

## **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 space 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.

## 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

---

<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

---

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

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.

## **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.).

This page intentionally left blank for document formatting purposes.