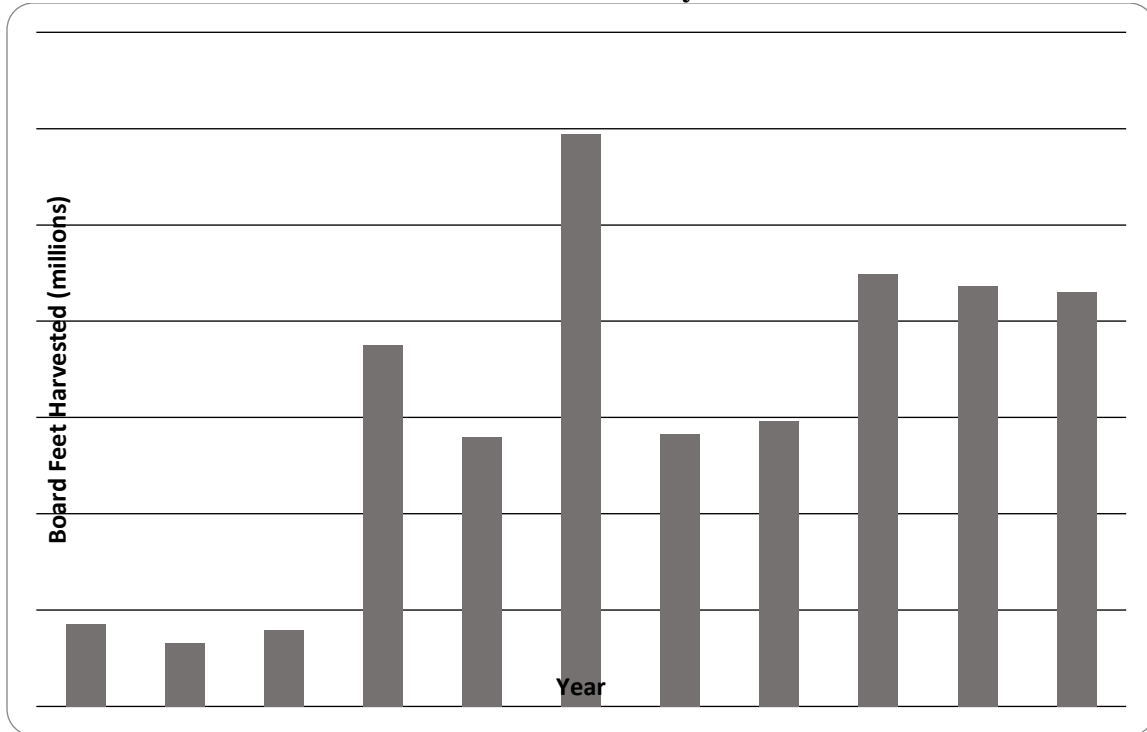
<sup>18</sup> U.S. Census Bureau State & County QuickFacts; this calculation includes only includes land area, exempting approximately 101,120 acres of water area in Flathead Lake.

<sup>19</sup> Natural Resource Information System, February 2011: private land ownership percentage

<sup>20</sup> United States Department of Agriculture – Flathead National Forest Timber Sale Reports, 2000-2010.

lands within Flathead County. Lands managed by the DNRC Trust Lands Management System account for approximately 130,953 acres of Flathead County.

**Figure 2.1**  
**Flathead National Forest Board Feet Harvested by Year**



Source: Flathead National Forest Timber Sale Reports, Calendar Year(s) 2000-2010

A substantial portion of the private property in Flathead County is used for timber production. The three largest timber landowners, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber, Plum Creek and Montana Forest Products together account for approximately 9.0% (295,500 acres) of the total land area in Flathead County (see Map 2.2). Land owned by these three corporations represents approximately 42.3% of the *private* land in Flathead County.<sup>21</sup> Many smaller operations also exist throughout Flathead County, contributing additional acreage to the private timberlands category. Although many of the private timber land owners generously allow public access to their land, these lands remain private. Private timberlands provide multiple positive benefits for Flathead County. In addition to the economic aspects of timber production and material products, these timber lands provide watershed protection, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities and other values. Private forest lands are also valuable reservoirs of mineral resources that are a necessary component of any growing community.

Many growth issues arise from private timber lands. Some residents perceive corporate timber lands to be “open space” and forget that the lands are being used to grow a sustainable product, similar to agriculture fields. Timber land owners utilize various

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.stoltzelumber.com>; <http://www.plumcreek.com>

silvicultural techniques and technologies to harvest timber materials using the machinery and procedures of the trade. Active forest management is essential to timber lands.

From a land use perspective, another issue arises from the conversion of timberlands to residential uses. Converting timberlands to residential real estate can be more profitable than harvesting timber. Excessive regulations and/or additional costs of owning land can hasten the conversion of timberlands to residential real estate as timberland managers look to maximize profits. However, the conversion of remote, rural lands to residential real estate impacts the community in a variety of ways. Public safety can be threatened as more people move into the wildland-urban interface. The wildland-urban interface (WUI) is commonly described as the zone where structures and other human development meet and intermingle with undeveloped wildland or forests.<sup>22</sup> This WUI zone is comprised of private and public lands and can pose risks to life, property, and infrastructure in associated communities if not mitigated. These risks to health and safety in the WUI can include inescapable wildfires and natural disasters or human contact with species such as bears, mountain lions, and wolves. Forest management practices which reduce the health and safety risks are essential in areas where public and private forest land border private properties. Risk reduction strategies can consist of commercial thinning projects and homeowner education, realizing that these practices are not a guarantee of home safety.

As is clear in the vision statement, the residents of Flathead County are interested in preserving the rural character of the county. Depending on the manner in which it is executed, residential development in rural areas can impact the character of a community, the health and safety of residents, the cost of providing public services (see *Chapter 7: Public Facilities and Services*) and the natural environment.

A balance can be achieved between providing flexible land use for corporate timber land owners and preserving the community vision by mitigating impacts to the rural character, cost of services and natural environment. As experienced stewards of the land, corporate timberland owners recognize the need to preserve the cultural integrity of rural Flathead County but must be allowed the economic flexibility to do so. Any effort to mitigate impacts of rural residential development must be reasonable, equitable and predictable.

#### **PART 4: Agricultural Land Uses (see Goals 3 and 4)**

Flathead County has a long tradition of agricultural land uses. Since the first settlers came to the valley, residents have sought to make a living by growing crops and raising cattle. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a substantial portion of the land in Flathead County is still used for agriculture (see Map 2.3). Back in 2002, approximately 40% of the private land (234,861 acres) in Flathead County was being farmed. By contrast, in 2007 roughly 251,597 acres or 36% of privately held land in Flathead County was used for agricultural purposes.<sup>23</sup> According to the most recent Census of Agriculture conducted in 2007, there were approximately 1,094 individual farms operating in the County, with the majority of these

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<sup>22</sup> Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction / Mitigation Plan

<sup>23</sup> USDA 2002 and 2007 Census of Agriculture; the next update is scheduled for 2012

farms (81%) being under 179 acres in size. Over half the farms in Flathead County had annual sales of less than \$2,500.00. These numbers indicate that a large portion of the farms in Flathead County are small hobby farms and not the primary source of income for the residents. Similar to the agricultural census data for 2002, in 2007 there were only 77 farms over 500 acres in size and 112 farms with annual sales of over \$50,000. These farms are more likely to be primary occupations of the landowners and represent a substantial portion of the agricultural acreage in Flathead County.<sup>24</sup>

Many flat areas of the Flathead Valley have very productive soils. Areas of deep, well structured and well drained soils are capable of producing a variety of crops. For more on soils, see *Chapter 8: Natural Resources*. Some of the major crops produced by Flathead County farmers include wheat, barley, flax, alfalfa, grain hays, silage, and livestock pasture. Specialty crops such as seed potatoes, mint, lawn sod, canola, mustard, raspberries, strawberries, grapes and vegetable crops are also important products.<sup>25</sup>

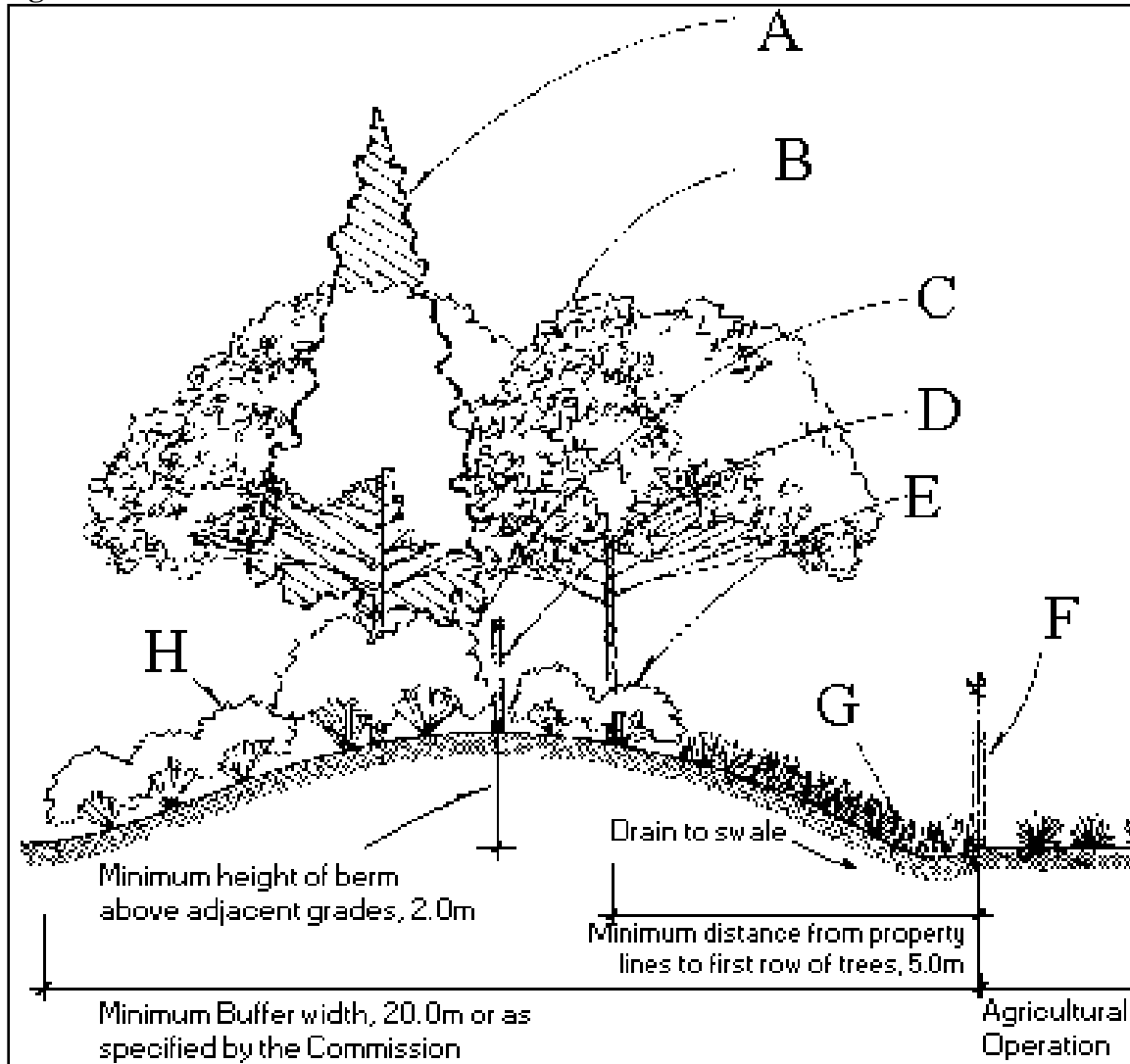
It is clear that agriculture plays a vital role in both the economy and culture of Flathead County. The custom and culture of agriculture in Flathead County is one of the features that is contributing to rapid growth and development. Lands that have traditionally been used for agriculture are being converted increasingly to residential uses as residents seek rural living. Issues can result from mixing residential and agricultural culture when new rural residents are unpleasantly surprised by the sights, sounds and smells associated with farming. Rural living requires adjustments from urban living, and it is unreasonable to expect that farming techniques could or would change when an adjacent field is converted to a residential subdivision. Vegetative buffers on the edges of new developments which abut existing agricultural operations can aid in lessening the cross contamination of weeds, chemicals, noise and odors. An example of such a buffer is seen in Figure 2.2 below.

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<sup>24</sup> USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture

<sup>25</sup> Flathead County Natural Resource Use Policy

Figure 2.2  
Agricultural Land Use Buffer - EXAMPLE ONLY



Source: British Columbia Agricultural Land Commission<sup>26</sup>

- A- Yearly coniferous screen
- B- Summer deciduous screen.
- C- Shrubs to block wind-blown weed seeds.
- D- Optional wood fence (invisible due to shrubs).
- E- Trespass inhibiting shrubs.
- F- Landowner fence
- G- Drainage swale.
- H- Additional trespass inhibiting shrubs.

There are no accurate data for the number of acres converted from agricultural to residential uses in Flathead County each year, but that conversion is a primary concern of many residents of Flathead County. There are a variety of factors contributing to this conversion. Current landowners are interested in farming as long as it is economically viable, but the

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.alc.gov.bc.ca/>

increasing costs of farming (land, machinery, fuel, labor, etc.) combined with stagnant crop revenue impacts that viability. Farmers in Flathead County are aging and, although there is great interest in agricultural practices among the younger population, none can afford to buy land when competing with residential developers. Extraction of minerals is also a viable use of many formerly agricultural lands as landowners seek more value from their property. The custom and culture of agriculture in Flathead County is at risk, not from a lack of interest or land capable of producing, but from land values that cannot justify agricultural uses and the currently poor economic climate for farming in Flathead County.

### **PART 5: Industrial Land Uses (see Goal 5)**

Industrial applications commonly have a greater impact on the surrounding community than other land uses. It is difficult to mitigate the impacts of industrial land uses due to their inherent nature. However, no economy can function without the important goods and services provided by industry. It is important for a growth policy to identify the existing and anticipated land use needs of a growing economy and plan for areas where industry can function efficiently with minimal impact on the natural and human environment.

Identifying appropriate land for industrial uses presents special issues for any community. Given the possibility that industrial uses will have a deleterious impact on the rights of adjacent property owners, it would seem desirable to segregate them. Certain industrial uses, such as those that have toxic byproducts, must be sufficiently separated from residential areas, schools, playgrounds, environmentally sensitive areas, etc. However, industry needs to be near a base of services in order to be efficient. The further industry is located from goods, services and people, the further all three must be transported. Industrial parks and centers provide a regional service by serving a growing economy with needed industrial space and co-locating potentially hazardous land uses in areas that have been designated as being minimally impacted by odors, heavy truck traffic, noise, etc.

Flathead County currently has approximately 333,136 acres that are zoned.<sup>27</sup> Many of these lands are located around or between the business centers of Flathead County, generally known as Bigfork, Kalispell, Evergreen, Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Of the 333,136 acres of land with regulated land uses, only 1,497 acres are zoned for uses commonly defined as industrial. A limited quantity of land makes prices higher and creates difficulties for businesses seeking efficient locations. This situation leads industrial business owners to acquire property further from services than they might desire, typically in unzoned areas of the County. Industry located far from services creates problems for water, sewer, transportation, safety and human resources.

With growth comes a demand for an increase in the number of businesses serving the population. It is important to locate industrial uses close enough to services to increase efficiency but far enough from established residential uses to avoid objectionable impacts.

### **PART 6: Commercial Land Uses (see Goals 6 and 7)**

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<sup>27</sup> This includes some Federal and State land included in select zoning districts (North Fork, Ashley Lake, CALURS, etc.)

One of the most important engines of the Flathead economy is the variety of small and large businesses. These businesses are important employers, taxpayers and service providers. In 2001 there were 3,279 private, non farm businesses in Flathead County employing approximately 29,075 people.<sup>28</sup> Only two years later (2003), there were 3,594 private non farm establishments employing approximately 29,906 people.<sup>29</sup> By 2009 a total of 4,250 private, non-farm businesses were established in Flathead County, employing an average 32,492 people a year.<sup>30</sup> By efficiently locating businesses so as to mitigate the negative impacts on views, traffic, and the identity of the local community, a diverse economy with a positive impact on the local community by providing goods and services where they are needed can be promoted. Inefficiently located businesses can be a high-impact burden to both the human and natural environment, and the cumulative costs to the community can outweigh the benefits.

Commercial land uses are unique for their ability to adapt and blend with other land uses. Mixing uses is especially appropriate when mutually negative impacts are mitigated. When land is visible, accessible and relatively affordable, there are limitless possibilities for commercial uses to match the local community character. Unlike industrial uses, commercial uses can more easily mitigate negative impacts to the surrounding neighborhoods, typically with minimal effort or expense. Visual impacts can easily be softened by simply building a few feet further back from the road and planting a few trees. Safety hazards can be corrected with frontage roads, turning lanes, sign controls, etc. However, it should be recognized that impact mitigation might preclude short-term profitability for some businesses and they will choose to locate elsewhere.

It is important to note that many commercial uses can have a positive impact by efficiently providing localized goods and services and an improved sense of community and place. Locating small scale commercial developments in the middle of developing rural areas can create places for neighbors to meet. Successful integration of such commercial uses requires careful planning to create a development within the character of the existing neighborhood and provides the developer marketable amenities. Such rural commercial can help to lessen traffic as nearby residents no longer need to drive into town to shop or conduct business.

Flathead County currently has a mix of commercial land uses. Some are fixtures in a local community, built and operated to integrate seamlessly into the community. Others are buildings built to provide maximum function to the business owner. Combining the need for commercial land uses with the vision of residents is both a function of where they are located, and the impact on the local community. All but one of the seven elements of the public's vision for the future of the county outlined in Chapter 1 are directly impacted by the manner in which commercial land is developed. County residents regularly comment on the need to prevent "strip development" from dominating the rural landscape between business centers. Strip development is a pattern of commercial development located along

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<sup>28</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30/30029.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/cbpnaic/cbpsect.pl>

<sup>30</sup> Montana Department of Labor & Industry, Quarterly Census of Employment & Wages Program



one or both sides of a street which is generally one lot in depth and is characterized by multiple and relatively closely spaced driveways, visually dominant parking schemes, low landscaping ratios and high floor area ratios within the development. It is not a common remark that no development should take place, just that a certain type of development should be avoided. Again, the *impact* of the development is just as important as the location of the development.

Current land use regulations allow commercial uses in a variety of designated areas. It is difficult to account for exact acreages of existing commercial designations because of the varying definitions of commercial uses between zoning districts. There are approximately 973 acres of “Business” zoning, with an additional 460 acres (approximate) designated “Business Resort”. There are approximately 368,023 acres of private property in the County which are unzoned.

### **PART 7: Residential Land Uses (see Goal 8)**

Residential lots are the single most rapidly growing land use in Flathead County, but economic conditions in the past five years have influenced the rate at which development is occurring. In 2005, 535 new residential lots hit the market in rural Flathead County. Although the number of lots created in 2005 is less than that of 2004, it still represents 1,928 new acres of residential land (see Table 2.1). The number of lots created through subdivision remained relatively high through 2008 before beginning a sharp decline as a result of the economic downturn. By 2009 the number of lots created through subdivision totaled 203, less than half as many as were created the previous year. By the end of 2010 only 38 lots had been created, for a total of 74 acres subdivided. It should be noted that these figures do not include lots and acreage totals from activities exempt from subdivision review such as family transfer or court ordered split. The change in land uses from agriculture and timberlands to residential and the accompanying impacts of that change, create some of the greatest growth challenges to the county.

**Table 2.1**  
**2000-2010 Lots Created and Acreage Converted by Year.**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Lots Created<sup>31</sup></b>	<b>Total Acreage Subdivided<sup>32</sup></b>
2000	260	3,030
2001	326	1,659
2002	517	3,386
2003	592	2,081
2004	894	2,644
2005	535	1,928
2006	420	2,371
2007	705	2,292

<sup>31</sup> Number of lots does not include lots created using an exemption from subdivision review such as family transfer or court ordered split.

<sup>32</sup> Acreages do not include land divided using an exemption from subdivision review such as family transfer or court ordered split.

2008	430	1,349
2009	203	1,024
2010	38	74
<b>Total</b>	<b>4920</b>	<b>21,838</b>
<b>Average per year</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>1,985</b>

Source: Flathead County Planning and Zoning Subdivision Database

The density of residential developments is an issue raised throughout the public involvement process (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). Residential development, including the subdivision of land, is not inherently problematic. However, residential development at a density that is not compatible with existing local services and neighborhood character is likely to be contentious.

Inappropriate residential density causes a variety of challenges. Road capacity determines efficiency of traffic movement. Capacity is based on the size and quality of the road, and once the capacity is exceeded, public safety suffers. Low density residential land uses on low capacity roads are a match, but medium or high density land uses on low capacity roads create problems. Emergency services such as fire, ambulance and law enforcement have a level of service that is dictated by response times. The further a development is located from services being provided, the longer the response times and likelihood of tragedy. High density development with delayed response times for emergency services is not a match. Low density land uses in areas with delayed response times are more appropriate for the welfare of the landowner and the public as a whole.

Appropriate densities can be dictated by the land itself. Areas with shallow groundwater or limited access to groundwater are more suited to low density residential land uses (see Map 2.4). High density residential land uses should be avoided in areas of steep slopes due to the risk of rockslides, mudslides, severe erosion, earthquakes, and avalanches (see Map 2.5). Although it is easy for a community to gradually forget about the devastating impacts of floods, floodplains with less than a 1% chance of flooding each year (areas between the 100 and 500-year floodplain) are still sure to flood again (see Map 2.6). The community should be vigilant about avoiding high density residential development in flood prone areas. History shows that taxpayers bear the burden of flood recovery, so it is prudent to minimize that expense through reasonable planning. Denying all development would be unreasonable. Allowing high density development in an area known to be at risk of flooding is unwarranted and irresponsible because it knowingly allows a future catastrophe to both those that live in the floodplain and the community that will be burdened with the cost of recovery.

Access to recreation is a factor that can limit density if a healthy community is to be promoted. Flathead County is surrounded by millions of acres of public lands on which residents can recreate (see Map 2.1). The downside is that many of these lands are “destination” recreation areas requiring full day excursions. Quick, convenient access to recreation such as pedestrian and walking trails and ball fields promotes a healthy community in which citizens will utilize recreation because it is convenient to their daily lives. High density residential land uses can be appropriate in areas with convenient places

for children and adults to recreate (see Chapter 4: Parks and Recreation). The County has acknowledged the importance of these resources by creating and adopting a Parks & Recreation Master Plan as well as a Trails Plan, to be incorporated and recognized as part of the 2012 Growth Policy update.

Many residents of Flathead County have expressed frustration with favorite hunting grounds being converted to subdivisions. Others have expressed concern over new subdivisions negatively impacting “backyard wildlife” encounters. The density of residential land use has a significant impact on wildlife and wildlife habitat if not adequately mitigated. When proper development techniques are combined with a low overall density, humans and wildlife can successfully co-exist. It is unreasonable to stop all development in wildlife habitat, but it is also unreasonable to allow high density development in areas that are critical to the healthy management of wildlife populations.

Local access to commercial goods and services can partially mitigate impacts of medium density development in rural areas. Residents of the county frequently mention traffic and traffic-related issues as a source of frustration. Some of the traffic is attributable to rural residents making frequent trips into urbanized areas of the county to shop and do business. Local access to libraries, coffee shops, hair salons, movie rentals, cafés, etc., can not only reduce some traffic on arterial roads and highways, but also act as neighborhood focal points.

One of the most important goals identified by residents of Flathead County is preservation of the character and identity of rural areas. Traditionally, the character of an area is a combination of features that make an area unique. Many features already discussed contribute to the character of rural areas of Flathead County. Country roads, wildlife, rural cafes and low density residential land uses are just a few examples of rural character. Another feature of rural character is the “feel” of wide open spaces and low population density. This “feel” is the product of large lots, mountain views, quiet neighborhoods, dark night skies and many other less obvious features. The “wide open spaces” so commonly associated with Montana are a critical component of rural character.

It is important to note that open space and residential development are not mutually exclusive. Many successful and marketable subdivisions in Flathead County have utilized open space development design. Preserving open space during creation of residential subdivisions in rural and suburban areas has a positive impact on all criteria previously discussed. Developers should be encouraged to preserve open space through density bonus incentives.

## **PART 8: Open Space Land Uses (see Goal 9)**

Flathead County residents value the wide open spaces associated with living in “big sky country.” The character of a community is not the only thing open spaces preserve. Agriculture, timber, tourism, construction, recreation, and other important economic engines rely on a balance of undeveloped and developed lands. Open spaces also preserve lands critical to the proper functioning of the natural environment, such as riparian areas,

wildlife habitats, wetlands, floodplains, etc. In fact, many of the items identified as critical to the future well being of Flathead County by residents of the county (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary) depend on careful mixing of development with open space preservation.

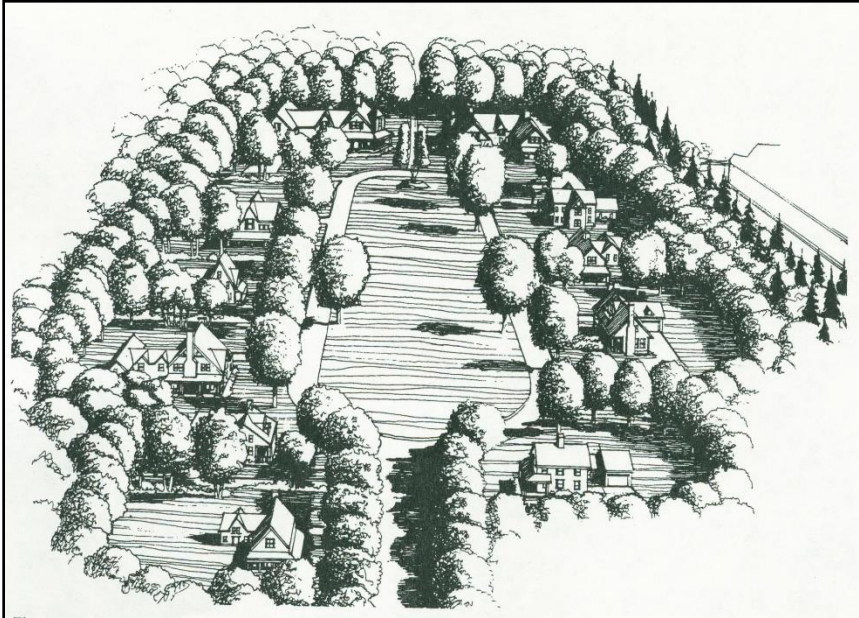
Open space can take many forms. During the development process, agricultural lands can be set aside in a portion of a subdivision. Those lands can then be leased to farmers for a minimal charge. The farmer can farm the land, while those living in the development can pay the taxes on the land from which they derive the scenic benefits. Conservation easements can be used to lower taxes paid on land by a landowner, while benefiting both the natural and human environment. In 2010 nearly 34,000 acres in Flathead County were held in conservation easement. The majority of acreage under easement is currently managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (9,960 acres) or the Montana Land Reliance (8,143 acres), with the remaining acreage managed by organizations including the Flathead Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the Vital Ground Foundation, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Forest Service.<sup>33</sup> Common areas, greens and ball fields can improve the character of a development and increase financial benefits to developers while increasing the overall health of the future residents (See Figure 2.3). Even areas of grass, shrubs and trees between roads and commercial or residential land uses can function as critical open space, softening the impact of both land uses and increasing property values (see Figure 2.4).

Open space preservation should consider the benefits of regional coordination. Recreation, the natural environment, and the economy all benefit when open spaces link up and allow a natural flow of humans and wildlife; these linkages have been contemplated in both the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan as well as the Trails Plan to be adopted as elements of this Growth Policy. Riparian areas and bicycle path easements are perfect examples of the benefits of contiguous open space preservation.

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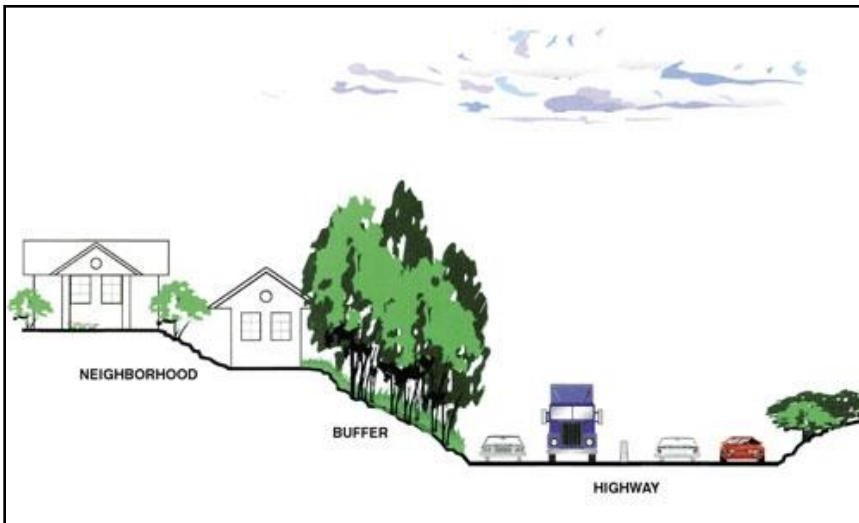
<sup>33</sup> For additional information reference *Appendix A; Baseline Analysis*.

**Figure 2.3**  
**Functional Open Space in a Subdivision**



Source: Rural by Design

**Figure 2.4**  
**Buffer – EXAMPLE ONLY**



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration<sup>34</sup>

Compliance with the elements of the public vision set forth in Chapter 1 demands fair and predictable methods of defining and preserving open space. All lands on which developments do not currently exist are not automatically considered critical open spaces. Private property rights may not be violated with open space policies that unfairly force a few landowners to bear the financial burden of creating scenery for the public. Conversely, all lands in Flathead County are not to be developed to the maximum possible density and

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/index.html>

intensity of land use at the expense of the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order or general welfare of residents.

A reasonable middle ground is development incentives for voluntary dedication of open spaces for the enjoyment of future generations. If open spaces are preserved only until the next developer can adequately profit, bonuses are granted but no preservation for the sake of public health, safety, morals, convenience, order or general welfare of *future generations* has occurred. Flathead County must plan for a desirable future economy and character.

Currently there are thousands of acres of “open space” with which Flathead County residents are fortunate to interact every day. New developments may either permanently preserve the integrity and character of “big sky country” or erase it. At the rate Flathead County is developing, once a property is fully developed, the opportunity to preserve even small areas of open space for the health of residents is lost. Many fully developed communities nationwide have determined that open spaces are important enough to spend large sums of public money to buy back developed properties. Flathead County is currently in a position to plan ahead and prevent tax dollars from being spent in the future by offering incentives for developers to preserve open spaces now.

#### **PART 9: Lands Unsuitable for Development (see Goal 10)**

There are lands in Flathead County on which development would pose such a substantial threat to the health, safety and general welfare of the entire community that it is reasonable to guide all growth away from these areas. It must be said that such areas comprise a relatively small percentage of Flathead County. However, it is important that an effort to protect the welfare of the community by identifying lands unsuitable for development should only delineate the minimum area to accomplish the goal. Prohibiting development in additional areas such as buffers is unreasonable and those areas should be considered areas of low density development.

100-year floodplains are areas where there is a 1% chance of flooding in any given year based on the historical flood of record [see Maps 2.6 and 2.6(a)]. The federal government requires minimum standards be observed in these areas, but local communities can regulate beyond the minimums to protect taxpayers and residents from future flood events. Fill in the floodplain raises the ground level above the base flood elevation, but this simply displaces flood waters to other areas of the community and is both extremely unfair to other landowners on the flood fringe and hazardous due to unpredictable flood processes.

Areas prone to high groundwater pose a special risk to both the public and the landowner. Previous generations have been familiar with the risks of living in areas subject to flooding from rising groundwater or pooling rain and have avoided development in these areas. Homes constructed in areas of shallow groundwater are far more likely to experience flooding, mold and unstable foundations. During drought years, it is easy to forget the impacts of shallow groundwater to the health and safety of Flathead County residents. Some health issues created by mold-infested living areas are a burden to all county taxpayers and are sometimes avoidable in new subdivisions. Areas subject to shallow

groundwater should be identified, and regulating development in these areas is a responsible action that should be taken for the health and safety of current and future residents.

Steep slopes can be extremely unsafe (see Map 2.5). Dynamic processes occur in these areas that are not compatible with public health and safety. Rock slides, flash floods, tree falls, avalanches, and unstable soils are among the more serious hazards in steep terrain. Flathead County is also an area of known seismic activity, making development in areas of steep slopes additionally hazardous (see Map 2.7). The vast majority of lands in Flathead County that exceed slopes of 30% are in National Forest and State lands. However, there is private property on which a steep slope designation would apply and those lands should be restricted from development directly upon the steep slopes.

Wetlands serve a variety of important functions in the natural environment. From retaining flood waters during rain events to filtering natural and man-made pollutants from water, wetlands are a critical resource that can be threatened by unrestricted development. Degrading the function of wetlands negatively impacts the entire community when rain and flood waters take on a more “flashy” character or when water quality in lakes, rivers and groundwater begins to degrade. It is reasonable to prohibit development in wetlands as long as the areas are delineated using scientific methods. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service has inventoried wetlands throughout the United States, but the accuracy of some wetland inventory maps is questioned by many experts [see Maps 2.8 and 2.8(a)]. An accurate, unbiased and scientifically-based method should be utilized for identifying wetlands on individual properties to ensure the development rights of landowners are not impacted by inaccurate designations.

Northwest Montana and Flathead County contain a variety of areas with historical and cultural significance. Original homestead structures, Native American hieroglyphs, and historic trails and railroad beds are some of the cultural phenomenon that should be preserved for the education and enjoyment of future generations. Some development can destroy these important links to the custom and culture of Flathead County, and once they are gone, they cannot be retrieved. It is worth noting that these land uses are frequently very small. Prohibiting development on a property just because a historic farmstead is there would be unreasonable. Allowing the destruction of a historic farmstead structure to make way for new town homes would also be unreasonable. In keeping with the vision principals outlined by the residents of Flathead County, development should seek to incorporate and highlight the cultural significance of historic places and artifacts. Due to the subjective nature of determining cultural and historical significance, reasonable minimum criteria for such a determination should be established.

## **PART 10: Special Need Areas (see Goals 11 through 14)**

When planning for growth in Flathead County, it is important to identify special need areas critical to the vision of the residents. Some land uses do not fit neatly under the criteria above but play a vital role in the future of Flathead County. Land uses that have a potential

to impact any of the attributes that drive the Flathead economy are areas of special needs. One of the single greatest economic attributes of Flathead County is tourism. Tourists flock to northwest Montana to visit Glacier National Park, recreate in the national forests, and shop at local businesses. Numerous shops and services cater to the tourist seeking the “Montana experience” of open spaces, friendly people and beautiful scenery.

Scenic resources are so critical to both the character of Flathead County and the diversity of the Flathead economy that it is the number one most mentioned aspect of Flathead County to protect (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). If the growth policy is a document that serves the desires of the public, then preserving the scenery is of the utmost importance. Scenic resources are not just views of mountains, but views of forests and open spaces as well. Scenic resources might be defined as views that are unique to Flathead County. However, it is impractical and unreasonable for the growth policy to protect every view from every vantage point in Flathead County. It is reasonable to focus on areas of *public scenic resources*.

Most of the scenery viewed from public spaces in Flathead County is from roads and recreational waterways. It is of utmost importance to protect these scenic resources. It is extremely important to recognize that preserving scenic resources does NOT mean prohibiting development. Scenic resources are not threatened by development that “blends in” and follows a minimal number of simple guidelines. Any land use guidance applied to scenic resources should address the negative impacts of development to scenic resources and suggest ways development can enhance such resources.

Gateway areas of Flathead County are areas where local residents and tourists are treated to some of the most beautiful views in the world. Unrestricted development can negatively impact important scenic resources and make Flathead County feel like anywhere else. It is important to develop minimal land use guidance that ensures the preservation of these resources. Gateway areas differ from scenic corridors in that views are more expansive and can be negatively affected by a larger number of development impacts.

There are special need areas that have little to do with scenery and more to do with safety, economic diversity, and public health. There are currently 245 gravel pits identified in Flathead County as active, inactive, reclaimed or unknown; according to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality there are currently 142 open cut mining operations permitted in Flathead Valley.<sup>35</sup> Existing gravel deposits are a needed resource for growth in Flathead County. However, the extraction, processing and transportation of gravel can create negative impacts to the community. Some argue that gravel operations should not be located near schools, homes and businesses, while others argue that schools, homes and businesses should not be located in areas of known gravel deposits. Future growth will have the perplexing affect of creating more schools, homes, businesses AND gravel extraction sites. Since the gravel extraction industry has little choice of where to locate, it is desirable to identify areas of gravel deposits that will serve the need of growth in Flathead County and restrict these areas to low density development and prohibit high impact public

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<sup>35</sup> Flathead County Geographic Information System; Montana Department of Environmental Quality Open Cut Mining Permitting Section



facilities such as schools. Given the potential impact of such a land use policy, it is also reasonable to limit the area from which gravel can be extracted. The transportation of gravel should be restricted to roads capable of accommodating gravel trucks without posing an undue threat to public safety. Gravel located in environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands and areas of high groundwater should not be extracted due to the potential impact to the health of all residents. Gravel extraction should be located in areas where the impacts can be adequately mitigated. Sand and gravel resources in Flathead County are addressed further in Chapter 9 of the Growth Policy document, in conformance with changes to the M.C.A. requirements for growth policies adopted in 2009.

Transportation in general has special land use needs. Areas like Glacier International Airport that serve the economy of Flathead County have special needs that are not met by standard land use considerations. Tourism, business, and emergency services in Flathead County depend on Glacier International Airport to provide efficient transportation services to and from Flathead County. In order to serve a growing county, the airport will need to expand and modify its existing site. Any airport has an impact on neighbors due to the volume and frequency of aircraft. A buffer area around Glacier International Airport that provides reasonable land use designations to protect both the future of the airport and the welfare of the neighboring land owners is both reasonable and desirable.

Buffering is a technique that can work in other special need areas. The Flathead County Landfill is well served by a buffer with adjacent land uses. The existing 275-acre landfill site has a projected life expectancy of approximately 29 to 57 years, depending upon the rate of growth.<sup>36</sup> Given the importance of refuse disposal to any growing area, it is reasonable to protect the ability of the Flathead County Landfill to continue providing service. Protecting this ability, as well as protecting the health, safety and welfare of adjacent land owners calls for a special need area to be designated around the landfill. This buffer serves to mitigate the impacts of the landfill to adjacent property owners as well as protect the ability of the landfill to expand and serve the future of Flathead County.

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<sup>36</sup> Flathead County Solid Waste District

## CHAPTER 3: DEMOGRAPHICS AND HOUSING

### Introduction

Conventional approaches to community planning examine population change over time, analyzing past and current population growth patterns to better predict future trends. Analysis of population incorporates not only the increase or decrease in the number of people, but also the gender, age, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the population. Understanding these population attributes allows communities to anticipate and plan for the future needs of its residents.

One of the basic needs for a growing population is housing. Housing is a fundamental element in the way communities grow and develop. The location and density of new housing are major drivers of transportation patterns, access to public services, and energy consumption. Housing is a prominent feature of the built environment, an investment and consumptive good, a symbol of personal history and familial connections, and a determinant of social interaction and achievement. A home is the largest purchase an individual is likely to make in a lifetime.

### Goal

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G.15 Promote a diverse demographic of residents.

### Policies

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P.15.1 Encourage housing, employment, education and recreation to attract, support and maintain young families.

P.15.2 Provide services and facilities to support elderly and special-needs residents.

P.15.3 Promote and respect the culture, heritage and history of Flathead County residents.

### Goal

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G.16 Safe housing that is available, accessible, and affordable for all sectors of the population.

### Policies

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P.16.1 Provide land use-based incentives and density bonuses for the promotion and development of affordable housing opportunities for a range of household types, family sizes, incomes, and special consideration groups.

P.16.2 Create an affordable housing plan for the county which includes evaluating the need for a county housing committee and establishing coordination between the county and the cities of Columbia Falls, Kalispell, and Whitefish.

P.16.3 Promote the development of affordable single and multi-family housing in areas of adequate service networks.

P.16.4 Consider the locational needs of various types of housing with regard to proximity of employment, access to transportation and availability of public services.

P.16.5 Promote the rehabilitation of historic and/or architecturally significant structures for the purpose of conversion to housing.

P.16.6 Consider the advisability of adopting a building inspection procedure for new residential construction.

P.16.7 Identify areas suitable for quality mobile home park development.

### **Goal**

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G.17 Encourage affordable homeownership in Flathead County.

### **Policies**

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P.17.1 Include provisions in the county zoning and subdivision regulations to promote affordable homeownership throughout the county.

P.17.2 Incorporate density bonuses in zoning and subdivision regulations for developments offering affordable homeownership.

P.17.3 Encourage mobile home parks as a form of affordable homeownership in areas with access to public sewer and water.

P.17.4 Develop zoning and design standards for Class A manufactured housing.

P.17.5 Encourage the establishment of public/private partnerships as a method to offer financing to first time homebuyers.

P.17.6 Establish affordable housing standards for developing infrastructure that would reduce the cost of affordable lots while maintaining the character of the projects.

P.17.7 Develop criteria for developers to meet to qualify for affordable housing incentives.

## PART 1: Population

### Population Growth

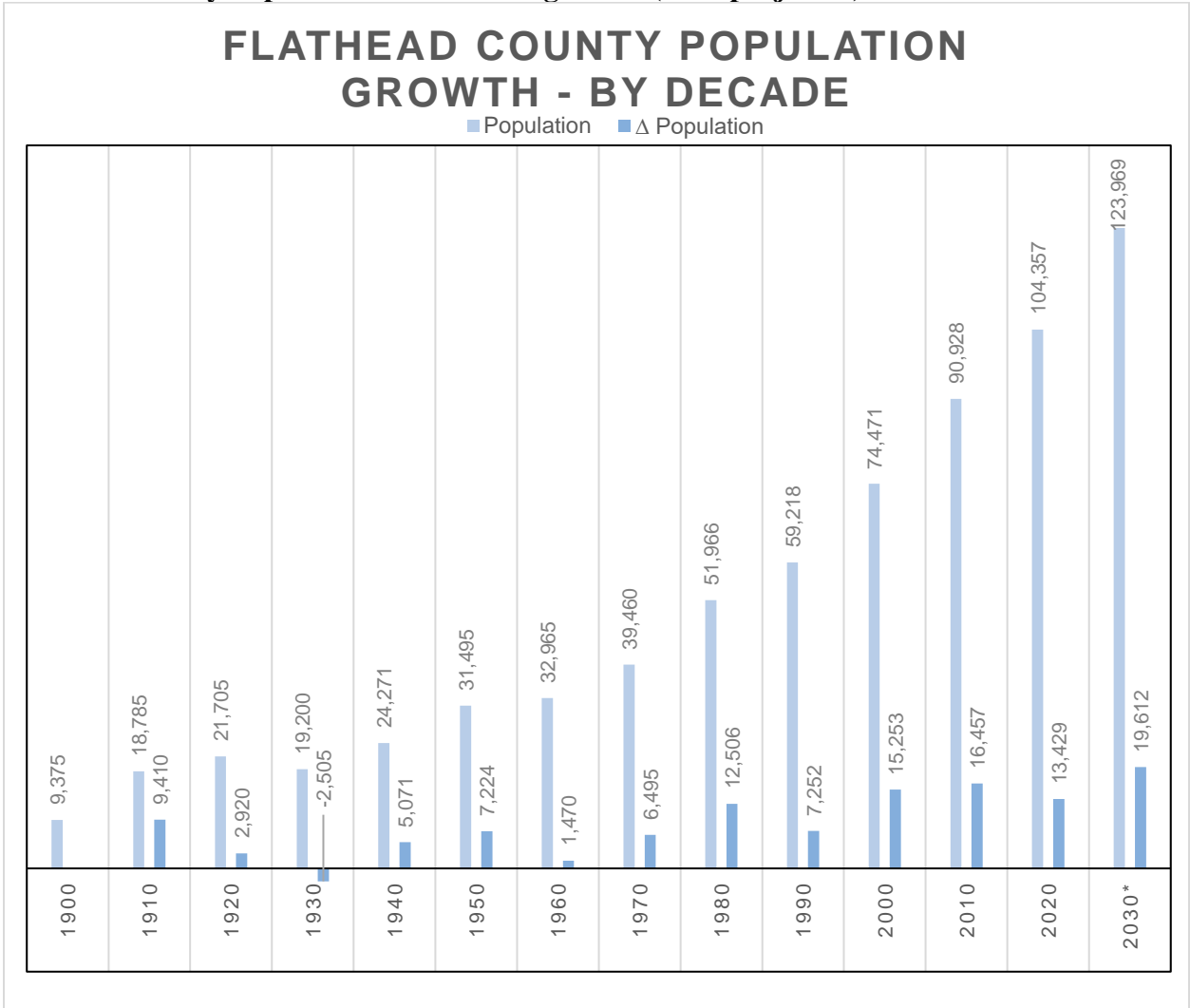
Population growth in Flathead County over the past 100 years has been significant and dynamic, as shown in Figure 3.1 below. With the exception of the period between 1920 and 1930, growth has generally exceeded 10% over the course of each decade. Only the decade between 1950 and 1960 experienced a single digit population growth of 5%. In total, population growth over the last 120 years has been approximately 94,982 people, which translates into over a 10-fold population increase in the County. For a detailed account of the historical growth and development of Flathead County, please refer to Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

The population boom of recent time began in the 1970s when population growth accelerated dramatically. The largest growth rate for any 10 year period since 1900 was the ten year period between 1970 and 1980 which experienced a 32% increase in population from 39,460 to 51,966 residents. This growth lessened during the 1980's to 14% as the population increased by 7,252 people. From 1990 to 2000 the growth in population resumed its post 1970 charge with a 20.5% increase, resulting in a 2000 population of 74,471 people. Since then, the population has steadily increased by approximately 15,000 people or so every 10 years. Given changes in migration patterns to rural areas, it is anticipated that, the numerical increase will outpace the proportional increase, potentially resulting in an additional 20,000 new residents by 2030.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> United States Census Bureau, population summary data, 1900 thru 2020

**Figure 3.1**  
**Flathead County Population – 1920 through 2030 (2030 projected)**

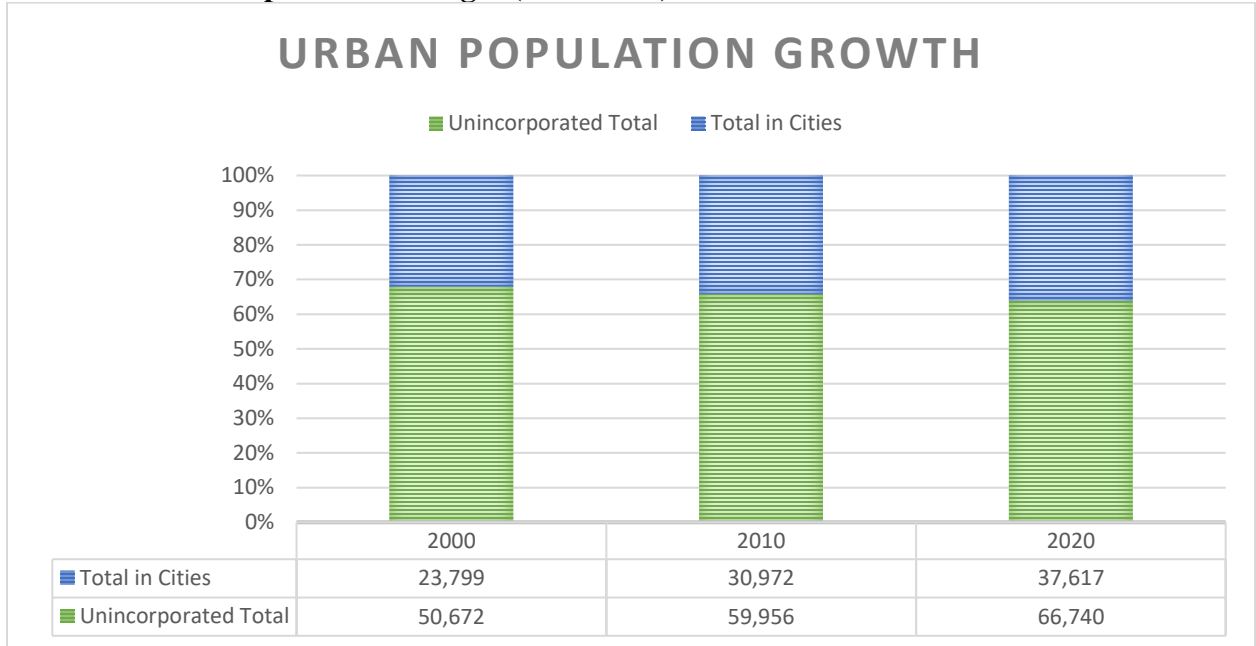


Source: U.S. Census Data, 1900 thru 2020

**Urban Population Growth**

Approximately 64% of the population in Flathead County resides outside of the three incorporated cities of Columbia Falls, Kalispell, and Whitefish (to be known as the incorporated cities). This number has been slowly declining over the last 20 years with 68% of the county living outside of the incorporated cities in 2000. These numbers, however, have to be taken in context. While there has been migration towards more urbanized areas, the incorporated cities have also expanded their boundaries to encompass a greater land area. With this in mind, the population growth of the incorporated cities compared to that of the county has been steadily increasing by about 2% each year. Due to the nature of Montana as a migratory State, it is difficult to say people are moving from rural areas into urbanized areas. The data better suggests that both rural and urban areas are growing, but urbanized areas of the county are growing at a proportionally faster rate. (Table 3.1)

**Figure 3.2**  
**Urban vs Rural Population Changes (2000-2020)**



**Table 3.1**  
**Urban Growth 2000-2020**

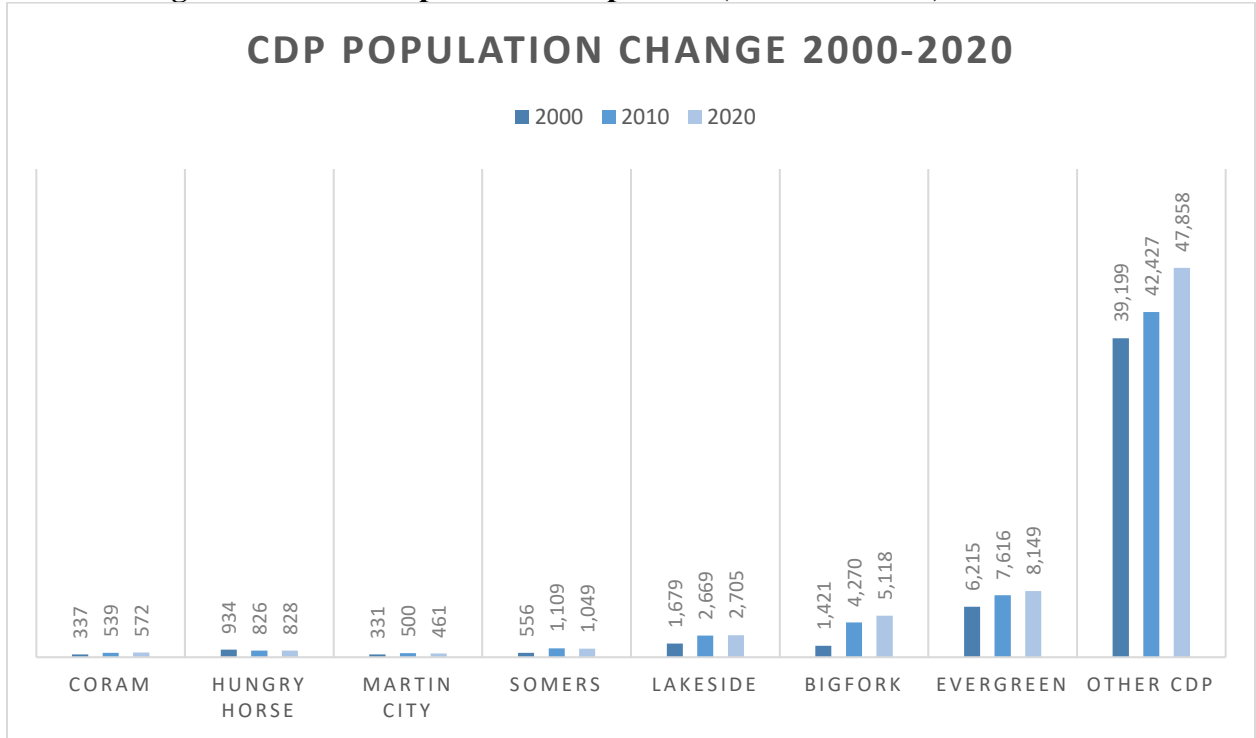
		2000	2010	2020	2030*
<b><u>Census Designated Places (CDP)</u></b>	<b>Bigfork</b>	1,421	4,270	5,118	
	<b>Coram</b>	337	539	572	
	<b>Evergreen</b>	6,215	7,616	8,149	
	<b>Hungry Horse</b>	934	826	828	
	<b>Martin City</b>	331	500	461	
	<b>Somers</b>	556	1,109	1,049	
	<b>Lakeside</b>	1,679	2,669	2,705	
	<b>Other**</b>	39,199	42,427	47,858	
	<b><u>Cities</u></b>	<b>Columbia Falls</b>	3,674	4,688	5,308
<b>Whitefish</b>		5,126	6,357	7,751	
<b>Kalispell</b>		14,999	19,927	24,558	
<b><u>Totals</u></b>	<b>Unincorporated Total</b>	50,672	59,956	66,740	84,443
	<b>Total in Cities</b>	23,799	30,972	37,617	51,755
	<b>Total in County</b>	74,471	90,928	104,357	136,198
	<b>Percent Incorporated</b>	32.0%	34.1%	36.0%	38.0%

\*Denotes population estimate

\*\*Includes minor CDP and areas not in CDP or Incorporated Cities

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Counts; 2000, 2010 and 2020

**Figure 3.3**  
**Census Designated Places - Population Comparison (2000 thru 2020)**



Source: 2020 U.S. Bureau of the Census TIGER Line File, MT Census Places with Population Data  
 \*\* Other CDP includes minor CDPs with populations less than 100 and areas outside of incorporated cities and CDPs

From 2000 to 2010 Bigfork, Somers, Evergreen and Lakeside had the greatest increases in population over the past ten years. The community of Bigfork nearly tripled in population with a 200% increase between 2000 and 2010. The population of Somers increased by 99%, the population of Lakeside increased by 59 % and the population of Evergreen increased 23% during the same ten-year period. The most significant increases in population in rural communities are occurring where vital public services such as public sewer and water facilities are available.

There are fifteen Census Designated Places (CDPs) in the county. These include the communities of Bigfork, Evergreen, Lakeside, Somers, Niarada, Marion, Little Bitterroot Lake, Batavia, Kila, Forest Hill Village, Olney, Hungry Horse, Martin City, West Glacier and Coram. The unincorporated sections of the county have seen the greatest increase in population over the last 10 years with an increase of 5,431 people, or a 12.8% increase from 2010. Typically, these unincorporated areas of the county are characterized by a lack of land use regulations and are of a rural nature.

In contrast, there are the three incorporated cities: Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls. The City of Kalispell experienced the greatest population increase of all the cities between 2010 to 2020; an increase of 4,361 people, or 23.2%.

In areas with zoning, many of the districts have filled to meet their maximum allowed densities, precluding or slowing further development within the incorporated areas of the county. This has pushed development into areas with fewer land use regulations where

development can occur more freely. Urban areas with utilities, water, sewer and other public services more readily available, experienced significant growth as well. This growth corresponds to where land is able to be subdivided within the county.

Several other communities throughout the county are also experiencing growth; some have experienced enough growth over the past decade to be designated CDPs according to the 2020 census. These communities are more scattered, and development is less dense. Residents in these communities are self-reliant with individual water and sewer facilities. These communities include Marion, Kila, Ferndale, Creston, and West Glacier. Communities such as Polebridge, Olney, and Essex have not experienced the rapid growth that the more accessible communities in the county are currently undergoing but have still a population increase over the past ten years. These areas have likely reached their limit of growth due to a variety of factors including lack of access to utilities, extreme environmental constraints, and low-density zoning regulations. Map 3.2 shows the existing overall population density related to a CDP in Flathead County.

### **Seasonal Populations**

Census population numbers do not account accurately for seasonal fluctuations in population. Seasonal residents require the same local services and infrastructure that full time residents require.

Although there is no precise way to calculate seasonal population, estimates can be derived using several indicators such as electrical hookups and consumption, increased traffic, waste generation, and law enforcement and emergency service calls. Certain communities have higher numbers of seasonal populations. Although it has proven difficult to quantify, the population of the county could be in significant excess of 104,357 persons as estimated by the US Census.

Demand is strong for second home ownership as well as for seasonal, recreational, occasional use and vacation housing. Those housing units dedicated for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use have been identified and quantified in the 2020 US Census. The 1990 Census indicates that there were 2,517 housing units in Flathead County that were occupied seasonally, for recreational use or for occasional use. That number rose to 3,570 in 2000, a 42% increase. By 2010, the number of housing units occupied seasonally or for recreation or occasional use rose to 6,542 units, roughly comprising 14% of the housing stock in Flathead County and exhibiting a nearly 83% increase over the number of units in 2000. During the same period the total number of housing units available rose to 46,963, an increase of 35%. As of 2021, 7,029 seasonal housing units exist in the valley which continues to compromise roughly 14% of the total housing stock.<sup>38</sup>

### **Population Growth Factors**

Population growth or decline is attributed to two factors: natural change and net migration. Measurements of these two factors illustrate trends over time and are important when planning for the needs of future populations. The combination of the two factors indicates the overall condition and health of the community. Natural change is the difference

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<sup>38</sup> Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, U.S. Census Bureau: 2000, 2010



between births and deaths. Between 2000 and 2004 Flathead County experienced a net increase of 1,214 people due to natural change, representing approximately 18% of the total population growth. Migration patterns are responsible for the remaining 82% of the population increase; approximately 5,577 people relocated to the county from elsewhere during the four-year period.

The most accurate method of calculating population growth takes into account the number of births in relation to number of deaths, and factors in the net migration of the population. In the early 2000s, the Planning Department calculated natural growth in comparison to net migration. Due to the large number of variables in attempting to calculate this number today, accurate data were not found to formulate a comparison. Therefore, no statistical comparison will be made at this time. Within the last decade, from 2010 to 2020, the population in Flathead County increased by 13,429. This greatly surpasses any natural growth rate plausible, especially considering the average size of a family has decreased over the last decade. It can be safely assumed that a majority of this growth is due to net migration.

### **Population Characteristics**

In 2000 the County's male-female ratio was approximately 1:1, meaning there were nearly equal numbers of males and females in the population as shown in Figure 3.5. This remained true in 2010, when 49.8% of the population was male and 50.2% of the population was female. As of 2020 the proportion stands at 49.9% of the population as male and 50.1% of the population as female. Although not charted, U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that the near even proportion of genders has remained constant since the 1970s.

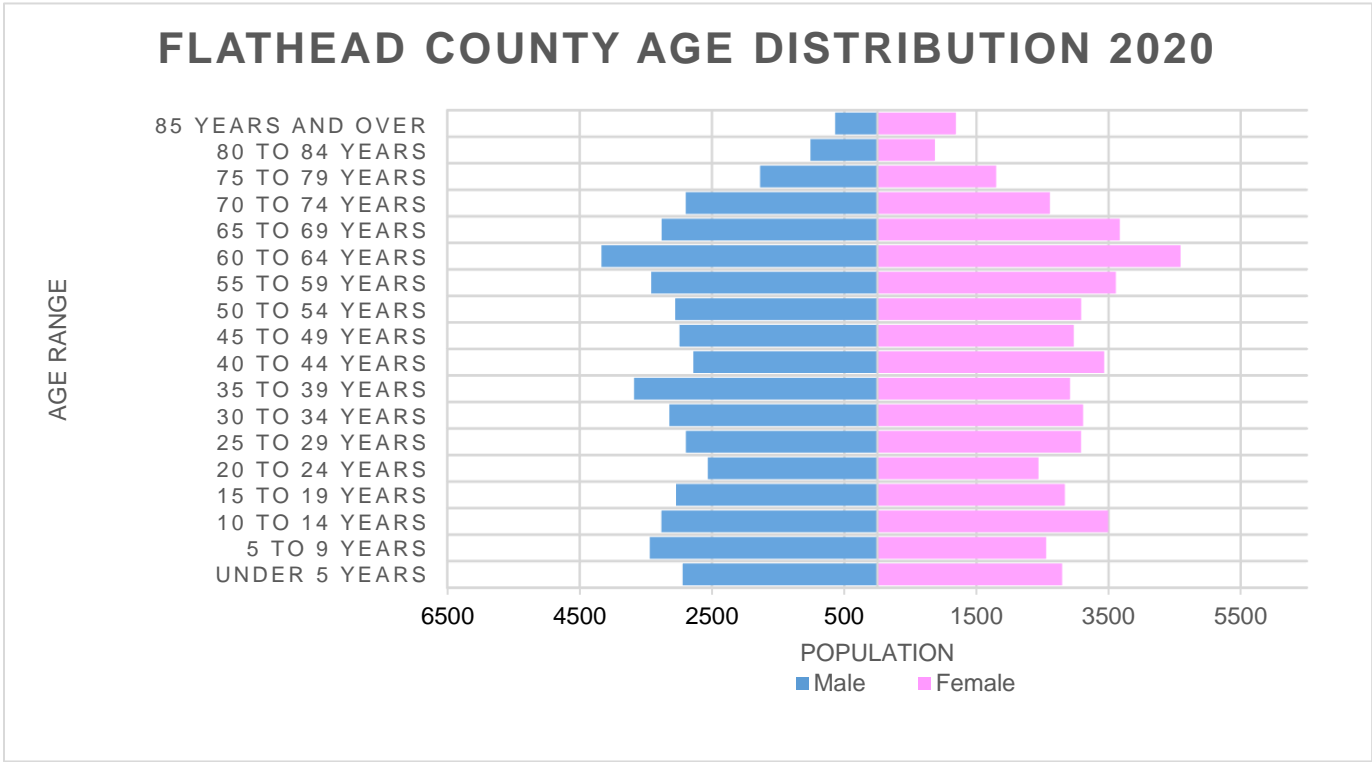
The ethnic composition of Flathead County is rather homogenous. In 2010, approximately 96% of the population was white, with the remaining 4% comprised of one or more other races. African Americans represented 0.5% of the population; American Indian and Alaska Native represented 2.4%; individuals of Asian descent represented 1.0% of the population, and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander or those of other origin making up the remaining 0.8% of the population. As of 2020 the racial breakdown is shown in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2**  
**Race**

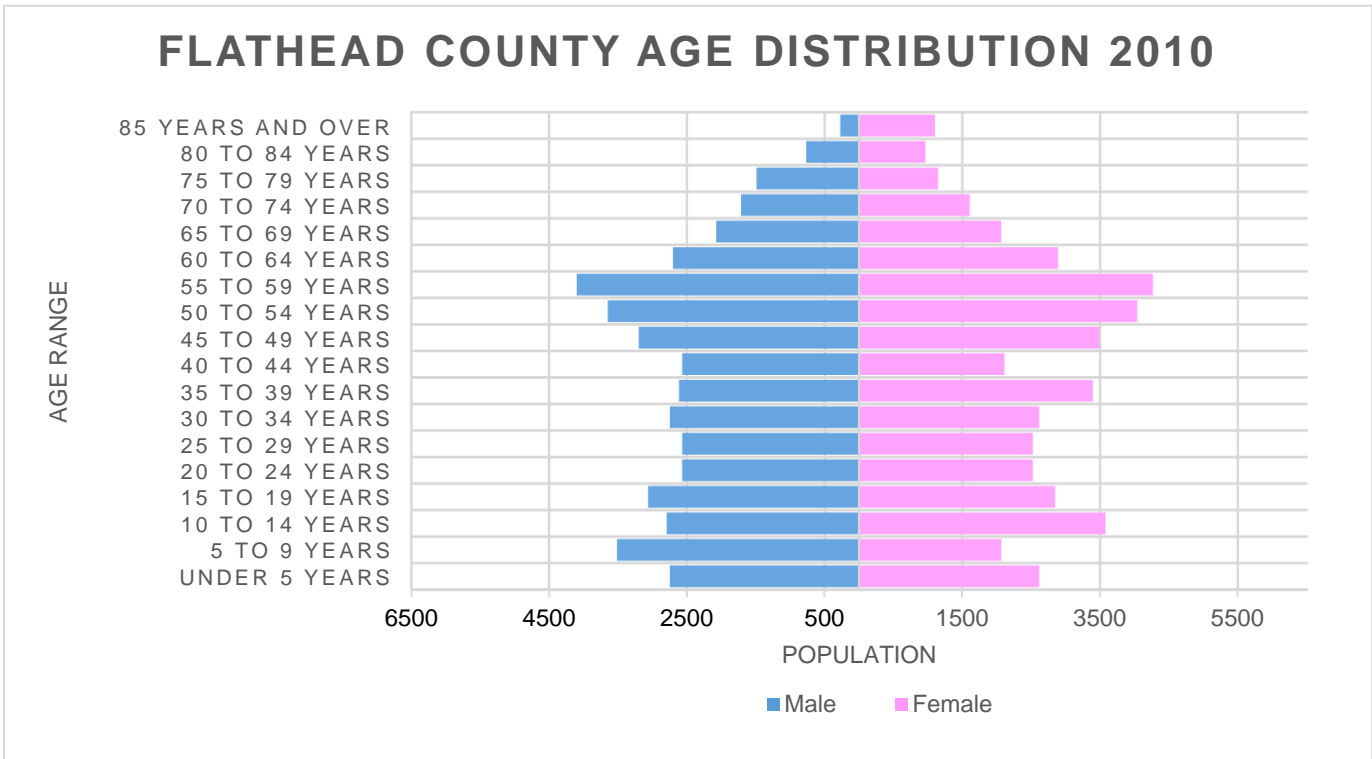
Total:	104,357	
Hispanic or Latino	3,329	3.2%
Not Hispanic or Latino:	101,028	96.8%
Population of one race:	95,855	91.9%
White alone	93,416	89.5%
Black or African American alone	269	0.3%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	931	0.9%
Asian alone	703	0.7%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	77	0.1%
Some Other Race alone	459	0.4%
Population of two or more races:	5,173	5.0%
Population of two races:	5,006	4.8%

Source: US Census Bureau 2020 P2

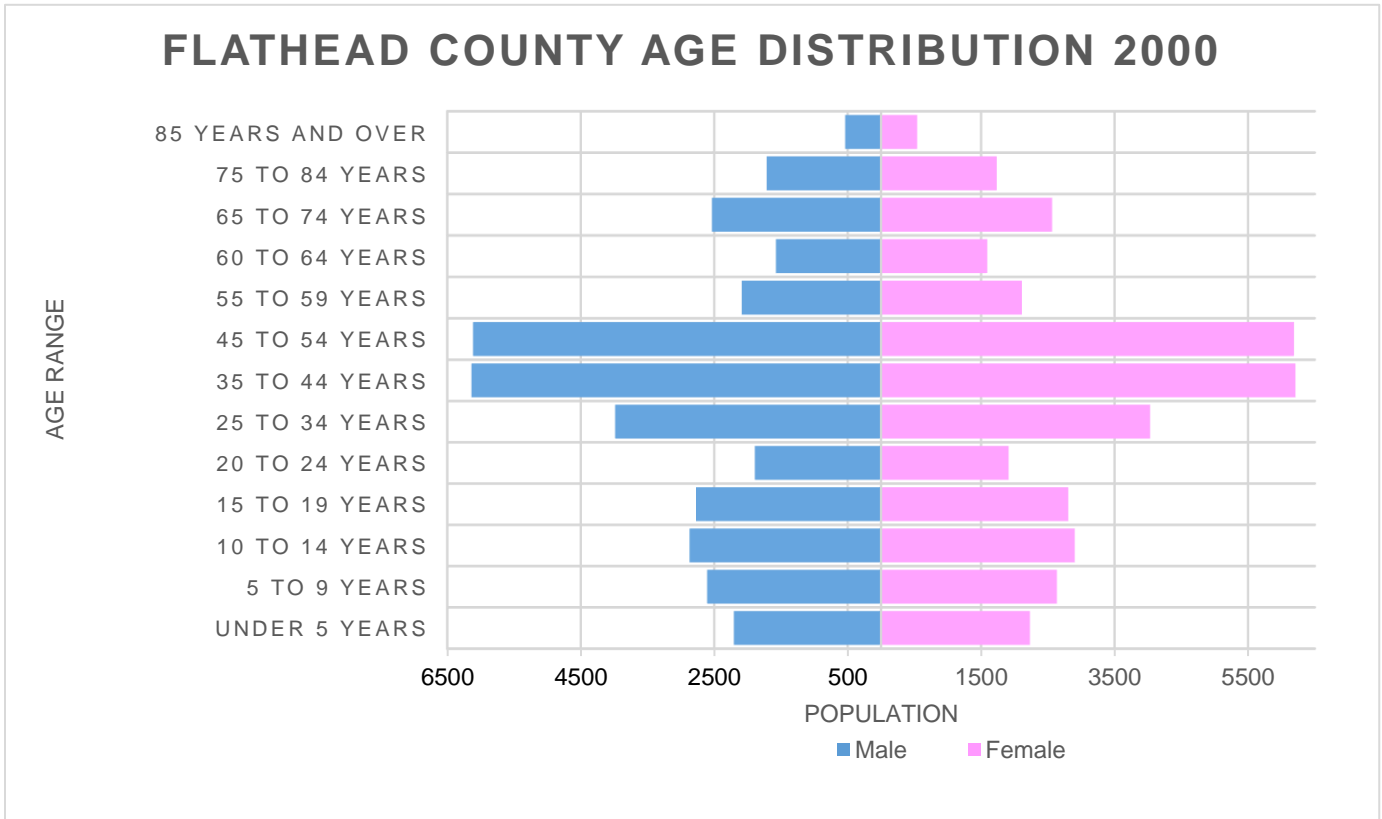
**Figure 3.4**  
**Flathead County Gender and Age Composition – 2000-2020**  
**3.4a**



**3.4b**



3.4c



Source: Profile of General Population & Housing Characteristics, U.S. Census Bureau 2020

Figure 3.5a-c depicts a snapshot of the population of Flathead County, bracketed into age groups from 2000 to 2022. This style of chart is called a population pyramid and is generally utilized by demographers to depict natural population growth trends. As previously discussed, there is a large seasonal population within Flathead County, and subsequently one of the primary drivers of population growth is migration, as opposed to natural population growth.

Typically, one can utilize a population pyramid to determine how a population will naturally grow. A classically shaped pyramid implies a rapid, naturally growing population. A healthy natural growth would be depicted with a steep sided tower that is larger at the base than it is the top.

As one can see in Figure 3.5, the shape is abnormal and inconsistent. Similarities between ‘pyramids’ show a relatively small proportion of children and teens, which tapers around young adulthood, afterward sharply increases towards ages 40-65, and sharply tapers again. While it is difficult to predict growth from this chart, it is not difficult to extrapolate the causation.

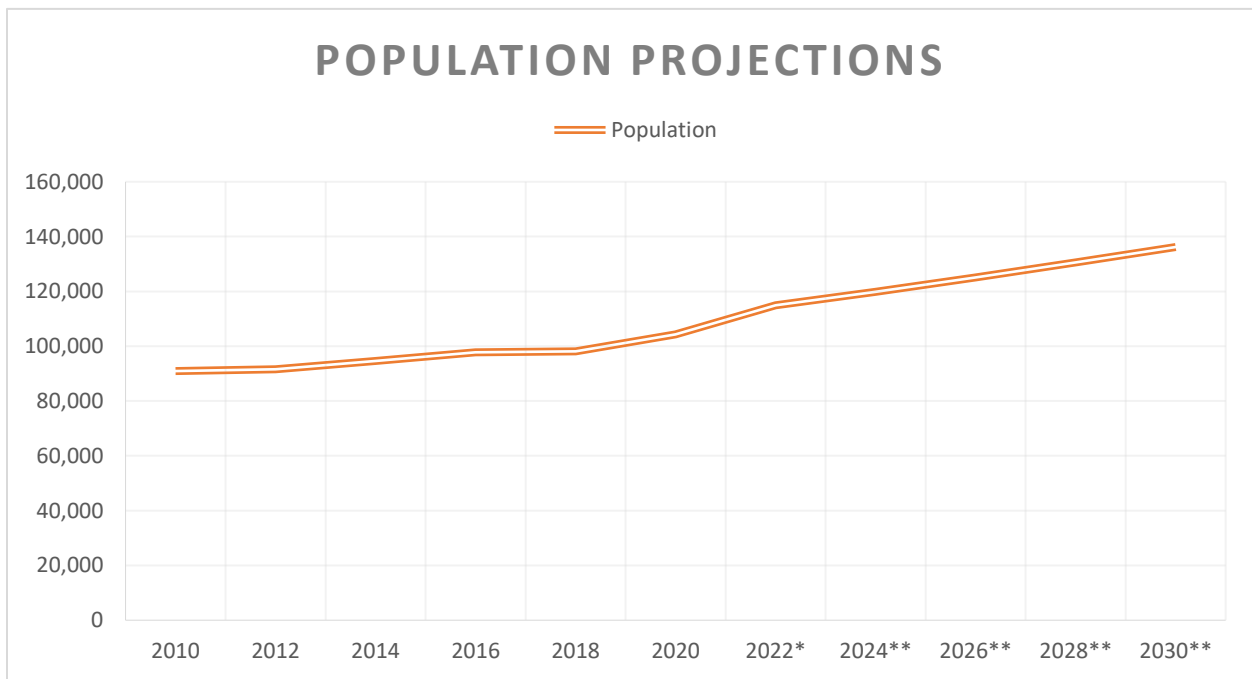
As will be discussed in Part 2, housing is a precious and finite resource within the Flathead Valley. Given the vast amounts of public land, environmental constraints, and the large number of secondary and tertiary home ownership that occurs, the housing market is

generally strained. While there appears to be an abundance of housing available, much of the excess within the housing stock is occupied by seasonal residents and is generally unused for 3-9 months out of the year. Given the limited nature of housing and the dramatic decrease in young adult as well as elderly residents, it is clear that affordable housing is lacking within Flathead County.

**Population Projections**

Projections are estimates illustrating plausible courses of future population change based on assumptions about natural change and net migration patterns. These projections are trends established from existing population data. The projected population for Flathead County through the year 2030 is shown in Figure 3.6 below. The projected population for 2030 is estimated at 136,198 representing an increase of 31,841 people from the existing population in 2020 of 104,357. The projection shows that the total population is likely to increase by approximately 33%. Net migration will likely be the driving factor in population growth, while natural growth will be its limiting factor.

**Figure 3.5**  
**Flathead County Population Projections– 2010 through 2030**



Source: US Census Bureau 2020 P2 using number of voters proportional to the population

More data are required to adequately provide for the land use needs of a growing population. Information on the desires and preferences of residents and in-migrants will determine suitable housing locations, as well as projected requirements for commercial and industrial uses. Accurate information on the service costs per mile of road maintenance, school bus operation, emergency services and other county services will inform the public and decision makers as land use designations are made.

## PART 2: Housing

### General Affordability

Housing costs often constitute the largest single monthly household expenditure. The affordability of housing is a major factor in community growth and development. Affordable housing is also a driving force of a vibrant economy. Home ownership is a goal for many Americans, and it is an achievement that can be a stepping stone to increased economic involvement in the community. This Growth Policy has goals and supporting policies which recognize the desirability of affordable housing and home ownership. A standard definition of “affordable housing” is yearly housing payments that cost no more than 30% of a household’s gross annual income. Households paying in excess of 30% of their income for yearly housing costs are considered cost-burdened and may have difficulty meeting the costs associated with common necessities such as food and transportation<sup>39</sup>. Calculating the annual household income needed to afford the median-value home in a given area provides a snapshot of the current housing affordability.

Table 3.3 designates housing affordability. The estimate is based off a \$20,000 down payment on a home, the average interest rate for the given year, a 30 year mortgage paid at a cost of 30% monthly income, 0.81% property tax of Flathead County, \$800/year home owners insurance, and a \$289/month car payment (the average car payment for the State of Montana).

**Table 3.3**  
**Housing Affordability**

	Median Home Price	What median income can afford	Cost to Affordability Ratio
Year	Inflation Adj.		
2021	\$313,981	\$286,968	-9.41%
2020	\$270,398	\$234,554	-15.28%
2019	\$260,678	\$244,226	-6.74%
2018	\$246,968	\$215,891	-14.39%
2017	\$233,595	\$249,502	6.38%
2016	\$218,393	\$212,090	-2.97%
2015	\$210,277	\$202,733	-3.72%
2014	\$200,921	\$191,983	-4.66%
2013	\$186,821	\$219,212	14.78%
2012	\$184,797	\$205,752	10.18%
2011	\$190,617	\$184,624	-3.25%
2010	\$206,598	\$178,148	-15.97%

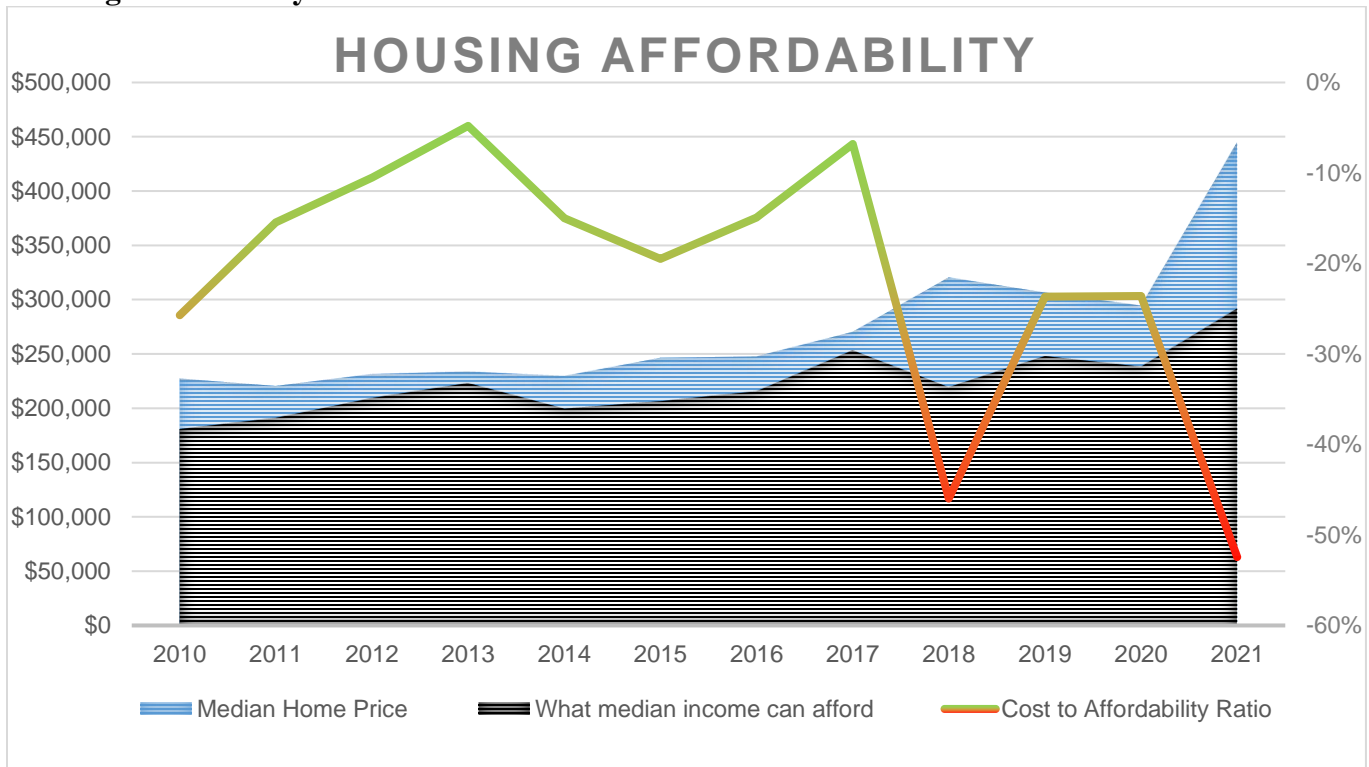
Source: U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, All-Transactions House Price Index for Flathead County, MT [ATNHPIUS30029A], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ATNHPIUS30029A>, December 1, 2022

\*\*Average household in Flathead County in 2021 is 2.50 people, therefore an estimate of a family of 3 will be utilized for poverty estimates

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Comparing the annual household income needed to afford the median home price in the county to the actual median household income for the same time period, provides insight as to whether the median home price is affordable to the median household. Figure 3.4 shows that a disparity exists between median income and median home prices in Flathead County.

**Figure 3.6**  
**Housing Affordability**



Source: FRED All-Transactions House Price Index for Flathead County, MT

**Table 3.4**  
**Median Income**

Year	Flathead County Median Income	Montana Median Income	United States Median Income	Est. Poverty Line
2010	\$41,854	\$42,666	\$50,046	\$20,612
2011	\$44,207	\$44,222	\$50,502	\$22,987
2012	\$46,444	\$45,076	\$51,371	\$23,381
2013	\$47,802	\$46,972	\$52,250	\$23,698
2014	\$47,362	\$46,328	\$53,657	\$23,761
2015	\$46,899	\$49,509	\$55,775	\$24,103
2016	\$50,142	\$50,027	\$57,617	\$23,983
2017	\$59,735	\$53,386	\$60,336	\$23,940
2018	\$53,193	\$55,328	\$61,937	\$23,933
2019	\$62,588	\$57,153	\$65,712	\$24,248
2020	\$57,763	\$56,539	\$64,994	\$26,712

2021	\$66,126	\$63,249	\$69,717	\$23,829
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Source: U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, All-Transactions House Price Index for Flathead County, MT [ATNHPIUS30029A], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ATNHPIUS30029A>, December 1, 2022

**Table 3.5**  
**Median Home Prices – 1998 through 2021**

Year	Median Home Cost	Annual Percent Change
1998*	\$110,000	
1999*	\$108,000	-1.82%
2000*	\$138,950	28.66%
2001*	\$126,000	-9.32%
2002*	\$136,000	7.94%
2003*	\$159,000	16.91%
2004*	\$178,500	12.26%
2005*	\$215,000	20.45%
2006*	\$234,900	9.26%
2007*	\$249,000	6.00%
2008*	\$239,000	-4.02%
2009*	\$205,000	-14.23%
2010	\$227,300	10.88%
2011	\$220,600	-2.95%
2012	\$231,400	4.90%
2013	\$233,800	1.04%
2014	\$229,600	-1.80%
2015	\$246,600	7.40%
2016	\$247,800	0.49%
2017	\$270,500	9.16%
2018	\$320,400	18.45%
2019	\$306,500	-4.34%
2020	\$294,600	-3.88%
2021	\$444,600	50.92%

Source: U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency, All-Transactions House Price Index for Flathead County, MT [ATNHPIUS30029A], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ATNHPIUS30029A>, December 1, 2022

The average yearly increase in median home prices between 2010 and 2021 was equal to 4.0%. As the economy rebounded from the recession of 2008, home prices were generally dropping at the beginning of the decade. Around 2014, the average median home price began to steadily increase, averaging approximately a 5.4% yearly increase from 2014 through 2020. In 2020, the pandemic dramatically changed the socioeconomic status within the U.S., and due to the value now placed on rural communities, home prices jumped by over 16%. This is the biggest increase in home values since the year 2000, when the median home value jumped 28.7%.



Rental housing is often a more affordable option for those without the ability to own a home. The median rent in 2010 equated to \$707 which would require a minimum yearly net income of approximately \$28,280 if the gross rent were to equate to exactly 30% of the occupant's monthly gross income. By 2021 the median rent in Flathead County was recorded at \$877, which would require a minimum annual income of roughly \$35,080 by those same standards.<sup>40</sup>

While Policy 16.2 calls for the creation of a county plan for affordable housing in coordination with the cities, it should be noted that this growth policy recognizes the need to address this as a community wide issue. A solid plan would include data on the availability of affordable housing for various income classifications and demonstrate the severity of the problem county-wide. Rapidly increasing home prices like those experienced over the last decade, combined with a growing number of service workers and lower-wage employment opportunities, has resulted in a serious problem that will continue to affect the county's ability to attract industry and maintain a robust work force in the future.

### **Housing Stock**

According to the US Census Bureau statistic in 2021, 77.4% of the homes in Flathead County are 1-unit, detached structures. Multi-family housing, comprised of 2 units or more, accounts for 12.5% of the housing stock. Manufactured or mobile homes are the second most dominant housing type, comprising 7.9% of the housing stock. The remaining 0.1% of housing is provided by recreation vehicles, boats, vans and other mobile types.

As manufactured homes, RVs and other cluster developments are created in methods similar to multi-family housing, they have been included within the count in Figure 3.10.

The number of housing units in the county has steadily increased over recent years. The total number of housing units in 2000 was 34,773 and grew to 36,077 in 2004, exhibiting a 4% increase<sup>41</sup>. By 2010 there were 46,963 housing units recorded in Flathead County, an increase of 30% since 2004. Generally, from 2010 on, the average yearly increase was under 1% aside from 2017 which saw a 1.7% increase in housing stock. From 2020 to 2021, the county experienced a jump of 3.4% or 1,662 housing units built.

Since 1940, the number of total housing units in Flathead County has increased, on average, by 28.1%. The highest increase in housing stock was the decade of 1980 which saw a 44.9% increase in housing stock. The lowest, was 2010 which saw an increase of 6.9%. Currently, there is a large percentage of the population that is considered housing displaced (further discussed in the housing cost section of this chapter). Because of the housing crisis of 2008 and the recession, it caused throughout the decade of 2010-2020, the housing market has stagnated and thus needs a significant increase in housing stock to meet the needs of the existing population of Flathead County. Extrapolating the average increase to the existing housing stock, Flathead County needs to see an increase of 14,277 housing

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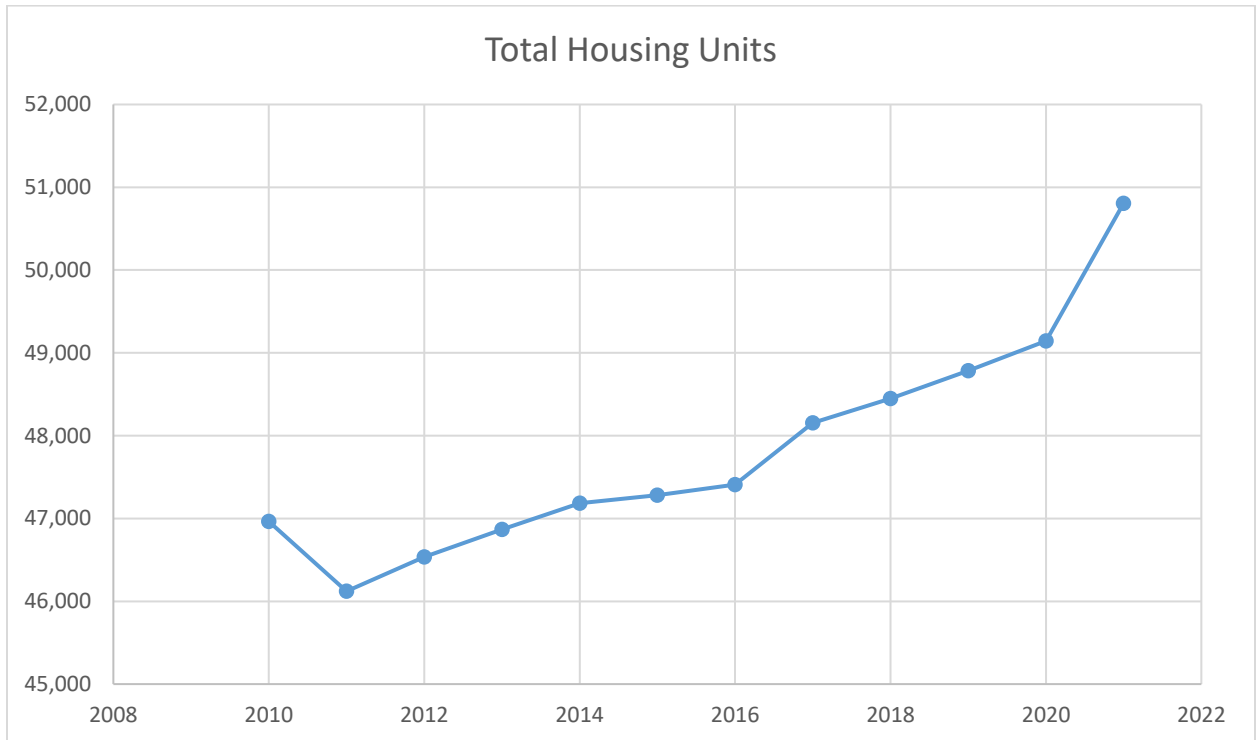
<sup>40</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Profile Report - H11 Gross Rent, Census 2010

<sup>41</sup> Population Division, US Census Bureau. *Table 4: Annual Estimates of Housing Units for Counties in Montana: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2004 (HU-EST2004-04-30)*. July 21, 2005.

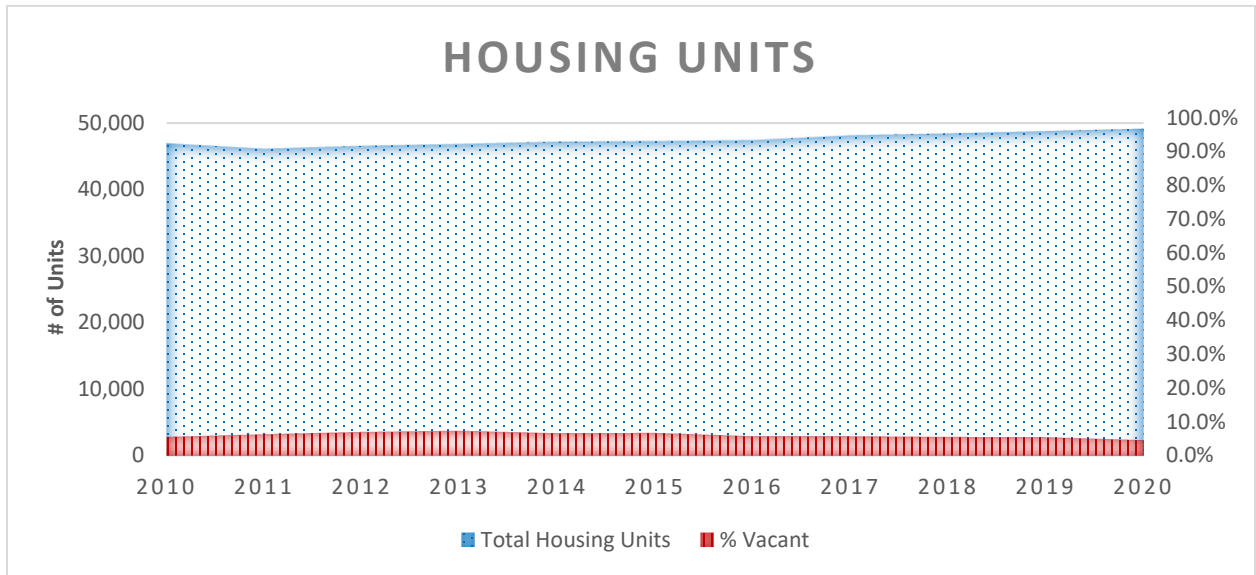
units by 2030 to meet the typical housing demands of the county. This would require approximately 1,427 units created per year.

Units are identified as the individual living quarters and include single family homes, individual condominium units as well as individual apartments, meaning a multi-family dwelling is comprised of several housing ‘units’. Figure 3.9 shows the standard rate of development through 2010 and tapering off of development through the decade is evidenced in figure 3.8a.

**Figure 3.7**  
**Housing Units and Adjusted Vacancies – Flathead County – 2010-2021**  
**3.7a**



3.7b



Source: US Census Bureau 2020

Housing is either rented or owned. Housing types as defined by the Montana Department of Commerce are either residential or commercial. Residential housing is homes that can be purchased as individual units and include mobile homes, condominium units, and single-family residences. Commercial housing mainly refers to multi-unit rental properties including apartments, duplexes, and mixed-use structures<sup>42</sup>.

The 2000 overall vacancy rate for the available rental and owner-occupied housing units was nearly 15%, or 5,186 units. Approximately 69%, or 3,570 units, of those units were designated as seasonal, recreational, or for occasional use. Therefore, the actual vacancy rate in 2000 for non-seasonal housing was 7% for rental units and 1.7% for owner-occupied. In 2010 the vacancy rate for available rental and owner-occupied housing units had risen to 21.8%. As 6,542 units were classified as seasonal, recreational or for occasional use, the current vacancy rate is actually closer to 8% for rental and owner-occupied housing.<sup>43</sup> Currently in 2020 there are approximately 9,220 vacant housing units and 7,029 units utilized for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use, so the actual vacancy rate for rentals is approximately 4.5%.

Based on the 2000 housing unit estimates, nearly 27% (7,190 units) of the 29,588 occupied housing units were renter occupied, while the remaining 73.3% were owner occupied. This means that the rate of homeownership in Flathead County in 2000 was 73.3%. By comparison, the amount of owner-occupied housing dropped to 55.4% in 2010, or 26,002 units, indicating the rate of homeownership dramatically declined over the previous decade. As of 2021 the rate of owner occupied housing has continued to recover from the housing crash of 2008. Factors stunting growth can be contributed to the challenges in recent years from the issues caused by the pandemic of 2020.

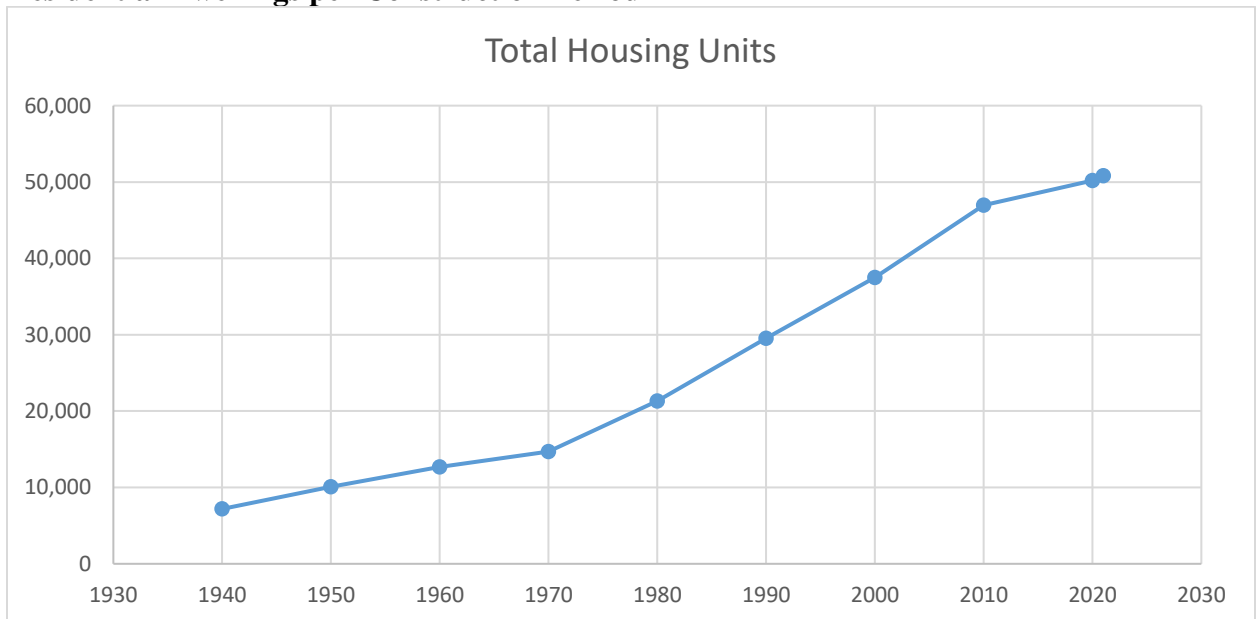
<sup>42</sup> Center for Applied Economic Research. *Housing Conditions Study*. 2002. Montana Department of Commerce: Billings, MT.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; Selected Housing Characteristics (B25004)

Since 1940, the number of total housing units in Flathead County has increased, on average, by 28.1%. The highest increase in housing stock was the decade of 1980 which saw a 44.9% increase in housing stock. The lowest, was 2010 which saw an increase of 6.9%. Currently, there is a large percentage of the population that is considered housing displaced (further discussed in the housing cost section of this chapter). Because of the housing crisis of 2008 and the recession, it caused throughout the decade of 2010-2020, the housing market has stagnated and thus needs a significant increase in housing stock to meet the needs of the existing population of Flathead County. Extrapolating the average increase to the existing housing stock, Flathead County needs to see an increase of 14,277 housing units by 2030 to meet the typical housing demands of the county. This would result in approximately 1,427 units created per year.<sup>44</sup>

The largest era of single-family home construction occurred prior to 1960. Manufactured or mobile homes peaked in construction during the period of 1970 to 1979, while the majority of condominiums in the county were constructed between 1980 and 1989.<sup>45</sup> Manufactured and mobile homes are often first home purchases. They are an integral part of a viable affordable housing program.

**Figure 3.8**  
**Residential Dwellings per Construction Period**

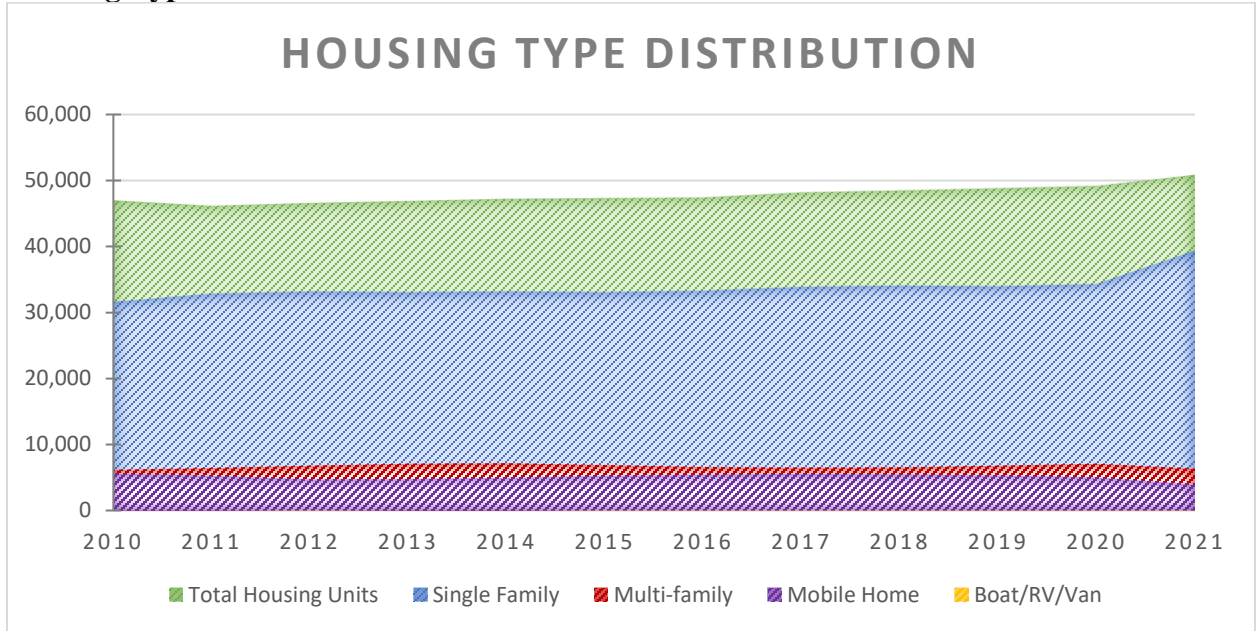


Source: US Census Bureau 2020

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; Selected Housing Characteristics (DP04)

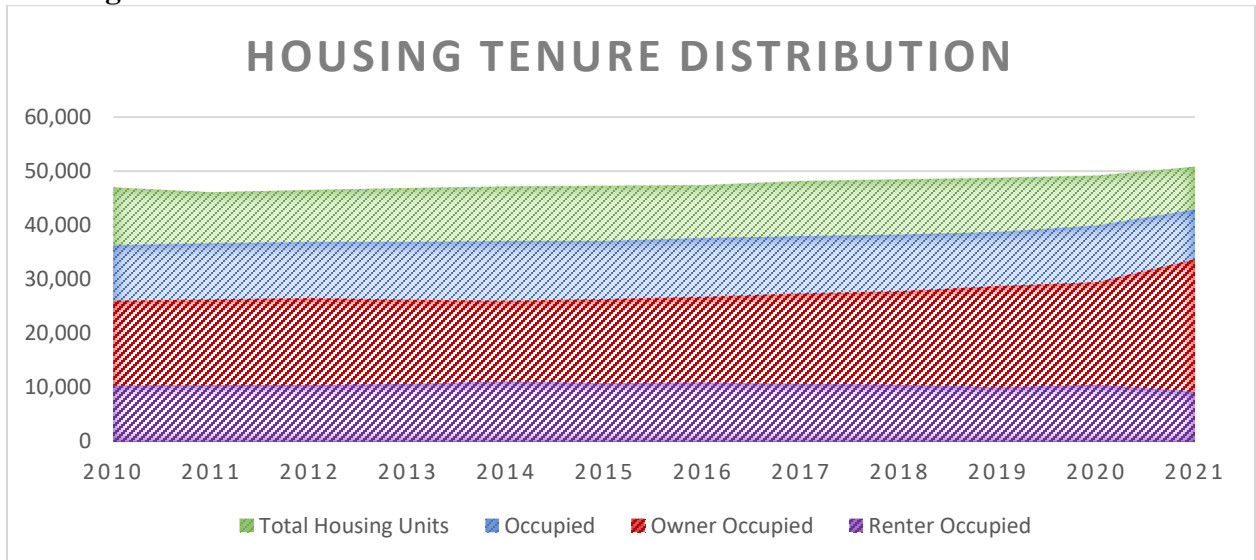
<sup>45</sup> Montana Housing Condition Study, Appendix I. Montana Department of Commerce, 2005.

**Figure 3.9**  
**Housing Type Distribution**



Source: US Census Bureau 2020

**Figure 3.10**  
**Housing Tenure Distribution**

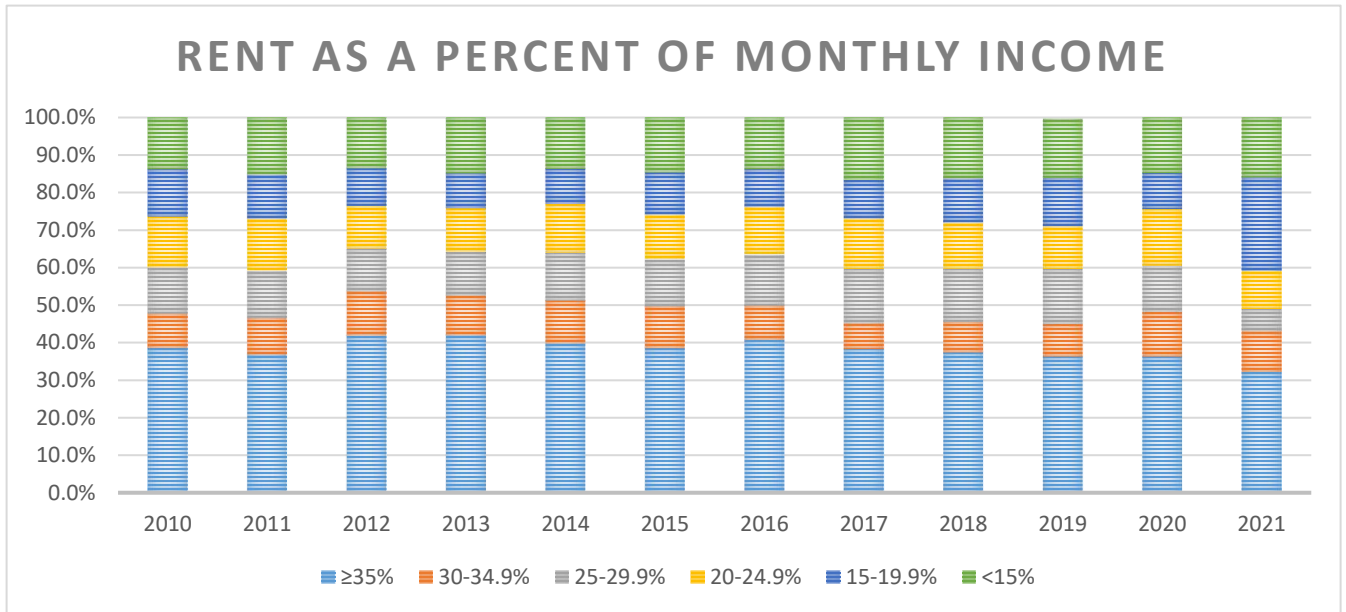


Source: US Census Bureau 2020

**Housing Affordability**

In 2020 there were 10,465 rental units occupied, and in 2021 there are 9,221 rental units occupied, demonstrating a drop, over a 3% decrease, in rental occupancy. While the median rent has increased, the vacancy rate is at a ten year high. Consistently over the last decade the majority of renters pay more than 35% of their income on rent, which is generally considered to be a burden and to reduce a person’s quality of life.

**Figure 3.11**  
**Rent as a Percent of Monthly Income – 2010-2021**



**Special Consideration Groups**

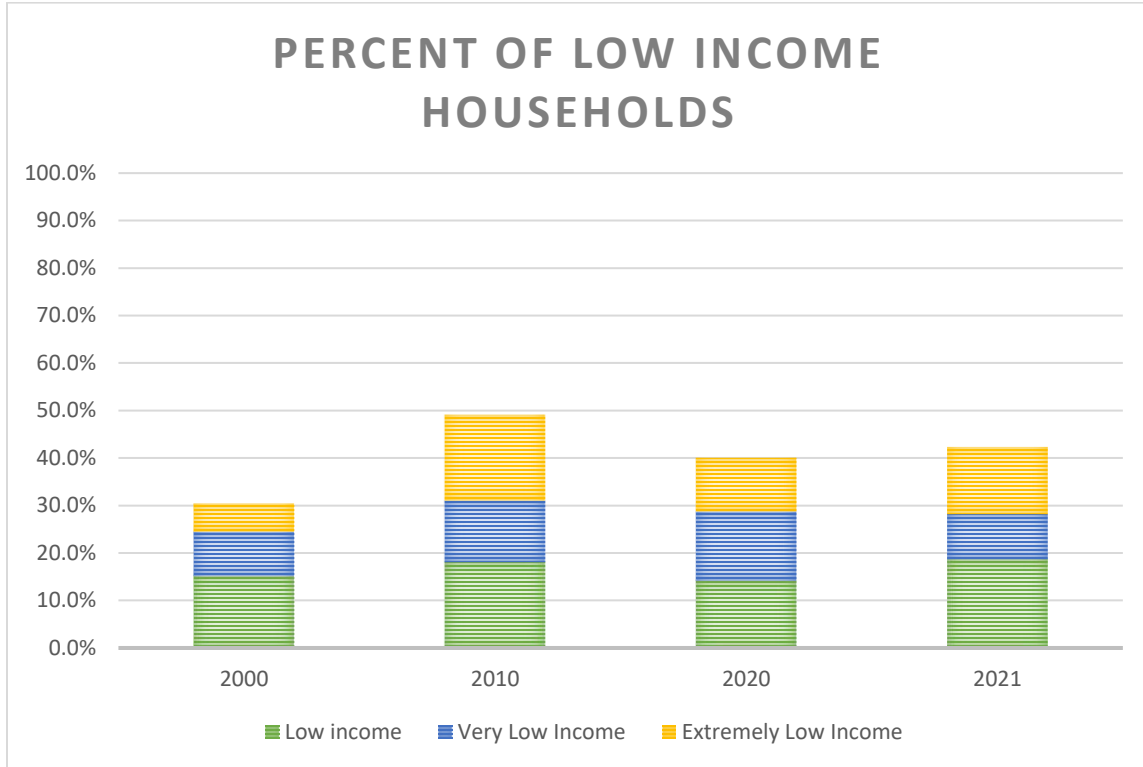
The US Department of Housing and Urban Development sets standards based on median family income (MFI) for assessing low-income housing needs. Three classifications are used when discussing low-income households: extremely low income (30% or less of MFI), very low income, and low income. These categories are defined as follows:<sup>46</sup>

- Extremely low income - those households with an income of 0% to 30% of the MFI;
- Very low income – those household with an income of 31% to 50% of the MFI;
- Low income – those households with an income of 51% to 80% of the MFI

Figure 3.13 shows the percentage of the county made up of low, very low, and extremely low-income households.

<sup>46</sup> U.S Department of Housing & Urban Development. FY2012 Income Limits. <http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/il/il12/index.html>

**Figure 3.12**  
**Percent of Low-Income Households – 2010-2021**



HUD also defines types of low-income households as small related, large related, elderly, and other households, in addition to special needs households which have members with mobility impairment, disabilities, or drug or alcohol addiction. Elderly and special needs households comprise a large portion of the low-income housing population. Over half of elderly and special needs households are considered low income, and these groups are expected to increase as the population ages.

Homeless persons are defined as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and have a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised shelter for temporary living accommodation, an institution providing a temporary accommodation, or a public or private place not designed for sleeping<sup>47</sup>. Two homeless shelters are located in Flathead County, both within the city of Kalispell. The Samaritan House provides shelter for the homeless with 20 beds for men, eight beds for women, and four family units. According to their website, the Samaritan House served over 32,000 meals and housed over 1,120 people in 2011.<sup>48</sup> The Ray of Hope is another homeless shelter located within the city limits with the ability to provide housing and assistance for 15 to 20 individuals at a time.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Federal Definition of “Homeless”; <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/homelessness/definition>

<sup>48</sup> Homeless in the Flathead; <http://www.homelessinthehead.blogspot.com/>, December 27, 2011 entry.

### Location of Housing

Costs associated with the housing location can be significant. The cost of transportation to and from destinations such as home, work, and school increases as the distance increases. The same is true for the cost of serving homes located away from public services such as police and fire protection, solid waste collection, and public sewer and water services. The average travel time to work for Flathead County commuters in 2010 was 15-19 minutes, which coincides with the fact that many residents in the County live outside of cities in rural areas. The term ‘rural’ refers to all population, housing and territory outside of urbanized areas (UAs) or urban clusters (UCs), as defined by the Census Bureau, which have a population of 2,500 or more<sup>49</sup>. Excluding the cities of Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls, unincorporated rural communities have the largest concentrations of housing. Communities such as Bigfork, Coram, Evergreen, Hungry Horse, Lakeside, Martin City and Somers are just a few Census Designated Places identified in the sections above and shown on Map 3.1.

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<sup>49</sup> 2010 Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria;  
<http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html>



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## CHAPTER 4: PARKS & RECREATION

### Introduction

Public parks, trails, and recreation offer countless values to Flathead County residents and visitors. Public parks, trails, and open spaces provide the opportunity to be physically active and fit. Having close-to-home access to quality places to recreate is one of the most important factors in determining whether people are active and will continue to stay that way. Flathead County formally adopted a Parks and Recreation Plan [Resolution No. 2015L] as an element of the Growth Policy. The Parks and Recreation Plan considers a number of factors related to parks and recreation master planning throughout Flathead County, including population growth, facilities maintenance, and the future needs and desires of the community. The Parks and Recreation Plan is referenced heavily throughout this chapter, as it provides a more detailed analysis and comprehensive evaluation as an extension of the Growth Policy document.

### Goal

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- G.18 To accelerate the development process for park, trail, and open space infrastructure to meet the challenges of community growth and development.

### Policies

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- P.18.1 Acquire park and leisure facility sites now to serve the future needs of the county, particularly water-based parks which provide public access to lakes, rivers, and streams.
- P.18.2 With the exception of water-based parks, utilize subdivision park requirements to create and/or fund dedicated park sites of an optimal size no less than five acres, to accommodate operation and maintenance costs.
- P.18.3 Ensure existing parks and recreational facilities are operated and maintained in a quality condition for use by the general public.
- P.18.4 Develop strategies to fund, operate, and maintain new parks and recreational facilities.
- P.18.5 Utilize the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide the expansion of the park system to meet the needs and expectations of the growing public. Update the Parks and Recreation Master Plan at a minimum of every five years from the date of adoption, to ensure the plan is current.
- P.18.6 Preserve and increase recreational access to public lands and waterways by procuring necessary land, easements, or rights of way.

- P.18.7 Create a committee to determine and prioritize areas for bike path easement acquisition and construction, prioritize the use of funds, guide grant applications, identify roads that should have bicycle lanes, determine maintenance funding mechanisms, and set county-wide bicycle path/lane construction standards.

**Goal**

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- G.19 To create partnerships with common interest groups and the people within our community.

**Policies**

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- P.19.1 Encourage parks, planning, maintenance, and development coordination with other local jurisdictions as well as state and federal agencies.
- P.19.2 Participate in developing partnerships, community civic groups and organizations, private sector building and development industry, and others interested in parks and recreation activities.
- P.19.3 Support “pocket parks” which are owned and maintained by homeowner groups and Associations.
- P.19.4 Recognize riparian buffers for their recreational value and their ability to protect the quality of water along major streams and rivers in the County in order to enhance recreational opportunities, protect the quality of water (reduce erosion; surface runoff containing pesticides, fertilizers, etc., stream bank depredation/defoliation, etc.) and their ability to protect the natural aesthetics of waterways.
- P.19.5 Develop County Parks in conjunction with public or private schools whenever possible.
- P.19.6 Develop standards, procedures, and requirements for the preparation, review, and adoption of neighborhood and subdivision park plans.

**Goal**

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- G.20 Maintain and/or increase the current level of service for park facilities and recreation services in Flathead County relative to population growth and public demands and expectations.

## Policies

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- P.20.1 Provide for and acquire new lands and indoor/outdoor recreation and park facilities as outlined in the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to keep pace with expanding population and demand.
- P.20.2 Maintain the current level of recreation services by providing innovative programs geared towards a diverse demographic of county residents (children, adults, seniors, etc.).

### **PART 1: Community Benefits of Parks and Recreation (see Goals 18 and 19)**

The economic benefits of parks and recreation areas are numerous. One of the more significant benefits is the increase in the value of private lands adjacent to or near protected public parks, trails, or open spaces. The close proximity of parks to residential areas leads to increased land values and safer walks for children and adults to the park and back. Often, quality parks and recreation areas are an important consideration of businesses looking at expansion or relocation. Parks and recreation areas improve the quality of the living environment and make communities more desirable for businesses and homeowners.

Parks, trails, and open spaces provide vital green space in an ever-changing landscape. They provide vegetative buffers and recreational areas and can be used to reduce the impacts of development. These areas are also instrumental in providing access to rivers, lakes, and adjoining public lands. Just as importantly parks, trails, and open spaces can help to maintain view sheds, provide groundwater recharge areas, floodplain protection, natural sound barriers, weed buffers, and filter pollutants from the air. Parks help to keep the living environment healthy.

Parks, trails, and open spaces facilitate social interactions between individuals, families, civic groups, and others. These areas are critical to maintaining community cohesion and pride. Parks provide meeting places where the community can develop social ties and bonds. Leisure activity in parks can reduce stress and enhance a sense of wellness. People go to parks, use trails, or experience open spaces to reinvigorate themselves and decrease anxieties about daily life.

Community recreation services and programs encourage organized structure and enjoyable activities for people of all ages. The Department of Parks and Recreation offers organized recreation programs for both youth and adults. Programs currently offered for youth include outdoor flag football, basketball, volleyball, and t-ball at various locations throughout the county. Adult programs include basketball, flag football, volleyball, and softball. The Conrad Sports Complex currently services over 100 softball teams. There are also a large number of nonprofit sports organizations throughout the county that utilize these facilities to offer a wide variety of activities for children and adults.

## PART 2: Flathead County Parks

### Existing Characteristics

The growing popularity and demand for parks and recreational opportunities are in proportion to the dynamic growth and development Flathead County has experienced over the years. During the growth policy public meetings held throughout Flathead County in November and December of 2005 and January of 2006, numerous residents cited increased and improved parks and recreation services as desirable goals for the future of the county. (See Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary.) A growing public desires greater opportunities for passive and organized recreation programming. Greater access to water-based recreation is also a growing priority. The Department of Parks and Recreation is currently responsible for the development, operation, and maintenance of a wide range and variety of parks and recreation facilities. Although the existing park and recreation system offers recreational opportunities for individuals, families, and group users, it should be dynamic to meet changing public needs and desires.

The department currently maintains 75 park and recreation facilities, 21 linear parks/trails, and one cemetery totaling approximately 890 acres. The facilities can be categorized by function. Of the 75 recreational sites, 46 sites are developed parks totaling approximately 743 acres including; 1 regional park, 17 water-based parks, 19 neighborhood parks, 4 sports parks, 1 special use park and 1 are linear park.<sup>50</sup> Two of the developed parks maintained by the County are not located on land owned by the County. Map 4.1 shows the location of the existing park and leisure facilities.

The Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan provides a detailed overview of all the County parks identified, inventorying the size, location, type, facilities, and availability of water access in Appendix A in this document. Please reference this document for further details and analysis regarding existing parks and recreation characteristics in Flathead County.

### Administration of Parks and Recreation

The Flathead County Parks Board oversees park and recreation services for the County. The board is comprised of five members appointed by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners to serve three-year terms. The Board meets monthly and has responsibility for the administration of the Parks and Recreation Department.

In July 1997, the County Commission merged the Parks and Recreation Department with the Weed Department. The two boards were merged and the Parks & Recreation Director currently acts as the noxious Weed Coordinator as well as the Facilities Manager in charge of building and grounds maintenance for the County.

The Parks Board advises staff and the County Commission on community needs and provides input related to parks and recreation issues. The Board is also responsible for long-range park planning. Park Boards are authorized under Section 7-16-2301 of the

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<sup>50</sup> Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Resolution No. 2015L; pg. 31, Table 6

Montana Code Annotated (MCA). Under these provisions, the Park Board has the authority to employ the department director, make rules for the use of parks, and impose penalties for the violation of rules. The Board employs staff to program recreation as well as operate and maintain facilities. The Parks Board can also acquire land needed for parks and recreation facilities. These sites may be in incorporated cities as well as in unincorporated areas of Flathead County.

In 2008, the Parks Board created an advisory committee to develop a Trails Plan under guidance from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program of the National Park Service, and in compliance with associated goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. The committee formed was known as the PATHS Committee, standing for “people, athletics, travel, health, and safety”. The Committee met for nearly 18 months in order to develop a comprehensive trail plan for the County, gathering community input, reviewing past efforts, developing goals and policies, analyzing trail patterns, network strategies, and implementation and administration efforts. The Flathead County Trails Plan was formally adopted on October 12, 2010, by Resolution No. 2015O as an element of the Growth Policy. Content of the Plan will be referenced later on in Chapter 6 of this document, regarding transportation in Flathead County.

### **PART 3: State and Federal Recreation Areas (see Goal 1 in Chapter 2: Land Uses)**

Within Flathead County, there are numerous parks and recreation areas under federal and state management. These facilities offer a wide diversity of all-season outdoor recreational amenities for county residents. Major recreational facilities and administering agencies are listed in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1  
Federal & State Recreation Areas**

<b>Facility</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Management Agency</b>
Glacier National Park	635,214 acres	US National Park Service
Flathead National Forest	1,875,545 acres	US Forest Service
Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo National Forests	115,390 (total acreage)	US Forest Service
Lost Trails National Wildlife Refuge	7,885 acres	US Fish & Wildlife
Swan River National Wildlife Refuge	1,568 acres	US Fish & Wildlife
Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area	5,189 acres	US Fish & Wildlife
Wayfarers State Park	67 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish Lake State Park	11 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Flathead River FAS	44 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Pressentine FAS	11 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Kokanee Bend FAS	185 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Lone Pine State Park	279 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Old Steel Bridge FAS	128 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Shady Lane FAS	5 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Sportsman's Bridge FAS	6 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Les Mason State Park	8 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Somers Beach State Park	106 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Somers FAS	2 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Echo Lake FAS	5 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Bigfork FAS	2 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Teakettle FAS	3 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
McWenneger Slough FAS	20 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Pine Grove Pond	23 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Smith Lake FAS	3 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Beaver Lake FAS	1 acre	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Blanchard Lake FAS	10 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Bootjack Lake FAS	3 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Paul's Memorial FAS	10 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Skyles Lake FAS	1 acre	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Source: Montana Natural Resource Information System, Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks  
<https://myfwp.mt.gov/fishMT/explore>

Stillwater State Forest and other scattered State Trust lands managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) for timber production in Flathead County have also historically been used for hunting, fishing, and other individual outdoors-oriented general recreational use. DNRC is responding to manage steadily increasing interest in commercial recreational use and more organized and developed recreational uses, especially in the urban interface lands such as those near Whitefish (e.g., groomed snowmobile and ski trails, commercial horseback riding, backcountry skiing access, dog mushing, improved hiking/biking trail system and various associated guiding services).

The primary distinction between federal and state recreation areas and county recreation areas is programming. Parks under county administration typically offer active organized sports activities (e.g. softball, volleyball, soccer, and football, etc.), while federal and state lands promote unique outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, fishing, and hunting. The importance of federal and state lands for recreation is tied to the custom and culture of Montana residents and visitors for outdoor activities. Flathead County seeks to provide recreational opportunities that are an alternative to activities found on federal and state lands as well as safeguard public access to public lands and water bodies.

#### **PART 4: Level of Service (see Goal 20)**

Level of service is one tool used to baseline existing parks and recreational infrastructure relative to population. Flathead County's population in 2020 was estimated at 104,357. The population of the unincorporated area of the county was estimated at 66,740 for this same time. Based on the unincorporated population, the county offers approximately 13.3 acres of total recreational area per 1,000 residents. In 2008 the county offered approximately 7.2 acres of total recreational area per 1,000 residents. Even with the increase in population, the county was able to improve the acres of total recreation area per 1,000 residents by 6.1 acres. Most of the additional parkland added is from the expansion of Herron Regional Park. Existing park space available to the residents of Flathead County is further discussed in Chapter 5: Level of Service of the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Level of service calculations are used to monitor performance in implementing park and recreation service delivery and infrastructure goals. Level of service goals are normally associated with comprehensive park master plans. The Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan adopted in 2009 analyzes the level of service as well as anticipated needs to serve future populations and increasing level of service demands. This information and a detailed analysis of current and future LOS projections can be found in Chapter 5 of the plan.

Comments gathered from County residents during the 2006 public survey process for the Growth Policy<sup>51</sup> indicated a need to provide organized sports and other recreational activities and services. Softball and youth soccer are popular and highly visible activities, with more than 100 teams competing annually for space at the Conrad Sports Complex.

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<sup>51</sup> Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Res. No. 2015L; Appendix E – Survey Summary



Organized recreation for youth is also in demand. More specialized types of recreation, such as skateboard parks and swimming, are growing in popularity. The County provides organized recreational programs to more than 10,000 residents each year. Presently, the county does not have a recreation center for basketball or other indoor recreation activities. These needs are comprehensively addressed in Chapter 6 of the Master Plan regarding organized sports.

## CHAPTER 5: THE FLATHEAD ECONOMY

### Introduction

When the Growth Policy was originally adopted in 2007, the Flathead Valley and its economy were experiencing significant growth and development. Traditionally characterized by its diversity, Northwest Montana's economy was stable and growing. A 2004 report on the 'State of the Rockies' identified Flathead County as having the most balanced employment composition in the Rocky Mountain West, with no one sector of the economy prevailing over another. That all changed in 2008, when the economic recession affecting the rest of the country began to significantly impact Montana's economy. Numerous reports in the years since have characterized Flathead County as one of the hardest hit economies in the state, with some of the highest long-term unemployment rates and a significant reduction in economic diversity. And while the effects of the recession continue to be felt today, the Flathead Valley is beginning a slow recovery, building upon the natural resources and scenic qualities that have traditionally been part of the economic landscape while embracing new opportunities and supporting those economic sectors that have remained resilient throughout the recession.

The County's natural environment has always been one of its chief economic assets, contributing significantly to the high quality of life that draws visitors as well as potential employers and future residents to the Valley. This quality of life is characterized by natural scenic beauty, clean air and water and access to outdoor and recreational opportunities. Region specific export products such as Flathead cherries and timber products, as well as the tourism draw of Glacier National Park and Flathead Lake are prime examples of how Flathead County's natural environment has contributed significantly to the local economy.

Rapid population growth since the 1980s has served as a major driver in the County's economic vitality. The population of older, working, financially established adults rapidly increased during this time period, as those in their early 40's to late 50's chose to relocate to Flathead County. The number of older, non-working adults and retirees requiring access to social and medical services without income attachment grew significantly during this time period which has led to a dichotomy in the present day between a growing number of people requiring services and a diminishing service sector. The national recession that began in 2008 had a dramatic effect on the rate of growth and overall composition of the population, particularly its civilian labor force. After the recession, building in the Valley slowed while population growth went on to surpass the available housing stock. As migration into Flathead Valley increases, the housing deficit has exacerbated a labor shortage. With a greater population to service and fewer people to provide services, the Valley's economy has become strained. Cyclical changes related to the evolving needs of a local and regionally connected population will continue to influence and drive the economy. Planning in a way that will encourage and sustain future economic growth in the face of cyclical change is one approach to the current economic situation facing the Flathead Valley.

**Goal**

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G.21 A healthy and vibrant Flathead County economy that provides diversity and living-wage job opportunities and is comprised of sustainable economic activities and private sector investment.

**Policies**

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P.21.1 Provide adequate land area designated for commercial and industrial use to promote affordability, creating entrepreneurialism and/or businesses relocation to Flathead County.

P.21.2 Develop methods to enhance a sustainable agricultural and timber industry through community-based incentives.

P.21.3 Foster business development as a method to provide employment and locally produced goods and services to meet the needs and demands of local communities and to provide region specific export goods.

P.21.4 Promote education and work force development programs to better prepare current and future generations for high quality job opportunities and to provide employers with quality and dependable workers.

P.21.5 Utilize economic development authorities to attract relocation or startup of businesses that offer competitive wages and job opportunities for those with a range of educational backgrounds.

P.21.6 Preserve the natural amenities that characterize the county in order to attract industries and businesses that maintain the high quality of life that attracts visitors and new residents and sustains the tourism sector of the economy.

P.21.7 Support the continuation of traditional and existing industries to maintain economic diversity and aid future business expansion.

**Goal**

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G.22 Available, accessible, and adequate business infrastructure including facilities, utilities, services and transportation networks to facilitate new businesses and relocation of existing businesses to the County

**Policies**

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P.22.1 Identify infrastructure needs of the various business types and identify areas of the County which can best suit those needs.

P.22.2 Promote business centers and industrial parks in areas served by sufficient infrastructure with consideration to proximity to population densities.

P.22.3 Encourage the development of an airport industrial/business center to provide convenient access to Glacier International Airport and to foster a growing economy.

P.22.4 Consider the infrastructure needs of local businesses when prioritizing development of new county facilities.

P.22.5 Encourage/support coordination with in the creation and update of the Flathead County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

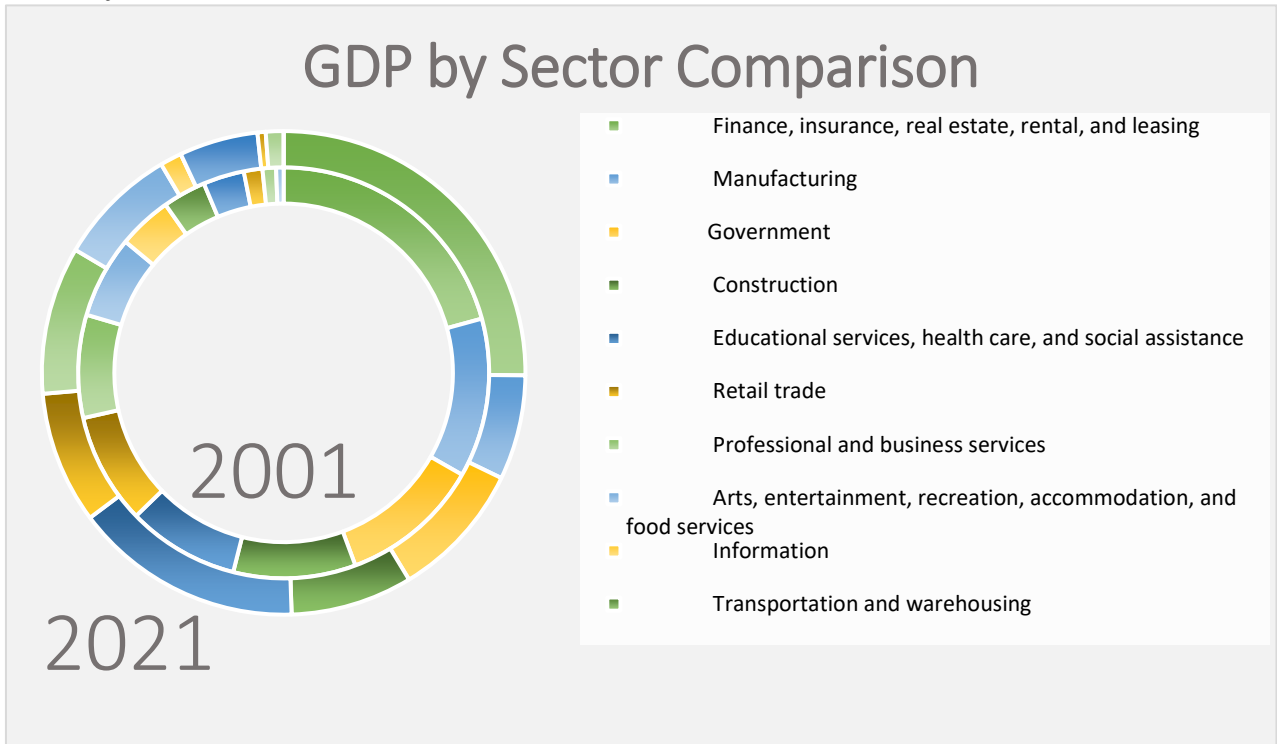
### **PART 1: Economic Composition (see Goals 21 and 22)**

The Flathead Valley was historically a natural resource-based economy. Logging, mining, and commodities production have decreased over the past decade, and as a result the Flathead economy has had to diversify in order to accommodate this change (as shown in Figure 5.1 below). The County's economy experienced significant restructuring at the turn of the century, with significant growth in the retail trade and service industries during the late 1990's and early 2000's. The economic downturn of 2008 tempered the diversification of the economy in the same way it has affected economic growth and stability. Those industries that experienced increases in employment, labor earnings, and sales over the past decade have since experienced significant losses in these same indicator areas during the recession. The closure of the Columbia Falls Aluminum Company and the Plum Creek mill, coupled with cyclical declines in the wood products and construction industry have added to these losses.

Several types of indicators may be used to evaluate trends in sectors and sub sectors of the economy. Wages and income, employment, and sales are some indicators which show changes over time. All these indicators are discussed throughout this chapter to contrast past and current trends and to provide a snapshot of today's economy. Information contained in this chapter describes both basic and non-basic sectors. Basic sectors are those sectors of the economy which are entirely dependent on the export of their goods or services. Examples of basic sector goods are agriculture, manufacturing, and retail trade. Non-basic sectors are dependent on local consumption of goods and services and include services such as healthcare and education.

Since the County's economic restructuring of the early 2000s one sector of the economy has stood out and generated the largest amount of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 'Real Estate'. In 2001 real estate made up 21% of the GDP and, as of 2021, counts towards a quarter of the County's GDP. 'Health and Education' follows second, increasing from 9% in 2001 to 15% in 2021. 'Professional Services', 'Government', and 'Retail' – respectively – are all close behind. Recreation and Entertainment have remained stable, making up for 8% of the economy in 2001 and still making up 8% in 2021. Manufacturing has continued its decline from the early 2000s, comprising 13% of the economy in 2001 to only 7% in 2021, along with construction falling from 10% to 8%.

**Figure 5.1**  
**County GDP (2001-2021)**



\*Real GDP is in millions of chained 2012 dollars. Industry detail is based on the 2012 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS)

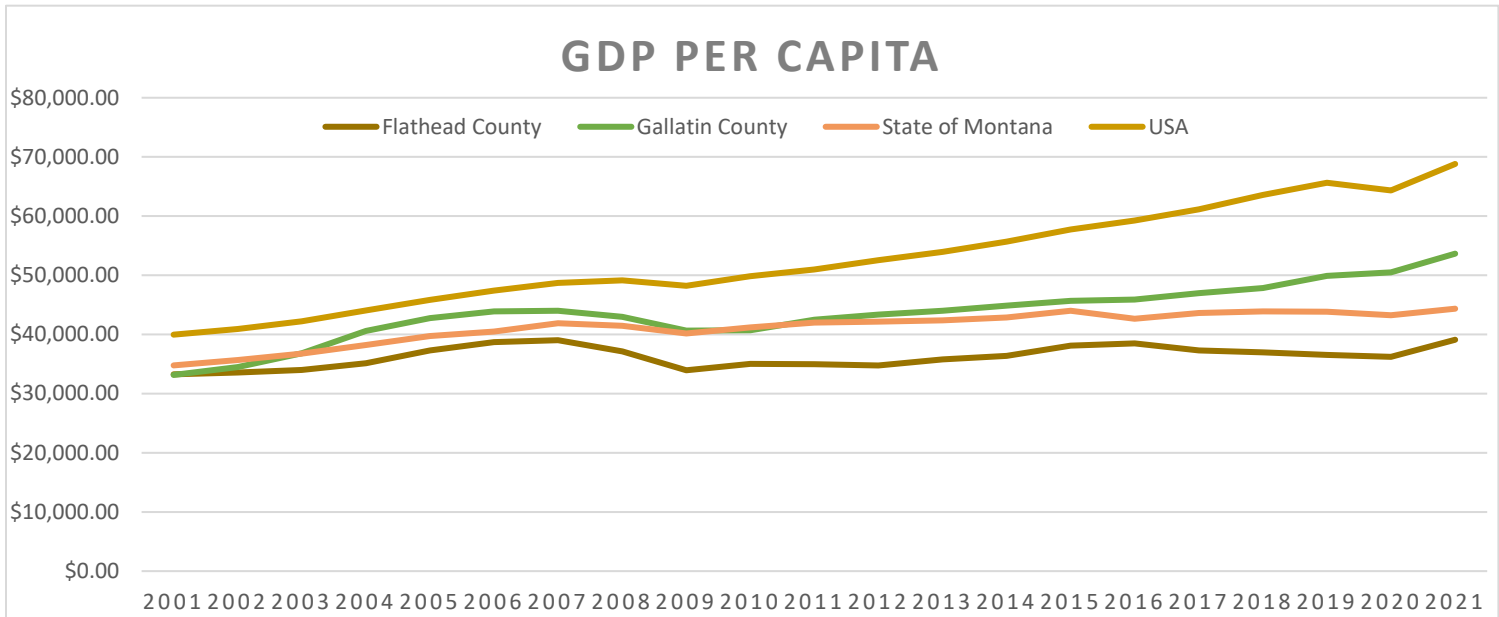
Sources: Bureau of Economic Analysis Data

[https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/?reqid=70&step=30&isuri=1&year\\_end=-1&classification=naics&state=0&yearbegin=-1&unit\\_of\\_measure=percentchange&major\\_area=0&area=04000&year=-1](https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/?reqid=70&step=30&isuri=1&year_end=-1&classification=naics&state=0&yearbegin=-1&unit_of_measure=percentchange&major_area=0&area=04000&year=-1)

1&tableid=512&category=1512&area\_type=0&statistic=1&selected\_income\_data=0#eyJhcHBpZCI6NzAsInN0ZXBzZljbMSwvNCwyOSwvNSwzMSwvNywiNywzMF0sImRhdGEiOltbImNsYXNzaWZpY2F0aW9uIiwiaWtkFjQ1MiXSxbInN0YXRlIixibjAiXV0sWyJ1bml0X29mX211YXN1cmUiLCJMZXZlbnR0aW9uX2FyZWVlLCIwIl0sWyJhemVhIixibjAwMDAwIl1dLFsidGFibGVpZCIsIjUxMiJdLFsic3RhdGlzdGljIixibjEiXV0sWyJZZWFyIixibjIwMDEiXV0sWyJZZWFyQmVnaW4iLCItMSJdLFsiWWVhcl9FbmQiLCItMSJdXX0=

The US Economic Census is conducted every five years and provides data for standard industry sectors important to the County’s economy. The most recent data available are from 2021, and data collected indicates a substantial increase in sales for all sectors from \$4.19 billion in 2017 to \$5.35 billion in 2021, an increase of nearly 21%. The real estate sector has been leading Flathead’s economy since the turn of the century and contributes \$1.28 billion to the Valley’s economy. Growing and stable sectors of the economy that make up more than 5% of the GDP over the last twenty years include ‘Finance and Real Estate’, ‘Educational and Health Services’, ‘Retail Trade’, ‘Professional Services’, and ‘Recreation, Entertainment, and Tourism’.

Figure 5.2  
GDP per Capita Comparison



\*Real GDP is in millions of chained 2012 dollars. Industry detail is based on the 2012 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS)  
 Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis Data  
[https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/?reqid=70&step=30&isuri=1&year\\_end=-1&classification=naics&state=0&yearbegin=-1&unit\\_of\\_measure=percentchange&major\\_area=0&area=04000&year=-1&tableid=512&category=1512&area\\_type=0&statistic=1&selected\\_income\\_data=0#eyJhcHBpZCI6NzAsInN0ZXBzIjpBMSwyNCwyOSwyNSwzMSwyNiwyNywzMF0sImRhdGEiOltImNsYXNzaWZpY2F0aW9uliwiTkFJQ1MiXSxbInN0YXRllixbljAiXV0sWwYJ1bml0X29mX2l1YXNlcmUiLCJmZXZlbHMlXSxbIm1ham9yX2FyZWEiLCIwIl0sWwYJhcmVhIixbljAwMDAwIlldLFsidGFibGVpZCIsIjUxMiJdLFsic3RhdGlzdGljIixbljEiXV0sWwYJZZWFyIixbljIwMDEiXV0sWwYJZZWFyQmVnaW4iLCItMSJdLFsiWWVhcrl9F9FmQiLCItMSJdXX0=](https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/?reqid=70&step=30&isuri=1&year_end=-1&classification=naics&state=0&yearbegin=-1&unit_of_measure=percentchange&major_area=0&area=04000&year=-1&tableid=512&category=1512&area_type=0&statistic=1&selected_income_data=0#eyJhcHBpZCI6NzAsInN0ZXBzIjpBMSwyNCwyOSwyNSwzMSwyNiwyNywzMF0sImRhdGEiOltImNsYXNzaWZpY2F0aW9uliwiTkFJQ1MiXSxbInN0YXRllixbljAiXV0sWwYJ1bml0X29mX2l1YXNlcmUiLCJmZXZlbHMlXSxbIm1ham9yX2FyZWEiLCIwIl0sWwYJhcmVhIixbljAwMDAwIlldLFsidGFibGVpZCIsIjUxMiJdLFsic3RhdGlzdGljIixbljEiXV0sWwYJZZWFyIixbljIwMDEiXV0sWwYJZZWFyQmVnaW4iLCItMSJdLFsiWWVhcrl9F9FmQiLCItMSJdXX0=)

Back in the early 2000s, Flathead County had a GDP per capita that was generally congruent with the state. With the recession of 2008 and the economic challenges offered by the 2020 global pandemic and subsequent housing crisis, Flathead has seen its fair share of economic setbacks. Considering the current economic conditions, it is important that Flathead County takes the appropriate measures to create a market friendly environment that promotes entrepreneurship and business investment to create resiliency in its economy. Appropriate and compatible land uses such as industrial parks near the airport, visible and accessible commercial lands, increased housing for service sectors, and expanding access and services for tourism in areas with water and sewer capacity are critical components of rebuilding and maintaining a diverse economy. These are some of the many areas to be considered for their future development potential. With a population projected to increase to 123,969 by 2030, the Flathead economy will continue to grow. Having a plan in place to promote economic development in all stable and growing sectors through appropriate, diverse and compatible land uses will ensure opportunities for diverse growth. The creation of an economic development plan will be discussed in greater detail in Part 6 of this chapter.

**PART 2: Employment (see Goal 21)**

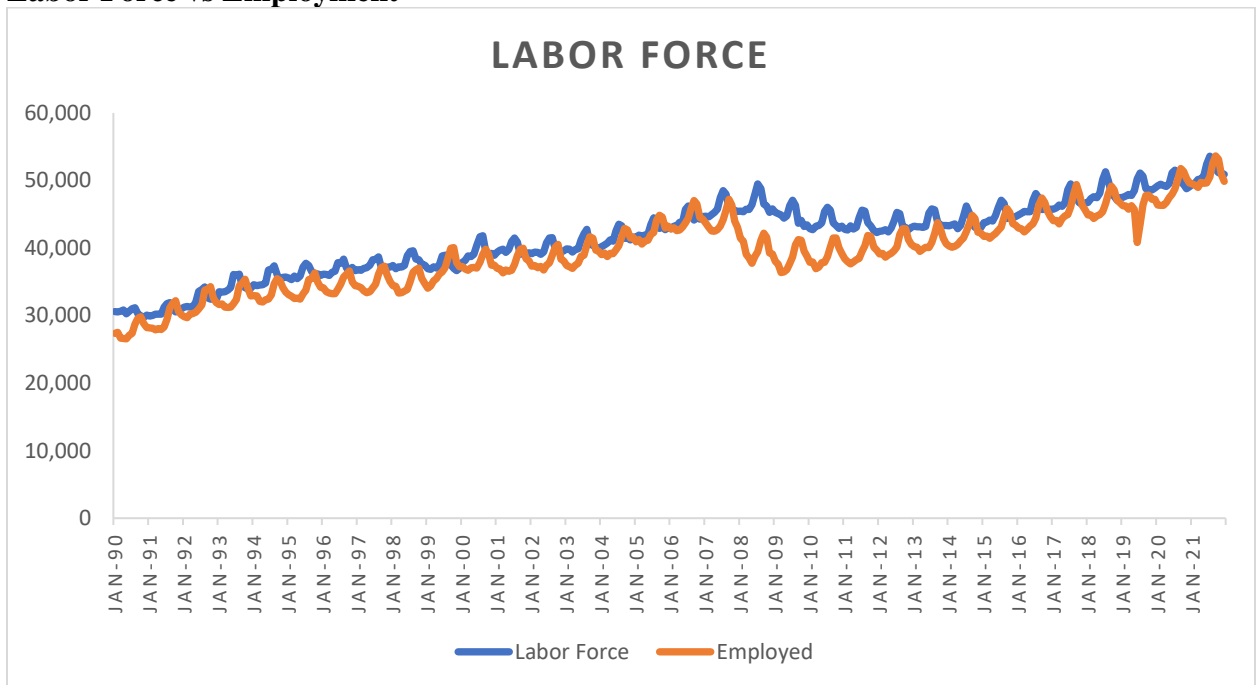
Over time the labor force in Flathead County has been steadily increasing. Data shows that from 1990 to 2000, 15,700 new workers were added to the labor force. The labor force is the total number of available workers, regardless of employment status. It is

important to put the increase in labor force into the context of the growing population because the employed portion of the labor force performs the function of serving the population and dollars made and spent in the County serve to further bolster the County’s economy. Figure 5.3a shows the change in labor force between 2000 and 2021.

Specifically, the labor force as a function of the population. One can see from the graph that the labor force generally hovers around 50% and since 2017 has dropped to around 40% of the County’s population. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics designates that the U.S., on average, had a civilian labor force participation rate of approximately 66% in 2003 which dropped to around 62% in 2021. Flathead County consistently lacks the national average labor force participation. Part of this is likely due to cyclical and seasonal positions. Figure 5.3a shows a 30-year snapshot of the Flathead County Labor Force. The graph shows the rise in available jobs which occurs each summer, a steep drop-off in fall, a slight bump in the winter, and another drop-off through spring.

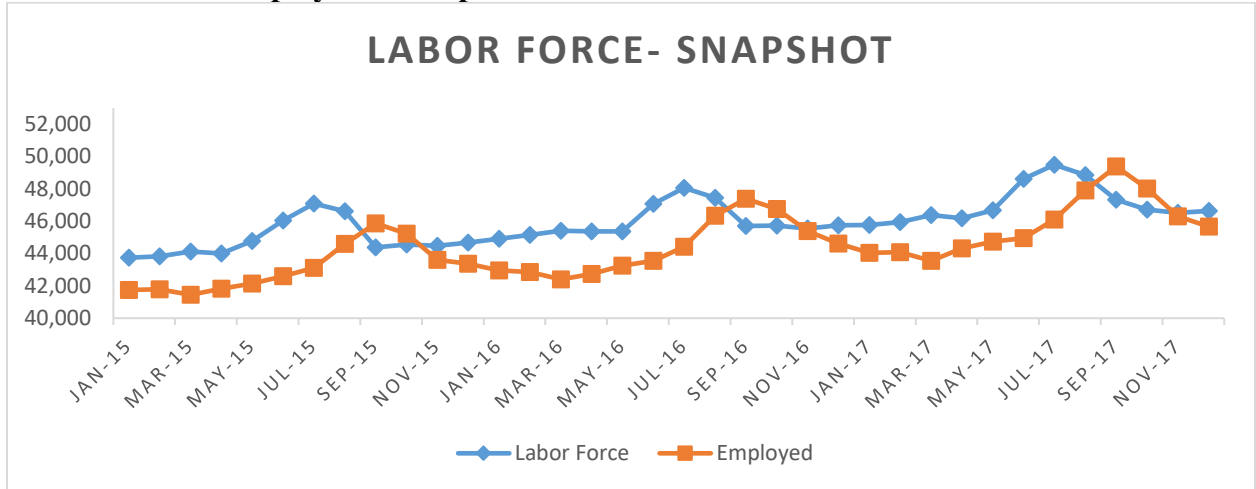
While the GDP of the County is led by Real Estate, Health Care, and Professional Services, the primary employers of the County are led by Health Care, Retail, and Food Services. In 2009, Retail led in employment, followed by government services and food services. As in 2009, annual employment levels within traditional sectors such as agriculture, forestry, construction, and manufacturing, have continued to decline.

**Figure 5.3a**  
**Labor Force vs Employment**



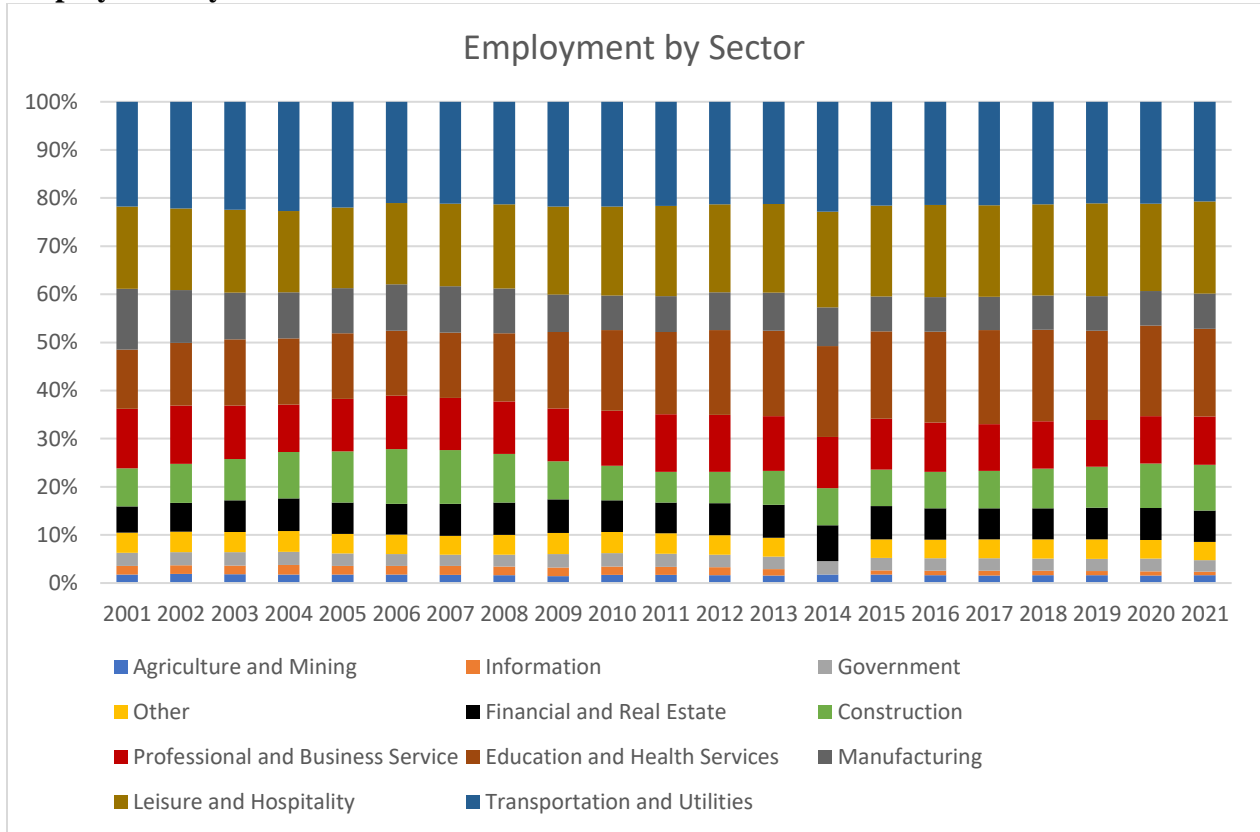
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>

**Figure 5.3b**  
**Labor Force vs Employment Snapshot**



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>

**Figure 5.4**  
**Employment by Sector – 2001-2021**



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>



Service and retail trade sectors witnessed a 57% employment growth during the 1990s. The types of occupations that increased were mainly high-quality jobs such as those in health care, engineering and management services, and business services. Service and retail occupations accounted for over 70% of the labor earnings during the 1990's. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of employees in health care and social assistance increased by 257%, followed by arts, entertainment, and recreation with an increase of 74% and employees in administrative and waste management services which increased by 70%.<sup>52</sup> These industry types are components of the service sector of the economy, characterized as providing a service (i.e. intangible good) instead of producing a tangible end product, through activities where people offer knowledge and time to improve productivity, performance, potential and sustainability. As evidenced in Figure 5.4 above, most service sectors continued to experience growth since 2004, primarily in the realm of healthcare and social assistance, accommodation and food as well as government services. Industrial sectors of the economy – those producing tangible goods instead of intangible services – generally experience a decline in employment in the years since 2004. Particularly hard-hit were the construction and manufacturing industries, with decreases in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting as well. Trends from the early 2000s have persisted with industrial sectors continuing to decline and service sectors growing. 'Leisure and Hospitality' and 'Health Services and Education' lead with the highest employment of any other sector. While 'Real Estate' and 'Professional and Business Services' lead in GDP, these sectors generally require fewer workers and thus have significantly lower employment. Given the increased interest in the housing market as well as the economy bouncing back from the recession of 2008, 'Construction' has seen a gradual increase in workforce.

As depicted in Figure 5.3b, the seasonal nature of the work force is an important function of employment within Flathead County. Many sectors, such as 'Construction' as well as service industries like 'Leisure and Hospitality' have dramatically differing staffing needs depending on the season. The seasonal nature of the workforce, and the economy as a whole, strains economic growth, as it requires large amounts of housing that may go unused throughout the off season, or requires employees to find unique seasonal accommodations, given the housing deficit. Additionally, a consistent turnover of employees year to year creates a dynamic population which lacks the resilience of a fixed population and a stable economy. Moving forward, steps should be taken to ensure adequate workforce housing and in turn to build resiliency into the seasonal aspects of the economy.

### Unemployment Rates

When the Growth Policy was written in 2007, Flathead County was experiencing low unemployment rates, as evidenced by Figure 5.5 below. Higher unemployment rates in the 1990's gave way to a relatively stable economy in 2000, and unemployment rates generally remained between 4% and 6% from 2000 to 2007. As a result of the 2008 recession, the unemployment rate peaked in 2010 hitting about 16%. Over the next 9 years, unemployment slowly recovered until 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic caused unemployment to jump even higher to 16.9%, quickly recovering to about 2.6% during summer and about 6.3% in the winter. Prolonged unemployment, the changing seasonal availability of employment, and a reduction in diversity and prevalence of low-wage

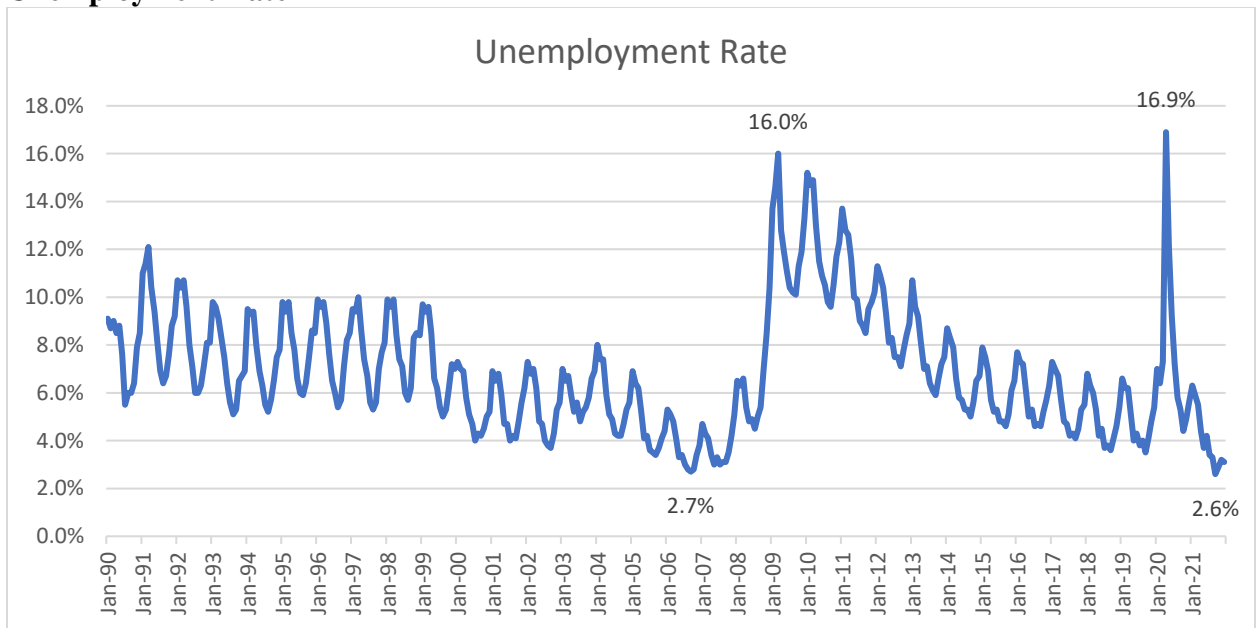
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<sup>52</sup> US Economic Census 1997, 2002

earning opportunities have resulted in an economy which lacks resilience to change and economic downturn.

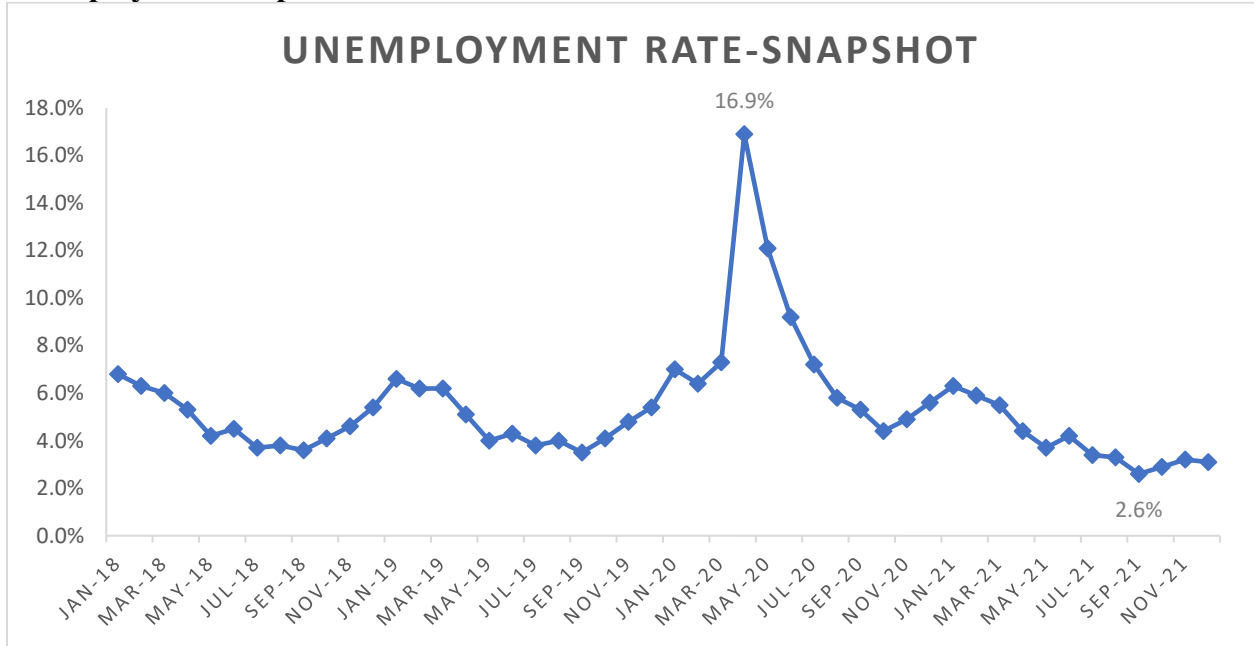
The data regarding unemployment rates in Flathead County is limited in that it only reflects the number of individuals applying for unemployment insurance during the time period (month) the data is collected. Job loss is a significant factor that has a direct impact on both unemployment rates as well as the current instability of the economy in Flathead County. Figure 5.5 shows the percent change in annual employment trends between 1990 and 2021, while Figure 5.6 looks more specifically at a snapshot of unemployment around the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The majority of industry employers reduced their workforce over the course of a year, indicating significant job loss in sector including utilities, construction, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trades, information, finance, real estate and management.

**Figure 5.5**  
**Unemployment Rate**



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>

**Figure 5.6**  
**Unemployment Snapshot**



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>

**Wages**

Between 2000 and 2007, annual wages for most employment sectors were on the rise. Following the economic downturn in 2008 there was a significant decrease in annual wages in the construction, manufacturing and retail trade sectors of the economy, and moderate decreases were felt in other sectors including wholesale trade, administrative and waste services, professional and technical as well as accommodation and food services. Only the health care and social assistance, finance, insurance, and government sectors have experienced increases in total annual wages since 2008.

Data regarding the interim between 2008 and 2010 is difficult to find for Flathead County, but since the economic recession of 2008 the median household income within the County has been inconsistent, with an increase of 12.3% from 2010 to 2011, and a decrease the following year of 3.2%. The rapid fluctuation of the median income is likely related to the lack of resilience of the Flathead County economy. Small fluctuations in the availability of seasonal workers, times of emigration, and other minor setbacks all affect the household incomes of the County.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the increasing cost of living in Flathead County has influenced what is defined as a “livable wage” or a wage which covers the costs of basic needs such as housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and insurance. The cost of housing in the County, as discussed in Chapter 3, is a major factor in determining a ‘livable’ wage since this cost has risen dramatically over the past decade. According to a report produced by the Montana West Economic Development, cost of living expenses related to groceries, transportation and healthcare all tend to be higher in the city of Kalispell (and surrounding

environs) than the national average.<sup>53</sup> Job related benefits also factor into the cost-of-living equation. A report conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates approximately 76% of Montanans are covered by some form of health insurance, be it public, private, or a combination of both. 55% of Montanans receive job-based health insurance, a percentage that has remained steady over the past decade despite a decrease at the national level. An estimate taken in 2009 provided by the US Census Bureau indicated an elderly population (age 65 and over) of approximately 11,709 persons, or roughly 14% of the total population at the time.<sup>54</sup> As of 2022, the elderly population has nearly doubled to 23,431 persons or about 20.9% of the population. Affordable healthcare becomes particularly important when factoring in the cost of living for residents in this age bracket but should be a consideration when factoring wage and per capita income for all area residents.

Generally speaking, per capita income has increased since the latter part of the 1990s. However, when compared to the United States, annual individual earnings in Flathead County have steadily declined against the national average. In the early 1970s the earnings per job in the county were comparable to those nationwide; in fact, in 1973 the average earnings per job in the county was over 95% of the national average. Over time, however, the rate of personal income increase slowed in Montana generally and Flathead County specifically, while annual per capita income continued to maintain about \$3000-\$4000 below the national level. Figure 5.2 offers an evaluation of per capita income for residents of Flathead County compared to residents of Gallatin County, the State of Montana and the U.S. as a whole. It is apparent from the data that Flathead County employers pay less than U.S. employers on average and are less competitive than their counterparts across the state of Montana. In 2004, per capita personal income in Flathead County was \$29,471 placing Flathead County as 10<sup>th</sup> highest in the state. Today per capita income for Flathead residents is \$58,964, on par with the state at \$58,344, however, this number falls significantly behind Gallatin County by 16.1%, a comparable county to Flathead County, and 8.5% below the national average of \$64,430.<sup>55</sup> Frustration with below average wages is evident from the residents of Flathead County. A goal commonly cited by participants in the 2005-2006 growth policy scoping meetings was jobs with adequate wages that include health insurance (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). These sentiments continue today, while unemployment rates are low enough to not cause concern available jobs are often found in industry sectors like retail trades or accommodation and food services that offer lower pay with few or no benefits.

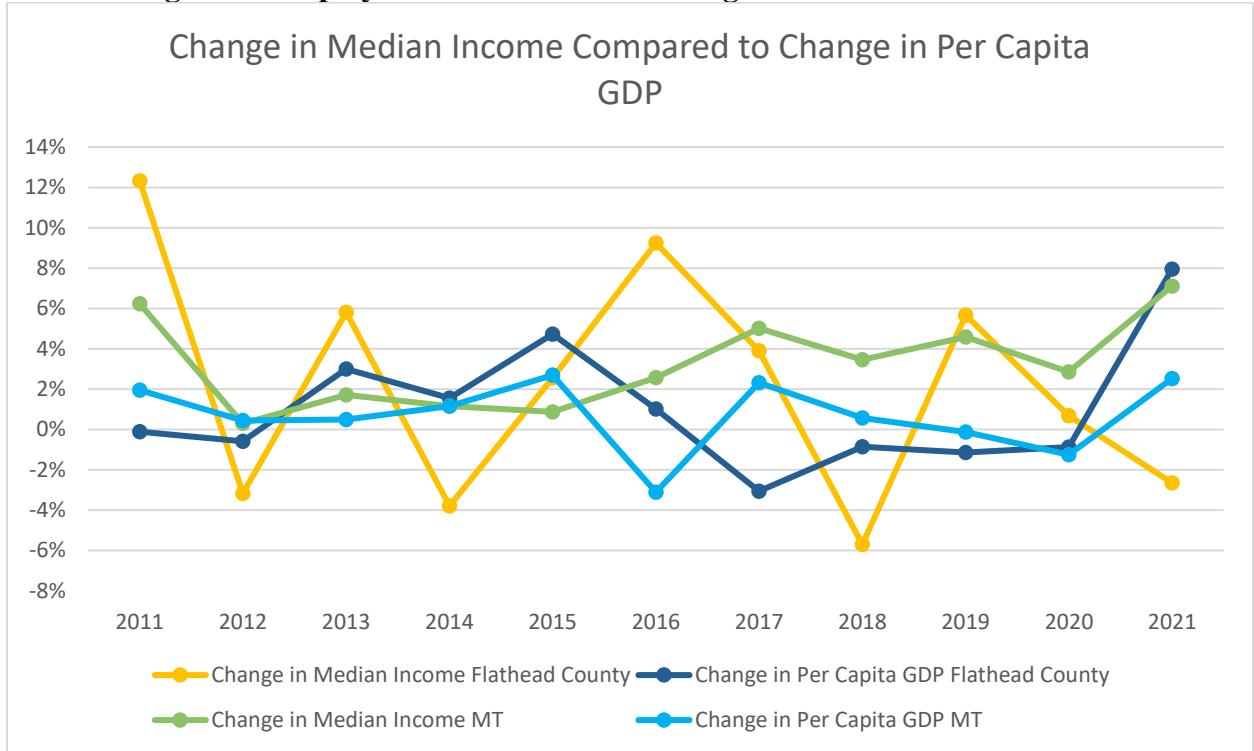
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<sup>53</sup> ACCRA Cost of Living Index, Q3 2010, [www.coli.org](http://www.coli.org)

<sup>54</sup> ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates for Flathead County, Montana: 2005-2009

<sup>55</sup> Montana Department of Labor & Industry; Income Report (1969-2009)  
US Bureau of Economic Analysis (1990-2021)

**Figure 5.7**  
**Annual Wages Per Employment Sector – 2011 through 2021**



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis Data; FRED Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Per Capita Personal Income in Flathead County, MT [PCPI30029], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCPI30029>, October 19, 2023

Growth in the service sector has resulted in an infusion of lower-wage employment opportunities in Flathead County during the second half of the 2010s. While any economic growth is typically considered positive, an increase in lower wages and often part-time jobs has its own unique impact on the economy. Figure 5.9a below shows the percentage of households supplemented by food stamps from 2010 to 2022. The graph is difficult to interpret as access to food stamps over time has been reduced. Table 5.2 below shows the lowest paying jobs across key employment sectors; note accommodation and food services and retail trades are generally the lowest paying, while accounting for 8% and 9% of the GDP of the county. As previously touched upon, these types of jobs rarely offer employment benefits or insurance to help offset cost of living expenses, and minimum wage is rarely considered enough of an income for an individual to provide for themselves or for a family. Economic conditions in the early 2000s through the early 2010s led to the prevalence of underemployment, a situation where skilled workers are employed in low-wage jobs that fail to offer the financial security necessary to support themselves, which tends to affect regional economic stability as well. This instability has been compounded today by an influx of remote workers whose money is earned and mostly spent outside of the county. However, these residents still require the same services as residents who work in the county, such as police and fire protection, roads and infrastructure, education and health care, food services and other

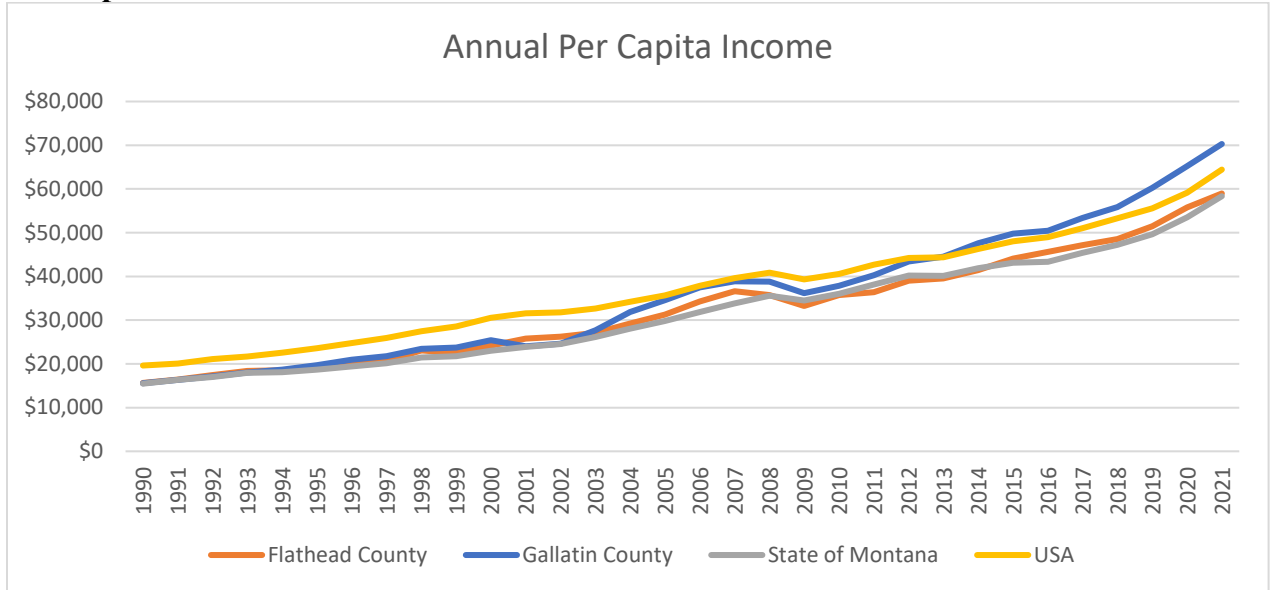
hospitality services, among others. Additionally, while difficult to quantify the extent, it is worth noting that the per capita income is likely artificially raised due to remote workers. This affects the economy by increasing the base cost of living, particularly housing, by raising the value of homes, and the subsequent property taxes, often resulting in housing displacement if not emigration by lifelong residents. Additionally, the exorbitant cost of housing precludes service industry workers -with low wages and minimal benefits- from being able to afford living in the Flathead. This strains the economy by resulting in fewer service industry employees that are expected to perform the same quality and quantity of labor, often resulting in burnout and a lower level of service for the county.

In years past, Census data has shown Flathead County residents increasingly live on non-wage incomes, which include income from investments and transfer payments such as social security and other government assistance such as food stamps. This may be due to the fact that the number of residents identified as ‘traditional retirees’, as well as people between the ages of 40 and 60 years old has been steadily growing. However, in 2010 over 77% of all household income in Flathead County was reported as all or partially wage-based, a 17% increase over the percentage reported in 2000. When the Growth Policy was originally adopted in 2012, 27% of all households in Flathead County received Social Security benefits, while nearly 17% of households received other forms of retirement income and 12% of households received additional income in the form of Supplemental Security Income, cash public assistance or food stamp benefits.<sup>56</sup> Currently, as of 2022, approximately 37.7% of households rely on Social Security income, 3.3% over the number of households in the State of Montana and 6.6% over the national number of households receiving Social Security Income.

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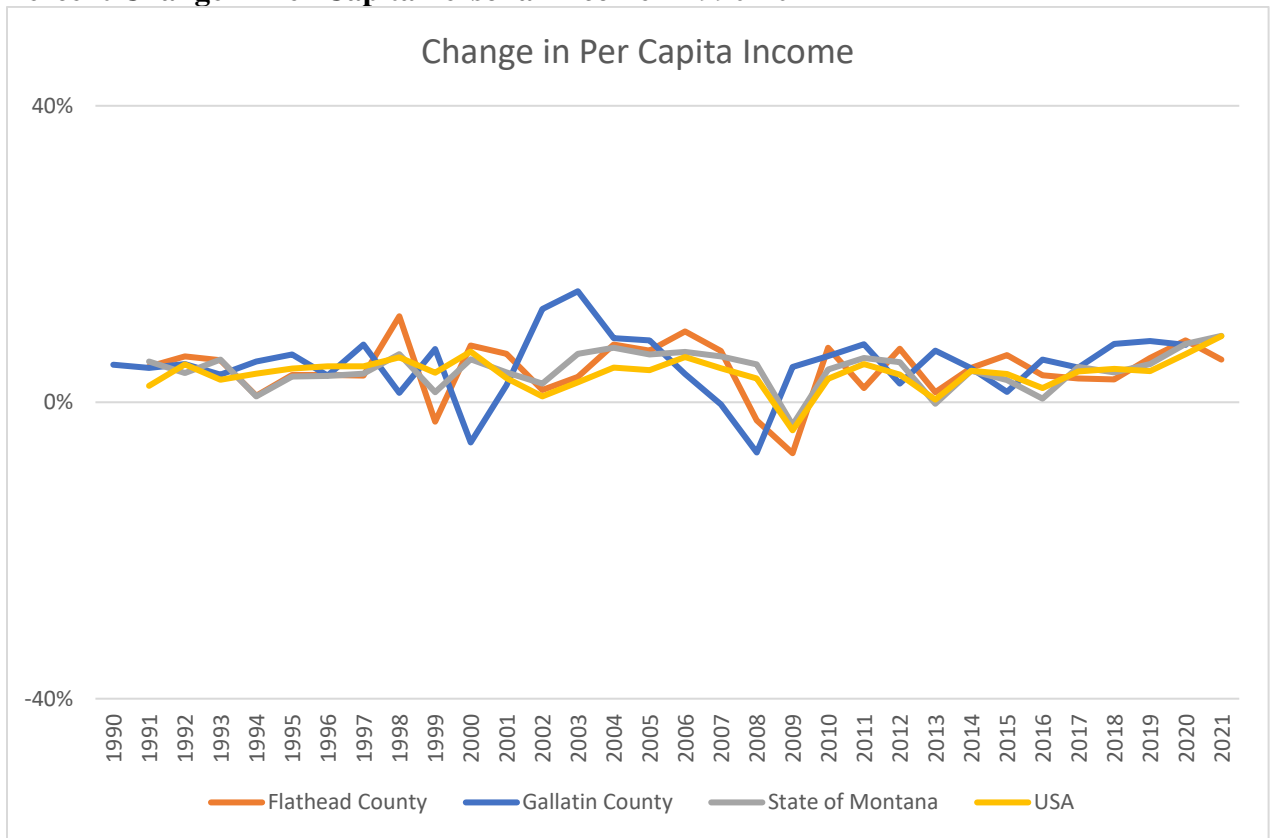
<sup>56</sup> ACS Profile Report, 2010 - Flathead County, Montana.

**Figure 5.8a**  
**Per Capita Personal Income – 1990-2021**



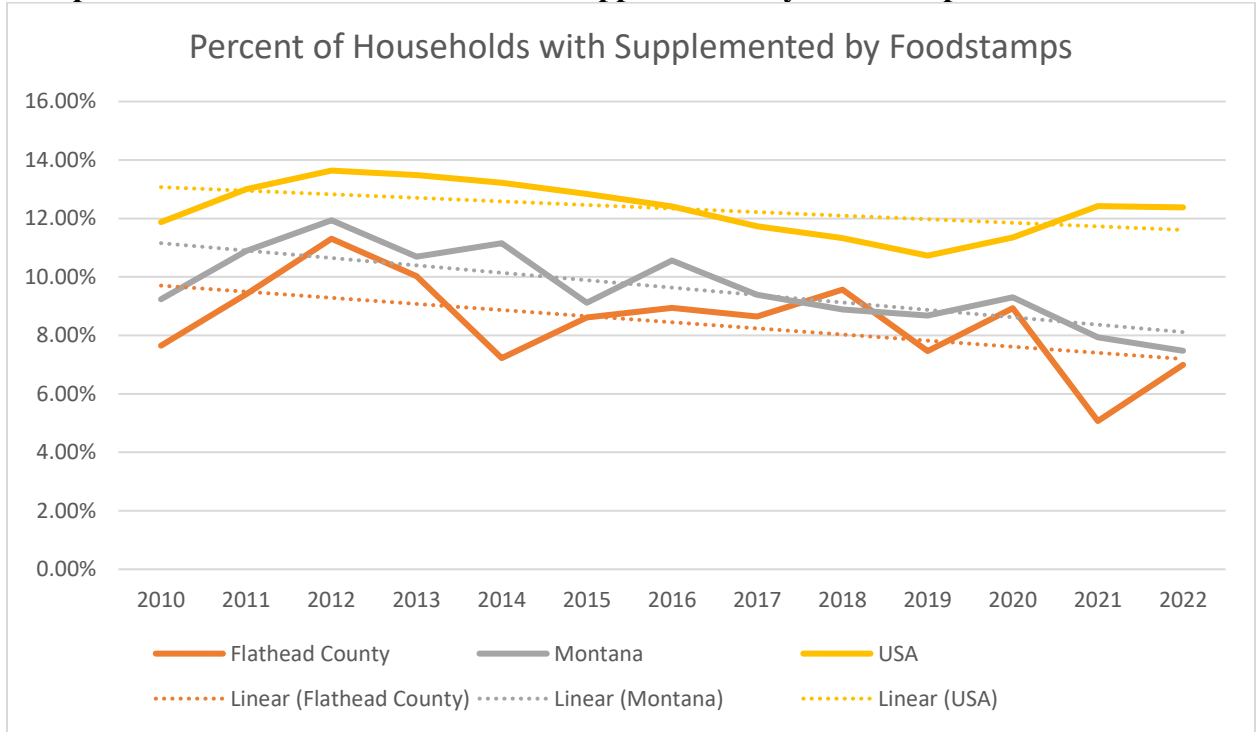
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis Data; FRED Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Per Capita Personal Income in Flathead County, MT [PCPI30029], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCPI30029>, October 19, 2023

**Figure 5.8b**  
**Percent Change in Per Capita Personal Income – 1990-2021**



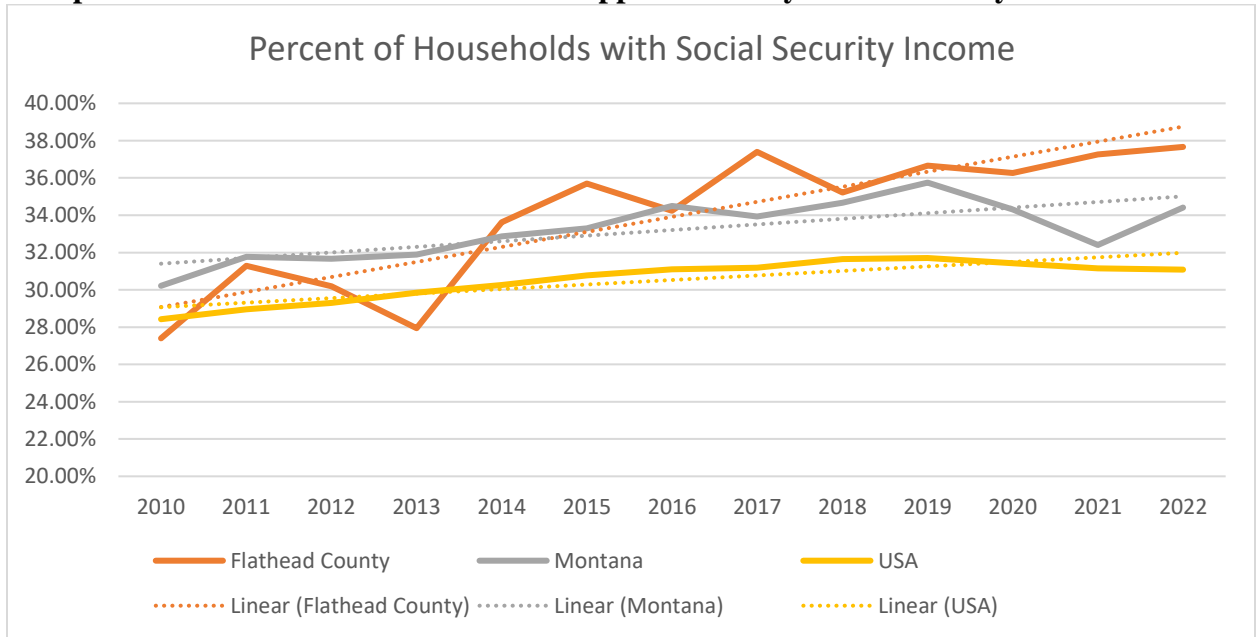
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics; Bureau of Economic Analysis Data; FRED Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis  
<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Per Capita Personal Income in Flathead County, MT [PCPI30029], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCPI30029>, October 19, 2023

**Figure 5.9a**  
**Comparison of Households with Income Supplemented by Foodstamps**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis Data  
<https://www.bea.gov/itable/national-gdp-and-personal-income>

**Figure 5.9b**  
**Comparison of Households with Income Supplemented by Social Security**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis Data  
<https://www.bea.gov/itable/national-gdp-and-personal-income>



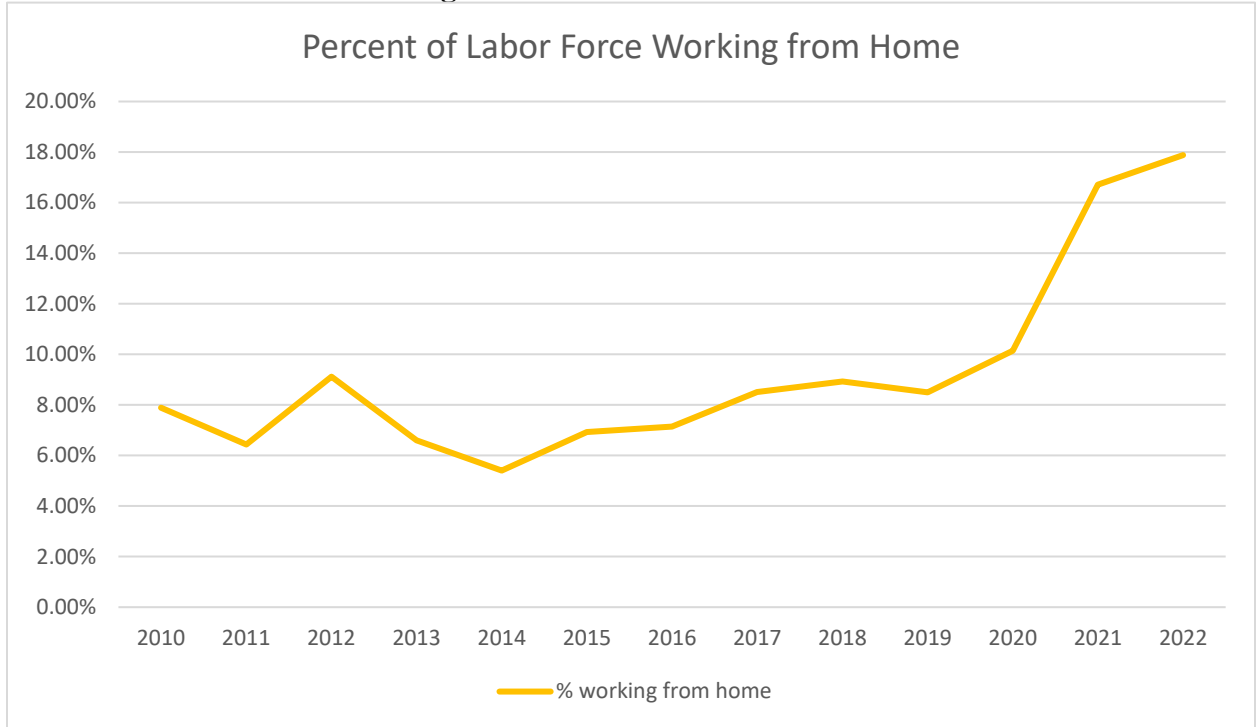
## Workforce

In 2004 Flathead County employers were experiencing difficulty filling available positions. Given the high rate of unemployment and number of jobs lost during the recession of 2008 there were more people than there were jobs in Flathead County in 2009. When the Growth Policy was written in 2007, the lack of a sufficient workforce raised employers' concerns about education, training and employee recruitment. At the time, with the high rate of unemployment and lack of available jobs, the potential for outmigration of qualified professionals looking for work in other parts of the state and country significantly impacted the Flathead's road to economic recovery.

Generally, an unemployment rate of 4-6% is considered healthy. Higher unemployment rates usually point to economic downturns, while lower unemployment rates create a challenging and inflexible job market. Flathead County currently has an unemployment rate of approximately 2%. With an unemployment rate so low, there is little ability for lateral movements within the job market, and limited ability for new workers to enter the workforce.

Creating and maintaining a local economy that is diverse and can be sustained relies upon the availability of jobs that pay a living wage and a qualified, able workforce to fill those positions. In addition to outmigration, individuals residing in Flathead County but having to work outside the County's jurisdiction grew slowly but steadily from 2004-2009. During the global pandemic there was a marked increase in the percentage of the labor force working from home. There are aspects of the data which are difficult to quantify, such as; How many workers were able to return to their offices? How many were added through the immigration of remote workers? How much would this number have increased regardless of the influx of remote workers? There is not enough data available to say. However, it is safe to say that Flathead County had a consistent number of employees working from home, ranging between 5.40%-10.15% for most of the 2010s. By 2022, the percentage of people working from home reached nearly 18%. Given the existing challenges within the housing market, many remote workers were able to take advantage of the ability to work from home and were able to make a living wage out of area while living in the County.

**Figure 5.10**  
**Percent of Labor Force Working from Home**



Source: FRED Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis  
<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LAUCN300290000000006A>

The majority of Flathead County residents 25 years or older have some education beyond high school, with – 31.11% having some college or an associate degree and 36.36% holding a bachelor’s degree or higher education.<sup>57</sup> This education trend is similar to that throughout Montana. An educated workforce is critical to a diverse economy. A major component of attracting business investments to the county is having a well-trained ambitious workforce. Flathead Valley Community College provides a critical service in achieving this objective and should be supported. For more on Flathead Valley Community College, see Chapter 7: Public Facilities and Services.

Based on 2022 estimates, the workforce (age 18-65) appears to be evenly split with 50% of workers female and the remaining 50% male.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup>American Community Survey Estimates, 2022; Selected Social Characteristics, Flathead County, Montana

<sup>58</sup> ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates for Flathead County, Montana: 2022

**Table 5.1**  
**Workforce Education (population 25 years and older) – 2021**

<b>Educational Attainment (Labor Force)</b>	<b>Flathead County</b>	<b>Montana</b>	<b>USA</b>
Less than High School Diploma	4.11%	5.75%	9.76%
H.S. Diploma or Equivalent	29.39%	27.54%	24.86%
Some College or associate degree	31.11%	31.05%	28.10%
Bachelor's Degree or higher	36.36%	35.65%	37.29%

Source: American Community Survey Estimates, 2021; Selected Social Characteristics, Flathead County, Montana

### **PART 3: Business Characteristics (see Goals 21 and 22)**

The majority of businesses in the county are small businesses indicating entrepreneurship is significant. Advanced telecommunication and transportation infrastructure has allowed new business opportunities in the county to grow and thrive. A high quality of living in the county is an advantage when encouraging relocation or the start-up of high tech and value-added businesses, as these businesses produce high value goods with low environmental impact. Non-employee businesses, or small businesses that employ only the business owner, are prevalent and compose a significant part of the Flathead County economy.

Approximately 4,419 individual private businesses operated in the county in 2009, by the end of 2022 there were approximately 6,337<sup>14</sup>. Construction firms were the most numerous with 1,046 businesses in operation, which include the construction of buildings, heavy and civil engineering construction, as well as special trade contractors. Professional, Technical, and Scientific Services were the second most numerous with 904 businesses. Vying for third, fourth, and fifth are Health Care and Social Assistance, Retail Trade, and Accommodation and Food Services, respectively.

While Accommodations and food services is one of the leading industries both by number of establishments and in number of employees, it is nearly the lowest annual average salary, second only to Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation. Rounding out the bottom three for lowest annual salary is Education Services. Professional and Technical Services, Accommodation and Food Services, and other service-based business establishments follow closely behind, as seen in Table 5.2 below. While there were only 325 health care and social assistance establishments in Flathead County in 2009, the Kalispell Regional Medical Center remained the largest employer with 2,282 employees. Employment estimates provided by the chief medical officer as of January 2011 indicate KRMC continues to grow, with approximately 2,400 employees today.

**Table 5.2**  
**Establishments per Sector, Annual Wages Per Job, Annual Number Employed –**  
**2022**

<b>Industry</b>	<b># of Employees</b>	<b># of Establishments</b>	<b>Average Annual Pay</b>
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	421	114	\$39,559
Construction	4,279	1,046	\$56,604
Manufacturing	3,275	238	\$64,900
Utilities		3	
Wholesale	1,233	224	\$72,333
Retail Trade	6884	491	\$41,390
Transportation and warehousing		156	
Information	351	94	\$69,465
Finance and insurance	1,892	268	\$90,417
Real estate and rental and leasing	901	374	\$46,951
Professional, scientific, and technical services	2,400	904	\$76,690
Management of companies and enterprises	57	22	\$139,289
Administrative and support and waste management	1,873	386	\$44,216
Educational services	359	76	\$33,590
Health care and social assistance	7,245	513	\$66,319
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	1,664	159	\$23,367
Accommodation and food services	6,848	434	\$26,053
Other services (except public administration)	1,680	426	\$39,940

<https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/en>

Larger private employers comprise a much smaller segment of the Flathead County economy. In 2023 there were eighteen businesses employing between 100 and 499 employees, while only two businesses employed 500 or more employees. There was no data available for public employers, but it is likely similar in distribution to the numbers given in 2010.

**Table 5.3**  
**Top Private Employers in Flathead Valley – 2023**

Business Name	Employment Range
A Plus Health Care	100-249
AON Service Corporation	250-499
Applied Materials	250-499
Brendan House	100-249
Costco	250-499
Flathead Industries	100-249
Glacier Bank	250-499
Health Center Northwest	250-499
Immanuel Lutheran Home	250-499
Kalispell Regional Medial Center	1000+
McDonalds	100-249
National Flood Services	100-249
North Valley Hospital	250-499
Smith's Food and Drug	100-249
Super 1 Foods	250-499
Teletch	250-499
Town Pump	100-249
Wal-Mart	250-499
Weyerhaeuser	500-999
Whitefish Mountain Resort	250-499

Source: Montana Department of Labor and Industry  
<https://lmi.mt.gov/LocalAreaProfiles>

**PART 4: Facilities and Infrastructure (see Goal 22)**

Adequate business facilities and public infrastructure are necessary to promote a healthy business climate. Successful business communities often rely upon designated business districts to promote proximity of businesses and services. Advances in transportation and communication technologies have enabled businesses to thrive in more remote areas of the nation. Important transportation infrastructure to support the county economy includes Glacier International Airport, road networks, and railroad lines. Utilities such as those providing high speed internet and phone services are also essential.

For an overview of land use considerations for commercial development see Chapter 2, and for more information on public facilities and infrastructure in the county, refer to Chapter 7.

Existing public facilities, utilities, and infrastructure - and their availability for future growth - are key considerations when determining what types of commercial and industrial development can be accommodated and/or planned for into the future. These considerations also directly relate to the patterns of land use and planning for future growth and development based on where necessary infrastructure exists and where infrastructure should be expanded. One component of an Economic Development Plan would deal with these types of issues by inventorying available infrastructure, assessing the needs of future development, and prioritizing likely improvements that may be necessary to accommodate certain types of industry in the future. This in turn provides a road map for economic development in the County, providing guidance as to what improvements may be necessary to promote economic growth in Flathead County, based on the types of commercial and industrial business desired and the County's ability to reasonably accommodate them.

The expansion of commercial air service to and from Flathead County is one area of infrastructure improvement that has the potential to benefit the Flathead economy, by creating additional jobs at or serving Glacier International Airport and increasing the opportunities for tourists to visit during peak travel seasons. The addition of Allegiant Airlines has been of great benefit to residents and visitors alike; continued expansion of commercial air service to better serve business travelers and visitors will improve Flathead County's industry competitiveness and accessibility well into the future. Improvements to existing rail infrastructure throughout the Valley are yet another consideration. Rail service is an important part of the Flathead's commercial and visitor infrastructure. Due to the lack of interstate highways serving Flathead County, most of the shipping and transportation occurs via rail; capitalizing on this existing resource and improving operations could add to the Flathead economic viability into the future. Planning for rail-serviced business parks similar to the one planned for Kalispell will ultimately benefit the Flathead economy. And lastly, highway maintenance and expansion to better serve localized transport and delivery will continue to have a lasting impact on the Flathead Valley. With the Highway 93 By-Pass complete, commercial, and industrial development opportunities will continue to expand in areas of the County not previously accessible or compatible for these types of uses.

County Fairgrounds – Due to deferred maintenance on the facility, it is likely the fairgrounds will become obsolete in the near future, failing to upgrade with the changing times and technology. With hospitality and accommodations currently serving as one of the County’s largest basic industries and significant source of job growth, the fairgrounds could be tapped as an opportunity to draw in new meeting and convention potential – if upgraded accordingly. By investing in the existing infrastructure, this facility could prove a sustaining asset for the local economy and the community.

## **PART 5: Economic Outlook**

When the Growth Policy was originally developed, the economic outlook for Flathead County was essentially good; most estimates projected steady economic growth well into the future, with the possibility of only a slight deceleration late in the decade. As with all economic projections, this rosy outlook was based upon the significant growth and development the County was experiencing during the early 2000s; the impending national economic crisis and its far-reaching impact on the Flathead economy could not have been anticipated.

Predicting future economic trends is a daunting task under the best of circumstances and becomes particularly difficult when dealing with a transitioning economy like that of Flathead County. During the last update to the Growth Policy in 2012 when population growth was slowing, complications arose. With the decline of the housing industry, construction on new houses ground to a halt which the current housing market is still recovering from. Construction and development today are additionally increasingly strained by the sheer amount of growth that is occurring in the Valley coupled with the fact that the supply for the last few years has not been able to meet the growing demand for more housing.

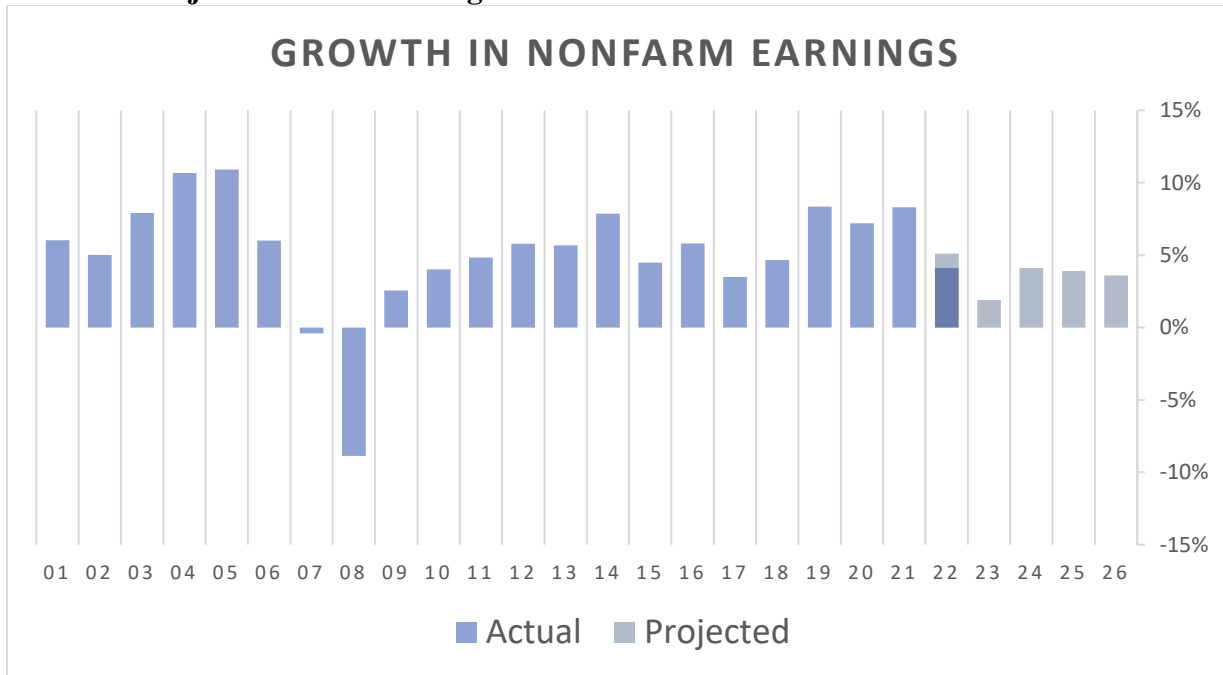
The manufacturing sector of the economy has continued its decline since 2007. ~~and~~ Retail trade as well as Accommodation and food services have experienced significant declines in annual wages, yet the County has an unprecedented need for employees in these sectors. Along with the food service and retail industries, most service sectors (e.g. health services, educational services, etc.) have been strained by a lack of employees to meet the demands of the growing County.

As can be seen in Figure 5.11 below, the effects of the national recession in 2008 significantly impacted earnings at the County level. 2007 was the first year since the turn of the millennia when the Flathead economy experienced a decline in non-farm labor income; 2008 continued the trend.

The impacts of the recession lasted until 2014 when there was, finally, a substantial increase in non-farm labor income. As the economy rebounded, between 2017-2018 there were times of incremental growth and just before the global pandemic, the growth in non-farm income jumped. It is difficult to discern- as previously mentioned- how much of the non-farm income growth is a result of economic factors. It is likely that the economy was stagnating as it had been towards the end of the last decade and the substantial jumps in

non-farm earnings are more attributable to immigration. With the post pandemic boom in immigration to Montana, and specifically to Flathead County, high wage immigrants pushed out low wage locals. This push resulted in a booming increase in non-farm labor earnings. The lower than predicted earnings in 2022 and the nearly stagnant numbers predicted in 2023 are likely a result of the slowing immigration.

**Figure 5.11**  
**Actual & Projected Percent Change in Non-Farm Labor Income – 2001-2026**



Sources: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, The University of Montana;  
 Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce  
<https://www.bea.gov/itable/national-gdp-and-personal-income>  
<https://www.bbber.umt.edu/pubs/seminars/2023/Flathead.pdf>

Projections for the State of Montana and the County’s economy appear to reflect similar trends. Continued and expanding investments in statewide energy and natural resource infrastructure programming, coupled with strengthened consumer spending levels and growth in exports, appears to be setting the stage for a stable economy in the future. These circumstances are projected to bolster Montana industries such as agriculture and natural resources, while forest products and construction are projected to experience little or no growth into the future. Real estate sales and development may slow down with declining home prices but will likely continue to lead the economy. Service sectors, including healthcare and the tourism industry (non-resident travel, accommodations and food services) are projected to grow moderately over this same time-period, but may struggle to grow, if adequate workforce housing is not implemented.<sup>59</sup> Data indicates the economic impact from tourism expenditures and non-resident travel - including hunting, fishing and guiding operations - will continue to play a significant role in Montana’s economy in years to come. With proximity to Glacier National Park and an abundance of hunting, fishing and recreating opportunities available to residents and non-residents alike, Flathead County

<sup>59</sup> The Montana Outlook - Outlook 2011; Bureau of Business and Economic Research, The University of Montana.



should focus on creating infrastructure and resiliency in these sectors in order to capitalize on this economic force.<sup>60</sup>

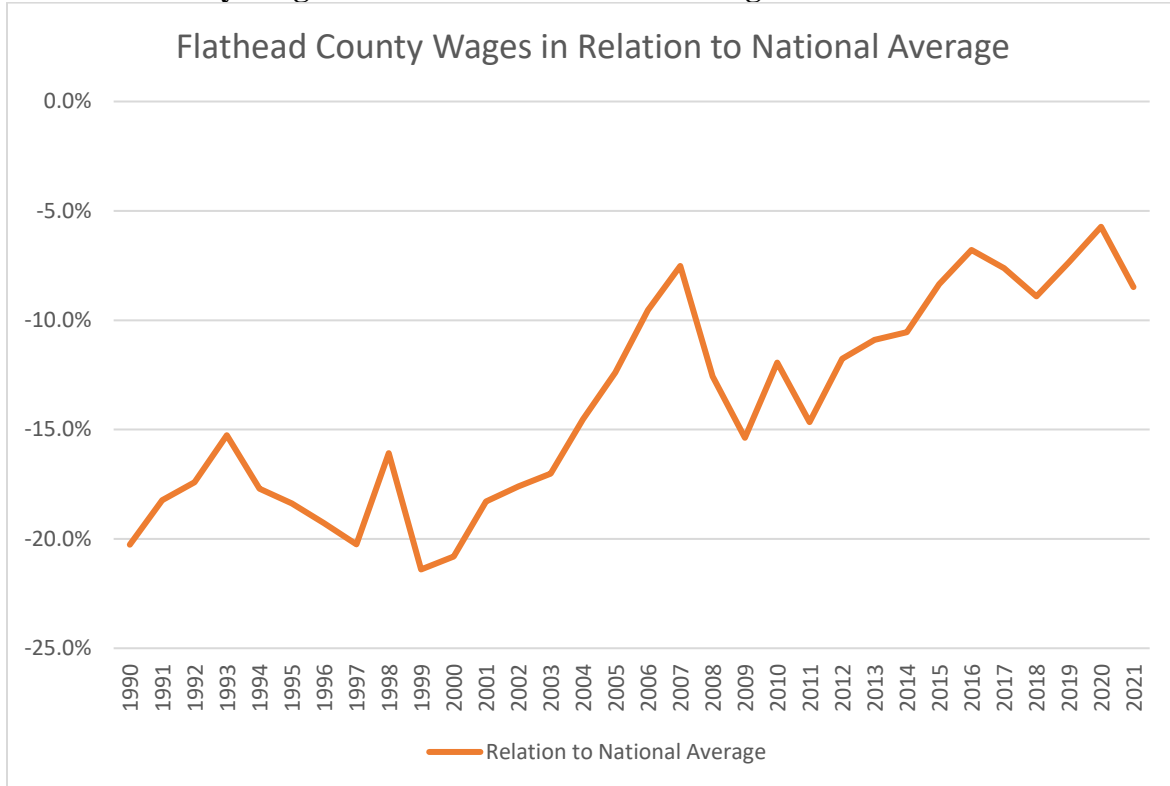
On January 1, 2023, the State of Montana increased minimum wage to \$9.95 per hour. Federal minimum wage on January 1, 2023, was \$7.25 per hour with the last increase occurring in 2009. Based on current figures provided by the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, it is likely wage income for Flathead County residents will continue to increase moderately, reflecting overall trends at the State level.

Currently, due to the scarcity of service industry workers wage offerings within the service industry vastly out compete that of the rest of the nation, with Taco Bell and other fast-food chains offering a starting wage at \$18 per hour. However, this phenomenon ends with the service industry. For the last 10 years wages in Flathead County have hovered 9.2% below the national average, and previous to that, hovered even lower. This poses a significant problem for employers seeking to attract and maintain a quality workforce in the face of high cost-of-living expenses.

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<sup>60</sup> The Economic Review of the Travel Industry in Montana – 2010 Biennial Edition; Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, The University of Montana.

**FIGURE 5.12**  
**Flathead County Wages in Relation to National Average – 1990-2021**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Per Capita Personal Income in Flathead County, MT [PCPI30029], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis;  
<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PCPI30029>, October 19, 2023

**PART 6: Plan for Economic Development**

The goals and policies of this chapter call for a number of activities that support business and economic development to be undertaken by the county. These include providing adequate land area, fostering business and workforce development, supporting traditional industries, promoting business and industrial centers and other efforts to support future economic development that can be sustained for years to come. These approaches tend to be most successful when the business community works with the county to produce an economic development strategy or plan. Such a plan must clearly articulate the needs of existing businesses and employers, evaluate present conditions and future needs, identify goals and opportunities and set forth an implementation strategy to encourage and support the desired outcome – an economic climate that is both stable and sustainable now and in the future. Efforts must be integrated so the county can send a unified message to prospective new businesses in a highly competitive climate. Land area needs must be demonstrated together with strategies for steering commercial growth to selected locations. Such a coordinated effort will help to assure that Flathead County’s economic goals will be reached.

This chapter of the Growth Policy identifies key resources and data that will be useful in supporting economic development through the creation and implementation of an

economic development plan. The Growth Policy serves as a general overview of the past and present economic climate, whereas an economic development plan would delve deeper into issues affecting the Flathead economy and provide a more comprehensive strategy for future growth and development. Economic development plans may be purely informational; focused on fulfilling the particular needs of a community; or intent on identifying and capitalizing on opportunities based upon existing resources and workforce. A development plan may also include a target industry study used to identify specific industries a community ought to target; this provides the basis for a focused marketing strategy should the County wish to pursue one. The scope of an economic development plan for the County will be dependent upon the goals and objectives identified by the committee participants at that time the plan is developed.<sup>61</sup>

A successful economic development plan should be based upon inter-agency coordination, utilizing existing partnerships and developing new ones to share information, knowledge and expertise beneficial to the plan's development. Existing documents – such as the Flathead County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) – may be a logical starting point for this collaborative effort. The CEDS document is the outcome of a collaborative planning process intended to guide future economic development and improve current economic conditions in the local economy. Much like the County Growth Policy, the document serves as both a summary of the current economic climate and a plan for how to address key issues and opportunities identified in the preliminary overview and analysis. The CEDS is updated every five years, the most recent of which occurred in 2017. In an effort to coordinate economic development efforts and utilize the wealth of existing information available, the County's participation in the 2022 update of the Comprehensive Economic Development Plan could serve as the basis upon which the CEDS document could be integrated within the Flathead County Growth Policy.

Planning for economic growth and development directly has a direct link to land use applications and coordinated infrastructure planning in Flathead County; therefore it is key that members of the Planning Board as well as County planning staff be involved in current and future update(s) of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. A document like the CEDS provides guidance on what types of infrastructure may be necessary to support growth in certain industry sectors, and can also provide insight on where that infrastructure should be located and why. This information is an important consideration when it comes to land use planning. For example, existing infrastructure may be available to accommodate a certain industry, but is located in an area of the County that is zoned for residential or agricultural uses. Another consideration is that the extension of infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, sewer) typically precedes development in the area to which it is extended, and planning staff may be able to provide a valuable perspective on development patterns and impacts resulting from this type of growth.

The following is a list of key participants that should be involved in the development and/or update of any economic development plan for Flathead County. The current Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (2017) lists over fifty committee members from local government agencies, citizen groups and private industries involved

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<sup>61</sup> Kelly & Becker, *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan*; Island Press, 2000.

in the creation of the CEDS document. Their continued involvement is imperative to a continued well-rounded economic plan for the future.

- Montana West Economic Development (MWED)
- Flathead County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA)
- Local Chamber(s) of Commerce
- Cities of Whitefish, Kalispell, Columbia Falls
- Montana Department of Labor & Industry

As with any planning document, implementation tools and strategies are key components in realizing the goals of any economic development plan. Implementation strategies may include marketing and technical studies, small business support, cultivation of existing industries or job training. Implementation tools could include tax increment financing (TIF) districts, major financial incentives, development assistance from state and local governments, shell buildings and even the use of free (public) lands.<sup>62</sup> It is up to each individual community to determine which tools and implementation strategies suit their needs; this will be an important component of Flathead County's Economic Development Plan as it takes shape.

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<sup>62</sup> Kelly & Becker, *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan*; Island Press, 2000.

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## CHAPTER 6: TRANSPORTATION

### Introduction

The quality and quantity of a transportation system can define a community. It can draw residents together or create barriers to separate them. A transportation element used in conjunction with other Growth Policy elements will shape Flathead County's community character, economic health, and quality of life. Not only does transportation provide for mobility of people and goods, it also influences patterns of growth and development. A quality transportation system enables prompt emergency services (i.e.: sheriff, fire and medical, etc.) to protect the public's safety and welfare. Transportation planning requires developing strategies to manage the transportation system as a way to advance the county's long term goals and shape future growth. Ideally the transportation system, or at least individual components impacted by a development proposal, should be in place as subdivision and private development occurs.

Chapter 6 is intended to provide information on future transportation needs in the context of projected growth and development. A transportation system must be flexible and capable of adapting to a growing and changing population. Transportation planning examines travel patterns and trends and creates policies that meet mobility needs without creating adverse impacts to the general character of the community or the environment. Transportation planning identifies appropriate modes of travel to support development decisions. Modes of travel in Flathead County include motor vehicle, pedestrian, bicycle, airplane, train and mass transit. Glacier Park International Airport is specifically referenced due to its regional economic importance.

### Goal

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G.23            Maintain safe and efficient traffic flow and mobility on county roadways.

### Policies

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- P.23.1            Manage land use and the transportation system as a unified and coordinated system to ensure that one does not outpace the other.
- P.23.2            Limit private driveways from directly accessing arterials and collector roads to safe separation distances.
- P.23.3            Encourage local (neighborhood) roads that access directly onto collector roads.
- P.23.4            Recognize areas in proximity to employment and retail centers as more suitable for higher residential densities and mixed use development.

- P.23.5 Protect public safety and allow safe travel by restricting development in areas without adequate road improvements.
- P.23.6 Support land use patterns along transit corridors that reduce vehicle dependency and protect public safety.
- P.23.7 Develop a transportation grid system that minimizes environmental impacts to developed and natural areas.
- P.23.8 Promote coordinated and cooperative transportation planning with Kalispell, Columbia Falls, Whitefish and Montana Departments of Transportation and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.
- P.23.9 Adopt urban road standards and designs consistent with city road standards in county areas adjacent to cities.
- P.23.10 Encourage frontage roads where needed and internal vehicle circulation roads for development outside of urban areas.
- P.23.11 Plan for and pursue opportunities for the development of additional east-west transportation corridors, especially between U.S. Highways 2, 93 and MT Highway 206.
- P.23.12 Adopt urban transportation standards in areas developed to urban densities.

### **Goal**

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- G.24 Develop a quality transportation network to meet the present and future needs of the public.

### **Policies**

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- P.24.1 Ensure that identified functional class, road easement width, and condition of existing transportation facilities are adequate
- P.24.2 Require County road improvements to mitigate impacts directly attributable to a subdivision or development as a necessary component of that development to preserve the carrying capacity of the roadway.
- P.24.3 Require development projects to design road systems that complement planned land uses and maintain mobility on arterial roads and highways.
- P.24.4 Require road easement dedications for identified areas of future connectivity as subdivision developments are proposed, to serve the present and future needs of the county residents.

- P.24.5 Attempt to develop cooperative agreements with the Montana Department of Transportation and the United States Federal Highway Administration to promote coordination of land use and transportation planning and the efficient use of transportation facilities.
- P.24.6 Develop a comprehensive countywide transportation plan to categorize current needs and to identify future needs.
- P.24.7 Develop uniform system of prioritization for road improvements and maintenance.
- P.24.8 Develop a Dust Abatement Program to mitigate dust impact from traffic on county roads as funding and resources allow.

### **Goal**

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- G.25 Identify and support alternative modes of transportation.

### **Policies**

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- P.25.1 Encourage development that provides functional alternative modes of travel such as bicycle and pedestrian paths.
- P.25.2 Identify and prioritize areas for a predictable regional and interconnected bicycle path network and require pedestrian/bicycle easements on both sides of identified county roads. Encourage developments that aid and/or connect to this network.
- P.25.3 Support the partnership between Eagle Transit, the State of Montana and the National Park Service to develop a joint transit system that services both Glacier National Park and the residents of Flathead County.
- P.25.4 Support the expansion of the Glacier International Airport to keep pace with the emerging demand for aviation services.
- P.25.5 Determine and prioritize areas for bike path easement acquisition and construction, prioritize the use of funds, guide grant applications, identify roads that should have bicycle lanes, determine maintenance funding mechanisms, and set county-wide bicycle path/lane construction standards.

## **PART 1: Roads in Flathead County (see Goals 23 and 24)**

### **Flathead County Road and Bridge Department**



The Flathead County Road and Bridge Department is responsible for operating and maintaining public county roads in unincorporated areas of the county. Department responsibilities include conducting traffic counts, snow plowing during winter months, and major construction projects during the non-winter months. Some other areas of responsibility include monitoring encroachment, utility installation and coordination, issuing approach permits and completing road reviews for subdivision processing. In addition to the installation and maintenance of guardrails, there are approximately 100 bridges and 700 culverts, cattle passes and cattle guards maintained by the department.<sup>63</sup>

### Existing Road Conditions

Population growth over the past decade has resulted in an increase in the number of vehicles on the road system and the overall demand for travel. The existing primary transportation system for roads and highways is shown on Map 6.1. Sustained growth and vehicle trips attributed to that growth have stressed the road network. Although population growth has slowed over the past three years when compared to the 2% growth rate per year (average) when the Growth Policy was originally written, the average annual daily traffic (AADT) on county roads has continued to increase at a dramatic pace. Since 1990 the population of Flathead County has increased approximately 54%, with traffic increases on selected county roads ranging from 4% to 64% *per year*. Increased growth directly influences land use patterns, and there is a direct correlation between land use patterns and traffic. Most of the local traffic increase is related to the rapidly expanding residential housing market, as each new home can be expected to generate an average of 10 trips per day (based on traffic engineering standards). Table 6.1 provides information on selected county roads and their AADT.

**Table 6.1**  
**Flathead County Road AADT**

Location	Point	Early AADT (yr)	Recent AADT (yr)	% Increase/Yr.
Bierney Creek Rd.	W. of US 93	933 (1998)	1,335 (2009)	3.9%
Boon Rd.	W. of US 93	390 (1998)	563 (2008)	4.4%
Cemetery Rd.	E. of Airport Rd.	753 (1999)	1746 (2008)	15%
Jellison Rd.	N. of Pioneer Rd.	205 (1998)	1,121 (2005)	63.8%
JP Rd.	E. of US 93	456 (1997)	1,506 (2005)	28.8%
Kila Rd.	At US 2	1,098 (1997)	1,960 (2005)	9.8%
LaBrandt Rd.	E. of MT 35	307 (1997)	681 (2009)	10.2%
McCaffery Rd	At Echo Lake Rd.	354 (1997)	518 (2007)	4.6%
Pioneer Rd.	E. of US 2	398 (1998)	1,322 (2005)	33.2%
Rocky Cliff Rd.	W. of US 93	629 (1997)	1,216 (2005)	11.7%
Stillwater Rd.	N. of Farm-to-Market	480 (1997)	2,035 (2008)	29.4%
Valley View Dr.	S. of Foys Lake Rd.	397 (1997)	1562 (2005)	36.7%
W. Springcreek Rd.	N. of US 2	948 (1997)	2,011 (2008)	10.2%
West Valley Dr.	N. of Farm-to-Market	581 (1997)	1,206 (2008)	9.8%

<sup>63</sup> Flathead County Road and Bridge Department

Source: Flathead County Road and Bridge Department Traffic Counts, 1997-2009

Traffic on Montana State and US Highways is increasing at rates similar to county roads. The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is responsible for management and maintenance of the federal and state highway systems. The state highway system includes major highways and secondary highways such as Whitefish Stage Road. The primary purpose of the highway system is to transport people and commodities over long distances. In Flathead County the highway system functions as a major arterial network to move people from collector roads to local destinations. MDT monitors daily traffic on the highways statewide by means of 86 permanent automatic traffic recorders (ATR sites), as well as numerous short term count recorders. According to MDT traffic count data, the AADT on highways has increased an average of 4% per year since 1990. Selected traffic counts for State and Federal highways are shown in Table 6.2.

**Table 6.2**  
**Selected Highway Average Annual Daily Traffic**

Highway	Location	1990	2000	2010	% Change 1990-2010
US Hwy 2	W. of Kalispell	5,540	7,500	7,920	43%
US Hwy 2	S. of MT Hwy 40	6,540	11,650	14,870	127%
US Hwy 93	S. of Lakeside	2,540	3,670	3,940	55%
US Hwy 93	S. of MT Hwy 82	5,120	7,050	7,640	49%
US Hwy 93	S. of MT Hwy 40	7,050	10,500	14,060	99%
US Hwy 93	N. of Whitefish	2,020	3,710	3,970	97%
US Hwy 93	N. of US Hwy 2	15,880	16,860	22,410	41 %
MT Hwy 35	S. of Bigfork	3,100	4,610	3,980	28%
MT Hwy 35	N. of MT Hwy. 82	2,600	6,090	6,020	132%
MT Hwy 35	S. of MT Hwy 206	2,660	5,610	6,910	160%
MT Hwy 35	E. of US 2	12,440	15,600	14,240	14%
MT Hwy 40	W. of US 2	5,280	7,590	8,030	52%
MT Hwy 82	W. of MT Hwy 35	3,880	4,500	5,950	53%
MT Hwy 206	N. of MT Hwy 35	2,730	3,440	4,170	53%
MT Hwy 206	S. of US 2	2,850	4,290	4,080	43%

Source: Flathead County Long Range Planning Task Force Road transportation Report, 2006; current data from Montana Department of Transportation Statewide Traffic Count Site Map, [http://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/datastats/statewide\\_traffic.shtml](http://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/datastats/statewide_traffic.shtml) [collected 9/19/2011].

General observations can be made from the information contained in Tables 6.1 and 6.2. On county roads daily traffic is increasing, on average, more than 15% per year. County roads are, by function, intended to collect traffic from local subdivision roads and connect to the highway system. As more local roads are built inside developments, collector and arterial roads will become busier. Motorists will seek alternative routes as existing roads

become more congested, impacting other roads that are not paved or already over utilized. Providing transportation choices for travel from residences to other destinations is an important consideration in developing a road system network.

The highway system AADT clearly shows that the highest concentration of traffic radiates outward from, or towards, the city of Kalispell. MT Highway 35, between Bigfork and Kalispell, has shown significant increase in travel as has US Highway 93 between Whitefish and Kalispell.

In addition to population increases, the location of new development influences trip generation and mobility. The travel time to work is a good indication of the functionality of the transportation system and developing land use patterns. Development close to a functional road system creates less impact (measured in travel time) than scattered development. Longer distances from residential development to destinations such as workplace, school, and shopping equate to increased traffic as well as increased travel time. Travel time, based on US Census Transportation Planning Package from 1990 to 2010 is presented in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3**  
**Flathead County Travel Time to Work**

	# of Residents with Commute Time Indicated			2010	%Change
	1990	2000	% Change		
<b>Travel Time</b>					
Less than 5 minutes	1550	2041	32%	2102	3%
5-9 minutes	4707	5578	19%	7106	27%
10-14 minutes	5462	6518	19%	8032	23%
15-19 minutes	4239	5579	32%	6145	10%
20-29 minutes	4175	6348	52%	7760	22%
30-44 minutes	2463	4225	22%	3572	-15%
Over 45 minutes	1027	2035	98%	1970	-3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23623</b>	<b>32324</b>		<b>36687</b>	

Source: U.S. Census Transportation Planning Package, 1990-2010

Table 6.3 shows that commuting times have generally increased since 1990, although travel time to work in excess of 30 minutes has decreased over the past ten years. The number of individuals with commute times averaging less than 5 minutes remained steady since 2000, while those reporting travel times ranging from 5 to 29 minutes have continued to increase at comparable rates to the previous decade.

The condition and maintenance of the county road system is a primary concern of most residents. County roads are very rural in character. Of the approximately 1,130 miles of county maintained roads, 430 miles are paved and the remaining 700 miles are graveled or unimproved.<sup>64</sup> Since the mid-1980's, the county has generally not accepted maintenance responsibility for new roads or easements. Approximately 20%, or 80 miles, of paved roads are near the end of their life cycle or are reaching carrying capacity and need to be reconstructed to meet the needs of the growing motoring public.

The Road Department's ability and resources to construct new roads have not kept pace with the growth in traffic due to new development, population growth and lack of funds. The department maintains the existing road system by asphalt overlay, chip sealing, minor repairs by filling potholes and easement improvements (i.e. guard rails, road signs, line-of-site maintenance, etc.). On average, the Road Department overlays between 30 to 40 miles of paved roads and chip seals about 35 to 50 miles annually.

The existing roadway system, consisting of asphalt paved and graveled surfaces, provides difficult decision making regarding allocation of resources. Asphalt paving is more intensive with up-front capital costs while gravel is less capital intensive. Conversely, once it is constructed, asphalt pavement is less costly than maintenance of new or reconstructed roads. Graveled roads become extremely cost prohibitive and resource intensive. Over a 10 year period pavement and graveled roads tend to equalize in overall costs. However, paved roads accommodate more vehicles while maintaining mobility.

This growth policy has goals and policies that call for the development of a county wide transportation plan that will address current and future needs, a uniform system of prioritization for road improvements and maintenance, a potential dust abatement program and other related issues. Any discussion of the road system should include the financial structure that supports it. The county must have a road improvement strategy for the future; that strategy should be coordinated with land use planning. The preferred locations for residential and commercial development influence new road and pathway construction and maintenance work done by the road department. Transportation Demand Management (TMD) techniques should be considered as a strategy to mitigate traffic effects as the transportation plan is implemented.

### **Roadway Classifications**

Defining road types by function is the first step in designing a transportation system. County roads have two basic functions: moving traffic and providing physical access to abutting land uses. Roadway designs and standards are developed for each classification considering use, volume, vehicle speed and public safety. The use of these standards is also intended to keep the operating cost of maintaining the road system at a reasonable level while providing infrastructure to meet public needs.

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<sup>64</sup> Flathead County 2-Year Road Network Maintenance Plan, February 2010

- **Local Roads** – Roadways that are used for direct access to residential, commercial, industrial, or other abutting properties in areas of lower traffic volumes at low speeds. Typically, these roads are located within a subdivision or commercial/business development.
- **Collector Roads** – Roadways which serve to distribute traffic between local roads and arterial roads and provide limited primary access to abutting properties. Higher traffic volumes and speed are normal. These roads may connect residential areas to commercial and other areas. Collector roads typically are dedicated to the public and maintained by the county, but can be privately maintained in specific instances.
- **Arterial Roads** – A roadway system serving as the principal network for through traffic flow. These roads connect areas of traffic generation. Arterials should always be public county roads maintained by the county or the MDT.
- **Highways** – A primary roadway system which allows movement of goods and commodities over long distances. In Flathead County the highways act as major arterials to move people from collector and arterials to other local destinations such as the work place and retail centers. Highways are maintained by the MDT.

### Transportation Projections

Land use and transportation policies work together. Over the next 20 years, the population is expected to increase by an additional 35,052 people. To maintain a livable and workable community, practical transportation solutions will be essential.

### Traffic Projections

Traffic in Flathead County will continue to grow in direct relationship with population growth. Assuming a household average of 2.5 persons per residence, population projections can be used as an indicator of future vehicle trips. Assuming no change in motorist behavior, each new detached single family residence adds about 10 vehicle trips per day to the road system. Projected vehicle trips, based on population estimates, are identified in Table 6.4.

**Table 6.4**  
**Projected Annual Vehicle Trips in Flathead County**

	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
<b>Population</b>	90,928	100,520	108,890	117,290	125,980
<b>Vehicle Trips (In millions)</b>	132.8	146.8	159.0	171.2	184.0

Source: U.S. Census Transportation Planning Package, 1990-2010

Standardizing roadway design for functional road classifications to accommodate future demand will aid in maintaining mobility. Road designs incorporate shoulders for emergency parking, turn lanes and vehicle speeds. Level of service ratings will be

extremely useful in developing a road system today to serve future motorists. Evaluation of the existing road system has been initiated by the Road Department. The Pavement Surface Evaluation Rating System (PASER) is used to evaluate paved roadway conditions. This information will be valuable in setting priorities for near term and long term improvements.

Flathead County can expect approximately 184,000,000 vehicle trips per year in 2030, an increase of 39% over existing travel. These trips will be a function of emerging land use patterns. Vehicle trips should not be confused with vehicle miles traveled (VMT). To protect public health and safety, the road system in Flathead County should be improved as the county population grows.

The existing roadway system, with 430 miles of paved roads and nearly 700 miles of graveled roads, coupled with the MDT highway system, provides the backbone for future easement or corridor expansion. Future growth in travel may be partially accommodated through improvements to the existing system as well as new road corridors to move traffic west to east across the Flathead Valley. Transportation modeling and travel demand modeling is needed to prepare a more comprehensive regional transportation plan. A collaborative modeling effort should show spatial relationships to existing and proposed land use patterns.

## **PART 2: Public Transportation (See Goals 24 and 25)**

### **Existing Characteristics**

Given the size and population of Flathead County, public transportation options tend to be limited. The population base and scattered low density land use patterns constrain the viability of an expansive public transit system. Low ridership coupled with long distances between pick-up/drop-off stops make comprehensive general public transit cost prohibitive. Specialized public transit is available to service the general population as well as those with special needs.

Eagle Transit provides general public transportation service in the county. The organization operates several transportation services, and for some residents is the only means of mobility. Eagle Transit is controlled by the Flathead County Area IX Agency on Aging, which began in 1987 and focuses on the elderly. Since then, Eagle Transit has expanded to serve the disabled population and general public within Flathead County. Eagle Transit currently provides a variety of services including city bus routes; Countywide “Dial-a-Ride” and “door to door” services, some of which are integrated with fixed city routes in Columbia Falls and Whitefish; commuter service to Kalispell from Columbia Falls and Whitefish; and demand-response intercity services.

The Kalispell City bus route operates year round during the work week. The route stops at key destinations including the community college, hospital, shopping mall, County Courthouse complex, senior housing and a variety of shopping markets. During Fiscal Year 2004-05 the service made approximately 12,000 trips and accounted for 25% of the total

system wide ridership.<sup>65</sup> During Fiscal Year 2010-11, ridership levels had increased to 25,764, accounting for 32% of the total system ridership.<sup>66</sup> Commuter services have also been implemented between Kalispell and the cities of Columbia Falls and Whitefish. Current commuter ridership levels between Kalispell and Columbia Falls are at 3,965 for FY 2010-11; ridership levels between Kalispell and Whitefish are much higher, coming in at 6,063 for the year.<sup>67</sup>

The “Dial-a-Ride” service implemented by Eagle Transit has been designed to meet the needs of the elderly and disabled and has measured great success in the past few years. In Kalispell, the service logged ridership levels of 30,862 in FY 2010-2011, with ridership in Columbia Falls at 6,063 (combined with the fixed city route) and Whitefish at 4,769 (also combined).<sup>68</sup> As part of this “door to door” service, Eagle Transit provides elementary school curbside pick up and transport to the Summit’s after school program called “SPARKS.” The service provided approximately 5,000 rides in Fiscal Year 2004-05. The “SPARKS” service is now integrated as part of the Kalispell fixed city route, and annual ridership numbers have been incorporated into ridership totals discussed in the paragraph above.

An additional “door-to-door” service provided by Eagle Transit is called the New Freedom Act and provides Dial-a-Ride services for those with disabilities, to help integrate them into their community. This service is provided outside of normal business hours and operates beyond the regular, established transit routes. In FY 2010-11, the New Freedom Act logged ridership levels of 1,348.<sup>69</sup>

Annual ridership by market segment is relatively well understood. The elderly and disabled population currently comprises 57% of the total ridership. Contracted transit and the general public comprise the remaining 43%. Elderly ridership has continued to slowly decline since 2005, while general public ridership has slightly increased. Ridership in the disabled market segment has been fairly stable in recent years. This modest change is a result of Eagle Transit promoting its services and expanding transit routes and programs to serve the general population, in addition to those with special needs.

### Public Transportation Projections

Eagle Transit ridership had been declining from approximately 53,000 riders in 2001 to 47,000 riders in 2005. However, the Eagle Transit 5-year Transportation Plan developed in 2005 indicated there would be a shift in population that would increase ridership levels by year 2010. This proved correct when total ridership levels increased to 81,462 in Fiscal Year 2010-11. The transit company has continued to develop and expand programs including their “Dial-a-Ride” service promoting advanced reservations, designated route deviation to pick up call in ride requests, demand response services and extended weekday

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<sup>65</sup> Transportation Development Plan Update, 2007-2012. LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. Chapter 4, pp. 1-2

<sup>66</sup> FY 2010-2011 data provided by David Polansky, Eagle Transit (9/21/2011)

<sup>67</sup> FY 2010-2011 data provided by David Polansky, Eagle Transit (9/21/2011)

<sup>68</sup> FY 2010-2011 data provided by David Polansky, Eagle Transit (9/21/2011)

<sup>69</sup> FY 2010-2011 data provided by David Polansky, Eagle Transit (9/21/2011)

and weekend hours. The 2007-2012 Transportation Plan Update is currently undergoing revision and will become available in July 2012, with public service transportation projections through 2017. The plan will incorporate the most current data related to public transportation programs and ridership throughout the County, and should be referenced in conjunction with this Growth Policy document for the most accurate and up-to-date information available.

There continue to be opportunities for Eagle Transit to expand partnerships with Flathead County, the State of Montana and the National Park Service with the goal that Glacier National Park's internal transit system would serve as a catalyst for development of such services outside the park. At the end of FY 2010-11, ridership within Glacier National Park exceeded 170,000 for the year, and is anticipated to continue to grow. The current transit system in Glacier National Park could be expanded to extend to Kalispell during the non-tourist season. Eagle Transit could use the Glacier National Park vehicles for public transportation in Flathead County during the off season. A partnership should be fully investigated.

### **PART 3: Bicycle and Pedestrian Paths (See Goal 25)**

#### **Pedestrian and Bicycle Paths in Flathead County**

Bicycle and pedestrian paths offer a range of benefits. Bicycle lanes, when added to road rebuilding plans, are a viable alternative to potentially costly separated paths. The Bicycle Transportation Committee initially called for in this document was formally created in 2008 by the Flathead County Weed, Parks and Recreation Board (Parks Board), in compliance with the Growth Policy. The PATHS Advisory Committee ("People, Athletics, Travel, Health and Safety") was established to provide guidance and recommendations on developing a countywide trails program, to provide residents safe and convenient access to a non-motorized trail network connecting communities throughout Flathead County. The PATHS Committee incorporated this vision in an overall plan – The Flathead County Trails Plan, adopted by Resolution No. 2015O on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 – that will be incorporated as an element of the Flathead County Growth Policy as part of the 2012 update.

Families, groups and individuals use paths in Flathead County to actively recreate. There is a significant health and fitness benefit as most recreation activities on pedestrian/bike paths involve exercise. It is common to see families biking or walking on the Great Northern trail or a group of cyclists cruising down the Somers trail. Serving as transportation corridors, these paths encourage pedestrian and bicycle commuting, thus reducing traffic congestion and fuel consumption.

Safety is another community benefit because pedestrian/bicycle paths are separated from automobiles. Most roads in the county were constructed specifically for motor vehicle use. Pedestrian/bike paths are separated from roads and are an attractive alternative to vehicles. Unincorporated Flathead County has about 33 miles of pedestrian/bike paths, which are primarily used for recreation activities and secondarily for commuting to work. Existing pathways, as well as proposed routes and new trail networks are discussed in greater detail



in the Flathead County Trails Plan and represented accordingly in the County-wide trails map found in Appendix M of the planning document.

### **Pedestrian and Bicycle Path Projections**

Given the levels of growth Flathead County has experienced in the past decade, a more comprehensive pedestrian/bicycle path program may be warranted in the county. Existing and proposed commuter and recreational path corridors are shown on Map 6.2, as well as in Appendix M of Trails Plan. Flathead County constructs an average of two miles of pedestrian/bike paths per year. Proposed project sponsors typically compete for available federal Community Transportation Enhancement Program (CTEP) funds, which are administered by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and passed through to local agencies. While CTEP funds often seem to be the most readily used funding source for new trail construction, many other funding options and programs are available to aid in the development and implementation of long range non-motorized transportation planning projects. Varieties of funding resources available, as well as their administrative requirements, are discussed at length in Appendix G of the Flathead County Trails Plan. At the County level, the administration and implementation of future trail planning and development, as well as the funding and coordination of such projects, is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 of the Trails Plan document.

### **PART 4: Glacier Park International Airport (See Goal 25)**

The demand for air service has increased dramatically over the last twenty years. In 1990, Glacier Park International Airport reported approximately 100,000 boardings. Total boardings increased to 178,000 by 2004, then dropped slightly to 174,795 enplaned passengers in 2010.<sup>70</sup> Even with this slight drop, air service needs have increased roughly 75% over the past twenty years. The airport currently has the following amenities<sup>71</sup>:

- Runway Aprons -2
- Tie Downs – 20
- FBO Hangars – 63
- Conventional Hangars – 10
- Passenger Gates – 4
- Public Parking – 518
- Rental Car Spaces – 119

The increase in the number of plane boardings evidenced over the past two decades is directly related to the number – and size - of aircraft transporting passengers. With the increase in air travel demand there is a need to continually monitor facility performance and assess needs to ensure that airport operations have the capacity to accommodate increased numbers of aircraft carriers, as well as larger planes accommodating more passengers. Such monitoring is also used to optimize internal terminal and parking activities. The airport is an extremely important asset in linking Flathead County to the

<sup>70</sup> GPI Airport Enplaned PAX Market Share data, 2011

<sup>71</sup> GPI Airport 2005 Master Plan Update

regional and global markets as well as transporting visitors to the area. Given the location of Flathead County relative to other non-county destinations, the airport plays a vital role in meeting the air transportation needs of the area.

Several other general aviation airports exist in Flathead County. These airports are intended primarily for general and recreational use and have no scheduled carriers. General aviation airports are located in Kalispell, Whitefish and Ferndale. The Kalispell City Airport provides charter services and is managed by the City. Whitefish Municipal Airport and Ferndale Airport are managed by Glacier International Airport.

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## CHAPTER 7: PUBLIC FACILITIES & SERVICES

### Introduction

Public facilities and services play a vital role in the health, safety and general welfare of a community. Successful communities provide education, law enforcement, emergency, health and other services. Very successful communities provide these services efficiently and effectively while fairly distributing the cost burden to those who benefit, either directly or indirectly. Communities experiencing rapid growth and increasing demand for services while relying solely on property taxes for revenue generation will be less likely to provide those services efficiently and effectively. Many participants in the 2005-2006 scoping meetings held throughout Flathead County (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary) indicated a desire for increased levels of public facilities and services, such as more police officers and better schools. Setting goals for maintaining or increasing the level of services and facilities enjoyed by the residents of Flathead County, while exploring ways to fairly share the cost burden among those who use those services (such as visitors and part time residents), is appropriate for a growth policy.

### Goal

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- G.26 Provide cost effective solid waste collection, transport, and safe, environmentally responsible disposal to all communities.

### Policies

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- P.26.1 Create design criteria for new development to ensure the safe, efficient, and effective collection and disposal of solid waste. Require all new subdivision site plans to be reviewed by the solid waste district and/or private hauler.
- P.26.2 Encourage new subdivisions to establish centralized refuse and recycling collection sites within the development when curb-side pick-up is not feasible.
- P.26.3 Encourage new development to utilize contractor haul of refuse.
- P.26.4 Recommend solid waste containers in rural areas to utilize measures such as animal-proofing, and encourage public education on disposal methods to discourage the attraction of wildlife.
- P.26.5 Promote and encourage increased opportunities for community recycling through recycling pilot programs and the initiation of public-private partnerships.
- P.26.6 Encourage safe disposal of household hazardous wastes through education and collection programs.

- P.26.7 Ensure that programs for junk vehicle collection and disposal are available and encourage stricter enforcement of existing laws.
- P.26.8 Recommend impacts to the local community be mitigated at the time of construction, improvement, or consolidation of a green box collection facility by encouraging visual screening, safety improvements and dust mitigation measures.

**Goal**

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- G.27 Safe, efficient and environmentally sound collection and disposal of solid waste.

**Policies**

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- P.27.1 Encourage contract hauling in all new developments to reduce traffic and disposal burden at satellite container sites (green boxes).
- P.27.2 Perform a needs analysis to assess current and future levels of service to provide cost effective and efficient solid waste collection services within the County.
- P.27.3 Encourage county-wide recycling program(s) to reduce the rate at which the existing landfill approaches maximum capacity.
- P.27.4 Explore new funding mechanisms for continued solid waste disposal activities as well as future expansion.

**Goal**

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- G.28 Efficient and effective waste water treatment and drinking water delivery.

**Policies**

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- P.28.1 Encourage high density development in areas that will be served by community sewer systems that treat to municipal standards.
- P.28.2 Discourage development in areas not conducive to individual on-site sewage disposal systems because of flooding, ponding, seasonal high water tables, bedrock conditions, severe slope conditions or lack of access to a community sewage system.
- P.28.3 Prepare a comprehensive water quality management plan for the county.
- P.28.4 Initiate the development of a regional wastewater treatment plan.

- P.28.5 Work to engage water and sewer districts in the county development processes.
- P.28.6 Encourage wastewater treatment facilities and technologies adequate to meet or exceed water quality standards.
- P.28.7 Encourage land division served by public sewer facilities in areas of high groundwater as established by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

**Goal**

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- G.29 Improve, protect, and maintain drinking water resources.

**Policies**

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- P.29.1 Ensure developments comply with state regulations to provide evidence that drinking water of sufficient quantity and quality is available in areas of proposed development.
- P.29.2 Promote the installation of community sewer and/or water services in areas where the quantity and/or quality of drinking water resources are threatened.
- P.29.3 Identify wellhead protection areas for public wells and limit land uses in those areas to reduce the risk of drinking water contamination.
- P.29.4 Support land uses and subdivision activities that do not threaten drinking water sources.

**Goal**

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- G.30 Safe and healthy individual wastewater treatment.

**Policies**

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- P.30.1 Identify areas of higher susceptibility to impacts from septic systems due to soils, depth to groundwater, proximity to sensitive surface waters, topography, and/or density of development.
- P.30.2 Determine the feasibility of a countywide wastewater management plan for the maintenance and management of septic systems.
- P.30.3 Develop an educational brochure that explains the appropriate management of septic systems and the impacts associated with inadequate management.

Promote the document by distributing it to home owners and home buyers in Flathead County.

### **Goal**

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- G.31 Growth that does not place unreasonable burden on the ability of the school district to provide quality education.

### **Policies**

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- P.31.1 Consider a school district's ability to accommodate new students as part of the proposed subdivision review process.
- P.31.2 Consider the needs for future school building sites as development occurs.
- P.31.3 Determine common characteristics of developments most likely to add school children to the local schools and identify incentives for projects to mitigate impacts.
- P.31.4 Support multi-use of schools and parks as well as other community meeting places.

### **Goal**

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- G.32 Maintain consistently high level of fire, ambulance and emergency 911 response services in Flathead County as growth occurs.

### **Policies**

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- P.32.1 Require new subdivisions to have adequate on-site water capacity and recharge for fire protection.
- P.32.2 Support mutual aid agreements between rural and municipal fire districts.
- P.32.3 Recommend subdivisions located outside existing rural fire districts be annexed into the nearest district if possible.
- P.32.4 Ensure convenient access to and within all subdivisions for the largest emergency service vehicles.
- P.32.5 Encourage two or more subdivision access points in areas of high and extreme fire hazard.
- P.32.6 Encourage subdivisions to either mitigate the impacts of delayed ambulance response times or limit density of development in identified rural areas.

- P.32.7 Identify target level of service (LOS) for emergency 911 call processing and work to achieve and maintain that target as growth occurs. This should include security, survivability and redundancy of facilities and services.

### **Goal**

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- G.33 Maintain a consistently high level of law enforcement service in Flathead County as growth occurs.

### **Policies**

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- P.33.1 Create a seamless emergency response system through a regional 911 emergency response provider network.
- P.33.2 Attempt to increase the current ratio of patrol officers per 1,000 residents to meet the growing number of calls for assistance.
- P.33.3 Support crime prevention through planning and community design.
- P.33.4 Develop a comprehensive public response plan for sheriffs and fire districts to support growth and development in the county.

### **Goal**

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- G.34 Communicate growth issues with utility providers to address health, safety and welfare of the community.

### **Policies**

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- P.34.1 Add appropriate agencies to the referrals during the subdivision and zoning review process.
- P.34.2 Coordinate with utility providers for co-location easements to ensure adequate easement access to all current and future utilities at the time of final plat.
- P.34.3 Promote land use patterns that permit the logical, predictable and effective extension and integration of utilities.
- P.34.4 Establish standardized regulations for wireless and fiber optics communications infrastructure that ensure the following are maintained: public health, safety, general welfare, convenience, natural resources, and the visual environment/appearances.

## **PART 1: Solid Waste (see Goals 26 and 27)**



## Flathead County Solid Waste District

Solid waste disposal services are provided by the Flathead County Solid Waste District. The District provides refuse collection, disposal services, hazardous waste collection, and recycling opportunities to all county residents. In 1969 the Flathead County Solid Waste District was created by Resolution No. 78. The district was created to meet the need for suitable areas and facilities to dispose of the refuse generated by county residents, commercial establishments and industries. The district boundary coincides with the county boundary and is governed by a board of seven appointed members. The district is enterprise funded, meaning that fees for disposing solid waste are used to fund all operations and activities. In Fiscal Year 2010 nearly 94,000 tons of refuse was disposed of by the district, compared to the approximately 116,000 tons of solid waste processed by the district in 2005.<sup>72</sup>

### Facilities and programs

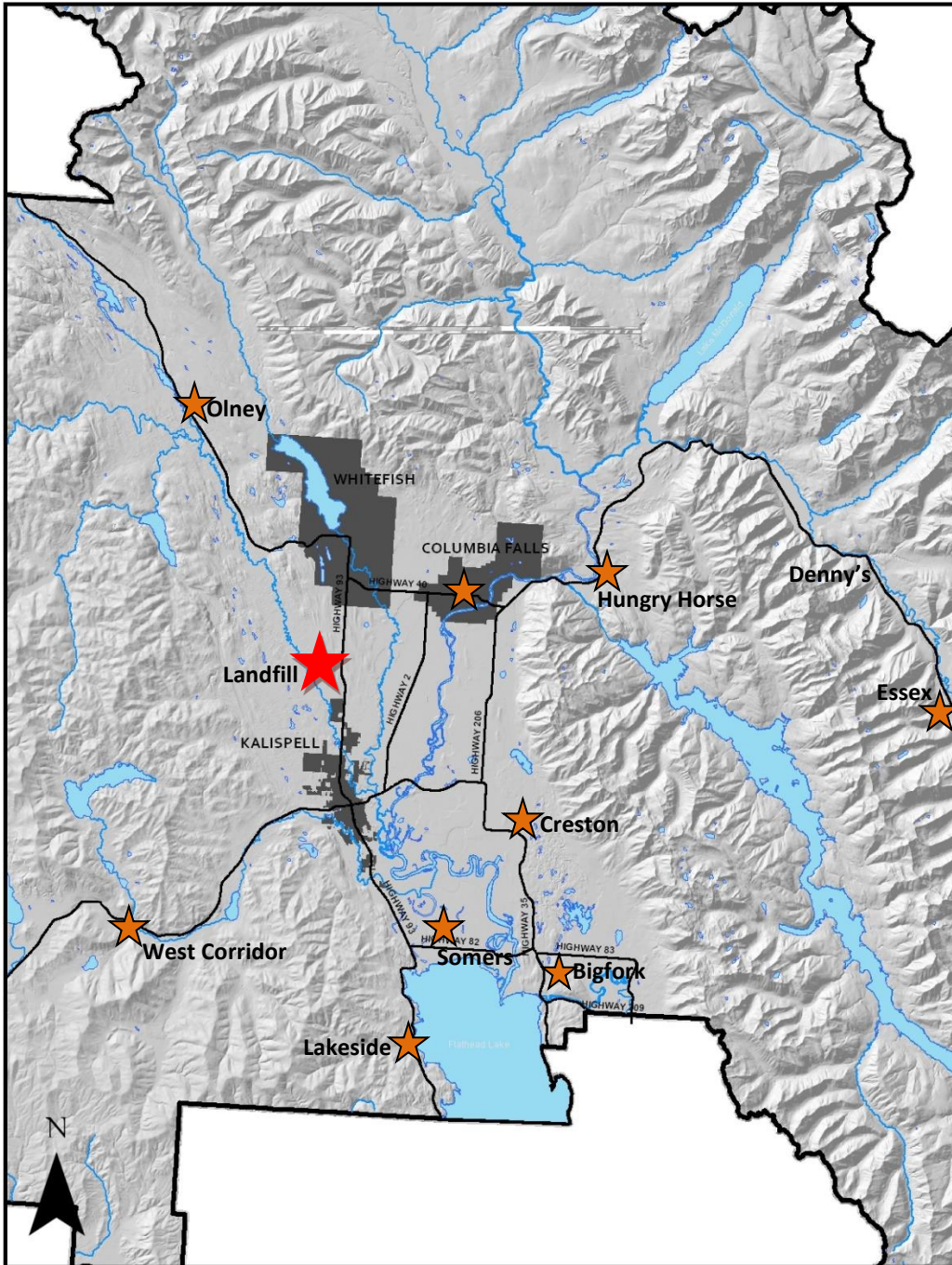
The Flathead County landfill is located five miles north of the city of Kalispell on US Highway 93. The landfill is permitted for waste management activities on approximately 80-acres, with a total of 275-acres dedicated for current and future waste management needs. The facility operates seven days a week and permits county residents to drop off waste at the county landfill or dispose of household refuse at one of 10 container or “green box” sites.

Container sites are located in the communities of Bigfork, Columbia Falls, Coram, Creston, Denny’s, Essex, Somers, Olney, Nyack, and Lakeside, as shown in Figure 7.1 below. The former green box sites in Marion and Kila were consolidated into one location known as the “West Corridor” site, approximately half-way between the two communities along U.S. Highway 2. Refuse accumulated at these sites is hauled by the district to the Flathead County landfill. As shown in Figure 7.2, waste travels to the landfill via the following four methods: individual private citizen haul, contracted private company haulers, municipal haulers, and green box disposal. Very similar to the figures provided in the 2005 Solid Waste Report, contracted private hauling companies are the most utilized method, followed by green box disposal, municipal haulers and individual private citizen haul.

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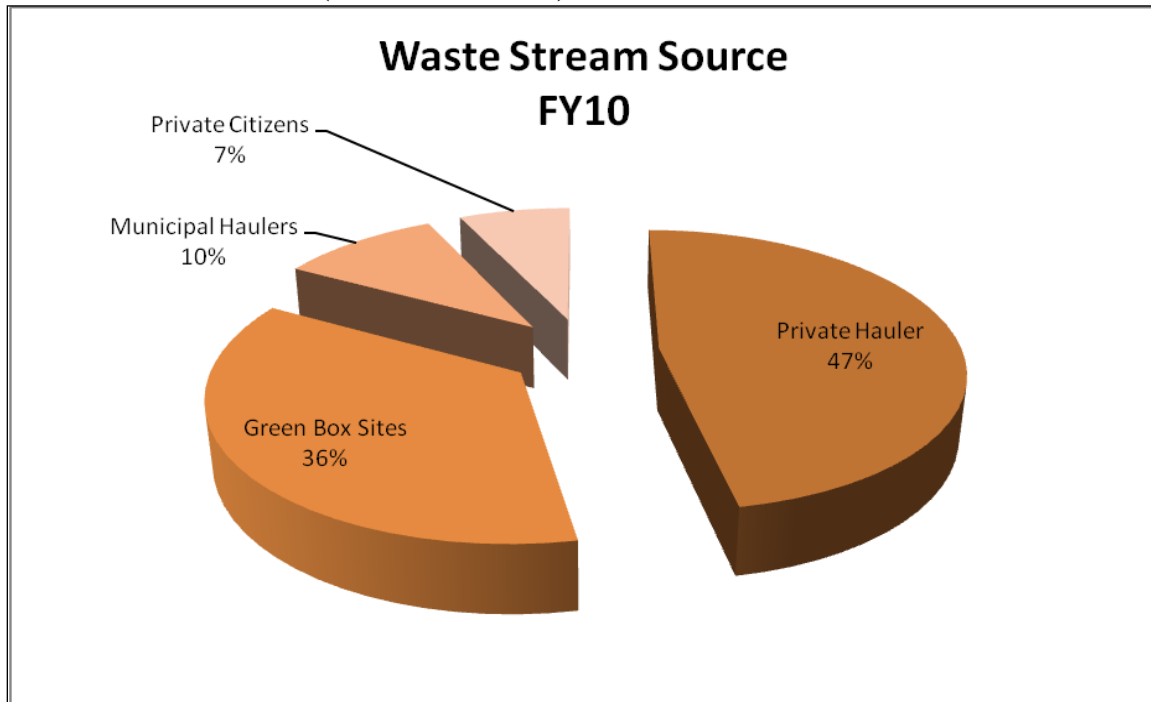
<sup>72</sup> Flathead County Solid Waste District 2010 Solid Waste Report, pp.17.

Figure 7.1  
Flathead County “Greenbox” Sites



Source: Flathead County Solid Waste District; Flathead County GIS Department

**Figure 7.2**  
**Waste Stream Sources (Fiscal Year 2010)**

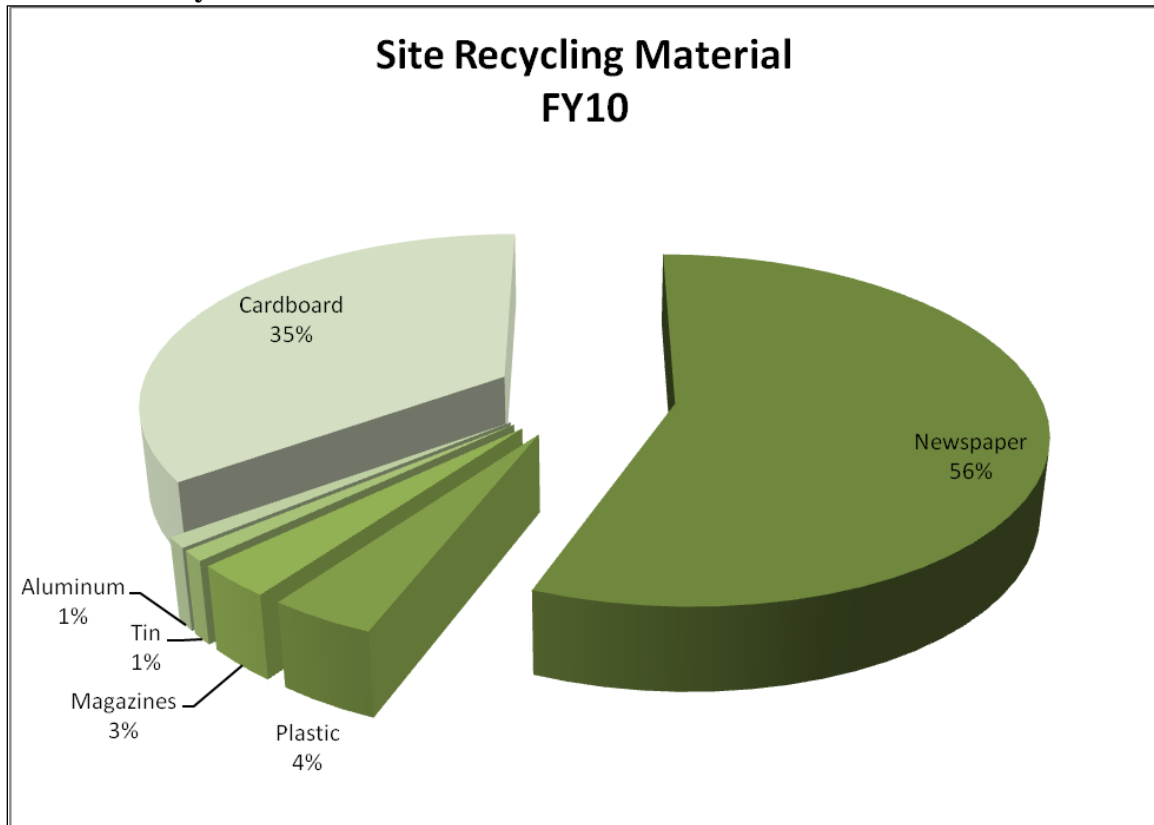


Source: 2010 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

### Recycling

The Solid Waste District funds the county “WasteNot” consumer education program to increase awareness of solid waste issues with emphasis on recycling, waste reduction, and safe disposal of household hazardous waste. In the county, recycling programs provide opportunity to recycle cardboard, newspaper, tin, aluminum, and plastic bottles and milk jugs. Recycling containers are available at the Flathead County Landfill, and the Columbia Falls, Coram, Kila, Creston, Bigfork and Lakeside and Somers collection sites (see Figure 7.1 above). The District maintains a contract with Valley Recycling Center for the recycling of most household recyclable materials. As is shown in Figure 7.3, the most frequently recycled material is newspaper, followed by cardboard, plastics, magazines, tin and aluminum. Glass recycling is not currently offered by the District. In addition to commonly recycled household materials, lead batteries, used oil, paints, solvents, chemicals, pesticides/herbicides and fertilizers, as well as materials from appliances and junk vehicles may also be recycled.

**Figure 7.3**  
**Materials Recycled in 2010**



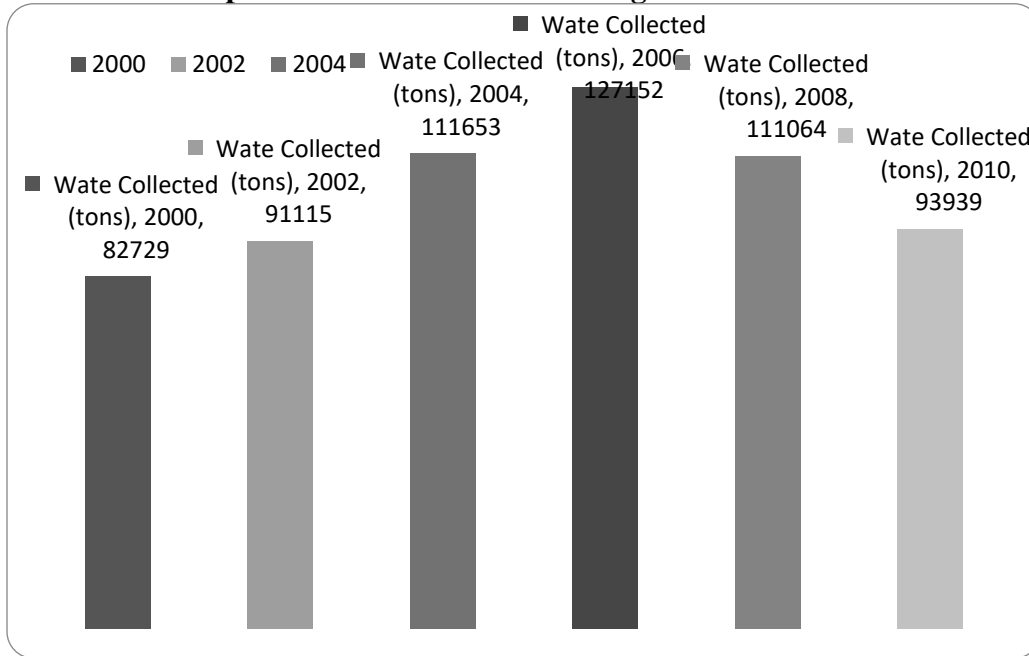
Source: 2010 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

The Solid Waste District maintains a household hazardous waste program (HHW) that collected 3,386 gallons of household hazardous waste in 2010, a significant decrease over the 8,000 gallons of household hazardous waste collected in 2005. Residents can dispose of HHW at no cost while small businesses have the opportunity to dispose of HHW once a year for a fee. Household hazardous waste is collected every third Saturday of the month and transported to a hazardous waste facility where it is either recycled or disposed of properly. Much of the household hazardous waste in the county is not disposed of properly. The District estimates that Flathead County residents dispose of between 80 and 240 tons of hazardous products in their garbage on an annual basis.

As the County experienced high growth rates during the first half of the decade, the volume of waste collected and disposed of in the landfill grew accordingly. The District witnessed a 40% increase in tons of refused hauled from container sites between 2000 and 2005. The summer months tend to be the time when the largest volume of waste is disposed of, with a 500 ton per day disposal rate. The increase in waste disposal during the summer can be attributed to the influx of visitors and seasonal residents. The total amount of waste disposed of in 2005 equaled 115,779 tons, while current figures place the total amount of

waste disposed of at the landfill at just under 94,000 tons<sup>73</sup>. Figure 7.4 shows a steady increase in waste disposal between 2000 and 2007, followed by a steady decline over the past four years as a result of the downturn in the economy.

**Figure 7.4**  
**Total Waste Disposal at Landfill – 2000 through 2010**



Source: 2009 Strategic Report for Flathead County Landfill

As a result of an overall trend in population growth over the past decade, the County has begun to experience the effects of increased waste collection and disposal needs. The increasing amount of refuse being collected from container sites has resulted in an increase in wildlife attraction to the container areas, including bears and large game. A visual degradation of the sites due to litter and lack of appropriate screening is another result. Illegal dumping of business wastes has increased also. The increase of individual households’ hauling refuse to the landfill and to container sites has resulted in litter along transportation routes because refuse is improperly covered or secured, and because there is increased traffic congestion at the container sites and landfill.

**Solid Waste Projections**

In the spring of 2006 the Flathead County Solid Waste District acquired an additional 90 acres of land to the south of the current operating area (known as the South Area). This acreage was approved by the Montana DEQ as part of an expansion plan for the Flathead County Landfill. In addition to improvements made to the Creston and Columbia Falls container sites in 2005, the District has enlarged the Somers container site and consolidated the Kila and Marion container sites into the West Corridor site near Ashley Lake Road.

<sup>73</sup> 2005 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District; 2010 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District.

Of the 275-acre landfill area, 171 acres are dedicated (and permitted) for current and future waste disposal needs. In 2005 the landfill had a projected capacity of 29 years assuming the increase in tons of waste disposed grew at an 8% annual rate. In that same year the projected capacity extended to a 57 year capacity if the tons of waste disposed grew at an annual rate of 2%. Based on the estimated capacity remaining as of July 2008, combined with current and projected inflow as well as diversion rates, the Flathead County Landfill is anticipated to reach capacity by 2055. Regardless of the changing growth rates, the county must continue to address ways to slow the increase of refuse growth, such as a more effective recycling program, and seek alternatives for the time when the landfill is full.

Given the growing increases in annual waste production, the landfill is a critical amenity for public health in the county. As the community grows adjacent to landfill operations, it is critical to maintain an understanding and application of compatible land use decision making. Land uses which are compatible to district operations (e.g. low intensity industrial and commercial, etc.) should be encouraged and uses not compatible discouraged (e.g. medium to high density residential).

Several waste disposal services not available from the District are provided by the private sector. Hauling of individual refuse is accomplished by private contractors, as well as tire disposal, Class III disposal of rock, dirt, concrete, clean wood and recycling facilities.

## **PART 2: Drinking Water and Wastewater Treatment (see Goals 28 through 30)**

### **County Water and Sewer Districts**

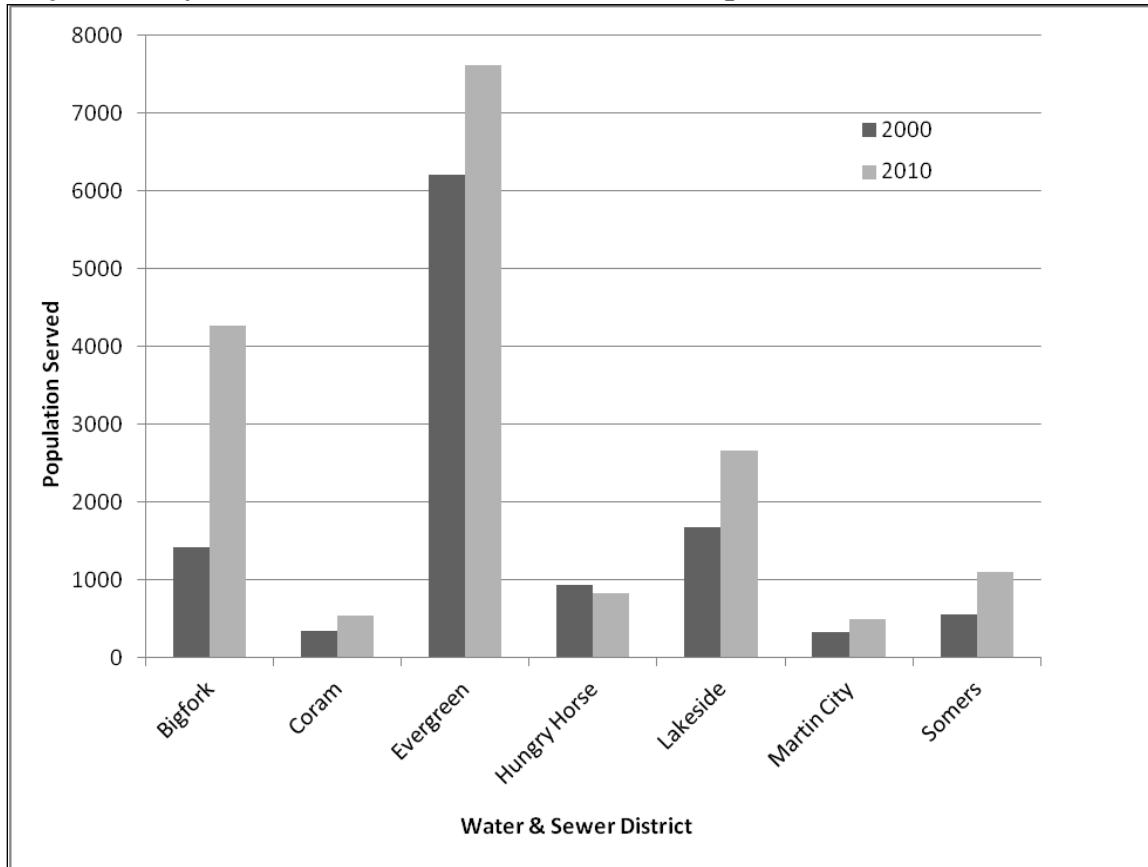
The majority of developments in the unincorporated areas of the county utilize individual septic systems and individual water wells to sustain development. Thirty-two Flathead County water and/or sewer districts have been established to serve larger scale development or rural communities. The ability to provide public sewer and/or public water services is a major factor influencing density and type of development in a community, as the necessary land area for septic systems and individual water wells is not a limiting factor. As these public services allow for higher densities, the public water systems can have hundreds to thousands of residents utilizing one or more wells. This makes protection of wellhead areas vital to limiting the risk of contamination to these public drinking water sources. Water and sewer districts, as they relate to the unincorporated areas of Flathead County are shown in Maps 7.1 and 7.2.

### **Existing Major Water and Sewer Districts**

Seven major water and sewer districts, as seen in Figure 7.5, serve entire unincorporated communities, half of which provide both water and wastewater treatment services. These water and sewer districts in the communities of Bigfork, Coram, Evergreen, Hungry Horse, Lakeside, Martin City and Somers each serve between 500 and 8,000 residents and businesses. The Coram, Hungry Horse and Martin City Districts offer public water services only. No public sewer treatment is available. The Bigfork and Lakeside Districts operate

their own sewer treatment facilities, while Somers contracts with Lakeside for sewer treatment, and Evergreen contracts with the City of Kalispell for sewer treatment services. Bigfork, Lakeside and Somers each grew over 50% between 2000 and 2010, continuing the growth trend from the previous decade. For more on these individual sewer and water districts, including applicable DEQ reports, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

**Figure 7.5**  
**Major County Water and Sewer Districts in Unincorporated Areas**



Source: US Census Bureau Place Population Summary, 2000 and 2010

### Existing Minor Water and Sewer Districts

The remaining 25 county water and wastewater treatment systems listed below serve large subdivision areas, not entire communities. Many smaller county water and sewer districts serve one or two large subdivisions and often provide only water services. These systems are often comprised of one or two wells providing drinking water, and several are serviced by a county or city sewer district.

- Big Mountain County Sewer District (sewer only)
- Cove Creek Ridge Water & Sewer
- Eagle Ridge Estates County Water and Sewer District
- Emerald Heights Water & Sewer
- Essex County Water and Sewer District

- Foy's Lakeside Estates County Water & Sewer District
- Fox Hill Estates Water & Sewer District
- Glacier Ranch County Water and Sewer District
- Green Tree Meadows HOA County Water and Sewer District
- Greenacres Water & Sewer District
- Happy Valley Water District, Areas A, and B (water only)
- Happy Valley Water & Sewer RSID (District #8)
- Kelsey County Water & Sewer District
- Lakeshore Heights County Water District
- Meadow Hills County Water and Sewer District
- Meadow Lake County Water and Sewer District
- Panoramic Mountain River Heights County Water District
- Pleasant View Homesites County Water and Sewer District
- Ranch County Water and Sewer District
- Smith Lake Vista County Water District
- Stillwater Estates County Water and Sewer District
- Stillwater Water & Sewer District
- South Happy Valley Water District, Area C (water only)
- Wapiti Acres Water and Sewer District
- Whitefish County Water & Sewer District

### Septic Systems

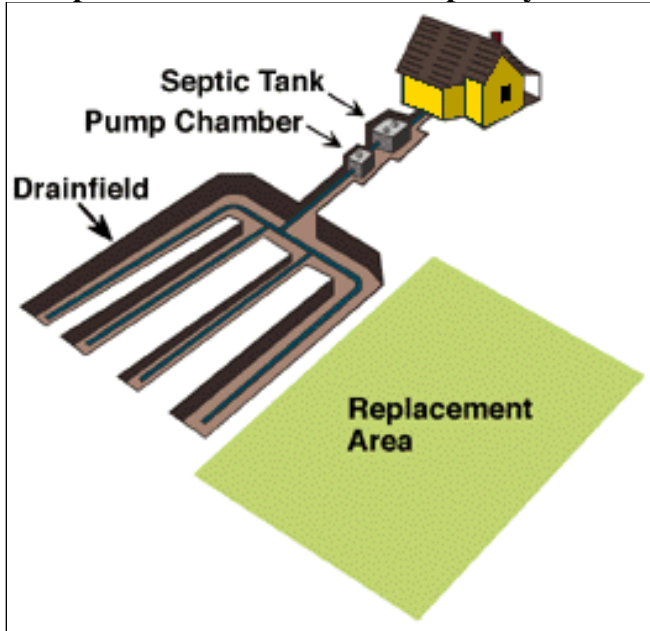
Individual wastewater treatment technologies are utilized in a majority of the county because rural development is not often located within a water and sewer district; this is evidenced by Map 7.1. Several scenarios have arisen throughout the county as areas are witnessing increased growth.

- Waterfront communities, once characterized as seasonal, have begun to host year-round residents.
- Development has increased in rural communities and on the fringe of urban areas beyond the service area of public water and sewer.
- An increasing number of inadequately maintained and aging systems lie scattered in the rural areas.

Figure 7.6 shows a typical pressure septic system that contains five main components: a pipe from the home or business, a septic tank, a pump chamber, a drainfield and the soil. Microbes in the soil remove the majority of contaminants from the wastewater before it reaches the groundwater. Septic tanks are buried, watertight and hold wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle and oil and grease to float to the surface. The remaining wastewater is discharged into the drainfield and percolates through the soil, removing bacteria, viruses and nutrients.



**Figure 7.6**  
**Components of a Pressurized Septic System**



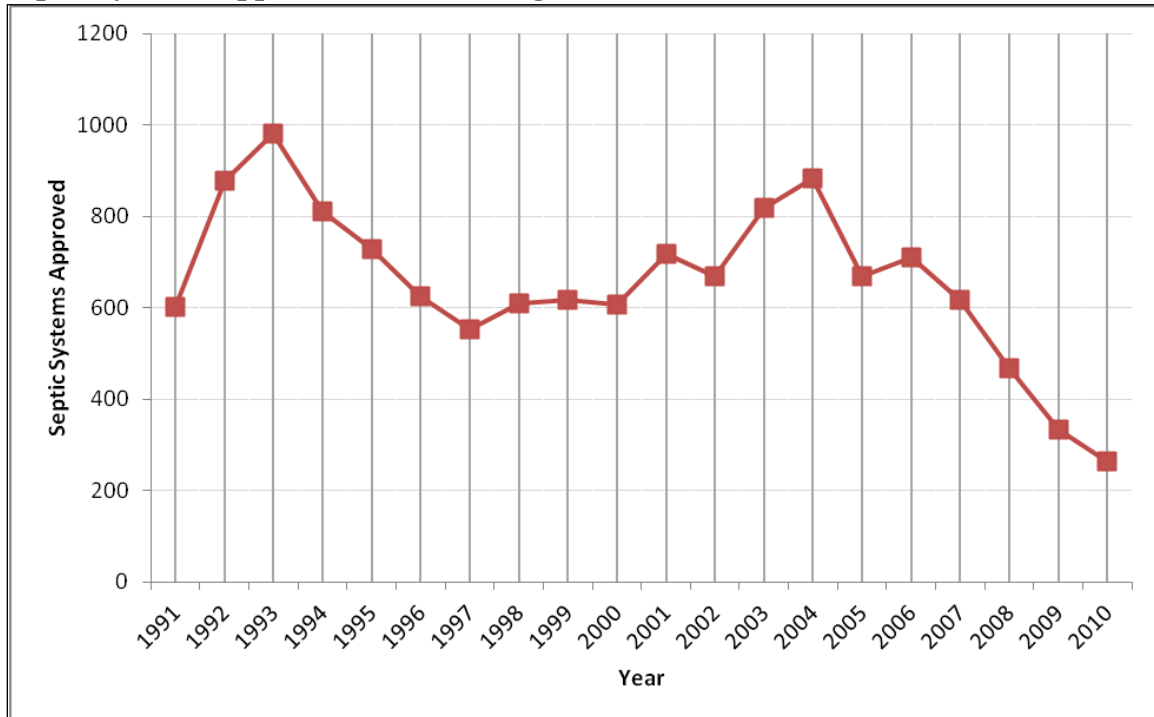
Source: Washington State University  
<http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb1673/eb1673.html>

Alternative systems are appropriate in areas of less suitable soils, areas of increasing development, areas of high groundwater established by the DEQ or Flathead City-County Environmental Health Department, or near bodies of water. These systems can provide higher levels of pre and post treatment and can be modified to cater to specific wastewater treatment needs. The advanced systems incorporate a variety of technologies and are manufactured by a variety of companies. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency currently lists 27 alternative septic effluent treatment system technologies utilizing a variety of treatment methods<sup>74</sup>.

As the county population has increased over the years, notable growth in areas without public water and sewer systems has occurred. Map 7.1 displays existing septic system density throughout the county. Figure 7.7 shows the number of septic systems that received approval at final inspection by the county Department of Environmental Health from 1991 through 2010. Noticeable increases in the number of approved septic systems occurred in the mid-1990s as well as the early part of this decade; however, these increases were tempered by a significant drop in septic system approval beginning in 2004. Table 7.1 shows the number of septic systems that were approved annually between 2000 and 2010. Beginning in 2000 the number of septic systems approved on an annual basis increased dramatically, from just over 600 to 884 in 2004. While the number held steady until 2006-2007, a significant drop in permits has been observed over the last part of this decade. In 2010 only 265 septic system permits were issued by the Environmental Health Department, a -56% decrease over the past ten years. The negative change in permit approvals correlates with the economic downturn experienced during the second half of the decade.

<sup>74</sup> Onsite Septic Systems - Technology Fact Sheets, [http://cfpub.epa.gov/owm/septic/septic.cfm?page\\_id=283](http://cfpub.epa.gov/owm/septic/septic.cfm?page_id=283)

**Figure 7.7**  
**Septic Systems Approved – 1991 through 2010**



Source: Flathead County Department of Environmental Health Services, 2010

### Septic System Failure

Many new residents in rural areas are unaware of the location of their existing septic systems and are untrained in the proper maintenance of these systems. Septic systems that are inadequately maintained cause bacterial contamination of groundwater and recreational waters, algal growth in water bodies and wetlands, and ultimately impact public health. Improperly maintained systems contribute to major water quality problems, which creates concerns in rural areas characterized by relatively small lot sizes where residents are dependent on individual wells<sup>75</sup>.

Some of the reasons for septic system failure include when a system is overloaded with too much wastewater; when amenities that use large quantities of water such as hot tubs and swimming pools are connected to the system; affects from household toxics and cleaners as well as impacts from garbage disposals; improper design or installation and lack of proper maintenance<sup>76</sup>. After the failure of a septic system, nutrients may leach into the groundwater. Failed individual septic systems lead to a dramatic increase in the number of non-point source sources of water pollution discussed in chapter 8 of this growth policy. In 1998 the Flathead County Health Department estimated that more than 50% of all individual septic systems in Flathead County were over 20 years old; this number will

<sup>75</sup> USEPA - Voluntary National Guidelines for Management of Onsite and Clustered (Decentralized) Wastewater Treatment Systems; March 2003. [http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/septic\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/septic_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> USEPA – A Homeowner’s Guide to Septic Systems; [http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/homeowner\\_guide\\_long.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/homeowner_guide_long.pdf)

surely increase as the numerous systems approved and installed in the early 1990s reach the 20-year mark<sup>77</sup>. Flathead County and DEQ require a designated replacement area for all septic systems.

Community wide septic system management can assist in minimizing part of the impact of septic system use. Management should include public education, planning, design, construction, operation and maintenance, permitting, inspections and monitoring, reporting, and financial assistance and funding to ensure that individual septic systems are permitted in areas that pose no health threats, are constructed properly, and are routinely maintained. Proper maintenance conserves water, protects property values, preserves the tax base, keeps costs low for homeowners and protects public health, residents and the environment.

### **Projected Trends**

As discussed in Chapter 3 - Demographics and Housing, population is expected to increase through the year 2030, although not at the rate once anticipated. With this increase population, the number of septic systems will likely increase in response to this growth. The extent to which development is directed to areas served by county water and sewer districts will dictate how much of the new development will utilize individual septic systems. As cities continue to grow and annex land, new and existing development may have access to public water and sewer utilities, eliminating some of the need for new septic systems in developing areas of the County.

### **PART 3: Education (see Goal 31)**

Flathead County residents enjoy quality public and private educational options. In the public meetings held prior to writing this growth policy (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary), residents were asked what they would not change about living in Flathead County. Quotes such as “the quality of the schools in the area”, “high quality schools” and “our own children have excellent schooling” were prevalent. Maintaining the level of service for schools in Flathead County requires careful planning and consistent – if not additional – revenues.

Flathead County serves over 9,200 elementary students and 4,200 high school students in 19 public elementary school districts and 4 public high school districts. The county is also home to the Flathead Valley Community College, with a current enrollment of over 4,000 students. There are ten private elementary and four private high schools in Flathead County. Approximately 3% of school age children in Flathead County are home schooled.<sup>78</sup>

Enrollments have fluctuated drastically as the regional demographics of the county have changed. Canyon Elementary School in Hungry Horse was forced to close in June 2011

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<sup>77</sup> Critical Lands Status Report: The North Flathead Valley & The Flathead River Corridor, Flathead Lakers, 2002

<sup>78</sup> County Statistical Report of Schools, 2010; Flathead County Superintendent of Schools Office

due to budget cuts and declining enrollment, shifting student attendance to Public School District #6 in Columbia Falls. Overall enrollment for public elementary schools in Flathead County has experienced a 5% increase over the past decade. Enrollment at private elementary schools had been on the increase during the first half of the decade (2000 through 2005) before experiencing a significant drop in enrollment between 2006 and 2010; overall, private elementary school enrollment has decreased 24% over the past ten years. Private high school enrollment suffered an even more significant decrease over the decade, with enrollment down 40% over ten years. Reference Table 7.1 for a summary of Flathead County school enrollment, as well as Appendix A: Baseline Analysis for detailed enrollment statistics.

**Table 7.1**  
**Flathead County School Enrollment**

	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>Change 2000-2010</b>
<b>Public Elementary</b>	8,911	8,853	9,156	2.7%
<b>Private, other and home elementary schools</b>	1,345	1,361	1,070	-20.4%
<b>Public High School</b>	4,369	4,456	4,175	-4.4%
<b>Private, other and home high schools</b>	326	372	285	-12.6%
<b>Flathead Valley Community College</b>	1,614	1,914	4,087	30%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>16,565</b>	<b>16,956</b>	<b>18,773</b>	<b>11%</b>

Source: County Statistical Report of Schools, 2010; Flathead Valley Community College Enrollment (provided by Susie Birch, Director, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Development patterns in Flathead County are generally reflected in school enrollments. As people move into high and medium density areas that are affordable to families with children, schools add students. This is evidenced by the increase in enrollment in the urbanized Kalispell District (up 20% over the decade) and the nearby West Valley Elementary District (up 42% over the decade). However, districts in less densely populated areas have also grown during this time period, including Cayuse Prairie, Olney/Bissell and Smith Valley. Schools likely to add students should be incorporated into the subdivision review process to familiarize both school districts and the public with health and safety issues of expanding enrollment. These communities should identify lands on which future schools could be built and plan ahead for acquisition. Such planning will save the taxpayers money and ensure schools are located in safe, logical and efficient locations with good access and space for children to safely recreate. Schools can also boost a sense of community as many activities take place in and around schools. Well maintained, effective schools are sources of pride in a community and should be prioritized.

Areas of low density are usually not affordable to young families with children and school enrollment has declined over the past decade in areas such as Deer Park and West Glacier. However, some urban and suburban areas have experienced similar declines over the decade, including Bigfork, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish. Home schooling tends to be more prevalent in extreme rural areas where large tracts may still be affordable.

Population growth, coupled with increased per-student expenditures and facility needs, demand proper planning. Identifying future school lands, offering incentives to developers to mitigate impacts of additional students and asking school officials to be involved in the development process are valuable steps towards a safe and well-educated future.

**Table 7.2**  
**Per Student Expenditures, 2000 through 2010**

	2000	2005	2010	Change (2000-2010)
Average Expenditure per Elementary Student	\$5,126.77	\$6,045.41	\$7,945.85	+55%
Average Expenditure per High School Student	\$6,018.30	\$6,777.89	\$9,278.01	+54.2%

Source: County Statistical Report of Schools, 2010

Flathead County offers education opportunities after high school. Flathead Valley Community College is a two year college that offers educational opportunities for advancement to a four year college, career enhancement and life long learning. A graduate of FVCC can obtain an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science in Nursing, Associate of Applied Science degrees, or a certificate in a variety of programs.

According to the FVCC economic impact fact sheet of November 2008, FVCC skills embodied in the present day workforce increase regional income in the FVCC service area economy by \$84.9 million. Altogether, the economy in the FVCC service area owes nearly \$113.5 million of its current labor and non-labor income to the past and present efforts of FVCC. This demonstrates FVCC as an engine of economic growth.<sup>79</sup>

#### **PART 4: Emergency Services and Facilities (see Goals 32 and 33)**

The provision of fire, ambulance, law enforcement, and 911 services are the community services most directly related to the health, safety and welfare of the public. Accurately assessing the impact of growth on these services in Flathead County is critical, as the County relies heavily on volunteer fire and ambulance departments and operates under severe budget constraints. The size of the county itself directly impacts the ability to

<sup>79</sup> Flathead Valley Community College Economic Impact Overview Fact Sheet; November 2008.

maintain an acceptable level of emergency services in the face of highly dispersed growth. Much more work should be done by the emergency services sector to assess capacity and gauge its ability to meet projected demands.

### **Emergency 911 Services**

The role of public safety (911) communications in emergency services has changed significantly in the last 20 years. Cell phones have caused an enormous rise in the number of 911 calls, and difficulty in knowing the location of such emergencies has created the need for sophisticated location technology. Nearly half of all 911 calls are placed from cell phones. In addition, when the public dials 911, there is an expectation that the 911 dispatcher will provide help before responders arrive on scene. This has placed the dispatcher in the role of the “first” first responder. These and other expectations require emergency communications centers to acquire sophisticated equipment and advanced training for their staff. In Flathead County, these expectations have caused both municipal and county public safety agencies to support the construction of a fully consolidated 911 dispatch center for all responders in the county. Calls for emergency services are processed and multi-agency responses more easily coordinated through this center, which was finished in 2009 and is fully operational today. The number of calls for service continues to rise, as does the need for emergency medical services, likely due to the aging population in our county.

### **Fire Services**

Fire response in Flathead County is covered by 19 separate fire departments, many of which are staffed solely by volunteers (see Map 7.3). Fire departments are primarily responsible for responding to fires and medical emergencies. Increased development has resulted in an increasingly high risk of fire in rural areas that are far from public services and facilities. On the opposite end of the spectrum, departments such as Evergreen are responsible for a high density area equivalent to the surrounding municipal departments of Kalispell, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish. In most cases the municipal and volunteer departments have mutual aid agreements to assist each other in the event of an emergency, providing better coverage to Valley residents. Citizens of Flathead County are fortunate to have excellent volunteer departments, although these departments are being stretched greatly in the face of increased development. For more information on individual fire districts and services, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

Many rural departments may require additional facilities, equipment and staff resources in order to maintain current service levels. Response time to a fire location is critical and must factor in the constraints of a volunteer staff. Response time includes travel time from a volunteer’s home or place of employment to the fire station and then to the fire location. The maximum response time in combination with other variables determines the ISO (International Organization for Standardization) rating of a fire department or fire district. ISO ratings range from 1 – 10, with 1 being the best rating. ISO ratings are used by insurance companies to assess risk and base homeowner premiums accordingly. In Flathead County, ISO ratings generally range from 6 to 8. Keeping a good ISO rating is

important to the fire chiefs and departments; consequently, the Flathead County volunteer fire department chiefs have an important role in directing future residential growth in ways that ensure public health and safety needs can be met.

Flathead County can assist by involving fire departments in the subdivision review process, through agency referrals and public discussion. Basic water supply requirements and safe access are two of the most obvious ways that subdivisions can proactively accommodate emergency services. Quick, convenient access to a substantial water supply should be made available on site. Cul-de-sacs should be avoided in fire hazard areas to avoid residents' being trapped due to limited ingress and egress. Road slope standards should be observed in all subdivisions, and legitimate secondary access should be secured or constructed whenever possible.

### **Ambulance Services**

Ambulance services are limited in Flathead County due to the size of the county and the location of its population. Basic Life Support (BLS) is the first level of ambulance service and provides non invasive procedures to stabilize and revive patients; however, not all rural fire districts are licensed to provide BLS service. Advanced Life Support (ALS) is a higher level of service and includes administering drugs and establishing IVs. Transporting patients requires a state license and currently is performed by Kalispell, Whitefish, Evergreen, West Valley, Bigfork, Marion, Big Mountain and Fire Departments as well as the Lakeside Quick Response Unit, Olney Ambulance service, West Flathead EMS and Three Rivers EMS in Columbia Falls. The ALERT helicopter is both ALS and transport certified, and is designed to reduce response and transport times in rural areas of the county. The ALERT service responds to areas too distant for effective ambulance response or other areas in the county when requested. Map 7.4 shows the emergency response areas throughout Flathead County.

Growth in Flathead County creates many issues related to provision of emergency ambulance services. Development existing far from ambulance services creates a situation where those who are injured are more likely to die prior to reaching a hospital. To mitigate this situation, it would be reasonable to direct high density development in the county towards areas reasonably close to emergency services.

### **Law Enforcement**

The Flathead County Sheriff's Department is responsible for protecting residents of the unincorporated areas of the county. Deputies are dedicated to protect the people of Flathead County and the professional enforcement of local, state and federal laws. Currently, the Sheriff's Department employs 116 people. About 32% of this total, or 37 patrol officers, provide "on the ground" law enforcement; this number is slightly reduced from the number of patrol officers (48) employed in 2007. This is a ratio of .41 patrol officers per 1,000 residents. The remainder work as support, court or jail staff. The adult correctional facility employs 28 staff, and the juvenile facility employs 12. The juvenile facility is regulated by the State of Montana, and the ratio of staff to inmate is almost 1:1.

There are five divisions within the Sheriff's Department:

1. Adult Detention
2. Juvenile Detention
3. Detective Division
4. ANW Drug Task Force
5. Children's Advocacy Center

In 2000 the Sheriff's Office responded to about 22,400 calls for assistance. By 2005 the number of calls increased by 60% to 35,700, greater than a 10% increase each year. Because of the ratio of patrol officers to population the Sheriff's office has prioritized call responses. Crimes in progress or life threatening situations receive first priority response and immediate attention. Other calls for assistance are prioritized based on availability of officers and the nature of the call relative to higher priority calls received at the same time.

The Sheriff's Office operates three patrol shifts per day; these shift run from 0600-1600, 1500-0100 and 2000-0600. Each patrol deputy is assigned a patrol area within the unincorporated county, which is broken down into North, South, Local and Roving. Typically there are 6 patrol officers assigned per shift; based on the total area of the County, each deputy is responsible for approximately 848 square miles to patrol each day. During any 6-officer shift there are 9,991 residents per patrol office; this number is reduced during shift change when there is an overlap in officers, resulting in approximately 4,996 residents per patrol officer during these times.

Although the number of calls steadily increases each year the Sheriff's Office has been able to maintain a relatively constant time in responding. This is partly due to stationing patrol officers in the field who are available to provide assistance on request and where needed. Specialty teams made up of existing sworn officers including a Boat Patrol, , S.W.A.T. Team, Bicycle Patrol, and Alcohol Enforcement Team ts provide alternative means to respond more quickly to calls for assistance.

The Sheriff's Office oversees other public safety functions. The Sheriff's Office provides administrative and operational oversight for citizen volunteer activities and groups. About 200 citizens volunteer for the county's search and rescue activities, through the North Valley or Flathead Search and Rescue units or on the Nordic Ski Patrol. These volunteers provide specialty emergency functions and can be called on at any time to locate and provide medical assistance to the people lost and injured in the wildlands. There are 10 sworn deputy reserves who may be called to assist other officers at organized events. The 55 person "Sheriff's Posse" assists with crowd control, at election polling places and other county sponsored and community events. The value to the community generated by Sheriff Office volunteer groups can not be overstated or over valued.

### **Law Enforcement Projections**

The number of calls for assistance and initiated officer responses has continued to outpace the rate of population growth in the county. In 2011 the Flathead County Sheriff's Office



received 30,333 calls for service. When contrasting the number of patrol officers to number of annual calls, each officer in the field responded to an average of 819 calls this year.

It is important that impacts of growth such as those referenced above are considered during the process of community development. Increasing population commonly increases crime, with more people living closer to one another and interacting more often. Improving and/or increasing the level of law enforcement services offered to residents of Flathead County is in the interest of all residents.

### **PART 5: Utility Services (see Goal 34)**

County residents rely on many basic services such as utilities that help define their quality of life and maintain their health and well being. Utilities in Flathead County include natural gas, electricity, and telecommunication services such as cable, telephone and internet. These services are usually taken for granted, but coordination and conscientious planning for future growth must be established to assure service is uninterrupted and adequate.

#### **Communications Media**

There are currently several Internet service providers that service Flathead County. These include Bresnan (now Optimum), CenturyTel (now CenturyLink), MontanaSky and Mountain Max. Optimum offers cable service in addition to internet connections. Satellite and wireless services are also available through a variety of companies that operate locally and nationwide.

CenturyTel – now known as CenturyLink - is the third largest telecommunications company in the United States, and delivers advanced communications to Northwestern Montana. In 2010, CenturyLink employed over 270 Montanans and had 244,000 access lines active throughout the state.<sup>80</sup> The company is a provider of residential and business communications in rural areas and urban cities in 37 states. CenturyLink offers a range of consumer services including broadband, television, voice and wireless communications. Additionally, CenturyLink offers data, voice and managed services for businesses, government and wholesale customers in local, national and select international markets through a high quality advanced fiber optic network and data centers. CenturyLink offers more fiber-optic bandwidth in Flathead County, per capita, than anywhere else in the Country, allowing residents and businesses more streamlined and reliable access to the internet. Beyond CenturyLink's fiber optic offerings, the Health Information Exchange of Montana is in the process of developing a 17,000 square mile fiber-optic network across rural northwest Montana, thanks to a \$13.6 million grant from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).<sup>81</sup>

Phone service is offered by CenturyLink, Optimum and AT&T. Optimum and AT&T do not have traditional land lines. Instead, the service is conducted over cable or the internet.

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<sup>80</sup> CenturyLink in Montana; <http://www.centurylink.com/static/Pages/AboutUs/FieldNews/Documents/montana.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> Montana West Economic Development; <http://dobusinessinmontana.com/case-studies/broadband/>

In addition, there are several cellular companies in the Flathead Valley including AT&T, Cellular One and Verizon Wireless.

### **Electrical Service**

Flathead Electric Cooperative, Inc. (FEC) is a locally owned and operated cooperative and is the only supplier of both commercial and residential power to Flathead County. Flathead Electric Coop is the second largest electric utility in Montana with nearly 48,000 members/customers. Over 3,800 miles of line serve the entire Flathead Valley and Libby, as well as several hundred members along the Montana-Wyoming border.

In 2004 the Co-op processed a record number of work orders and new services. Engineering released more than 2,700 jobs for construction taking in more than 125 new subdivisions. Underground cable replacement projects were completed in Desert Mountain, Kokanee Bend Subdivision, Rogers Lake Road and Peaceful Acres Subdivision. More than 416,000 feet of underground cable was installed, compared with 376,000 feet in 2003. Other projects completed in 2004 include U.S. Highway 93 from Four Corners to 13th Street in Kalispell, the Bigfork transmission rebuild, the Montana Avenue rebuild in Kalispell, design work for new substations in Lakeside and North Kalispell as well as a number of relocation projects related to highway construction. Replacement of standard electric meters with automated meter reading units continued, allowing the meters to be read electronically from the FEC office. More than 5,500 old standard meters were replaced with new automated meters in 2004.<sup>82</sup>

The FEC Annual Report in 2010 paints a different picture, influenced by the economic downturn over the past three years and the slow in customer growth that has resulted. New member services anticipate a net increase of just 263 metered services between 2009 and 2010; this growth rate is significantly less than the historical long-term trend experienced by the company. Staffing levels have adjusted accordingly between 2007 and fiscal year 2010, and the amount of contract work has been reduced (with the exception of tree-trimming services).<sup>83</sup>

### **Natural Gas Service**

Northwest Energy is the only major supplier of natural gas to the Flathead Valley. The company distributes natural gas to approximately 181,300 customers in 105 Montana communities, while also servicing smaller distribution companies that provide service to approximately 31,000 additional customers. Northwest Energy transmits natural gas statewide through a distribution system consisting of roughly 4,900 miles of underground pipeline.<sup>84</sup> Pricing for natural gas is approved by the Montana Public Service Commission and is deregulated.

### **Utility Projections**

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<sup>82</sup> Flathead Electric Cooperative Annual Report 2004

<sup>83</sup> Flathead Electric Cooperative Annual Report 2010

<sup>84</sup> Northwestern Energy 2010 Annual Report

As population increases, so will the demand for utility services. Availability of utilities plays a role in successful community development. Communications are a vital element in attracting new businesses to the county. For more on the importance of communications to a diverse economy, see Chapter 5 - *The Flathead Economy*. Public health and safety is affected by the location of utilities on developed property. A meeting with representatives of the major utility companies in 2004 revealed many concerns with development techniques that impact the provision of safe and convenient services now and in the future. Foremost was the issue of locating utility easements in new developments. Increased coordination between utility companies throughout the development process regarding locations of easements and locations of individual pipes and lines within easements would increase the safety of those working on the lines as well as the residents living nearby.

## CHAPTER 8: NATURAL RESOURCES

### Introduction

The vitality of Flathead County is inextricably connected to the abundance of its natural resources. From the aboriginal tribes to the early settlers, prevalent natural resources have been utilized to sustain lives and livelihoods. In 21<sup>st</sup> century Flathead County, industries such as timber harvest, milling, mining, farming and ranching have shared a balance with real estate development, tourism and outdoor recreational activities. In the past as well as today, the County depends on the availability and utilization of natural resources.

The Montana State Constitution declares all citizens are entitled to clean air and water; this growth policy affirms this entitlement for residents of Flathead County. Air and water are two basic elements of a complex environmental system. The water cycle encompasses all the aspects of water quality, flooding and drought, while carbon and oxygen cycles affect air quality. There are many other nutrient cycles that directly or indirectly impact the quality – and in some cases quantity - of the county’s natural resources. Development and human interaction can alter these cycles and create imbalance. Location of development is a key consideration when addressing environmental concerns. This growth policy seeks ways to protect the environment by adequately mitigating development impacts where practicable and restricting development in areas of high sensitivity.

Flathead County has an abundance of natural resources, with over 40 lakes and 3 major rivers surrounded by or adjacent to public lands. Flathead Lake extends from Flathead County into Lake County, 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, serving as a barometer of the ecological health for the entire Flathead watershed. The surrounding mountains are primarily forest lands managed by the federal and state government. Glacier National Park was established in 1910 and has become Flathead County’s most popular tourist destination. The park is split between Flathead County and Glacier County and encompasses approximately 1,008,306 acres which include over 200 lakes and streams and over 700 miles of hiking trails<sup>85</sup>.

Private timberlands generate positive contributions to Flathead County’s economy through timber production as well as the maintenance of healthy forests, watershed protection, wildlife habitat and other aspects of public value. Flathead County’s valley floor is open as a result of extensive logging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore able to accommodate a variety of agricultural uses, extractive industries and residential and commercial development. The main tributaries that flow through the valley floor - the Flathead, Whitefish, Stillwater and Swan Rivers - have created areas of prime agricultural soils and critical riparian habitat.

Flathead County has a long history of beneficial utilization of its natural resources. Agriculture and timber production have historically provided a solid economic base for

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<sup>85</sup> National Park Service, Glacier National Park webpage; <http://www.nps.gov/glac/index.htm>

residents and a record of stewardship that has effectively preserved the abundant natural resources enjoyed today. These resource industries are based on the sustained production of essential products and effective management of the natural resources necessary for their creation. Their role in the protection of natural resources is recognized, as is the importance of their continued presence.

Flathead County Growth Policy public input meetings held between 2005 and 2006 generated an overwhelming response from participants about the preservation of natural resources. In particular, participants wanted goals and policies to protect water resources, open space, scenic views, air quality and wildlife habitat (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). The majority of comments expressed concern about the degradation of natural resources from commercial and residential development, agricultural uses and extractive industries. The goals and policies that follow were developed from a public involvement process and are intended to promote and protect the public health, safety, and welfare of Flathead County directly dependent on natural resources.

### **Goal**

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- G.35 Protect and preserve water resources within the Flathead watershed for the benefit of current residents and future generations.

### **Policies**

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- P.35.1 Establish public/private partnerships to develop a Flathead basin watershed management plan using scientific data to determine critical areas and evaluate the impacts of future development on water quantity and quality.
- P.35.2 Provide improved educational information to landowners on the importance of buffers and restoration techniques to reduce nutrient loading to water resources.

### **Goal**

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- G.36 Protect water quality in lakes, rivers, aquifers and streams from existing and potential pollution sources.

### **Policies**

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- P.36.1 Require development to demonstrate compliance with local, State, Tribal, and Federal water quality standards, where applicable.
- P.36.2 Review and revise the Lakeshore Protection regulations to include consideration of potential harm caused by fertilizers and pesticides entering lakes, streams and rivers.

- P.36.3 Investigate the feasibility of a regional wastewater treatment system. Ensure that the regional wastewater treatment plan protects the Flathead watershed.
- P.36.4 Require all public waste water treatment systems to meet applicable DEQ discharge standards.
- P.36.5 Identify and encourage land development practices that do not contribute to increases in Total Maximum Daily Loads.
- P.36.6 Support non-point source pollution reduction within the Flathead Basin watershed.
- P.36.7 Identify critical aquifer recharge areas in Flathead County and support land uses in these areas that protect water quantity and quality.

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**Goal**

- G.37 Prevent untreated storm water from entering into any surface water, stream, river, or lake.

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**Policies**

- P.37.1 Encourage the development of innovative stormwater collection, detention and retention systems.
- P.37.2 Develop and provide educational information to individuals, organizations, and neighborhood associations regarding storm water management and the importance of proper storm water management practices.
- P.37.3 Develop best management practices (BMPs) and setback requirements for development projects that impact water bodies. This may include vegetative buffer strips along stream sides and riverbanks, and the use of sedimentation barriers.
- P.37.4 Encourage constructed wetlands as part of on-site drainage plans to restrict untreated storm water from entering lakes, rivers, and streams.

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**Goal**

- G.38 Preserve and protect floodplains to ensure the safety of residents from flood hazards and to prevent the degradation of water quality and critical wildlife habitat.

**Policies**

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- P.38.1 Adopt FEMA maps and existing floodplain studies as they become available.
- P.38.2 Review and revise floodplain regulations as necessary. Consider appropriate setback requirements from floodplain.
- P.38.3 Discourage development in floodway or floodway fringe that may result in a net increase in the floodplain area.
- P.38.4 Consider density guidelines in the floodplain regulations.
- P.38.5 Discourage development that displaces floodwaters within the 100-year floodplain.

**Goal**

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- G.39 Preserve and protect wetlands and riparian areas to prevent degradation of natural resources, including but not limited to water quality and critical wildlife habitat.

**Policies**

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- P.39.1 Use scientific studies to identify locations of riparian areas and delineated wetlands.
- P.39.2 Encourage educational programs on voluntary conservation strategies for private property owners.
- P.39.3 Develop regulations that restrict development in jurisdictional wetlands and riparian areas.
- P.39.4 Develop best management practices (BMP's) and setback requirements for development to mitigate adverse impacts to sensitive wetland and riparian areas.

**Goal**

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- G.40 Protect sensitive areas over shallow aquifers.

**Policies**

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- P.40.1 Use scientific studies to identify the location of shallow aquifers.

- P.40.2 Promote development in areas with public facilities or appropriate depth to groundwater to preserve water quality and water supply.
- P.40.3 Encourage rural residential densities or community wastewater treatment systems in areas of high groundwater established by MT DEQ
- P.40.4 Encourage rural low-intensity land uses in areas of high groundwater, as defined by the MT DEQ.
- P.40.5 Develop incentives to encourage failing and polluting septic systems to be upgraded.
- P.40.6 Encourage educational programs on septic system impacts to groundwater and surface water quality for neighborhood associations and other organizations to utilize.

### Goal

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- G.41 Promote the preservation of critical fish and wildlife habitat and preserve the area's unique outdoor amenities and quality of life.

### Policy

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- P.41.1 Develop an educational brochure that explains "Living with Wildlife" concepts and the impacts landowners can expect when living in rural areas of the County. Promote the document by distributing it to home buyers and home owners in Flathead County.
- P.41.2 Discourage unmitigated development in areas identified as critical wildlife habitat.
- P.41.3 Encourage maintaining and managing riparian areas in accordance with Montana state and federal laws.

### Goal

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- G.42 Recognize and work to manage Flathead County's rich heritage of hunting, fishing, timber, agricultural and mineral activities that provide economic benefits while utilizing and protecting our natural resources.

### Policy

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- P.42.1 Promote an active and environmentally responsible timber industry utilizing sustainable practices on private and public lands.



P.42.2 Encourage agricultural practices and uses which protect natural resources and allow for productive use.

P.42.3 Recognize and respect the important history and heritage of hunting and fishing by encouraging development that creates new or preserves existing access to public lands and waters.

For further policies associated with G.42, see G.3 and G.12 in Chapter 2.

### Goal

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G.43 Protect the air quality in Flathead County.

### Policy

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P.43.1 Implement the existing Flathead County Air Pollution Plan, adopted December 16, 1996 and revised January 17, 2008, into development standards. Any new plans should be considered for inclusion through a public process.

P.43.2 Prioritize and perform road-surfacing and dust abatement projects annually to reduce airborne dust generated from gravel-surfaced roads.

P.43.3 Encourage industrial and other land uses that do not degrade the Glacier National Park Class I air shed.

## PART 1: Water Resources (see Goals 35 through 40)

### Flathead Watershed

The Flathead Basin watershed encompasses approximately 8,587 square miles - or six million acres of land that drains water into Flathead Lake and the Flathead River. Running north to south the basin stretches 175 miles, and is 88 miles at its widest point. Water flows from headwaters in Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Canada into Flathead Lake.<sup>86</sup> Water from the Flathead Basin sustains life in the Flathead Valley and is delineated in Map 8.1.

The Flathead Basin encompasses the Swan, Stillwater and the Whitefish Rivers, as well as the North, Middle and South Forks of the Flathead River. The North, Middle and South Forks of the Flathead River drain the eastern portion of the Flathead Basin and merge at Columbia Falls to become the Upper Flathead River; combined, these forks of the Flathead contribute approximately 80% of the water entering Flathead Lake. The Whitefish River and Stillwater River drain the northwest part of the Flathead Basin and join the Upper Flathead River below Kalispell. The Upper Flathead River and Swan River are the two

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<sup>86</sup> Flathead Basin Commission 2006-2011 Strategic Plan

main tributaries that empty into the northeast corner of Flathead Lake. Water flow into and through the lake is controlled in part by the Hungry Horse Dam on the South Fork of the Flathead River, and the Kerr Dam near the lake's outlet south of Polson.<sup>87</sup>

Rivers and streams in the Flathead basin create floodplain areas, riparian corridors and wetlands critical to water quality, wildlife and fisheries habitat. Functional riparian corridors and wetlands are important because they filter nutrients, trap sediments, reduce flooding, stabilize soils and provide critical wildlife habitat. Riparian corridors typically extend along the banks of rivers, streams and drainage ways where ground water and surface water mix.

Groundwater is an important resource in the Flathead Basin. Most residential and agricultural development relies on groundwater wells for drinking water. Shallow aquifers provide water to many of the wells. Well-defined shallow aquifers include the Delta region, located between the north shore of Flathead Lake and the Flathead River; the Evergreen aquifer located between the Flathead and Whitefish Rivers, which is the most developed shallow aquifer; the east side between the Flathead River and the foothills of the Swan Mountains; and the Lost Creek fan west of the Stillwater River near the Salish Mountains. Most other places where shallow aquifers have been developed are along stream valleys.

Major threats to the water resources of the Flathead Basin include non point source pollution, where sediments and nutrients - in particular nitrogen, or nitrates, and phosphorus - end up in streams and lakes via storm water runoff or groundwater contamination. Water quality in Flathead Lake is an important indicator of the health of the entire Flathead Basin. Research by the University of Montana Flathead Lake Biological Station at Yellow Bay shows that water quality in Flathead Lake has been declining since the 1970s. Flathead Lake has been listed as an impaired water body by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality since 1996, and water quality monitoring of the lake and its tributaries continues to be vital for evaluating and understanding long term trends.<sup>88</sup>

### Clean Waters

Preservation and improvement of water quality are perhaps the most critical elements when considering surface waters in Flathead County. The high water quality of Flathead County's lakes and rivers is consistently referred to as a prized and cherished characteristic of the Flathead Basin that leads to a high quality of living for residents and visitors.

The North and Middle Forks of the Flathead, as well as the South Fork of the Flathead River above the Hungry Horse Reservoir, are designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers. Under the authority of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, a river or river section may be designated by the U.S. Congress or the Secretary of the Interior. Rivers, or sections of rivers so designated are preserved in their free flowing condition and are not dammed or

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<sup>87</sup> Flathead Watershed Sourcebook: A Guide to an Extraordinary Place. Chapter 1, pp. 3

<sup>88</sup> Flathead Lakers Water Quality Monitoring; <http://www.flatheadlakers.org/index.php?page=water-quality>

otherwise improved. These portions of the Flathead River include the landscapes of Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall and Great Bear Wilderness areas.

Designation as a Wild and Scenic River is not the same as designation as a national park, and generally does not limit use of a river in the same manner as a Wilderness Area designation. The idea is not to halt development and/or use of a river, but to preserve the character of a river.

Every two years the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) compiles a list of water bodies that fail to meet water quality standards. This document is known as the 303(d) list, after the section of the Federal Clean Water Act that requires states to report impaired waters. The 303(d) list identifies the probable causes of impairment as well as the suspected sources of the pollutant. In turn, the DEQ is required to develop Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) for all water bodies on the 303(d) list. (See Appendix A)

There are two primary sources of water pollution resulting from human influence – point source and non-point source pollution. Point sources are discharges from a specific outlet such as pipes or ditches, and are regulated through permits issued by the DEQ. Examples of point sources include municipal and public sewage treatment facilities, factories, some storm sewers and large livestock feedlots. Non-point sources are more dispersed and generally relate to land extensive activities from multiple contributors that do not require discharge permits. Non-point sources include agriculture and forestry activities, small construction projects, unregulated storm water discharges, individual septic systems and the many negative effects resulting from forest fires. Another potential source of non-point source pollution is leakage from municipal sewer lines. There are also natural sources of pollution that are inherent to any watershed and are contributed without the influence of human activity. Examples include sediment and nutrient loading as a result of fire, or the naturally high concentration of metals or chemicals in rocks and soil which leach into surface or groundwater.<sup>89</sup>

A Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) is the total amount of a pollutant a given water body can receive without exceeding water quality standards. The purpose of establishing TMDLs for waterbodies throughout this state is to ensure there are safe and healthy waters available for current and future generations of Montanans. The TMDL process for a particular watershed and/or water body begins by diagnosing the problems concerning water quality; identifying and assessing the source(s) of the problem; setting pollutant level thresholds (or targets); setting a TMDL based on the established threshold; allocating the amount of pollutant reduction among all the contributors; and outlining how those reductions can be made. Once this process is complete, decisions about what to do next rest in the hands of local governments, individuals and organizations. The TMDL process by itself does not institute new regulations; however, local governments may decide

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<sup>89</sup> Understanding the Montana TMDL Process (pamphlet); by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, 2007.

regulatory measures are appropriate to ensure the recommended reductions are made and water quality standards are met.<sup>90</sup>

Flathead Lake has been listed as a “water quality limited water body” or “impaired” by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality; therefore, Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) have been determined for the lake to guide restoration efforts reducing point and non-point source based pollution. TMDL’s have also been established for the Swan River Watershed and the Flathead Headwaters (including the North, Middles and South Forks of the Flathead River). Current TMDL efforts in Flathead County include developing TMDLs for impaired waters in the Flathead-Stillwater Planning area, as well as the development of Phase II TMDL allocations for the Flathead Lake Watershed. Phase I TMDL allocations for Flathead Lake are shown in Table 8.1 below; Table 8.2 identifies streams and lakes throughout the Flathead watershed that are impaired for nutrients, sediment and temperature.<sup>91</sup>

**Table 8.1  
Proposed Flathead Lake TMDL Targets**

Primary production	80.0 g C/m <sup>2</sup> /yr
Chlorophyll a	1.0 micrograms/liter
Soluble Reactive Phosphorous (SRP)	<0.5 micrograms/liter (BDL)
Total Phosphorous	5.0 micrograms/liter
Total Nitrogen	95 micrograms/liter
Ammonia (NH <sub>3</sub> )	<1.0 micrograms/liter
Nitrate/ Nitrite (NO <sub>2/3</sub> )nitrogen	30 micrograms/liter
No measurable blooms of Anabaena (or other pollution algae)	
No oxygen depletion in the hypolimnion	
Algal biomass measured as Chlorophyll a ( on near-shore rocks) remains stable or exhibits a declining trend.	

Source: *Appendix C: Current Flathead Lake Monitoring Program (2000), Flathead Lake Biological Station.* <http://deq.mt.gov/wqinfo/TMDL/finalReports.mcp>

**Table 8.2  
Flathead Basin Impaired Streams and Lakes**

TMDL Planning Area	Impaired Streams & Lakes		
	Nutrients	Sediments	Temperature
Flathead Lake	Flathead Lake	Flathead Lake	(none)
Flathead Headwaters	Challenge Creek	(none)	(none)

<sup>90</sup> Understanding the Montana TMDL Process (pamphlet); by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Flathead TMDL Project – Montana DEQ and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); <http://montanatmdlflathead.pbworks.com/w/page/21641099/Welcome%20to%20the%20Flathead%20Basin>

Flathead - Stillwater	Lake Mary Ronan, Ashley Creek, Fish Creek, Sheppard Creek, Spring Creek, Stillwater River, Swift Creek, Whitefish River	Whitefish Lake, Ashley Creek, Fish Creek, Logan Creek, Sheppard Creek, Stillwater River	Ashley Creek, Whitefish River
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Source Flathead TMDL Project – Montana DEQ and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); <http://montanatmdlflathead.pbworks.com/w/page/21641099/Welcome%20to%20the%20Flathead%20Basin>

According to Section 303(d) of the Federal Clean Water Act, and Title 40 part 130 of the Code of Federal Regulations, each state is required to develop a list of waters that do not meet water quality standards. The 303(d) list is a subset of all impaired waters listed in the comprehensive 305(b) water quality report. Water bodies on the 303(d) list have at least one impairment caused by a pollutant, and are currently without a TMDL completed and approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). A water body is placed on the 303(d) list when it does not meet, or is not expected to meet the state’s water quality standards after full implementation of technology-based controls – because of this it is considered ‘impaired’. Up-to-date annual lists of 303(d) impaired water bodies in Flathead County can be found by visiting the Clean Water Information Center on the Montana Department of Environmental Quality’s website.<sup>92</sup>

The 303(d) List identifies probable causes of impairment such as, nutrients, siltation, suspended solids, flow alteration, organic enrichment or low dissolved oxygen, algal growth, PCBs, metals, mercury, and noxious aquatic plants. The main sources of pollution include runoff from development, old and poorly maintained septic systems, poor agricultural and timber harvest practices, and air pollution. Air pollution contributors include dust, exhaust and fumes as well as smoke from chimneys and forest fires.

In 1998, the levels of dissolved oxygen in the Big Arm Bay of Flathead Lake were the lowest ever recorded and blooms of a pollution algae (Anabaena Flosaquae) were observed near shore. The result is the oxygen supply in the water becomes depleted. Similar oxygen sags, as they are called, have been identified in Swan Lake and Whitefish Lake. Nitrogen concentrations in the Stillwater and Flathead rivers were among the highest ever recorded. As nutrients increase (nitrogen and phosphorus), the number of algae and other organisms increase. As these organisms die, bacteria break down their remains using oxygen in the process. Oxygen depletion is a recognized sign of water quality degradation.

Wastewater is produced from homes, industries, schools, and businesses; thus demand on wastewater systems is dependent on land use, population density, the magnitude and type of commercial and industrial activity in the area, visiting population and employment impact, the condition of the existing systems and regulatory requirements. Wastewater treatment plants remove solids, organic matter, nutrients, and pollutants and restore oxygen before discharging into surface water bodies.

<sup>92</sup> Clean Water Act Information Center, Montana Department of Environmental Quality: <http://cwaic.mt.gov/faq.aspx?qryId=87109>

The *Nutrient Management Plan and Total Maximum Daily Load for Flathead Lake, Montana*<sup>93</sup> provides a prioritized nutrient management plan for the Flathead Lake. This document presents information on point and non-point sources of pollution to the Flathead Lake watershed and makes recommendations on approaches to achieving water quality goals for this same body of water. The document offers sources of pollution to the entire watershed and shows Sewer Treatment Plants (STPs) at 2% and 1% of the total Phosphorus and Nitrate/Nitrite load respectively (Figures 4 – 7 and 4 – 8). Nonetheless, the State of Montana Department of Environmental Quality mandates phosphorous limits for wastewater treatment plants. The City of Kalispell's Advanced Waste Water Treatment Plant continues to surpass its 1 mg/L total Phosphorus permit requirement by meeting levels closer to a daily average of 0.2 mg/L for total phosphorous and voluntarily undertakes active nitrogen removal.

In order to meet the needs of a growing community and to continue the City of Kalispell's efforts to protect streams and groundwater in the area, it was necessary to increase the City's wastewater treatment capacity in 2006. In preparation for growth and to provide adequate infrastructure for the next 20 years, the City upgraded the Advance Wastewater Treatment Plant to the design capacity of 5.4 million gallons per day.<sup>94</sup>

Past efforts to reduce the amount of nutrients reaching Flathead Lake and its tributaries have been successful. Upgrading sewage treatment plants in the upper basin for phosphorus removal, connecting Evergreen to the Kalispell sewer system, and banning domestic use of phosphorus containing detergents have reduced the amount of nutrients reaching Flathead Lake from these sources. Community facilities have also played a significant role in reducing non-point loading. Reductions in non-point loading through the development of new public systems, such as Lakeside/Somers, and the expansion of areas served by public systems such as Evergreen, Big Mountain, Whitefish Lake and Bigfork have played a major role in protecting water quality.

### **Storm Water Runoff**

Polluted runoff, also known as non-point source pollution, is perhaps the greatest threat to water quality in the Flathead Basin. It is caused by rainfall or snowmelt moving over and through the ground. As it moves, runoff picks up and carries natural and human-caused pollutants, finally depositing them into rivers, lakes and groundwater.

Croplands, livestock feedlots, golf courses, lawns, gardens, roadways, parking lots, construction sites, landfills, city storm sewers, logging operations, residential septic systems and erosion from streams, river banks and lake shores are all sources of polluted runoff. Even airborne chemicals and particulates resulting from wood-burning chimneys and forest fires can be carried into our waters by rain or snow and contribute to the non-point source pollution problem.

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<sup>93</sup> Executive Summary: *Nutrient Management Plan and TMDL for Flathead Lake, Montana*. 12/28/2001. Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

<sup>94</sup> *City of Kalispell Wastewater Facility Plan Update*, March 2008. Prepared by HDR Engineering, Inc.

The scattered locations of these pollutants and their often unpredictable dispersal make clean up efforts complex and often costly. This is because the waterways within a watershed are interconnected. Streams flow into rivers, which in turn flow into lakes. Surface waters and groundwater are often interconnected; a pollutant introduced in one area upstream can pollute the water downstream.

Meeting TMDL targets and allocations for Flathead Lake will require reductions in nutrient loading in the Flathead River Headwaters and Whitefish and Swan Lakes as well as rivers and streams that flow into and out of these lakes. Increased development in close proximity to rivers, lakes and streams directly contributes to non-point source pollution. Impervious surfaces increase the amount and velocity of stormwater run-off, carrying pollutants directly into waterbodies with limited opportunity for infiltration. Limiting development in these areas or increasing the amount of pervious surface (i.e. natural grass, foliage or other types vegetation) between impervious surfaces and water bodies helps reduce the velocity of run-off as well as the amount of non-point pollutants entering our lakes and streams.<sup>95</sup>

### **Floodplains**

Flooding causes more property damage in the United States than any other natural disaster. It is estimated that flooding causes 90 percent of all property losses from natural disasters in the United States. In terms of economic disruption, property damage and loss of life, floods are “nature’s number one disaster.”<sup>96</sup>

The presence of floodplain in Flathead County [see Map 2.6 and 2.6(a)] is an impediment to growth and development. The topography of the county, which includes extremely mountainous areas, large lakes, several deep river valleys and the low valley floor, form a very complex drainage system and wide variation in climate.

Foothills and valley bottom land make up approximately 20 percent of the county landscape. The relatively flat terrain of the valley floor manifests itself in the sinuous nature of the rivers that wind through the valley to Flathead Lake. Glacier outwash underlies most of the area in the Flathead River Valley and forms floodplains and terraces adjacent to the Flathead River and its tributaries.

Precipitation averages are generally higher in Flathead County than in other areas of Montana. The most severe flooding in Flathead County usually occurs in the spring and early summer months as a result of snowmelt and/or rainfall runoff. On rare occasions, ice jams result in some overbank flooding. In addition to flooding along streams, shallow flooding periodically occurs in other isolated, developed areas of the county due to other factors. The mountains can receive several hundred inches of snow annually. Low flows in the basin occur naturally during the winter months, and floods normally occur in the

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<sup>95</sup> Coffman, Larry S. *Low-impact development: An alternative to stormwater management technology.* Handbook of Water Sensitive Planning and Design. Lewis Publishers, 2002. pp. 97-123.

<sup>96</sup> National Flood Insurance Program. *Flood Insurance Guide for Community Associations.* 2005.

spring during periods of rapid snowmelt. Runoff from snowmelt, occasionally combined with rainfall, provides high streamflows in the spring.

Historically, flooding has shaped much of the Flathead Valley floor. The Flathead Valley has experienced six (6) severe flood events. These occurred in 1894, 1926, 1948, 1964, 1975 and 1995. During the 1964 flood, families were evacuated from their homes, livestock drowned, and property damage was excessive. For a history of these floods, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

The 100-year floodplain, also known as the Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA), is the land subject to inundation by one percent (1%) or greater chance of flood in any given year. Construction is extremely limited in these areas and requires state, federal and local permits. The SFHA is divided into two parts: the floodway and the floodway fringe. The floodway is the channel of a stream and any adjacent floodplain areas that must be kept free of encroachment so that a 1% annual chance flood can be carried without substantial increases in flood heights.<sup>97</sup> The floodway further limits the amount of construction within its boundary, beyond that which is allowed by permit within the SFHA in general. According to the Flathead County Floodplain Regulations, the floodway fringe is defined as the portion of floodplain *outside* the limits of the floodway.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has not identified all of the floodplain in Flathead County, but most of the Flathead, Whitefish and Stillwater River corridors and the valley bottoms have been mapped and shown on the Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM). Approximately 12% of the valley area of Flathead County is designated as 100-year floodplain. An additional 2 to 3% of the valley bottom is designated as 500-year floodplain.<sup>98</sup> Most of the floodplain is located along the Flathead River corridor between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake. Areas of 100-year floodplain are present along the Stillwater and Whitefish Rivers.

Flathead County also contains areas where FIRM panels are not printed. These areas are considered to be unmapped, or areas where no SFHA is present. Although many of these areas contain streams and rivers that have flooded in the past, since they are not located on a FIRM panel they are not required to comply with the Flathead County Floodplain and Floodway Management Regulations.

FIRM panels can only be amended or modified by FEMA. There are two ways for individual property owners to amend an adopted FIRM panel. If a property owner feels that they have inadvertently been included in the floodplain and that the ground is *naturally* above the 100-year floodplain elevation, they can apply to FEMA for a Letter of Map Amendment (LOMA). If a property owner has placed fill or other material to raise the ground *artificially* above the 100-year floodplain elevation (with an appropriate permit), they may apply to FEMA for a Letter of Map Revision based on Fill (LOMR-F). If FEMA approves the LOMA or LOMR-F, a Letter of Determination is sent to the applicant

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<sup>97</sup> FEMA Map Service Center, Definitions of FEMA Flood Zone Designations. <http://www.fema.gov/>

<sup>98</sup> Calculations based on current Flathead County GIS data provided by FEMA; calculations contemplate the amount of 500-year floodplain *beyond* what is already classified as 100-year floodplain.



indicating the new flood zone designation. A copy of the determination is also submitted to the Community; however the actual FIRM panel is not reprinted.

100-year floodplain offers numerous benefits to the property and community by:

- Providing flood storage and conveyance;
- Reducing flood velocities and the potential for erosion;
- Absorbing large volumes of water and gradually releasing it to adjacent streams or water bodies during low flow periods;
- Recharging wells and aquifers by holding water long enough to allow it to percolate into underlying soils;
- Supporting vegetation that acts as a flood buffer and stabilizes the shoreline;
- Enhancing water quality by absorbing sediments, toxins and nutrients;
- Providing habitat for millions of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish and amphibians.

Construction is allowed in the floodway fringe by special permit and must meet established regulations. The Flathead City-County Health Department, which issues permits for all on-site sewage disposal systems, does not allow a system in or within 100 feet of a designated 100-year floodplain because of DEQ requirements that septic systems be 100 feet from surface water.

Current national floodplain management standards allow for channel and overbank conveyance areas to be reduced, essential valley storage to be filled, or velocities changed with little or no regard to how these changes impact others in the floodplain and watershed. The net result is that through our actions we are intensifying damage potential in the floodplain. This current course is not equitable to those whose property is impacted, and has been shown to be economically unsustainable.

The Association of State Floodplain Managers and the Association of Montana Floodplain Managers support local accountability and active management of the floodplain through outreach and education. Both organizations support the "No Adverse Impact" policy that is meant to ameliorate negative impacts associated with floodplain development. This growth policy discourages activities in the floodplain that might displace floodwaters to neighboring properties.

### **Riparian Areas and Wetlands**

The NRCS defines riparian areas as ecosystems that occur along watercourses or water bodies. They are different from surrounding lands because of unique soil and plant characteristics that are strongly influenced by free or unbound water in the soil. Riparian ecosystems occupy the transitional area between the terrestrial (dry) and aquatic (wet) ecosystems. Typical examples would include floodplains, streambanks, lakeshores, and wetlands. Riparian areas may exist within any land use area, such as cropland, hayland, pastureland, rangeland, and forestland.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/water/setbacks/>

Wetlands are areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil all year or for varying time periods throughout the year. Water saturation levels (hydrology) determine how the soil develops and what types of plant and animal communities can be supported in the environment; wetlands can support both aquatic and terrestrial species. Inland wetlands (such as those found in Montana) are commonly found on floodplains along rivers and streams (riparian wetlands); in isolated depressions surrounded by dry land; along the margins of lakes and ponds; and in other low lying areas such as vernal pools and bogs. Inland wetlands include marshes and wet meadows as well as wooded and shrubby swamps.<sup>100</sup>

Wetland preservation is beneficial to many species of plants, birds, mammals and invertebrates. They serve as retention areas for overflowing rivers, lakes, and streams, thus reducing flood and erosion damage in other areas. Wetlands also filter pollutants through plant assimilation and slowing untreated surface runoff before entering the water body.

Only about 4% of the land area in the state of Montana has been identified as riparian and/or wetland habitat. Yet these areas are critical to conservation efforts, as many of the the state's mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish depend on these riparian habitats for survival. According to the Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy prepared by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 196 of the 265 terrestrial species found within the wetland and riparian community type are classified as being "essentially associated", which means an association exists between geographic area, type of vegetation, or fish and wildlife species that is critical to the existence of a population of fish or wildlife. Additionally, 17 of the 19 species of greatest conservation need found in these riparian and wetland community types are essentially associated.<sup>101</sup>

The quality of Montana's blue ribbon streams are uniquely dependent on the riparian habitat that is commonly found along rivers, streams and lakes. These areas usually have a variety of riparian forbs, shrubs and trees such as cottonwood, alder, serviceberry, chokecherry and willow to keep them intact. There is abundant wildlife and waterfowl as well as amphibious and unique plant life.

Riparian areas help slow stream bank erosion, remove contaminants from water draining into streams and rivers, improve fish habitat and help to maintain cool water temperatures that many fish species require to survive. Riparian habitat may be degraded when water diversions and dams prevent flooding or when wetlands are drained or filled. Harvesting of trees, noxious weed invasions, livestock over-grazing and human use can destroy stream riparian habitat. Maintaining proper and healthy vegetation may include harvesting and planting trees along with trimming and planting shrubs.

The main stem of the Flathead River, Stillwater River, Whitefish River and Ashley Creek, as well as their associated backwater channels, spring creeks, wetlands and tributaries provide important wildlife habitat. Areas that support intact natural stands of forest and shrubby vegetation are critical to a variety of species. These areas provide food as well as

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<sup>100</sup> USEPA Circular on Wetlands: <http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/>

<sup>101</sup> Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 2005

screening and thermal cover, and although these habitats may be intermingled with residential development and agricultural use, they remain important to the wildlife species that depend on them.

### Groundwater and Depth to Water Table

Groundwater is water that fills pores and cracks in rocks and soil. Groundwater sustains lake levels, provides for base flows in streams, and is a major source of domestic water. Groundwater comes from precipitation and condensation that enters the soil and is susceptible to depletion in quantity and degradation of quality. Groundwater flows beneath the surface of the earth, generally moving downhill following the contours of the land toward a point of discharge, usually a lake, stream, spring or well.<sup>102</sup>

The depth to groundwater varies with seasons and precipitation levels. Many areas experience seasonally high groundwater levels, typically in the spring, which limits land use. These areas are commonly located within or near floodplain, alluvial deposits and swamps, and their presence places certain limitations on septic tanks, basements and road building. In Flathead County, both public and private water supplies commonly depend on wells that utilize a variety of natural aquifers.

An aquifer is a water-bearing layer of permeable rock, sand or gravel. The thickness and depth of an aquifer vary with its location. The quantity of water a rock can contain depends on its porosity or the amount of open space and cracks between grains. Water movement in rock depends on permeability, defined as the measure of how well spaces are connected and allows water to flow. Aquifers are recharged or filled by precipitation and infiltration from streams. Recharge is greatest in late spring when snow melt creates runoff from the mountains.<sup>103</sup>

According to a 2004 report by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology<sup>104</sup>, a large intermediate and deep aquifer sits below Flathead Valley, in the “Kalispell Sub-Area”. This large aquifer is confined by bedrock to the north, west and east, and by Flathead Lake to the south. Water at depths of 100-200 feet below the surface is considered to be from the intermediate aquifer, while wells drilled to over 200 feet below the surface are considered to be utilizing the deep aquifer. Well logs show that most residents living at the outer perimeter of the Flathead Valley derive water from the intermediate and deep aquifer.

Recharge to the intermediate and deep aquifer comes from the mountain ranges surrounding the valley. Recharge occurs within and at the base of the Swan range front to the east, along the base of the Whitefish range to the north, and along the Whitefish and Salish ranges to the northwest and west. Much of the recharge is often at the valley floor

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<sup>102</sup> U.S. Geological Survey Open File Report 93-643; <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1993/ofr93-643/>

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Geological Survey Open File Report 93-643; <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1993/ofr93-643/>

<sup>104</sup> LaFave, John, Smith, Larry N. and Patton, Thomas W. *Ground-Water Resources of the Flathead Lake Area: Flathead, Lake, Missoula, and Sanders Counties, Montana. Part A- Descriptive Overview and Water Quality Data.* Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology. 2004.

where the aquifer contacts are relatively close to the surface and the overlying impermeable deposits are thin or absent. Sources of recharge come mainly from precipitation and snow melt run-off. Run-off from the Swan range front seems to contribute a significant amount through surface water to recharge the deep aquifer as well as overlaying shallow perched aquifers along the valley margins. Noisy Creek, Krause Creek, Brown Creek, Blaine Creek, Hemler Creek and others all go immediately underground at, or shortly after, contact with the valley floor. Brown Creek alone has been shown to produce peak flow rates in excess of 20 cfs and produce an average volume of nearly 3,000 acre-feet, none of which reaches far beyond Foothill Road before it disappears into the gravels of the deep aquifer. Interformational leakage from the shallow perched aquifers may also recharge the deep aquifer at differing locations in the valley. Clearly, the quality and quantity of the deep aquifer owes a significant amount of its water recharge to the west side of the Swan range, and protection of the quality and quantity of water that comes off of this basin is one of the keys to the long term health of the deep aquifer.<sup>105</sup>

The median yield reported from wells accessing the intermediate and deep aquifer is 25 gallons per minute. The Bureau of Mines and Geology report states that a downward trend in intermediate and deep aquifer irrigation well water levels was observed in the 1980s, but the trend appeared to level off in 1991. Overall water level declines over the past 10-20 years have been observed in most long-term records of all wells accessing intermediate and deep aquifers. The Bureau of Mines and Geology calls for continued monitoring of deep aquifer water levels to allow time for remedial steps by users if water levels should become dangerously low.

Residents living closer to the center of the valley commonly access a shallow alluvial aquifer, often referred to as the Evergreen Aquifer. The Evergreen Aquifer is located between the Flathead River to the east and Whitefish River to the west, and between Badrock Canyon to the north and the confluence of the Flathead and Whitefish rivers to the south. The depth to water table in this area is generally less than 50 feet and, for much of the area, less than five feet.

A significant amount of area with seasonally high ground water and/or frequent flooding can be found throughout the Flathead River corridor and the valley bottom, which is experiencing development pressure. Much of the development south of Kalispell in the Lower Valley area is occurring where the depth to groundwater is less than 15 feet. Homes being constructed in this area are on individual water and septic systems. Since there is a direct connection between the aquifer and the Flathead River and Flathead Lake, activity that substantially or incrementally changes the natural integrity of the floodplains and their aquifers will have a direct and pervasive impact on surface water quality. The groundwater supply in this area feeds directly into the aquifer and Flathead Lake. High density development in Lower Valley and other areas of high groundwater has the potential to degrade the water quality of both Flathead River and Flathead Lake, as well as the groundwater that supplies and recharges domestic water wells in the area.

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<sup>105</sup> LaFave, John, Smith, Larry N. and Patton, Thomas W. *Ground-Water Resources of the Flathead Lake Area: Flathead, Lake, Missoula, and Sanders Counties, Montana. Part A- Descriptive Overview and Water Quality Data.* Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology. 2004.

The Flathead Lake Biological Station of the University of Montana has conducted groundbreaking research (see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis) detailing the environmental importance of the shallow alluvial aquifer of the Flathead River. They have documented water flows and detailed the effects of pollution through continued water quality monitoring of Flathead Lake and its tributaries. They have also identified areas where the depth to groundwater is five feet or less as critically sensitive.

Shallow aquifers are intrinsically susceptible to surface sources of contamination. The aquifer materials are highly permeable, allowing rapid movement of water (and any associated contamination) from the land surface to the aquifer. Furthermore, as the land surface in the valley becomes more developed, potential sources of point and non-point source contamination will increase. Surface land uses not compatible with water quality policies in areas of shallow groundwater should be discouraged. High density individual wastewater disposal systems, high density housing, open pit gravel and mineral operations and other industrial uses are examples of surface land uses that have the potential to create health and safety issues in areas of shallow groundwater.

## **PART 2: Fish and Wildlife Resources (see Goals 36 through 38 and 41)**

### **Fish and Wildlife Species**

Mountain forests, meadows, streams, lakes, valley rivers, wetlands and riparian corridors provide aquatic and terrestrial habitats for wildlife. These areas are nesting sites for 319 species of birds including the threatened bald eagle. Only one mammal present in the Flathead Watershed - the Canada lynx – is currently listed as a threatened species according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The grizzly bear is unique in that it is managed by the federal government in geographically distinct locations which include the Yellowstone, North Continental Divide, Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, North Cascades and Bitterroot ecosystems. In March of 2007 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the Yellowstone District Population Segment (DPS) of grizzly bears no longer met the ESA's definition of 'threatened' or 'endangered', and was subsequently delisted. While this decision and its impacts continue to be debated in the court system, the grizzly remains a threatened/endangered species in the remaining ecosystems, including the Northern Continental Divide and Cabinet-Yaak regions within and surrounding Flathead County.<sup>106</sup> The gray wolf was recently removed from the endangered species list following three decades and much controversy. Forty-six (46) species of fish inhabit the aquatic ecosystems, which also provides habitat for seven species of amphibians and nine species of reptiles.<sup>107</sup>

The biggest threat to fish and wildlife is habitat loss. The Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) is the primary agency responsible for management of fish and wildlife populations in the Flathead. FWP jointly manage fish and wildlife habitats with the Salish

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<sup>106</sup> U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Mountain-Prairie Region Endangered Species Program. Grizzly Bear Recovery. <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/grizzly/>

<sup>107</sup> Flathead Watershed Sourcebook, Chapter 2 – Natural History, 2010 Edition; pp.59 through 73.

and Kootenai Tribes within the Flathead Reservation. Throughout the year, FWP regulates fishing and hunting seasons for big game, upland game birds, webless migratory birds, waterfowl and furbearers. The white-tailed deer remains the most popular big game animal pursued by hunters in northwest Montana, known as FWP Region 1.<sup>108</sup>

### Fish Species

The rivers, streams, reservoirs and lakes of Flathead County support native fish communities that are threatened from declining water quality and the introduction of non-native fish species. Of the 46 species of fish that call the Flathead Watershed home, only 23 are considered native; these include the westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, lake trout lake whitefish, mountain whitefish, pygmy whitefish and grayling. Long considered the lifeblood of the watershed for their persistence over 14,000 years, the bull and westslope cutthroat trout are indicator species for environmental disturbance in the watershed. The westslope cutthroat has experienced significant declines in numbers over the years, as a result of habitat degradation, competition with non-native species, hybridization and a high intolerance for disturbance; the fish now occupies between 19-27% of its historic range in Montana. Bull trout have been listed as threatened species according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.<sup>109</sup> In the past Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) fisheries biologists have conducted sinking and floating gill net surveys of Flathead Lake to assess shifts in species composition. Gill net surveys occurring in 1983 (pre-mysis) and 1999, showed a decrease in native westslope cutthroat trout from 23% of the catch in 1983 to only 5% of the catch in 1999. Conversely, the survey showed the presence of the northern pike minnow increased from 12% of the catch in 1983 to 25% of the catch in 1999.<sup>110</sup> A similar gillnet survey was proposed by Montana FWP as part of the ongoing co-management plan for Flathead Lake in 2010; however, the results of the survey are not yet available for comparison.

### Wildlife Species

Of the total 3,262,720 acres that make up Flathead County, 78.6% of the land is managed by federal, state or tribal agencies (see Chapter 2: Land Uses). These public lands are home to a wide range of forest carnivores, big game species, osprey, eagles, upland game birds, migratory waterfowl, amphibians and reptiles.

Important wildlife species include grizzly and black bear, mountain lion, white-tailed deer, three species of mountain grouse, and furbearers such as the marten and wolverine. Big game species include black bears, mountain goats and lions, moose, elk, white-tail and mule deer. Elk and deer inhabit forested areas, while moose typically occupy wetland and riparian areas. Highly important bear habitats occur along foothills of major valleys, particularly the east Flathead Valley, Stillwater, Swan, Middle Fork, and North Fork Valleys.

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<sup>108</sup> <http://fwp.mt.gov/regions/r1/>

<sup>109</sup> Flathead Watershed Sourcebook, Chapter 2 – Natural History, 2010 Edition; pp.59.

<sup>110</sup> Montana FWP; Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. *Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan, 2001-2010*. November 2000; pp. 30.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintains a list of all species classified as endangered, threatened or candidate in Flathead County. Endangered species are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. Threatened species are likely to become endangered within the near future. Candidate species are those for which there is sufficient information on biological vulnerability and threats to support a proposal to list as endangered or threatened. The loss of a species to extinction can have irrevocable impacts on the ability of remaining species to survive.

**Table 8.3**  
**Endangered, Threatened, and Candidate Species**

Designation	Species Name
Endangered	None
Threatened	Canada lynx, bull trout, Spalding's Catchfly
Candidate	None

Source: Montana Natural Heritage Program Plant/Animal Species of Concern Report(s) for Flathead County; October 2011

Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest include Federal Wilderness, Research Natural Areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers. These critical habitat areas provide large, relatively undisturbed blocks of open space important for wildlife migration corridors. A variety of designated protection areas exist in Flathead County. Table 8.4 shows over 15,000 acres that have been permanently set aside for the health of fish and wildlife species.

**Table 8.4**  
**Special Designated Wildlife Areas in Flathead County**

Name	Acres	Year Initiated	Management Agency
Flathead Waterfowl Protection Area	2,370	1971	FWS
Batavia Waterfowl Protection Area	510	1975	FWS
Smith Lake Waterfowl Protection Area	975	1973	FWS
Blasdel Waterfowl Protection Area	535	1987	FWS
McGregor Meadows Waterfowl Protection Area	799	1999	FWS
Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge	7,885	1999	FWS
Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area	1,530	1953-1986	FWP
Flathead River Wildlife Habitat Protection Area	216	1986-1999	FWP
Owen Sowerwine Natural Area	442	1970s	DNRC
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,262</b>		

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MT DNRC, MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks websites

### PART 3: Land Resources (see Goals 36 through 42 and see also Chapter 2:Land Uses)

#### Forestry

Proactive forest management creates healthy forest ecosystems through practices that include planting, thinning and harvesting of forest vegetation. Proper management of forests protects the cultural integrity of Flathead County and promotes the health and safety of residents by reducing the risk of wildfires and contributing to the local economy.

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 1,875,545<sup>111</sup> acres within Flathead County. Various species of trees found in the mid elevation areas of these forests are Douglas fir, western larch, Lodgepole pine, western white pine, grand fir, western red cedar, western hemlock and Engelmann spruce. Various species of trees found in the higher elevation areas of these forests are subalpine fir, whitebark pine and subalpine larch.

The three largest private timber landowners, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber, Plum Creek and Montana Forest Products together account for approximately 9% (295,500 acres) of the total land area in Flathead County. Land owned by the three largest corporations represents approximately 42.3% of the private land in Flathead County (see Map 2.2).<sup>112</sup>

Many growth issues are associated with forest lands such as the declining timber industry and the conversion of private forest lands into residential development. One important growth-related issue is the wildland-urban interface. The wildland-urban interface (WUI) is commonly described as the zone where structures and other human development meet and intermingle with undeveloped wildland or forests.<sup>113</sup> This WUI zone is comprised of both private and public lands, and poses tremendous risks to life, property, and infrastructure in associated communities. These risks to health and safety in the WUI can include inescapable wildfires and natural disasters or human contact with wildlife species such as bears, mountain lions and wolves if development is not adequately mitigated. Forest management practices that reduce these health and safety risks are essential in areas where public or private forested lands border developed properties. Risk reduction strategies can consist of commercial thinning projects and homeowner education.

The State of Montana manages approximately 130,953 acres of forested trust lands in Flathead County. The lands are managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation Trust Lands Management Division. Although trust lands are commonly thought of as forestry and/or recreation lands, these lands are managed to generate revenue and uses can be as varied as any other public or private lands in Flathead County.

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<sup>111</sup> Montana Natural Resource Information System

<sup>112</sup> <http://www.stoltzelumber.com>; <http://www.plumcreek.com>

<sup>113</sup> Flathead County Community Wildfire Fuels Reduction /Mitigation Plan 2005; Resolution No. 1913



## Agriculture

Agriculture represents a significant part of the historic culture in the Flathead Valley, and as the economy continues to change, agriculture remains critically important to maintaining economic diversity. In 2002, approximately 40% of the private land (234,861 acres) in Flathead County was being farmed; roughly 1,075 individual farms were counted, with the majority of these farms (78%) under 179 acres. By contrast, in 2007 roughly 251,597 acres or 36% of privately held land in Flathead County was used for agricultural purposes.<sup>114</sup> According to the most recent Census of Agriculture conducted in 2007, there were approximately 1,094 individual farms operating in the County, with the majority of these farms (81%) being under 179 acres in size.

Some of the major crops produced by farmers include wheat, barley, flax, alfalfa, grain hays, silage and livestock pasture. Specialty crops such as seed potatoes, mint, lawn sod, canola, mustard, raspberries, strawberries, grapes and vegetable crops are important products.<sup>115</sup>

A primary concern of residents is the conversion of farmland into other land uses, including residential development. The conversion of these lands has a lasting impact on the rural community character, and can negatively affect water quality, water supply and wildlife habitat.

## Soils

A comprehensive soils survey for Flathead County has not yet been completed, although portions of the County have been partially mapped by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), including the Flathead National Forest and the upper Flathead Valley, as well as portions of the Highway 2 West corridor and the Highway 93 corridor south of Kalispell as recently as 2010. Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) completed a soil survey for the Upper Flathead Valley Area in 1960, which continues to be utilized today. However, soils in the relatively flat portion of Flathead County north of Flathead Lake consist of two broad types. One is rocky and poorly drained and is underlain by unsorted glacial till. This is commonly used for timber production. The second type of soil is deep, well structured and well drained. It is underlain by deposits that have been reworked or sorted by running water and is the most productive in Flathead County. It is important to note that soils in this area can be highly irregular as a result of glacial deposits over time; it is not uncommon to find a variety of soil types in one location.

The concept of hydric soils includes soils developed under sufficiently wet conditions to support the growth and regeneration of hydrophytic vegetation. Soils that are sufficiently wet because of artificial measures are included in the concept of hydric soils. Soils in which the hydrology has been artificially modified are hydric if the soil, in an unaltered

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<sup>114</sup> USDA 2002 and 2007 Census of Agriculture; the next update is scheduled for 2012

<sup>115</sup> Flathead County Natural Resource Use Policy

state, was hydric. Some series designated as hydric have phases that are not hydric depending on water table, flooding and ponding characteristics.<sup>116</sup>

Hydric soil lists have a number of agricultural and nonagricultural applications including land use planning, conservation planning and assessment of potential wildlife habitat. A combination of hydric soil, hydrophytic vegetation and hydrology criteria defines wetlands as described in the National Food Security Act Manual (Soil Conservation Service, 1994) and the Corps of Engineers Wetlands Delineation Manual (Environmental Laboratory, 1987).

Surveys were completed in the upper Flathead valley for most of the valley bottom by the NRCS. The majority of hydric soils are found along the Flathead River in the Lower Valley area, along Ashley Creek and Smith Lake, and southeast of Whitefish. Much of the remaining soil types in the valley bottom have hydric inclusions and characteristics, especially prevalent along the Flathead River corridor. A complete list of hydric soils and soils with hydric inclusions in the Upper Flathead Valley, along with descriptions of soil characteristics, is available on the Montana Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) website.

## Geology and Minerals

The topography of Flathead County was formed during the ice ages when the enormous glacier that filled the Rocky Mountain Trench of British Columbia thinned as it spread southward through the Flathead Valley and into the Mission Valley. The Mission Range split the glacier sending one branch of ice down the Swan Valley and another to the southern end of Flathead Lake. When the glacier melted, it left a deep fill of sediment in the floor of the Flathead Valley.<sup>117</sup>

The valley bottom is generally level to moderately sloping. Most steep slopes occur along the fringe, in the public and private timberlands surrounding the valley bottom, as well as in Glacier National Park. Approximately 75% of Flathead County has slopes over 25%, most of which occur in the mountainous areas within the National Forest or National Park.

At the beginning of the 1900's, coal and oil exploration began in the North Fork Valley along the Flathead Fault. Open cut mining is primarily limited to sand, gravel and rock in the Flathead Valley, based upon the geologic composition of the area. Various types of gravel are in demand for road construction, while rock is used for concrete and asphalt road construction, as well as fill and road surfacing project.

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality is the regulatory authority for all open-cut and hard rock mining in the state of Montana. The Opencut Mining Act (82-4-401 et seq., M.C.A.) and resulting regulations apply to the mining of bentonite, clay, scoria, soil

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<sup>116</sup> Natural Resource Conservation Service, Hydric Soils circular; <http://soils.usda.gov/use/hydric/>

<sup>117</sup> Alt, David and David Hyndman: Roadside Geology of Montana. Mountain Press Publishing Company, June 2003, pp. 50.

materials, peat, sand or gravel.<sup>118</sup> The Hard Rock Mining Program established under the Metal Mine Reclamation Act (MMRA) applies to the mining of all ore, rock, or substances with the exception of oil, gas, uranium, and those materials covered under the Opencut Mining Act. Under the Act, "mining" is defined as the extraction of ores or minerals in commercial quantities for sale, beneficiation, refining, or other processing.<sup>119</sup>

All open cut sand and gravel operations must comply with the applicable zoning regulations if operating in an area that is zoned for such uses. An air quality permit from the DEQ is required for the operation of any mineral crushing or other processing plants.

Currently there are 142 open cut mining operations permitted in the valley; of those currently permitted, 130 are active, 11 are inactive and 1 has been reclaimed. Please reference Chapter 9 – Sand and Gravel Resources, for additional information on mining activity in Flathead County.

#### **PART 4: Air Quality (see Goal 43)**

Under the Clean Air Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) establishes air quality standards to protect public health, including the health of “sensitive” populations such as people with asthma, children, and older adults. EPA also sets limits to protect public welfare. This includes protecting ecosystems, including plants and animals, from harm, as well as protecting against decreased visibility and damage to crops, vegetation and buildings.<sup>120</sup>

Air quality problems in Montana are usually related to urban areas and mountainous topography or river valleys that are sensitive to temperature inversions. Particulate matter and carbon monoxide are the pollutants that have the greatest adverse impact on Montana's air quality. Particulate matter generally comes from vehicles traveling on unpaved roads, sand and gravel from winter traction material, and residential wood burning. Increasing traffic levels on unpaved roads has been a growing problem as development pressure increased over the past decade, and these impacts continue to be a significant topic of discussion when considering appropriate land use in Flathead County. This growth policy contains policies recommending county-wide dust abatement programs to help address this issue.

In January 2008 an Administrative Order on Consent (Docket No. AQ-07-04) went into effect between the Department of Environmental Quality and Flathead County. The basis of the Consent Order centered around Airborne dust created from roads maintained by the County. Excessive dust on County roads was a major contributor to the overall deterioration of air quality in Flathead County, and the County was given the option to pay an administrative penalty or implement a Supplemental Environmental Project (SEP). The County chose to submit an annual SEP report to the DEQ, beginning in 2009, detailing

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<sup>118</sup> Montana DEQ Opencut Mining Program; <http://www.deq.mt.gov/opencut/default.mcp>

<sup>119</sup> Montana DEQ Hard Rock Mining Program; <http://www.deq.mt.gov/hardrock/default.mcp>

<sup>120</sup> The Plain English Guide to the Clean Air Act; <http://www.epa.gov/air/peg/index.html>

abatement measures related to signage, enforcement and dust palliative application(s) throughout the jurisdiction.<sup>121</sup>

Although prevalent, dust is not the sole contributor to air pollution in Flathead County. Carbon monoxide pollution primarily results from motor vehicle exhaust and residential wood burning. Although industrial sources account for only a small part of carbon monoxide and particulate matter emissions in most communities, industries are the main source of sulfur dioxide and lead pollution in Montana. Forest fires also pose a very serious threat to air quality. The Flathead County Air Pollution Control Program requires the use of all available practicable methods to reduce, prevent and control air pollution from a variety of sources in Flathead County. The Flathead County Air Pollution Control Plan regulates open burning, solid fuel burning, prohibited materials for wood or coal residential stoves, and the Kalispell, Columbia, and Whitefish Air Pollution Control Districts.<sup>122</sup> Air quality monitoring sites are located throughout Flathead County; at the Columbia Falls Ball Park at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and C Street E.N.; in Whitefish at the end of West 10<sup>th</sup> and Highway 93 (referred to as the 'dead-end'); and at the Flathead Electric site in Kalispell, at the corner of Center Street and Woodland Avenue.<sup>123</sup>

Congress states that one of the purposes of the Clean Air Act is "to preserve, protect and enhance the air quality in national parks, national wilderness areas, national monuments, national seashores and other areas of special national or regional natural, recreation, scenic or historic value".<sup>124</sup> In Glacier National Park, an extensive air quality monitoring network exists for pollution and visibility conditions. As a Class I airshed, Glacier National Park is provided the greatest air quality protection under the Clean Air Act. This includes visibility and fluoride monitoring and a national atmospheric deposition network. Glacier's monitoring instruments are located mostly on the west side of the park. Seasonal vegetation collection associated with fluoride monitoring also occurs at various sites on the west side.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Special Environmental Project Annual Report; Administrative Order on Consent. Docket No. AQ-07-04; Flathead County, MT.

<sup>122</sup> Flathead County Air Pollution Control Program, Chapter II – Declaration of Policy & Purpose

<sup>123</sup> Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Air Quality Monitoring Sites;  
<http://svc.mt.gov/deq/AGMonitoringSites/listDisplay.aspx>

<sup>124</sup> Clean Air Act, Title 42, Chapter 85, Subchapter 1, Part C, Subpart (i), Section 7470 – Congressional Declaration of Purpose.

<sup>125</sup> Glacier National Park website; <http://www.nps.gov/glac/naturescience/airquality.htm>

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## CHAPTER 9: SAND & GRAVEL RESOURCES

### Introduction

Sand and gravel are important natural resources found throughout Flathead County. While large amounts of gravel are located throughout the Flathead valley, sand is a resource that is more limited in this area of the state. Sand and gravel resources provide the foundation upon which our infrastructure is built, defining where, how and to what extent development occurs. Our roads, bridges and highways are all constructed using gravel; the houses we live in, buildings we work in and sidewalks we walk on utilize the resource as well. Access to local gravel resources reduces costs associated with transportation and processing fees, thereby reducing the overall cost of development. The potential for local extraction of sand and gravel resources also affects the overall economic climate by providing jobs and serving local construction industries. Developing an awareness of where sand and gravel resources are currently located and what types of activities (extraction, processing, and transportation) are occurring in these locations is important for a variety of reasons. Continued growth and development in areas of the County where sand and gravel resources are currently found will result in continued land use conflicts and may limit the availability of these types of resources into the future.

In 2009, a senator from Flathead County sponsored a legislative bill (Senate Bill No. 486) requiring communities provide an inventory of sand and gravel resources within their jurisdiction. By requiring local governments to identify these resources, this information was intended to provide a base upon which future land use policies could be developed to encourage the separation of incompatible uses while ensuring an economically viable source of gravel to facilitate and support future development.<sup>126</sup> Changes resulting from this proposal during the 2009 Legislative session now require all Growth Policies to include a description of sand and gravel resources. As part of Flathead County's Growth Policy Update for the year 2012, this chapter has been added to address these additional requirements and comply with Section 76-1-601 MCA.

Mapping the location and extent of these resources will serve to inform future land use planning efforts in Flathead County and will help ensure the continued availability and accessibility of sand and gravel for the County's future growth and development needs. Due to the limited data available, this chapter is not intended to be an evaluation of existing materials or a directive on where future sand and gravel extraction should necessarily occur. Pursuant to Section 76-1-601(3)(viii) MCA, this chapter intends to identify existing sand and gravel resources located within the planning jurisdiction of Flathead County. This will encourage the development of corresponding goal(s) and policies that may aide in future data collection and planning efforts involving sand and gravel resources.

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<sup>126</sup> Montana's Growth Policy Resource Book. Montana Department of Commerce Community Development Division. April 2009; pg.33.

## Goals & Policies

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- G.44 Support land use policies that ensure adequate quality and quantity of sand and gravel to meet current and future demands in Flathead County.

In addition to the above stated goal, existing goals and policies found in “Chapter 2 – Land Uses” and “Chapter 8 – Natural Resources” of the Flathead County Growth Policy specifically address sand and gravel resources and should be referenced accordingly. Specifically, G.12 and P.12.1-12.8, as well as G.42 reflect and support the issues addressed in this chapter.

### **PART 1: History of Sand & Gravel Resources and Extraction in Flathead County**

The importance of sand and gravel resources in Flathead County has led to a great deal of discussion over the years; in some cases that discussion has led to zoning map and text amendments and even law suits regarding the evaluation of gravel extraction, and extractive industry in general, within the Flathead County Zoning Regulations (FCZR). The zoning regulations identify “gravel extraction” and “extractive industry” as two distinct yet similar uses conditionally permitted in select, zoned areas of the County. Although the Planning and Zoning Office has no regulatory reviewing authority over the types of uses in unzoned areas of the County, any extractive industry resulting in the removal of more than 10,000 cubic yards of material proposed in these areas is still required to obtain a permit through the Department of Environmental Quality Opencut Mining Program (pursuant to the Opencut Mining Act, 82-4-401 et seq., MCA).

Certain areas of the County address gravel resources and extractive industry more often than others, due in part to the zoning in place but also based upon the location and availability of gravel resources in particular geographic locations. The West Valley, North Fork and West Glacier areas have most recently dealt with gravel extraction issues related to land use. However, this is not to say that other areas of Flathead County have not or will not deal with sand and gravel resource issues in the future.

The West Valley area has been characterized as predominantly residential, following the outcome of a series of court decisions in 2008. The zoning district that applies to much of West Valley is unique in that it identifies “gravel extraction” as a conditionally permitted use; this differs slightly from agricultural and industrial zoning districts that identify “extractive industry” as the type of conditional use under which gravel extraction would be included. Section 76-2-209(2) of the Montana Code Annotated identifies instances where the recovery of gravel and certain extractive industries (such as concrete or asphalt operations) can be conditioned or prohibited in areas zoned for residential uses. In an attempt to address this inconsistency, a 2010 text amendment was approved by the Flathead County Commissioners [Resolution 955 HE], adding a formal definition of “gravel extraction” to the zoning regulations. This definition included the processing of gravel through crushing, screening, asphalt, wash and concrete plants as well as transportation and stockpiling, and applies to Flathead County as a whole.

Another part of the County where the issue of gravel resource extraction has been prominent in recent years is the North. The North Fork area is rural and remote, accessible only by a gravel road extending nearly forty miles north of the City of Columbia Falls to the Canadian border. Mining and extraction has been a controversial issue affecting the area since its discovery, as the North Fork is part of a trans-boundary region spanning from British Columbia south into Montana. The North Fork of the Flathead River serves as the western boundary of Glacier National Park, which has been designated a World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). After years of discussion, deliberation and negotiation, a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Environmental Protection, Climate Action and Energy was signed between the Province of British Columbia and the State of Montana on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010. The Memorandum serves to permanently prohibit coal and hard rock mining as well as oil and gas development in the North Fork region. The governments involved have been working since this adoption to secure and retire existing land leases for gas, coal and mining activities, in an effort to return the ecosystem back to its natural state. A text amendment to the North Fork zoning district was proposed in early 2010 to address the intent of the Memorandum of Understanding. The proposed amendment would have altered the definition of extractive industries for only the North Fork zoning district, limiting the size and scope of operations permitted in this specific area of the County. However, the proposed amendment was tabled and eventually denied by the Flathead County Commissioners following a public hearing in the fall of 2010.

In addition to amendments (proposed and/or approved) described above, the following list of resolutions approved by the County Commissioners deal with gravel extraction and extractive industries in Flathead County. This list should not be considered exhaustive due to the constantly evolving nature of land use issues in the County, but should be viewed as informational, providing a succinct history of the issues relating to sand and gravel resources in the Flathead.

**Resolution No. 955 GM (8/17/2005)**

Added new subsections 9 and 10 to Section 3.03.020 to define those zoning districts that allow residential uses as residential ones for purposes of Section 76-2-209, M.C.A., to delete Section 3.09.030(14) in order to delete extractive industries as a condition use in R-1 zones, and to amend Section 3.07.010 to allow for estate-type residential development in SAG-10 zoning districts, in order that regulation of operations that mine sand and gravel or that mix concrete or batch asphalt may be allowed, conditioned or prohibited in those residential zones.

**Resolution No. 955GU (3/20/2008)**

Amend Section 3.03.020 of the Flathead County Zoning Regulations to redefine what districts are “residential” for purposes of applying the zoning regulations to gravel operations, and clarify that AG-40 (Agricultural) and AG-80 (Agricultural) districts are not residential zones for those purposes and (ii) amend Section 4.10.010 of the Flathead County Zoning Regulations to remove the requirement that a Montana Department of Environmental Quality reclamation contract be executed prior to the issuance of a conditional use permit for gravel operations.



**Resolution No. 955GY (10/09/2008)**

Amend Section 4.10.040 of the Flathead County Zoning Regulations, setting forth the process by which conditional use permits for gravel permits are issued, by deleting the sentence thereof which requires that “When such a plan is also required by the Open Cut Mining Act, the submitted plan shall have been approved by the Department of Environmental Quality” and replacing it with a sentence that states that “When such a plan is also required by the Open Cut Mining Act, the submitted plan must include all information required by the Department of Environmental Quality for such an application.”

**PART 2: Existing Sand & Gravel Resources**

Gravel resources are commonly found in glacial fluvial valleys where the water table is high, and in alluvial floodplains along streams and glacial deposits.<sup>127</sup> These areas are generally acknowledged as environmentally sensitive, and are typically designated as floodplain, wetland, or riparian areas having characteristics of prime habitat or sensitive classification. Because gravel extraction must occur where the gravel is located, the potential for conflict is heightened due to the environmentally sensitive nature of these areas and the methods and machinery used to extract the resource.

In the spring of 2010, at the direction of a sub-committee of the Flathead County Planning Board, planning staff researched and compiled available data on surficial soil classifications from the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MTBMG), open cut permits issued through the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MT DEQ), hard rock and open cut mining permit sections, and the status of existing gravel operations based upon data collected and maintained by the Flathead County GIS Department (through 2010); the end result is the Flathead County Gravel Resources Map included in this chapter (see Map 9.1).

The map identifies the location of known gravel pits throughout Flathead County and provides their operation status – active, inactive, reclaimed or unknown - as of 2010. Of the 142 open cut mining operations permitted in the valley, 130 are currently active, 11 are inactive and 1 has been reclaimed. These locations are overlaid atop the surficial soils data provided by the Bureau of Mines and Geology, showing the types of soil classification units prevalent throughout the Flathead Valley. The map also includes data points identifying each operation having obtained an open cut or hard rock mining permit through the state Department of Environmental Quality; these permit locations typically correspond to a mapped gravel pit location. Open cut permits include sand, gravel, bentonite, scoria, peat moss and soil extraction; hard rock permits include rock picking, quarrying for talus, ballast as well as mining for gold, leads, copper, zinc and other minerals.<sup>128</sup>

Although permitted sand and gravel operations are located throughout Flathead County, it should not be assumed that just because an area is void of any existing, permitted extractive

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<sup>127</sup> Sand & Gravel Operations in Montana; [www.montanagravel.org](http://www.montanagravel.org)

<sup>128</sup> Information provided by Craig Jones, MDEQ Hard Rock Mining Permitting Program (May 27, 2011); James Connor, MDEQ Open Cut Permit Program (May 25, 2011).

industry there are no resources present. If anything, the dispersed nature of resource extraction in Flathead County is beneficial to the economic vitality of the industry and the area in which it is located. Having localized sand and gravel resources in a variety of locations reduces hauling costs to complete infrastructure improvements in these areas and may reduce transportation costs for employees as well.

**TABLE 9.1**  
**MDEQ Open Cut Mining Permits**

Permit No.	Operator	Mine Status
110	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
111	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1118	COLUMBIA FALLS INDUSTRIAL PARK	ACTIVE
1119	COLUMBIA FALLS INDUSTRIAL PARK	ACTIVE
112	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1125	CLARK ED A	ACTIVE
1133	CRESTON TOPSOIL	ACTIVE
114	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1147	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1148	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
115	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1151	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1152	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1160	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1161	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1162	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1163	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1164	DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES STILLWATER UNIT	ACTIVE
1181	ESLICK PAUL	INACTIVE
12	ANDERSON LLOYD K	ACTIVE
1207	FH STOLTZE LAND AND LUMBER COMPANY	ACTIVE
126	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
127	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1276	GOOSE BAY EQUIPMENT INC	ACTIVE
1277	GOOSE BAY EQUIPMENT INC	ACTIVE
128	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1281	GLACIER HORSE RANCH LLC	INACTIVE
129	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1298	GRIZZLY LOGGING AND LUMBER LLC DBA GRIZZLY GRAVEL PRODUCTS	ACTIVE
13	WAGONERS SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
130	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1305	HANSON NEIL	ACTIVE
1315	HAMILTON HOWARD D	ACTIVE
1320	HANSON NORMAN K	ACTIVE
1321	HANSON NORMAN K	INACTIVE
1337	HELENA SAND AND GRAVEL INC	ACTIVE
1383	KELLER LES	ACTIVE
1387	KLEMPPEL JOE AND RON	ACTIVE
1388	KLEMPPEL JOE AND RON	ACTIVE
1407	KNIFE RIVER	ACTIVE
1408	KNIFE RIVER	ACTIVE
1410	KNIFE RIVER	ACTIVE
1411	KNIFE RIVER	ACTIVE
1416	KNIFE RIVER	ACTIVE
142	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1422	KRUEGER GARY	ACTIVE
1424	LEIGHTY BROS CONSTRUCTION LLC	ACTIVE
1432	LHC INC	ACTIVE
1440	LASALLE SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
1478	MANY LAKES EAST	ACTIVE
1494	MURPHYS EXCAVATING INC	ACTIVE

1520	OLSEN RUSSELL	ACTIVE
1527	PLUM CREEK TIMBERLANDS LP	ACTIVE
1552	POTTS LYLE	INACTIVE
1555	PUMCO INC	ACTIVE
1559	RIVERSIDE CONTRACTING INC	ACTIVE
1640	RUSSELL KIMBERLY J	INACTIVE
1645	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1648	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1650	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1658	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1659	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1661	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	INACTIVE
1668	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1669	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1679	SCHLEGEL AND SONS CONTRACTOR INC	ACTIVE
1685	SPOKIE GRANT	ACTIVE
1686	SPOKIE GRANT	ACTIVE
1713	SPOKIE ROBERT	ACTIVE
1714	STREET ROBIN	ACTIVE
1717	SILVERTIP PROPERTIES	ACTIVE
1719	STUPAK JAMES	ACTIVE
1720	STW PARTNERSHIP	ACTIVE
1721	SUDAN INC	ACTIVE
1724	SWIFT CREEK CABINS LLC	ACTIVE
1725	SCHWARZ CONSTRUCTION	ACTIVE
1726	CHARLAND STEVE R	ACTIVE
1731	TUNGSTEN HOLDINGS INC	ACTIVE
1733	TAMARACK HOLDINGS LLC	ACTIVE
1734	THORNBERRY RONALD AND ESTHER	ACTIVE
1743	TIMBERLINE READY MIX	ACTIVE
1753	TURNER WAYNE	ACTIVE
1754	TUTVEDT BRUCE	ACTIVE
1757	US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE	ACTIVE
1769	WAGAR JOE	ACTIVE
1783	WOODRING ERIC	ACTIVE
1788	WHITE ROCK AGGREGATE LLC	ACTIVE
1797	WAGONERS SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
1798	WAGONERS SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
1807	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	WITHDRAWN
1812	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	INACTIVE
1821	PLUM CREEK TIMBERLANDS LP	DENIED
1846	WHITE ROCK AGGREGATE LLC	ACTIVE
1873	KNIFE RIVER	PENDING
1886	JTL GROUP INC - KALISPELL	INACTIVE
1910	WILKE LAURENCE G	DENIED
1946	SCHELLINGER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY	ACTIVE
1991	DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	ACTIVE
1992	GRIZZLY LOGGING AND LUMBER LLC DBA GRIZZLY GRAVEL PRODUCTS	ACTIVE
2	PACK AND COMPANY	INACTIVE
2006	ESLICK PAUL	PENDING
2031	WAGONERS SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
24	DOANE DON	ACTIVE
25	ROBINSON SAND AND GRAVEL	ACTIVE
3	CITY OF WHITEFISH	ACTIVE
30	JTL GROUP DBA MCELROY AND WILKEN	ACTIVE
305	DOTEN NEIL	ACTIVE
38	NORVELL LINDA EVART	ACTIVE
486	PLUM CREEK TIMBERLANDS LP	ACTIVE
500	PLUM CREEK TIMBERLANDS LP	ACTIVE
515	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
516	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
517	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
518	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
519	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
520	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE

521	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
522	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
523	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
524	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
525	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
526	FLATHEAD COUNTY ROAD DEPARTMENT	ACTIVE
54	JTL GROUP DBA MCELROY AND WILKEN	ACTIVE
545	MISSION VALLEY CONCRETE	ACTIVE
55	PACK AND COMPANY	ACTIVE
650	LHC INC	ACTIVE
661	THORNBERRY RONALD AND ESTHER	ACTIVE
671	AC ENTERPRISES LLC	ACTIVE
706	BEASLEY JOE	ACTIVE
721	BROWNN PAMELA	ACTIVE
724	BRASH PROJECTS LLC	ACTIVE
83	HAMILTON HOWARD D	ACTIVE
	RUSSELL WILLIAM M	ACTIVE
	SPOKLE ROBERT	INACTIVE

**TABLE 9.2**  
**MDEQ Small Miner Exemption Status**

PROGRAM	COMPANY NAME	OPERATION TYPE	MINERAL	STATUS
07-011	STAHLBERG BRYAN K	OPEN PIT	TALUS	SHUTDOWN
07-021	JENSEN PAUL	OPEN PIT	SHALE, ROCK	ACTIVE
07-027	JARVIS WILLIAM	ROCK PICKER	RIP RAP ROCK	ACTIVE
07-032	F H STOLTZE LAND & LUMBER CO	OPEN PIT	ROCK	ACTIVE
07-034	GRIZZLY LOGGING & GRAVEL PRODUCTS INC	ROCK PICKER	ROCK	ACTIVE
07-035	KLEMPPEL JOE & GINA	OPEN PIT	ROCK	ACTIVE
07-036	ANDERSON MASONRY INC	OPEN PIT	DECORATIVE ROCK	ACTIVE

**TABLE 9.3**  
**MDEQ Operating Permits (Hard Rock Mining)**

PROGRAM	MINE NAME	OPERATION TYPE	MINERAL	STATUS
00045	ESSEX QUARRY	OPEN PIT	BALLAST, RIP-RAP	ACTIVE
00123	HOG HEAVEN MINE	OPEN PIT, UNDERGROUND, VAT LEACH	COPPER, GOLD, LEAD, OXIDES, SULFIDE, ZINC	ACTIVE
00151	WEAVER GRAVEL QUARRY	OPEN PIT	TALUS ROCK	ACTIVE
00167	MULTIPLE QUARRY PERMIT	MULTIPLE QUARRY SITES	ROCK	ACTIVE
00175	MULTIPLE QUARRY PERMIT	GENERAL QUARRY	ROCK	ACTIVE

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## CHAPTER 10: IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

### Introduction

A Growth Policy is a non-regulatory document created to “ensure the promotion of public health, safety, morals, convenience or order or the general welfare, and for the sake of efficiency and economy in the process of community development” (76-1-106 M.C.A.). A Growth Policy does so by working with community members to identify a collective vision and develop goals and policies to support and implement that vision over time. The Flathead County Growth Policy has fifty goals and over two hundred supporting policies that do just that. Some of those policies may be implemented by the Planning Office in the normal course of business, as land use applications undergo review. However, there are over one hundred policies that call for specific actions beyond the scope of daily application processing activities undertaken by the Planning Office. These policies call for things such as agreements with other governmental bodies, identification of lands suited for particular purposes, new countywide plans and new or expanded regulations. This chapter organizes those policies into categories and calls for the creation of an implementation plan by the County Commissioners and Planning Board. The Implementation Plan would achieve the goals of the growth policy in a reasonable timeframe. Land use maps are an integral part of the implementation strategy, and their recommended use is explained in this chapter. Existing instruments including subdivision and zoning regulations as well as neighborhood plans act as logical extensions of this strategy. New instruments should also be considered, and specific measures are suggested in this chapter. Public participation is one of the most important components of any implementation strategy; no new policies, plans, maps or regulations should be formally adopted until they have been publicly reviewed by the Planning Board and their recommendation forwarded to the County Commissioners in the manner set forth herein.

It is important to remember a Growth Policy is not a miracle cure for the ills of a growing community. Even the best Growth Policy has no impact if it cannot be implemented. In keeping with Chapter 1 of this document, regulations should protect public health and safety with minimal impact on personal freedoms. Implementing the Flathead County Growth Policy must achieve a balance. This chapter discusses various aspects of implementing the Flathead County Growth Policy and proposes techniques that are a reasonable “middle ground” between many competing interests.

The implementation tools described in this chapter are reasonable and appropriate suggestions for Flathead County based on numerous suggestions received from the public during the development of this Growth Policy document (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary).

### PART 1: Categories for Policy Implementation

This section organizes various policies of the Growth Policy into categories based upon the type of action called for. A variety of plans, agreements, maps and regulations are listed below. The county will be able to more effectively deal with the ramifications of growth

when the recommended documents are in place. The County Commissioners should meet with the Planning Board in the first six months after the growth policy has been adopted to establish priorities and create an implementation plan to be a part of the initial amendment (see Part 6 of this chapter). The implementation plan shall include a complete timetable for implementing the growth policy. The implementation plan and timetable for completion should be revisited following each Growth Policy update cycle, to review what has been accomplished and revise the strategy accordingly. Ultimately, the implementation plan and timetable for completion are determined by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners, and may evolve depending on the make-up of the Board over time.

## **PART 2: Public Process**

The Flathead County Growth Policy does not address the specifics of every growth issue but rather creates a guiding framework that calls for detailed plans to be developed and incorporated over time, as appendices to this document. The list of plans that may be appended to the Flathead County Growth Policy includes (but is not limited to);

- **Affordable Housing Plan**
- **Parks and Recreation Master Plan**
- **Trails Master Plan**
- **Transportation Plan**
- **Water Quality/ Flathead Basin Management Plan**
- **Public Facilities Plan**
- **Emergency Plan(s)**
- **Wastewater Management Plan**
- **Mineral Resource Extraction Plan**
- **Economic Development Plan**

All plans created in Flathead County should involve the public and be a reflection of the views of the residents. In order to accomplish this, the following process will be utilized:

1. **Guidance from Planning Board and Commissioners:** The Flathead County Planning Board and Flathead County Board of Commissioners will prioritize and guide planning projects in Flathead County and offer guidance to planning staff accordingly.
2. **Scoping Meetings:** The public must first be informed of the problem or problems and the manner by which the proposed plan will address these issues. This allows the public to determine if the proposed plan is an efficient and worthwhile allocation of public resources. Meetings shall have opportunities for the public to provide comments and suggestions. Public meetings should be held county-wide at convenient times and locations and should be advertised on the County's website as well as in the local newspaper, and posted locally in public places including (but not limited to) post offices, convenience stores and/or libraries.
3. **Public Workshops:** As the draft plan is created, interactive public workshops will be conducted covering concepts and solutions being considered for incorporation

- into the plan. Workshops will allow staff and the public to refine ideas before they are presented in the draft.
4. **Public Comment on Draft:** After the document is created, a draft version will be released for public review and comment. Electronic versions shall be available online and paper versions at Flathead County libraries and the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office. The public will have an adequate amount of time (no less than 30 days) to read and comment on the draft plan, prior to formal consideration by the Planning Board.
  5. **Planning Board Review and Revision:** The Flathead County Planning Board shall review and revise the draft plan as the Board deems appropriate and based on public comment received. This review will take place during a series of public workshops and at least one public hearing, following the procedural requirements set forth in Section 76-1-602 M.C.A.
  6. **Final Public Review and Comment:** A final, revised version of the plan will be forwarded to the Flathead County Commissioners for their consideration. After the commissioners pass a resolution of intent to adopt, the public will have an opportunity to read and comment on the final plan, the timeline for which shall be established by the Commissioners.

### **PART 3: Land Use Maps**

Land use maps are traditionally used to illustrate locations in a given area that have identified characteristics. They graphically present valued information such as boundaries, spatial relationships and various geographical characteristics. The Growth Policy utilizes land use maps in several ways. There are Officially Adopted Maps that become extensions of the Growth Policy. There are Illustrative Maps that indicate relatively specific areas where certain conditions exist. There are maps which simply reflect existing conditions as of the date of the map. There are also Proposed Maps that are not yet in existence, but are suggested as a means to accomplish certain objectives.

#### **Officially Adopted Maps**

The following Officially Adopted Maps have been adopted as part of the Flathead County Growth Policy. They serve as visual representations of select parts of this document and are thus considered visual policy statements. They should be implemented and regarded the same as the written portions. Additional maps may be officially adopted as part of the Growth Policy in the future. No maps are as yet listed in this section.

#### **Designated Land Use Map (See enclosed map)**

This map depicts areas of Flathead County that are legally designated for particular land uses. This is a map which depicts existing conditions. The areas include zoning districts which are lumped together by general use rather than each specific zone and neighborhood plans. Further information on particular land uses in these areas can be obtained by consulting the appropriate zoning regulations or neighborhood plan document. The uses depicted are consistent with the existing regulations and individual plan documents. This



map may be changed from time to time to reflect additional zoning districts, changes in zoning districts, map changes and neighborhood plans as they are adopted. Since this map is for informational purposes, the Planning Staff may update the same to conform to changes without the necessity of a separate resolution changing this map.

### Illustrative Maps

These maps illustrate areas of the county that have been identified as belonging in various categories. Initial versions of these maps are included in the Growth Policy and have been noted as being for “illustrative purposes only”. The Planning Department will update these maps and provide additional maps as information becomes available. These maps are not definitive and are not to be used to legally classify a particular piece of real property. They can be used to indicate the likelihood of a particular condition existing on a particular site. The burden of proof will fall upon the owner or developer of a parcel to demonstrate the condition does not exist. The following maps have been provided as part of the Growth Policy:

- Map 2.1: Flathead Lands
- Map 2.2: Corporate Timber Lands
- Map 2.3: Agricultural Land Use
- Map 2.3(a): Agricultural Land Use (detail)
- Map 2.3(b): Land Classification (from MT Department of Revenue records)
- Map 2.4: Groundwater
- Map 2.5: Slopes Analysis
- Map 2.6: Floodplain
- Map 2.6(a): Floodplain (detail)
- Map 2.7: Geologic Fault Lines
- Map 2.8: Wetlands
- Map 2.8(a): Wetlands (detail)
- Map 3.1: 2010 Census Designated Places
- Map 3.2: 2010 Population per Square Mile
- Map 3.2(a): 2010 Population per Square Mile (detail)

- Map 4.1: Existing Park and Recreation Sites
- Map 6.1: Transportation Network
- Map 6.2: Bike & Pedestrian Paths Network
- Map 7.1: Existing Septic Systems
- Map 7.2: Existing Wells
- Map 7.3: Fire Districts
- Map 7.4: Emergency Response Districts
- Map 8.1: Flathead Watershed
- Map 9.1: Sand and Gravel Resources
- Map 11.1: Existing Neighborhood Plans

### Proposed Maps

- **Official Right-of-Way Maps** - Official maps are used to spatially identify rights of way that must be preserved in a growing community. One of the causes of increased traffic is a static transportation grid that forces more cars onto the same roads. Areas where public utilities should be located to serve the public are identified, allowing landowners to plan accordingly. By planning areas of Flathead County where roads, trails and public utilities should be built to serve a growing community, the acquisition of rights-of-way can occur over time during the development process, rather than all at once through an expensive and undesirable condemnation process. An official map that plans for essential road, trail and public utility corridors would serve to eliminate requests for right-of-way easements on a project-by-project basis. Developers and landowners would consult the “official map” during the project planning process to determine whether any rights of way will be requested by Flathead County over time or as part of the review. Standards for county execution of road, trail, or utility construction once a certain amount of right of way is acquired should be included to insure that rights-of-way are used in a timely manner.

## PART 4: Existing Land Use Instruments

### Subdivision Review

The subdivision of land in Flathead County is and will continue to be regulated by the Flathead County Subdivision Regulations. Subdivision review implements the Growth

Policy by ensuring healthy, safe and compliant development practices that do not unreasonably impact the residents of Flathead County. The regulations undergo periodic review to ensure continued compliance with the Montana Code Annotated as well as the policies cited above; the most recent revision went into effect on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

Local government review of subdivision is required under 76-3-501 M.C.A. Pursuant to 76-1-601(3)(h) M.C.A., growth policies in the State of Montana are required to contain statements explaining how the governing body will define, evaluate and make decisions regarding proposed subdivisions with respect to the criteria identified in 76-3-608(3)(a) M.C.A. Accordingly, the Growth Policy should identify:

- **How the governing body will define impacts** - Spatial thresholds and criteria will be established and listed to define the impact of both major and minor subdivisions on the elements listed specifically in 76-3-608(3)(a) M.C.A. These thresholds and criteria will be included in the subdivision regulations and subject to public review.
- **How the governing body will evaluate and make decisions regarding proposed subdivisions** - Each of the thresholds and criteria that are listed as definitions will be stated as presumptions of impact if the definition is met. All development applications meeting the definitions will be required to present evidence to overcome the presumption of impact. The governing body will consider evidence presented by the applicant and determine whether the applicant has overcome the presumption. This method of evaluating and making decisions regarding the impact of proposed subdivisions places the burden of proof on the applicant, not the residents or representatives of Flathead County.
- **How the governing body will conduct public hearings on proposed subdivisions** - The Flathead County Planning Board, an authorized agency of the governing body (76-1-101 M.C.A.), will conduct public hearings compliant with the requirements of 76-3-605 M.C.A. Meetings will generally be conducted according to Roberts Rules of Order, and will contain the following items, not necessarily in this order:
  1. Reading of the public notice for hearing.
  2. Approval of minutes.
  3. Report by staff.
  4. Presentation by applicant/representative.
  5. Agency comments.
  6. Public comments.
  7. Staff/Applicant rebuttal.
  8. Board questions of staff, applicant.
  9. Motion.
  10. Second to motion.
  11. Board discussion, questions.
  12. Action on the motion.

13. Public comment on any matters not specifically on the public notice for hearing.
14. Old business.
15. New business.
16. Motion to adjourn
17. Second to the motion.
18. Action on the motion.

## Zoning

Land use zoning in existence at the time the Growth Policy is adopted shall remain in place unless modified by an approved land use application. Current and future zoning districts may include, but are not limited to the following use classifications:

- Agriculture
- Timberlands
- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Public
- Corridor
- Planned Unit Development Overlays
- Neighborhood plan specific zoning in existence at the time of adoption of this document.

## Neighborhood Plans

Flathead County has a long tradition of recognizing Neighborhood Plans to be the most grass root form of local participation and influence. All Neighborhood Plans that were adopted as part of the 1987 Master Plan are hereby incorporated as addenda to the Flathead County Growth Policy. Neighborhood Plans created or updated between the adoption of the 1987 Master Plan and the 2007 Growth Policy were similarly recognized as formal addenda to the 2007 document, and the same goes for plans created or updated between 2007 and the 2012 Growth Policy update (reference Chapter 11 of this document for a detailed list of recognized Neighborhood Plans). Existing neighborhood plans adopted under the Growth Policy should be reviewed for consistency with the provisions of Chapter 11 of this document, as well as the goals and policies found throughout. Implementation of neighborhood plans must be subsequently reviewed for consistency in promoting the goals and policies of the plan, especially as a plan is updated or revised over time.

## PART 5: Possible Land Use Instruments

The following are suggested as potential instruments for use by Flathead County in implementing the Growth Policy. Each has its own benefits and can be utilized in specialized circumstances to achieve desired results.

### Special Consideration Areas

Areas of Flathead County with unique situations pertaining to public health, safety and general welfare will be treated with special consideration. Each area will be delineated using criteria open to public scrutiny and subject to the health, safety and general welfare goals of the Flathead County Growth Policy. Special consideration areas should include, but not be limited to:

- Glacier International Airport
- Glacier National Park
- Gateway areas
- Flathead County Landfill
- Designated floodplain
- Lakes and lakeshore protection areas
- Wetlands
- Critical wildlife habitat

Regulations applicable to “Special Consideration Areas” should be the minimum necessary to mitigate the impact of growth and development. Special consideration areas should not be misconstrued to prohibit development, but should be used to create impact mitigating standards and/or incentives to promote appropriate and compatible development in these areas.

### Capital Improvement Plan

Flathead County must use a systems approach to identify and prioritize maintenance and infrastructure improvements relative to all other county and regional service delivery programs and needs. A comprehensive capital improvement plan (CIP) including, but not limited to, buildings, roads, public services and facilities as well as parks and recreation areas must be created to compare needs with existing and future sources of revenue. Most CIPs are based on performance and identify what improvements and programs are needed to provide a level of service goal or to meet public demands and expectations.

A typical CIP document involves a short term (five year) and long term (total) list of facilities and needs. The CIP is used to develop an annual budget and to determine funding gaps to maintain a certain level of service or performance. A CIP should contain an administrative section that prioritizes projects based on goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy, and a fiscal plan to identify costs for planning, design and construction of each CIP project. Identifying project costs and scales assists coordination of financial arrangements as well as construction timelines. Prioritizing capital projects aids the planning process by identifying areas that will have infrastructure capacity to accommodate certain types of growth.

### Impact Fees

During the 2005 legislative session, Senate Bill 185 was passed enabling jurisdictions in Montana to utilize impact fees to mitigate actual impacts on the local infrastructure resulting from development. Before Flathead County can utilize impact fees, a study must be completed to determine the actual fiscal impact to local facilities and services of each lot in a new development. To meet the established goals of the Flathead County Growth Policy, impact fees shall be assessed that are justified, reasonable and accurate.

### **Special Improvement Districts**

Special improvement districts establish a way for those residents who will benefit from an improvement to community infrastructure to pay for the improvement without burdening all residents. The authorization to create rural improvement districts (districts outside of incorporated areas) comes from 7-12-2102 M.C.A. State law clearly establishes the projects and purposes for which improvement districts may be created. Flathead County can create rural improvement districts for infrastructure improvements that will benefit a limited number of county residents and are specifically authorized in 7-12-2102 M.C.A.

### **Tax Increment Financing**

Tax increment financing is an implementation tool that utilizes future revenue generated by a public improvement project to secure up-front financing. Tax increment financing is authorized for a variety of projects in 7-15-4282 M.C.A., and any use of tax increment in rural Flathead County must comply with all relevant state statutes.

### **Performance / Impact Zoning**

Adopted under traditional zoning laws, this program regulates the impact of a use rather than the use itself. For example, there would be no strictly residential, commercial or industrial zoning districts. Instead, a developer would have to comply with a series of prescribed performance standards that would address the amount of traffic generated, the number of access points, the amount of dust, odor or smoke emitted, fire protection, height, setbacks, views, landscaping and screening, sewer and water plans, drainage, etc. resulting from a proposed development. This type of zoning has been utilized to implement certain existing neighborhood plans.

### **Development Rights**

Development rights may be considered a commodity that can be bought and sold. Some communities have set up systems to facilitate the transfer of these rights. The systems have proven difficult to use and may not be well suited to an area the size of Flathead County, particularly without the participation of the incorporated areas and without County-wide zoning in place. These systems will evolve over time and it may become advisable for the county to consider this as an option for the future.

### **Community Character Based Land Use Systems**

Community character based land use systems attempt to define and map general land use types, such as urban, suburban and rural. They then go on to describe the type of development that may be compatible with each land use type, in terms of size and density but not in terms of use. A fundamental objective of this type of system is to preserve the character of an area and enhance it where possible; to allow development, but to assure that development is consistent with character. Community character based land use systems establish standards and criteria for land development that will maintain and enhance specific character types (urban, suburban and rural) in designated areas. These systems have been successfully utilized in Wyoming, Washington and Colorado, areas that are also concerned with maintaining the identity of rural communities (see Chapter 1: The Character of Flathead County).<sup>129</sup>

## **PART 6: Monitoring Implementation**

Implementation of the Flathead County Growth Policy must be monitored for the document to succeed in serving the public. Monitoring compliance with goals and policies of the document, as well as execution of the implementation timeline, is a critical component of the document.

### **Growth Policy Update**

At a minimum of every five years, the Planning Board shall prepare a draft revised Growth Policy. The revised Growth Policy should include updated demographic and housing statistics, existing characteristics and projected trends. Market fluctuations, environmental events, shifts in custom and culture, and all other changes in the community should also be documented. Goals and policies should be revised as needed to accurately reflect the present day needs of Flathead County, and new goals and policies suggested to capture evolving trends. The update should include a review of implementation techniques, identifying new techniques needed to implement goals and policies as well as those implementation techniques no longer relevant or appropriate and that should be eliminated.

Public meetings shall be held to present revisions to the public and gather public opinion. After a thorough public engagement process, the document shall be forwarded to the Planning Board for consideration (or following the appropriate process as determined by current state statute). The Planning Board shall consider revisions and make changes as needed before making a recommendation to the County Commissioners.

## **PART 7: Growth Policy Amendments**

A plan must be allowed to function as intended before an accurate measure of its effectiveness may be made. However, all plans must have a degree of flexibility. Various events could potentially create a situation where certain goals, policies and/or implementation techniques are no longer adequate or appropriate. If this occurs prior to the regularly scheduled updates, the Flathead County Growth Policy may be amended.

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<sup>129</sup> Duerksen, Christopher & James Van Hemert. True West: Authentic Development Patterns for Small Towns and Rural Areas. American Planning Association; Planners Press, 2003.

Amendments may be proposed by initiative from governing bodies or citizens. It is also contemplated that an Initial Amendment shall be needed to correct any oversights, flaws or unintended consequences that become apparent as the Growth Policy is put in place. Additionally, it is assumed that from time to time changes will need to be made to the Officially Adopted Maps. Amendments shall be adopted by the following methods.

### **Initial Amendment**

The Initial Amendment shall be proposed to the County Commissioners by vote of the Flathead County Planning Board in the seventh month following adoption of this Growth Policy by the County Commission. This amendment shall correct any perceived flaws and oversights in the document, remedy any unintended consequences and include final, or updated, versions of maps and other items referenced in the Growth Policy. The Planning Board shall also call for written submissions for inclusions in the Initial Amendment from the public. All such submissions shall be received prior to the end of the fifth month after this Growth Policy has been officially adopted. A public hearing or hearings on the Initial Amendment shall be conducted by the Planning Board prior to its recommendation to the County Commissioners for adoption.

The Flathead County Planning Board completed an initial amendment to the Growth Policy document in December of 2007. The amendment included the adoption of an implementation plan (Appendix 'C') offering a detailed analysis of the 262 policies found within the document.

### **Amendments Initiated by Governing Bodies**

To continually protect and serve the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare of all residents of Flathead County, planning staff may, at the request of the County Commissioners or majority vote of the Planning Board, initiate an amendment to the Flathead County Growth Policy. Amendments shall be subject to standard public review procedures including public notice of hearing in a newspaper of record, preparation of findings of fact, planning board hearing and recommendation and decision by the governing body. Findings of fact shall be based on criteria for growth policy amendments found later in this chapter.

### **Citizen Initiated Amendments**

Circumstances may arise when residents in Flathead County feel the growth policy is no longer adequately protecting the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare in the process of community development (pursuant to 76-1-106 M.C.A.), and may feel revisions are warranted. If this occurs, an application requesting a specific revision may be submitted to the Planning and Zoning Office for consideration. Such written request for revision must address the criteria outlined later in this chapter, and will be reviewed by the Planning Board and County Commissioners as a plan amendment.

### **Map Changes**



Officially adopted maps are essentially “snapshots in time” of the county. As such, it will become necessary to amend those maps to reflect actual changes over time. Other types of changes may also become advisable. Map changes should be considered by the Planning Board on a quarterly basis, or as staff time and resources permit. Possible changes to the Officially Adopted Maps may be suggested in writing to the Planning Office at any time for consideration during the next regularly scheduled ‘Map Change’. Such suggestions must include verifiable evidence necessitating the proposed change. As part of the 2012 Growth Policy update, all Officially Adopted Maps will be available in digital format on the Flathead County Planning and Zoning website, ensuring the public has continual access to the maps – as well as the corresponding text - of the document. Keeping the maps in digital format will also increase the frequency at which they may be updated in the future.

### **Growth Policy Amendment Criteria**

The following criteria shall be used when considering amendments to this document:

- Does the amendment affect overall compliance of the growth policy with 76-1-601, M.C.A.?
- Is the amendment based on existing characteristics and/or projected trends that are substantially different from those presented in the most recent update?
- Does the amendment create inconsistencies within the document?
- Does the amendment further protect and comply with the seven elements of the public’s vision for the future of Flathead County?
- Has the proposed amendment undergone a sufficient process of county-wide public participation and review?

## CHAPTER 11: NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS

### Introduction

Montana state law allows any county or municipality in Montana to prepare a growth policy, pursuant to 76-1-106(1) M.C.A. While the growth policy is designed to be a comprehensive policy document, it may contain more site specific neighborhood plans pursuant to 76-1-601(4). Each neighborhood plan must be consistent with the growth policy. Land use decisions guided by a neighborhood plan should reflect a community's vision of how they intend to grow in the future. In the absence of a neighborhood plan, land use decisions are guided by the growth policy and existing regulatory documents, as applicable. The intent of this chapter is to provide a general framework to facilitate the preparation, revision and update of neighborhood plans in Flathead County.

### Goal

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- G.45 A clear majority of landowners and residents desiring a neighborhood plan in areas of the County presently without a neighborhood plan have the ability to develop a neighborhood plan.

### Policies

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- P.45.1 Develop expedited and simplified subdivision and development review processes for lands within the jurisdiction of an approved neighborhood plan that has been reviewed for consistency with the growth policy.
- P.45.2 Develop a guide to assist landowners and residents who desire neighborhood plans to develop a plan that implements the character of the neighborhood and fulfills the needs identified by the community.
- P.45.3 Ensure a clear majority of both landowners and acreage represented within the established boundary of a neighborhood plan [described in Step 1 of the neighborhood planning process] are in support of a proposed neighborhood plan by following the process outlined in this chapter. Steps 1 through 6 of the neighborhood planning process provide a mechanism by which the Planning Board can recommend denial of a plan to the commissioners due to lack of support if a clear majority of landowners within the planning area boundary do not support the plan.
- P.45.4 Ensure checks and balances throughout the neighborhood planning process by establishing an option whereby a plan adopted by the County Commissioners may be repealed should written protest be submitted within 90 days following the adoption date by 40% of landowners within the neighborhood plan area whose names appear on the last completed assessment role, or by landowners representing 50% of the acreage included within the neighborhood plan boundary.

- P.45.5 Establish a Commission-approved advisory committee for each approved neighborhood plan, comprised of landowners and residents representing diverse elements of the plan area.

### **Goal**

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- G.46 Honor the integrity and purpose of existing neighborhood plans, respecting the time, effort and community involvement that has taken place.

### **Policies**

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- P.46.1 Ensure previously existing neighborhood plans remain in effect until revised by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners by incorporating those existing plans into the Growth Policy as addenda deemed consistent with the existing Growth Policy.
- P.46.2 Enable the Flathead County Planning Board and the Planning and Zoning Office to periodically review existing neighborhood plans to determine whether the County and the landowners in the neighborhood plan area should update the neighborhood plan.
- P.46.3 Initiate a neighborhood plan amendment and/or update when the County Commissioners approve a recommendation by the Flathead County Planning Board that a neighborhood plan should be updated.
- P.46.4 Apply expedited subdivision and development review processes to existing neighborhood plan areas.

### **PART 1: Neighborhood Plans in General (See Goals 45 and 46).**

The Flathead County Growth Policy contains existing characteristics, projected trends, goals and policies for county wide issues. Neighborhood plans provide more detailed information regarding land uses, policies and issues relevant to that specific neighborhood or geographic area. They guide the community from present to future land use through patterns of development consistent with the vision of the community as well as goals, policies and maps.

The size of an area contained in a neighborhood plan is dependent on the community interest, character, physical and environmental features, as well as institutional and regulatory boundaries. The boundaries of a neighborhood plan area may change over time as revisions, annexations or other actions by cities or other governmental agencies occur. Refer to Step 1 of the planning process below for more on establishing new neighborhood plan boundaries.

Neighborhood plans may contain a variety of elements that work toward identifying, preserving and protecting local characteristics that define a community while planning for and accommodating inevitable growth. Neighborhood planning involves citizens, landowners, local stakeholders, community organizations and businesses who work collaboratively to address future land uses and service delivery. Neighborhood plans provide an opportunity to foster a sense of community by identifying current trends and projections for the future. Generally speaking, a neighborhood plan should consider the elements found within the growth policy [pursuant to 76-1-601 M.C.A.], as appropriate and where applicable given the varied size and character of communities in Flathead County. Elements that may be included in a neighborhood plan (as applicable) are listed below, in no particular order:

- Authorization and background
- Plan area boundaries
- Essential community characteristics
- Community vision
- Existing conditions:
  - Land uses
  - Population
  - Housing needs
  - Economic conditions
  - Local services
  - Public utilities and facilities
  - Natural resources and the environment
  - Transportation
  - Sand and gravel resources
  - Land ownership (public/private)
- Projected trends for the elements listed above
- Issues and opportunities
- Goals and policies
- Land use categories
- Existing and future land use map(s)
- Coordination statement
- Implementation strategy
- Monitoring plan (or goals and policies)
- Support information
  - Maps, graphs, charts and tables
  - Other appendices as necessary
- Amendment procedures

## **PART 2: The Neighborhood Planning Process (See Goal 45)**

The neighborhood planning process outlined below applies to communities pursuing a new neighborhood plan following the adoption of this growth policy. Refer to Part 4 of this chapter for more on the review of existing neighborhood plans.

On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010 the Flathead County Commissioners adopted a general policy statement clarifying the process a community should follow when initiating a new neighborhood plan. The policy statement provides guidance to members of the public when requesting County assistance in the development of a new neighborhood plan, to ensure the planning process is followed and encourage a high level of public participation in the planning process itself. The following identifies the steps to be followed to initiate a new neighborhood planning process:

- 1) Community members approach the Commissioners to request the Planning Offices' assistance informing the community about neighborhood plans, the planning process and what is involved in the creation of a new neighborhood plan.
- 2) Should the Commissioners approve the request, the Planning Office then provides information to the community through a series of educational meetings/workshops on neighborhood plans and the planning process. Over the course of these meetings planning staff will gauge the level of support for the creation of a new neighborhood plan based on written comments, surveys, verbal feedback and other forms of quantitative information gathering.
- 3) If there is adequate interest in beginning the neighborhood planning process, and the Planning Office has sufficient resources and personnel to devote to the effort, planning staff will approach the Commissioners to request further resources be devoted to assisting the community in developing a neighborhood plan. The Planning Office will develop a work plan specific to the community's request with the support and approval of the Commissioners. The approved work plan will include periodic updates to the Commissioners to ensure transparency in the process, and keep the governing body abreast of any developments as the neighborhood planning effort progresses.
- 4) The neighborhood planning process moves forward following the six steps outlined in this chapter of the Growth Policy.

The creation of a new neighborhood plan consists of six general steps. They include:

- 1) Initial neighborhood plan organizational meeting;<sup>130</sup>
- 2) Base-lining existing conditions;
- 3) Drafting the community vision, characteristics and goals;
- 4) Preparing the draft plan;
- 5) Plan approval and adoption; and
- 6) Ongoing monitoring the implementation of the plan.

It is imperative that each step of the process outlined above allow ample opportunity for public input and engagement; this process begins with full notification of the affected residents and landowners. The neighborhood planning process – and public involvement strategy - is summarized by Figure 10.1 found in the following pages. It is anticipated

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<sup>130</sup> A reasonable effort should be made to publicly notify all landowners within a proposed planning area of the initial meeting, including posting notice on the County's online calendar, in the local newspaper(s), in a variety of public places in and around the community, and mailing written notice of the initial meeting to each of the landowners in the proposed planning area using a County-generated mailing list.

County planning staff will work with communities to provide guidance and assistance throughout the planning process. The success of the planning effort depends on the amount of meaningful public participation.

Organizational meetings (**Step 1**) are needed to determine community interest in the neighborhood planning process and define the geographic area to be included. During these initial meetings a steering committee will be formed, with membership representative of the land ownership within the proposed neighborhood plan area. Community ownership and buy-in of the organizational framework at the front end of the process is especially critical. To be successful, the entire planning process should be inclusive and transparent by allowing all residents and the general public the opportunity to participate. Results from this initial step should be a clear definition of the neighborhood planning area under consideration as well as an outline of the organizational approach to be used to generate the plan.

The boundary of the neighborhood plan area should be established by the community members during the initial organizational meetings. Plan areas should be large enough to guide and accommodate multiple types of growth, but small enough to be identified as “neighborhoods” where residents share common interests, needs and goals. Neighborhood plan areas that are too small will not be able to identify areas appropriate to accommodate necessary growth and a variety of land use types, while neighborhood plan boundaries that are too large are more likely to encompass multiple groups with unique interests and goals that might have greater difficulty reaching a consensus during the planning process.

“Neighborhoods” should consist of residents who similarly identify with a particular area of Flathead County, and who are most likely to be influenced by future growth in that area. For example, residents living in Kila are only minimally affected by growth in Marion. Somewhere between the two areas is a boundary separating those who identify themselves as living “just east of Marion” and “just west of Kila.” That cultural boundary would serve as a logical starting point for establishing the neighborhood plan area boundary for either of these locales. Cultural boundaries may cover a smaller geographic area with a high population density (such as “Lakeside”), or may cover a larger area with a more dispersed population (such as “Lower Valley”). Either way, these factors are important to consider when discussing neighborhood plan boundaries with affected community members.

**Step 2** of the process involves research and mapping to establish baseline data, otherwise known as existing conditions. Baseline data sets the tone of a plan by establishing current conditions and identifying areas of constraint or special opportunity. Existing land uses and development density patterns (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, forest lands, etc.) need to be identified and mapped, along with public facilities and infrastructure (e.g. streets, utilities, schools, parks, etc.). Any physical, topographical or environmental constraints (e.g., floodplains and high groundwater, steep slopes, geo-hazard areas, wetlands, etc.) should also be identified as part of the baseline process. This may include any limiting resources such as groundwater availability, access and/or utility constraints, which may affect land use densities and configurations. State, federal and tribal lands that fall outside the jurisdictional planning authority boundary should be identified and mapped

as well. Finally, baseline data should acknowledge applicable provisions of the Growth Policy and any regulatory documents that must be considered in the development of a plan. Once the baseline conditions have been established, the planning process can move forward.

The community's vision and goals are formalized in **Step 3** of the neighborhood planning process. The vision statement expresses the aspirations and goals of the community, identifying what an 'ideal' future might look like for a neighborhood. It should state how the neighborhood's worthwhile qualities are to be protected while allowing for growth and development. The vision will guide important decisions in the formulation of the plan, so it must be widely agreed upon and supported by members of the community. Goals should be developed that support the vision, and these goals should express the community's perspective on issues such as land use, development density, transportation, preservation, affordable housing, implementation and others addressed by the Growth Policy. Each goal will require associated policies and action items that will lead to achievement. Combined, these elements will support the vision and address pressing issues and opportunities as identified by the community.

**Step 4** is the finalization of the draft plan utilizing the goals, policies and action items, as applicable. Development guidelines and standards will be addressed. A Neighborhood Plan Map is required to spatially portray planned land uses (refer to Part 3 of this Chapter). The land use map should interrelate with and clearly reflect the plan's text, goals and policies. The plan should also include an implementation section that establishes a monitoring process to evaluate the plan's performance and identify when there is a need for plan revisions, amendments and updates. Procedures for amending the plan, similar to those found in the Growth Policy, must be included. The final draft of the neighborhood plan document should be submitted to public agencies and service providers for review and comment. After comments received have been addressed, the final draft plan should be submitted to the Flathead County Planning Office for formal consideration.<sup>131</sup> As part of the formal review process, written notification of the draft plan's completion and status will be mailed by the County Planning Office to all landowners within the plan boundary area appearing on the most recent tax assessment list.

The approval and adoption process is **Step 5**. The Planning Board will hold a public workshop - or multiple workshops - to become familiar with the draft plan, followed by a public hearing during which time the Planning Board will review the document in its entirety, listen to public comment and make a recommendation on the draft plan to the Flathead County Commissioners. After the Planning Board public hearing, the draft plan - with recommendation(s) from the Planning Board - shall be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners for final consideration. There is typically a public comment period following their action before a final decision is reached. A 90-day public protest period follows the Commissioner's final decision.

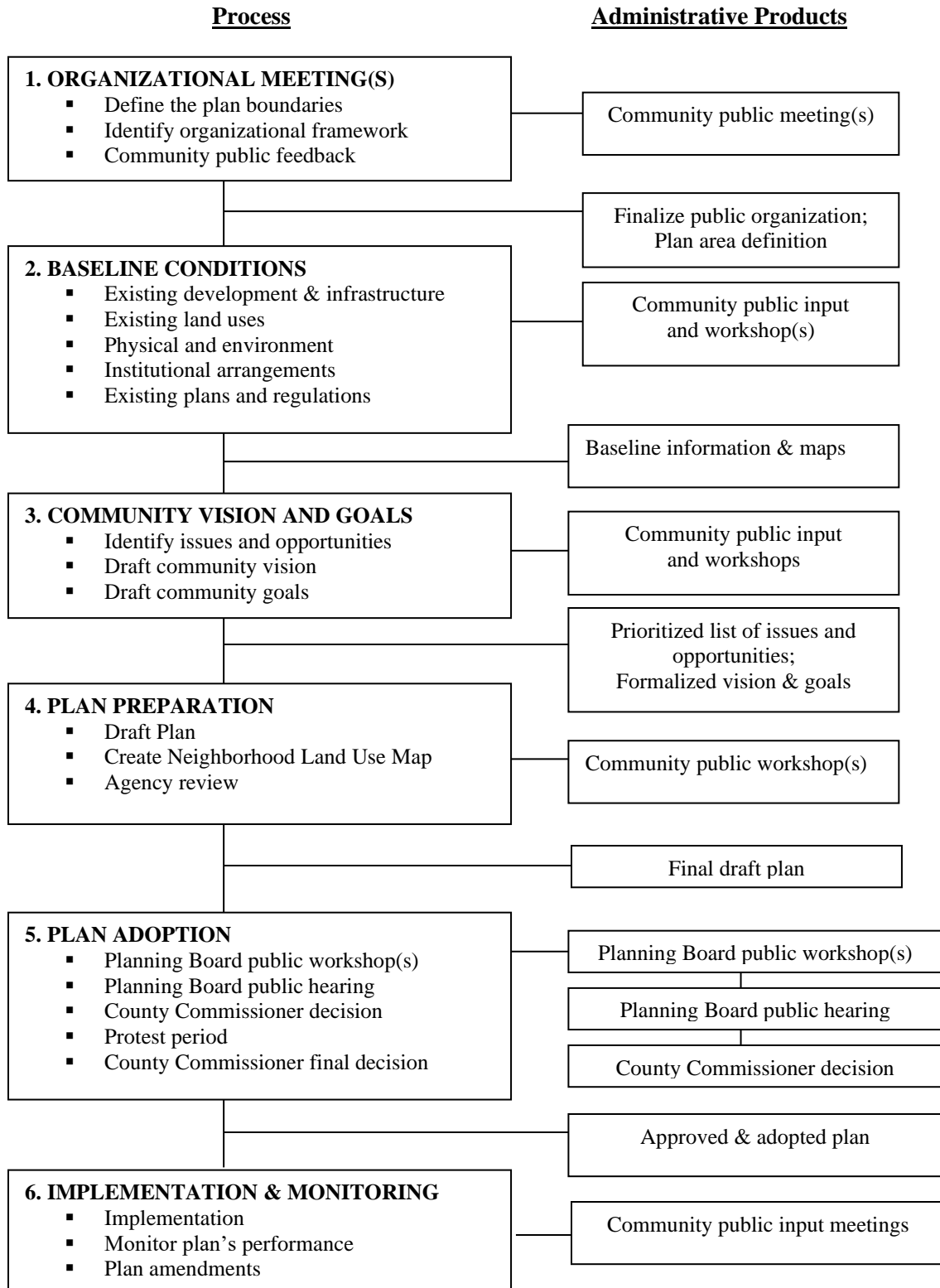
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<sup>131</sup> Formal consideration of the plan requires that an application and fee – when applicable - be submitted to the Planning and Zoning Office, whereby a file is created and a Planning Board public hearing date is set.

The final step, **Step 6**, implements the plan and monitors its effectiveness. Periodic adjustments may be made to plan components. Private, parcel driven amendments without full consideration of the integrity of the neighborhood plan should be discouraged, and the plan's amendment process should make this clear. However, all neighborhood plans (both existing and new) should contain clear and fair procedures for considering a privately initiated amendment. At minimum, any revisions to the plan - publicly or privately initiated - should follow the steps outlined in Part 4 of this Chapter.



**Figure 11.1**  
**Overview of Neighborhood Planning Process**



### PART 3: Land Use Categories (See Goal 45)

Neighborhood plans should accommodate growth and guide it toward areas of the community that have been designated as appropriate. In Step 2 of the process outlined in Part 2 of this chapter, the community identifies areas both appropriate and inappropriate for growth. Land categories should be used to designate where growth should occur based on this information. Land categories are indicative of where certain land types, uses and densities are appropriate in order to protect public health, safety, morals, convenience, order or general welfare in the process of community development (76-1-106 M.C.A.).

Neighborhood plans might not incorporate every land category contained in this chapter. However, it is intended that neighborhood plans use as many categories as are appropriate to accommodate all facets of growth unique to a planning area. After Step 2 of the process outlined above, the local community should have a better idea of where growth should go based on criteria such as appropriate roads, efficient access to county services, commercial needs and environmental constraints. The process of designating land categories to guide growth toward appropriate areas should be a part of the public process undertaken in conjunction with Step 3 and 4 outlined in Part 2 above. The three-step process outlined below will be used to identify combinations of land type (Step A), land use (Step B) and land use intensity (Step C).

Existing plans must similarly accommodate and guide all appropriate types of growth; however, existing plans do not have to follow the categorization methods outlined below. See Part 4 of this chapter for more on the review of existing neighborhood plans.

#### **Step A: Designate the general land type.**

Neighborhoods should begin by creating a map that designates where the following general land types would be most appropriate. A community must accept some level of additional growth as a reality, and collectively decide where that growth would be most appropriate and best accommodated. Again, not all land types will be utilized by every plan, and will depend on unique circumstances and the existing character of an area. A community should decide where the following land types would be most appropriate based on the factors identified in Step 2 of the neighborhood planning process. Land types include:

**REMOTE** – Remote land is mostly undisturbed from its natural state. There are few roads and access is generally limited. Examples are large wetlands and swamps, forests, mountainsides and meadows. Remote land is generally characterized by very little development of any kind and the intensity of use is very low. Limited industrial activities could be found in areas with appropriate resources (gravel extraction, timber or agricultural processing).

**RURAL** – Rural Land is pastoral countryside and usually incorporates a variety of agricultural or silvicultural uses and small to medium sized woodlots. Average density is low and large tracts of land common. Residential subdivisions are unusual. Roads are occasionally gravel. Limited industrial activities could be found

in areas with appropriate resources (gravel extraction, timber or agricultural processing).

SEMI-RURAL – Semi-rural Land is still largely pastoral countryside, but it includes more non-agricultural uses and pockets of higher density. Semi-rural Land has a predominantly rural feel though it has more intense land use and tracts tend to be medium sized. Residential subdivisions and commercial developments are scattered and in the distinct minority. Roads are paved. Limited industrial activities could be found in areas with appropriate resources (gravel extraction, timber or agricultural processing).

SUBURBAN – Suburban Land is mostly residential, though it is characterized by large lots (as opposed to tracts) and can have commercial centers that create small community focal points and serve to reduce traffic. Road interconnectivity allows more efficient transportation. Neighborhoods have roadways constructed to handle anticipated volumes of residential traffic, are located relatively convenient to emergency service, and have appropriate access to water and efficient septic drainfields.

VILLAGE URBAN – Village Urban Land is a combination of high density residential and commercial land uses. The area is usually fairly small and commercial enterprises are typically located on a single street. Industrial uses are typically confined to appropriate areas. This land type would designate a strong desire to see new or improved public facilities such as sewer, water, curb and gutter as well as local services such as fire and ambulance. Neighborhoods have roadways constructed to handle higher volumes of residential and commercial traffic, convenient emergency services, and appropriate access to community water and sewer systems.

TOWN URBAN – Town Urban Land is a larger area of high density residential and commercial land uses. There may be several streets primarily dedicated to commercial uses, with industrial uses still confined to appropriate areas. This land type would have existing public facilities and services and a strong desire to see those improved and increased. Neighborhoods have roadways constructed to handle the highest volumes of residential and commercial traffic, emergency services, curb and gutter, storm water systems and access to public water and sewer systems.

### **Step B: Assign appropriate uses in each land type.**

Begin with each designated land type. Based on future access to facilities and services, existing environmental constraints, future community needs (such as gravel, public lands access, etc.) and the established goals of the community, designate and map land uses within each land type. For example, intersections or streets with the best visibility and accessibility should typically be mapped for commercial land uses, while areas near recreation and schools should typically be mapped for residential land uses. Plans should

incorporate as many of the uses as is appropriate based on local and county-wide needs outlined in the Growth Policy. Utilization of PUD density bonuses may be appropriate in certain land use categories. Land use types are described as follows:

PUBLIC FACILITIES - ‘Public Facilities’ designates areas for new or existing public facilities such as parks, public golf courses, government buildings and complexes, schools, hospitals, police and fire stations, and other uses considered public or quasi-public such as libraries, churches and public utilities. Great care should be given when considering the location of these facilities. Future land use and transportation patterns will be influenced by the location of this type of land use. While various types of public facilities may be appropriate in almost every land type, problems can arise when they are located in close proximity to non-compatible uses.

GOVERNMENT- ‘Government’ designates lands under state or federal land management agency administration. Examples include lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service, U. S. National Park Service, U.S Corps of Engineers, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. It should be noted this list is not exhaustive and may contain other state and federal agencies as necessary.

TRIBAL – ‘Tribal’ includes areas controlled and managed by Native American Indian tribes. These lands may be part of a Reservation or Tribal Trust Land.

FOREST LAND – ‘Forest Land’ designates privately owned lands that will be primarily used for commercial silvicultural activities, with the exception of Christmas tree production (which is considered an agricultural use). This use primarily includes contiguous land in parcels larger than 15 acres that are capable of producing timber for harvest in commercial quantities, and are producing timber unless the trees have been removed through harvest or by natural disaster, including but not limited to fire.

Single family residential clustering and PUD density bonuses may be appropriate for this category when such development allows for the preservation of some forest land acreage, providing that such development is located outside of sensitive environmental areas and can meet MT DEQ standards.

AGRICULTURAL LAND – ‘Agricultural Land’ designates privately owned lands that will be primarily used for agricultural purposes. This use promotes the continuation of agricultural practices, including but not limited to the growing and harvesting of crops, hay and grains as well as livestock production. This category is intended to protect agricultural land from encroachment of intense residential and commercial uses. Animal feedlots, horticultural plantations and nurseries, Christmas tree farms and other agrarian operations are all compatible with this land use designation, as is limited residential.

Single family residential clustering and PUD density bonuses may be appropriate for this category when such development allows for the preservation of some agricultural land acreage, providing that such development is located outside of sensitive environmental areas and can meet MT DEQ standards.

RESIDENTIAL LAND – ‘Residential’ designates lands that will be primarily utilized for residential uses and ancillary purposes. Residential clustering and PUD density bonuses may be appropriate for this category when lots are arranged so as to minimize visual impact or preserve sensitive environmental features. Manufactured housing must be considered and allowed in areas where appropriate. Residential lands should have adequate access to roads, parks, basic commercial services, local schools and employment centers wherever possible.

AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST INDUSTRIAL – ‘Agricultural and Forest Land Industrial’ designates parcels of land in Rural, Semi-Rural and, in limited instances, Remote land type areas that are suited for a specific and appropriate industrial use. This could include parcels that contain known resources for mineral extraction. It could also include parcels that have existing industrial uses considered appropriate, such as grain and feed operations and processing plants. Normally there would be a density buffer created to preclude problems associated with adjacent, incompatible uses.

BUSINESS INDUSTRIAL – ‘Business Industrial’ applies to areas of industrial use and provides general locations for new and existing industrial development, normally in proximity to major transportation facilities and with existing or anticipated access to appropriate water and sewer facilities. The uses should be reviewed for safety and aesthetics when adjacent to other dissimilar uses or when visually impacting neighborhoods. Examples include, but are not limited to, manufacturing and material processing centers; mineral extractive processing facilities when not in proximity to residential areas; local and regional product distribution centers, etc.

AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST LAND COMMERCIAL – ‘Agricultural and Forest Land Commercial’ designates parcels of land in Rural and Semi-Rural land type areas that are suited for a specific and appropriate low density commercial use. It would include parcels that have existing commercial uses that are considered appropriate to agriculture and forestry uses such as equipment sales and repairs, feed stores, riding arenas, etc.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL – ‘Neighborhood Commercial’ designates areas suitable for low density retail and service commercial uses that primarily serve local patrons and do not include more intensive general commercial uses. “Access to commercial services” mentioned throughout this Growth Policy refers to this type of land use. Examples include neighborhood grocery stores, small professional business offices, barber and beauty shops, restaurants, gas stations and other similar neighborhood retail and service uses.

Developments in this land use type should be sized and designed to fit the surrounding neighborhood and community character. Mixed-use developments are appropriate when scaled to match the local character (such as 2<sup>nd</sup> story apartments over small-scale businesses mentioned above). Such areas should be developed as nodes around important intersections or existing focal points and not configured in a “strip” commercial pattern. Any development along a major roadway would be subject to County guidelines for highway corridors.

GENERAL COMMERCIAL – ‘General Commercial’ designates suitable land for higher intensity retail and service commercial uses that serve a broader community and tourist economy. These uses include, but are not limited to, shopping centers, banks, restaurants, professional office centers, and other larger retail and service uses. Hotels, motels, campgrounds and RV parks are all generally suitable in this category. Mixed commercial-residential uses where the residential portion is subordinate to the commercial development would also be appropriate. Commercial developments should be configured as centers or nodes and “strip” commercial configurations should be avoided. Only communities with significant daily traffic and population densities should consider this category as appropriate.

### **Step C: Assign appropriate intensities to individual land uses.**

The third and final step is to determine the appropriate intensity of land use and assign a corresponding density. Intensity considerations are primarily for residential and commercial land uses. Appropriate intensities are determined by focusing on elements such as buffers between incompatible land uses, encouraging a diverse base of residential and commercial lot sizes, and locating higher densities closer to adequate roads, emergency services and commercial centers adequate to serve them. Land intensities are described as follows:

LARGE TRACT – ‘Large Tract’ allows for a maximum of one dwelling unit per forty (40) acres. It intended to control the intrusion of incompatible uses in Remote and Rural land types including, but not limited to, residential development. Clustering or PUD bonuses are available.

MEDIUM TRACT – ‘Medium Tract’ allows for a maximum of one dwelling unit per twenty (20) acres. It intended to control the intrusion of uses in Remote and Rural land types that are not compatible with those environments including, but not limited to, residential development. Clustering or PUD bonuses are available.

SMALL TRACT – ‘Small Tract’ allows for a maximum of one dwelling unit per ten (10) acres. It intended to control the intrusion of uses in Remote and Rural land types that are not compatible with those environments including, but not limited to, residential development. Clustering or PUD bonuses are available.

LARGE PARCEL – ‘Large Parcel’ allows a maximum of one dwelling unit per five (5) acres. This land density category is intended to promote low residential densities in suitable areas. The predominant residential lifestyle is detached single-family dwellings, which are either full-time or seasonal in nature. Multiple family dwellings are not appropriate in this category.

SMALL PARCEL – ‘Small Parcel’ allows a range of one dwelling unit per one (1) acre to one dwelling unit per five (5) acres. This density category is intended to promote detached single-family residential development at medium densities and promote areas within unincorporated Flathead County that are already developed with similar densities. Multiple-family dwellings are not appropriate in this category.

LARGE LOT – ‘Large Lot’ permits a range of single-family development on half acre to one (1) acre lots. This category is intended to be in proximity to public services. Multiple-family dwellings are not appropriate in this category. Residential development is intended to be in conjunction with public or community water systems.

SMALL LOT – ‘Small Lot’ permits a range of single-family and multiple-family residential development densities, including duplexes, townhomes and apartment complexes ranging from two (2) to six (6) dwelling units per acre. Such residential development is intended to be in conjunction with public or community water and sewer systems. Mixed commercial and residential uses may be appropriate when the commercial uses are ancillary to the residences.

HIGH USE – ‘High Use’ permits a range from six (6) to eighteen (18) dwelling units per acre. Residential uses within this category include single and multiple-family dwellings including duplexes, townhomes, trailer courts and apartments. Such residential development is intended to be in conjunction with public or community water and sewer systems. Mixed commercial and residential use complexes can be appropriate when the commercial uses are ancillary to the residences.

LIGHT BUSINESS – ‘Light Business’ allows commercial and industrial uses that are limited in size to no greater than 2,500 sq. ft. per establishment and a total of 10,000 sq. ft of total development size. Parking areas are restricted to a maximum of 20 spaces per establishment.

MEDIUM BUSINESS – ‘Medium Business’ allows commercial and industrial uses that are a maximum of 5,000 sq. ft. per establishment and a total of 20,000 sq. ft. of total development size. Parking areas are restricted to 30 spaces per establishment.

HEAVY BUSINESS – ‘Heavy Business’ allows all sizes of commercial and industrial enterprises. There are no restrictions on sizes of parking areas.

#### PART 4: Existing Plans (See Goal 46)

There are 19 approved neighborhood, local or regional land-use plans within the unincorporated areas of Flathead County. The intent of these plans is to capture the vision of local communities and provide more specific guidance for future development. Some of these plans are old and may require revision or updating to reflect the current conditions and changing visions of the neighborhood areas.

The following is a list of plans that have been previously adopted by Flathead County and are hereby incorporated into the Growth Policy as addenda to it, along with the most recent date the plan was adopted by Flathead County.

**Table 11.1**  
**Existing Plans and Dates of Most Recent Adoption**

<b>Plan</b>	<b>Date most recently adopted/amended</b>
Ashley Lake	10/14/2011
Bigfork	06/02/2009
Big Mountain	09/01/2015
Big Mountain West	12/02/2003
Canyon	05/17/1994
Cooper Farms	07/16/2008
Helena Flats	09/13/2005
Labrant-Lindsey Lane	04/07/1998
Lakeside	12/1/2010
Little Bitterroot Lake	01/24/1996
North Fork	06/12/2008
Quarter Circle/LA Ranch	10/26/2005
Riverdale	02/21/2008
Rogers Lake	04/16/1997
South Whitefish	02/03/2000
South Woodland/Green Acres	04/02/1997
The Amended Stillwater Neighborhood Plan	11/05/2003
Two Rivers	06/28/2005
West Valley	04/09/1997
Whitefish Area Trust Lands	06/08/2005

These neighborhood, local or regional land-use plans have unique characteristics, community visions, goals and policies. Some of these plans are implemented through a single residential zoning district, such as Ashley Lake or North Fork. Others use a more traditional approach, combining multiple land use categories to reflect the land use characteristics of a community (such as Bigfork). In order to provide for adequate public participation, review of the existing plans listed above should follow the process outlined below.



1. **Guidance from Planning Board and Commissioners:** The Flathead County Planning Board and Flathead County Board of Commissioners will prioritize and guide the review of existing plans in Flathead County and offer guidance to planning staff accordingly.
2. **Public Workshops:** As the revised draft is being created, interactive workshops will be conducted covering concepts and solutions being considered for incorporation into the plan. Workshops may allow staff, landowners and residents living within the neighborhood plan's boundaries to discuss and refine ideas before they are presented in the revised draft.
3. **Comment on Draft:** After the document is created, a draft version will be released for review and comment. Electronic versions shall be available online and paper versions available at the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office. The public will have an adequate amount of time (no less than 30 days) to read and comment on the plan, prior to formal consideration by the Planning Board.
4. **Planning Board Review and Revision:** The Flathead County Planning Board shall hold a public workshop(s) as well as a public hearing on the plan and review and revise the draft plan as the Board deems appropriate.
5. **Final Public Review and Comment:** A final, revised version of the plan will be forwarded to the Flathead County Commissioners for their consideration. After the commissioners pass a resolution of intent to adopt the plan, the public will have an opportunity to read and comment on the final, revised plan, the timeline for which shall be established by the Commissioners.

## **PART 5: Neighborhood Plan Implementation and Monitoring**

Following the creation and approval of a neighborhood plan, a land use advisory committee should be established. The committee should consist of residents and land owners within the plan area who represent a cross section of the community. The function of the committee is to provide insight and recommendations on land use applications and other planning issues affecting their particular community with input from the public.

The land use committee should facilitate implementation as identified in each respective neighborhood plan. Implementation occurs through regulatory documents such as official maps, subdivision, zoning, flood plain and/or lakeshore regulations. The committee should assist planning staff, the Planning Board and the Commissioners in reviewing and commenting on these regulations. Setting up the implementation section of the plan is critical to the success of the ongoing planning process.

Existing neighborhood plans should be reviewed and evaluated periodically to determine whether a plan continues to represent the vision and goals of a community and, if not, whether it should be updated accordingly. When an existing neighborhood plan undergoes an update, it is reasonable to assume that any corresponding implementation tools – such as a zoning district– would also be reviewed and undergo an update to reflect changes made to the neighborhood plan document. It is important to note that while a neighborhood plan may be implemented through the creation of a zoning district, a neighborhood plan revision and/or update is a separate process; changes to an existing zoning district which may

implement a neighborhood plan must follow the process for a zoning text and/or map amendment outlined in Section 76-2-205 M.C.A. This separate zone change process involves a series of public hearings before both the Planning Board and County Commissioners, and allows ample time for public participation and comment, similar to the neighborhood plan update process. However, amendments to an existing zoning district would only occur after an update to a neighborhood plan has been reviewed and approved by the Commissioners, and would not be considered as part of the neighborhood plan update following the process(es) outlined in this chapter.

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## CHAPTER 12: STATEMENT OF COORDINATION

### Introduction

The Growth Policy does not have sole jurisdiction over all lands within Flathead County; there are multiple planning jurisdictions present throughout the County. Lands under the jurisdiction of the National Forest Service, National Park Service, Salish-Kootenai Confederated Tribes, or cities of Whitefish, Columbia Falls and Kalispell are not subject to the goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. However, growth in one area of Flathead County has the potential to impact other areas of the valley as people, goods and services move between jurisdictions. It is essential that Flathead County have a plan for coordinating with other jurisdictions on land use issues pertinent to protecting the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare in the process of community development (76-1-106 M.C.A.).

### Goal

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- G.47 Growth and development around Columbia Falls that respects the cultural, geographic and historic heritage of the city while providing essential facilities and services that protect and preserve the health, safety, and welfare of the natural and human environment.

### Policies

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- P.47.1 Uphold the provisions of the existing interlocal agreement between Flathead County and the City of Columbia Falls.
- P.47.2 Maintain communication on planning issues adjacent to the interlocal agreement boundary.
- P.47.3 Review the provisions of the interlocal agreement for adequacy, accuracy and relevancy annually, and revise as necessary.
- P.47.4 Encourage a statement of coordination on planning issues between the County and Columbia Falls.

### Goal

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- G.48 Growth and development around Kalispell that respects the cultural, geographic and historic heritage of the city while providing essential facilities and services that protect and preserve the health, safety, and welfare of the natural and human environment.

**Policies**

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- P.48.1 Work with the City to identify areas around Kalispell appropriate for high density, urban development.
- P.48.2 Share plans for guiding growth away from hazardous and/or unhealthy lands.
- P.48.3 Identify areas most appropriate to be served by Kalispell or county sewer and water services. Share plans for extension of sewer and water facilities to increase the predictability of the community development process.
- P.48.4 Work with the City to identify areas around Kalispell appropriate to preserve through open-space development design incentives or acquisition of land for natural and/or recreation areas.
- P.48.5 Work with the City to identify areas around Kalispell likely to be annexed and appropriate for development to urban density, service and facility standards.
- P.48.6 Discourage urban-density development that lacks urban services *and* facilities.
- P.48.7 Encourage a statement of coordination on planning issues between the County and Kalispell.

**Goal**

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- G.49 Growth and development around Whitefish that respects the cultural, geographic and historic heritage of the city while providing essential facilities and services that protect and preserve the health, safety, and welfare of the natural and human environment.

**Policies**

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- P.49.1 Promote representation by county officials of those residents outside the City of Whitefish, while giving consideration to both the interests of those residents as well as the growth needs of the City of Whitefish during county planning processes.
- P.49.2 Request comments from the City of Whitefish agencies on subdivision, zoning and other land use issues within 2 miles of city limits and give consideration to those comments during the county review process.
- P.49.3 Protect and preserve the many unique opportunities present in the natural and human environment.

- P.49.4 Encourage a statement of coordination on planning issues between the County and Whitefish.

### **Goal**

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- G.50 Communication and coordination during the development process, where appropriate, that respects the cultural heritage and jurisdictional integrity of the Flathead Indian Reservation and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

### **Policies**

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- P.50.1 Develop an intergovernmental agreement clarifying and codifying all jurisdiction, communication and coordination issues on lands within both the Flathead Indian Reservation and Flathead County as well as tribally-owned lands outside the Flathead Indian Reservation.
- P.50.2 Communicate on development occurring near and/or on lands designated as culturally significant to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.
- P.50.3 Provide for cultural clearance of development sites in Flathead County where defined Indian artifacts are uncovered during development, as part of the intergovernmental agreement.

### **Goal**

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- G.51 Federal and state land management that considers and respects the custom and culture of Flathead County residents.

### **Policies**

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- P.51.1 Actively participate in the process of planning for federal and state lands, communicating regularly on issues of importance to Flathead County residents and providing input to state and federal agencies on the effectiveness of existing plans.
- P.51.2 Regularly review and update the accuracy and relevance of the “Flathead County Natural Resource Use Plan, Custom and Culture Document.”
- P.51.3 Pursue a “statement of coordination” with state and federal land management agencies, clarifying and codifying relevant jurisdictional issues including, but not limited to, fire response, fuel reduction, emergency services, road usage and access, water resources, timber, agriculture, noxious weeds and recreation access.

- P.51.4 Consider relevant state and federal planning documents when reviewing development proposals that will impact federal or state lands.

## **PART 1: Municipal Jurisdictions (see Goals 47 through 49)**

### **Columbia Falls**

Columbia Falls is a growing community facing many challenges and opportunities in the years ahead. Many changes are occurring adjacent to city limits in areas that culturally and geographically identify with the City of Columbia Falls. It is appropriate that the City of Columbia Falls act to protect the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare in the process of community development (76-1-106 M.C.A.) in these areas. Under authorization by the Interlocal Cooperation Act (7-11-104 M.C.A.), the Flathead County Commissioners signed an interlocal agreement on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, granting the City of Columbia Falls planning jurisdiction over an designated area adjacent to the existing city limits. The interlocal agreement contains provisions for future cooperation, coordination and communication between parties and an annual meeting to review the boundaries of the agreement.

### **Kalispell**

Kalispell continues to be one of the fastest growing communities in Flathead County, having experienced population growth nearing 40% between 2000 and 2010.<sup>132</sup> With a large portion of that growth taking place through annexations, the City of Kalispell is rapidly expanding into formerly rural areas of Flathead County. This transition from rural or suburban to urban land uses has affected both the City of Kalispell and Flathead County. The City of Kalispell's Annexation Policy (adopted by Resolution No. 5484A on March 7, 2011) offers multiple options for annexation from the County into the City limits. Annexation may occur through the process of direct annexation, a petition of waiver of right to protest annexation, the creation of an annexation district or a City Council directed annexation of a wholly surrounded area. Following annexation, the City may immediately provide urban services such as law enforcement, rapid emergency response, street cleaning, solid waste pickup, public sewer and water facilities, parks, and building safety oversight; however, different annexation options enable a variety of scenarios that may not result in all of these service options being immediately available to an annexed area. While annexation may be a welcome option for County residents interested in urban services and development potential, many residents of Flathead County are not interested in being enveloped so quickly by a rapidly growing city. Conversion to high density residential or commercial land uses results in a variety of impacts and additional needs of residents. Annexing and/or developing lands simply because sewer and water lines can be engineered to reach them does not always serve the health, safety and welfare of both new and existing residents. Over the past decade the City of Kalispell has annexed over 4,000 acres of

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<sup>132</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010 PL 94-171, March 2011; Census 2000 Summary File 1, 2001.

land,<sup>133</sup> expanding the City's jurisdiction over delivery of public services such as emergency response, police and fire protection, and public water and sewer services; this rapid expansion of service area has the potential to result in a reduced level of service for both new and existing City residents. The City's growth and expansion into areas formerly located within the County's jurisdiction highlights the need for these two jurisdictions to work collaboratively on issues of land use so these impacts may be anticipated and addressed accordingly.

It is essential that the City of Kalispell and Flathead County coordinate and cooperate on issues of growth into rural areas. Some development that occurs under the jurisdiction of Flathead County should meet urban standards to prepare for inevitable annexation. Other development in rural areas should preserve rural character, whether annexed or not, to provide a healthy, natural environment for future generations of city and county residents. Coordination and cooperation between Kalispell and Flathead County would lead to easier identification of lands appropriate for certain types and densities of development, now and in the future.

### **Whitefish**

The City of Whitefish has a unique character and economy based on a history of railroading and tourism. Real estate and construction have emerged as additional drivers of the Whitefish economy. Whitefish is a rapidly expanding municipality with an economy that depends in part on maintaining the unique "mountain ski resort" character. However, some drivers of the Whitefish economy that are closely linked to the character of the town are located just outside city limits (such as Whitefish Mountain Resort, Lost Coon Lake, Blanchard Lake and many of the lakefront properties on Whitefish Lake). When economic success is inextricably linked to preserving and maintaining the unique character of a municipality and adjacent areas, it is important for county planning and implementation efforts to give consideration to both the municipality's growth planning as well as the desires of residents within those areas.

During the process of planning for lands adjacent to the City of Whitefish, Flathead County representatives should work with local residents as well as representatives of the City of Whitefish to protect the quality of life of current residents anticipate future growth of the city and accommodate the needs of County government to provide services and facilities.

### **PART 2: Tribal Jurisdictions (see Goal 50)**

The Flathead Indian Reservation contributes approximately 28,296 acres to Flathead County.<sup>134</sup> Approximately 24,315 acres of this total are owned by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and are not under the jurisdiction of the Flathead County Growth Policy. Fee lands owned privately by a member of any tribe are not under the jurisdiction of the Flathead County Growth Policy. During the writing of the 2006 Growth Policy,

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<sup>133</sup> Conversation with and supporting documentation provided by Sean Conrad, Senior Planner, City of Kalispell on 11/22/2011.

<sup>134</sup> Natural Resources Information System, February 2011. Tribal & BLA land ownership.



Flathead County Planning and Zoning staff met with planners from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Much of the discussion centered on understanding jurisdictional issues pertaining to tribal lands. It was obvious during that meeting that both Flathead County and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes would benefit from an intergovernmental agreement codifying jurisdictional issues.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are interested in protecting and preserving their rich heritage, and Flathead County is in a position to aid that interest. Opportunities are available for coordination and cooperation during the development process on issues such as wetlands, floodplains, cultural protection, subdivision, road naming etc. on non-tribal owned lands within the Flathead Indian Reservation and Flathead County. Growing development pressures throughout Flathead County may eventually impact the small percentage of lands held by tribal interests. Given this likelihood, it is better to be prepared with knowledge and understanding rather than wait to address the issues piecemeal as they arise.

### **PART 3: Federal and State Jurisdictions (see Goal 51)**

Federal and state lands contribute a substantial percentage of the overall acreage of Flathead County (see Chapter 2: Land Uses). Land use planning on federal and state lands is the jurisdiction of the federal and state government, respectively. Plans created to manage federal or state lands for the best interest of all citizens have the potential to impact the local environment and economy in a variety of ways. While residents of one county or area may not dictate management practices on public lands, it is essential that local residents communicate the local consequences of federal and state management practices. Flathead County's role should be to educate federal and state planners and decision makers about local impacts related to land management practices on public lands. Flathead County created a document to fulfill this roll in the summer of 2005 [adopted by Resolution No. 1777C]. Entitled the "Flathead County Natural Resource Use Plan, Custom and Culture Document", this document was written to explain the importance of natural resources to the residents of Flathead County, and was intended to be used by federal and state planners in consideration of local needs. By communicating these local needs, Flathead County can actively protect the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, or general welfare of its residents, pursuant to 76-1-106 M.C.A. The "Custom and Culture Document" was last amended on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008, and continues to undergo review and revision to ensure the plan remains an accurate and relevant portrayal of citizen interests in Flathead County.