



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Setting

Missoula County is largely characterized by its remarkable landscapes that have had a pronounced influence on the area's development and life style. The mountains, valleys and river corridors that make up the striking scenery have shaped the physical development of the county by creating several distinct places, and each of these places has its own identity and sense of community. While this landscape creates separate physical places, it also provides a strong connection among residents. The natural landscape creates open spaces with tremendous recreational opportunities that provide many of the reasons the residents live here and enjoy a high quality of life. It also draws more people to live and visit here.

Missoula County contains many special places that have provided for fish, wildlife, and people from time immemorial until today. The oldest Indian artifacts found in Missoula County date from 12,000 years ago and the first known semi-permanent sites were developed 5,500 years ago. During the following centuries, Missoula County was occupied by a succession of Native American tribes. For centuries the Missoula Valley also offered natural passageways between the mountain ranges, where Native Americans, such as the Salish, Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille,

and Nez Perce, traveled to and from buffalo hunting grounds on the plains east of the Continental Divide.

The physical landscape has played a major role in the economic development of Missoula County. Rich soils with nearby sources of water supported agriculture as an early form of economic development after European settlement. Construction of the railroad through Missoula Valley and timber resources brought prosperity to the area in the late 19th century. The natural resources supported the agricultural and timber industries as the mainstays of Missoula County's economy for over a century.

The physical landscape and the discrete places created by it also contribute to a sense of self-reliance that is shared among residents of the rural parts of the county. Rural residents feel a strong sense of protection for the character of their communities that is matched by their independence and desire for limited governmental regulation. However, a growing population creates challenges for preserving the very attributes that residents value.

While many residents in rural communities highly value their decision to live, work and raise their families in a rural environment, they also enjoy and rely upon their proximity to the City of Missoula. The city provides additional



employment opportunities, health care services and facilities, grocery stores, cultural and entertainment activities and an energy generated around the University of Montana. Missoula County provides its residents the opportunity to enjoy a rural lifestyle with urban services, economic opportunities and amenities nearby.

This growth policy seeks to protect the natural landscape and open spaces that are so important to Missoula County, while preparing for growth and promoting the economic wellbeing of its residents.

What is a Growth Policy?

In Montana, a growth policy is a plan for the future of a city or county. It is a vision for how to provide vibrant places for people to live, work and play while protecting the assets that residents value most. 'Growth Policy' is the term used in Montana state law [Montana Code Annotated 76-1-601] for a comprehensive plan or master plan.

A growth policy takes stock of what a community was yesterday, is today, and provides a vision for what a community would like to become tomorrow. It includes goals based on community priorities and an action plan to help

achieve those goals.

Fundamentally a growth policy is a guidance document, not a regulatory document, and it does not necessarily require regulations to be adopted. However, growth policies provide the legal framework and philosophical foundation upon which future plans and regulations are based. In summary, a growth policy is a guide for decision-making as well as a road map that articulates what a community would like to become and how it intends to get there.

How are Growth Policies Used?

Growth policies can be used to identify community priorities. With limited staff and budget, Missoula County must decide what projects and initiatives are most important and budget accordingly; growth policies can help to guide those decisions. Growth policies are also used to guide infrastructure investments like public roads, water, sewer, parks and trails. In addition, growth policies are used as the basis for updating or adopting land use regulations and are used as a resource when evaluating development applications. Chapter 7 provides more detail on how this growth policy will be used.

How was this Growth Policy Developed?

This growth policy is a comprehensive update to the 2005 Missoula County Growth Policy. Since 2005, much has changed in the county including an end to the land and housing boom, a major economic recession, closure of two major employers and the emergence of new industries. In addition, the land use planning functions of the City of Missoula and Missoula County are now separately housed in city and county agencies.

The Missoula County Growth Policy covers all of Missoula County outside of the city limits of Missoula (Map 1).

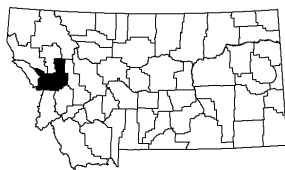
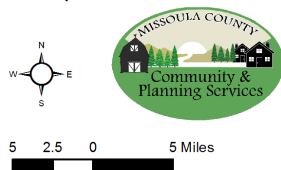
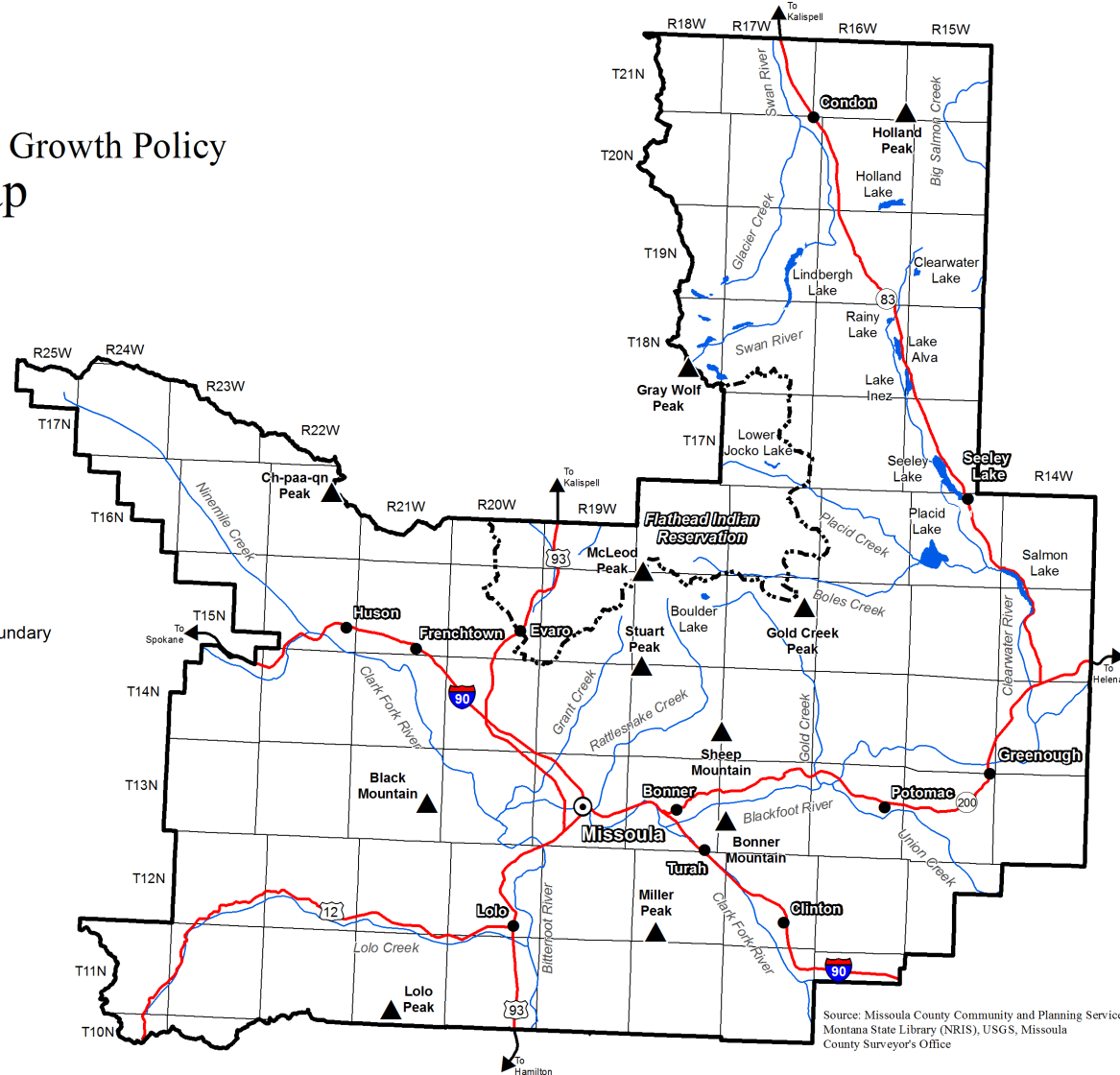
In order to understand how the community challenges and priorities have changed since 2005, under the guidance of the Missoula Board of County Commissioners and Missoula Consolidated Planning Board, a team of county planners and planning consultants interviewed County Commissioners, department heads and stakeholder organizations and held three rounds of listening sessions in communities across the county. Round 1 was designed to introduce the public to the Growth Policy update and for the planning team to gain an understanding of the key issues that are important to Missoula County residents. Round 2

Map 1

Missoula County Growth Policy Location Map

Legend

- Cities and Towns
- ▲ Summits
- Highways
- Rivers
- Lakes
- Townships
- Missoula City Limits
- ⋯ Flathead Reservation Boundary
- ▭ County Boundary



Source: Missoula County Community and Planning Services, Montana State Library (NRIS), USGS, Missoula County Surveyor's Office



evaluated initial goals and objectives in order to gauge the public's level of acceptance of the draft approaches to address the key issues. Round 3 was designed to assess more specific policy recommendations and develop a plan of action. (See Appendix B)

The county also created a website dedicated to the project that has provided background information, updates and allowed participants to submit comments throughout the process. All told, this effort has engaged hundreds of individuals whose comments and suggestions have been used to create this plan.

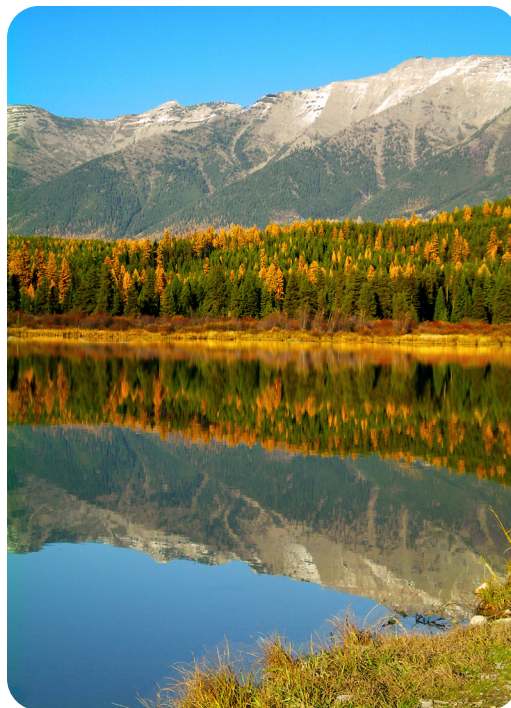
In addition to these efforts, the adoption process included public hearings before the Planning Board and final adoption by the Missoula County Board of Commissioners through a public hearing process.

Main Themes

This growth policy is organized under the main themes of landscapes, livelihoods and communities. Primary issues and concerns related to these themes are described below.

Landscapes

The valleys, mountains and open spaces that make up Missoula County's landscape provide a geographic framework for the growth policy. The valleys are formed by large drainages with natural water features throughout the county. Over 1,975 miles of rivers, streams and named tributaries crisscross the valleys of Missoula County. The quality of life here and the livelihoods of many residents depend on protecting watersheds in general, and water quality and quantity in particular, as new development occurs and the volume of storm water runoff and the number of septic systems increases.



The valleys can be subject to inversions that trap particulates in the air that can cause health problems for residents. Maintaining clean healthy air is another essential component of a high quality of life that is important to local residents, and it also is essential for attracting new economic development.

The forested mountains that frame the valleys brought early prosperity to Missoula County through the wood products industries. The open spaces that blanket the valley floors are iconic of Missoula County, but they also provide agricultural lands in close proximity to water. Agriculture was an early economic activity in the Missoula area and it continues today. Growth of the county during the recent decades has extended subdivisions and development into the forest and also onto much of the agricultural land base, resulting in challenges related to public safety, cost of providing services, and long term agricultural production.

In listening sessions throughout the county, open spaces and the natural environment were frequently discussed. The county's natural features were regularly listed among the values and assets for the people of Missoula County. Residents also included protection of and access to natural resources as important for the county's future.



These natural resources transcend all facets of life in Missoula County. They contribute to quality of life by providing recreational opportunities and scenic amenities. They also provided for early agricultural and timber industries, imprinting the culture and heritage of the current day Missoula County. The natural environment continues to be a



significant asset that helps recruit and maintain economic development.

How the natural environment and natural systems may shift with the effects of climate change, and how we should plan and develop our communities in preparation for and in response to changing circumstances, are important considerations as we seek to accommodate population growth.

Livelihoods

The people of Missoula County are key to vibrant and successful communities. When residents enjoy productive livelihoods they are committed to their communities and

have a stronger stake in the overall success of the area.

Missoula County's physical landscape supported the livelihoods of its residents for many decades, and continues today providing agricultural timber, and recreational resources. The economy in Missoula County is changing; however, many jobs in timber-related industries are being replaced with jobs in newly emerging industries such as biotechnology, data management, and research. Agriculture provides a smaller share of the area's economic activity than in the past.

Missoula County has always been fortunate to enjoy access to the larger region that ushered in new waves of economic development. First the railroad was constructed through the area in mid to late 19 century, followed later



by Interstate 90. Now the very same alignment that accommodated these two transportation facilities provides

the route for a major backbone of the digital highway between the Midwest and the West Coast.

In the transitioning economy, the manufacturing sector continues to be strong while the University provides new opportunities with a steady stream of graduates. Opportunities in restoration, renewable energy, re-development and re-use of older commercial sites, and positioning the county to capitalize on recreational opportunities and a high quality of life have great promise. Overall, there are good reasons to be optimistic about Missoula County's economic future, although this optimism is not shared uniformly across the county.

Parts of the county that have relied on the timber or other resource-based industries have been hit hard by recent economic changes, and remote communities in the county seek greater economic stability. Promoting the economic development of Missoula County may be challenging, but the hardest part may be ensuring that rural communities and low income residents also benefit from the economic growth of the county.

Communities

The valleys that make up the natural landscape of Missoula County are home



to several distinctive, unincorporated communities that have evolved over time. Residents in each of these places share a strong sense of community. The remoteness of some communities from the City of Missoula, coupled with their distinctive character, causes many residents to perceive decisions of the county government as failing to meet their needs. The unincorporated area adjacent to the city adds diversity to Missoula County by functioning as an extension of the city with little visible distinction between the two jurisdictions, while also maintaining a level of rural character close to the city limits that residents value.

Establishing policies and decisions that apply to dispersed and diverse communities is challenging. An effective system for consistent outreach and



communication is essential to fostering a countywide sense of community that will be necessary to implement this Growth Policy.

Another challenge Missoula County residents face is high housing prices. Compared with typical wages, the cost of housing in Missoula County is disproportionately high, necessitating additional efforts from the public, private and non-profit sectors to provide the housing stock necessary to accommodate growth.

Missoula County is home to numerous agencies and organizations that are pursuing individual missions and goals. Two economic development agencies, several non-profit organizations, Tribal government, city government, several governmental commissions and boards, multiple county departments, numerous homeowner associations, the University of Montana and Missoula College create a rich mixture of organizations and agencies operating in Missoula County. This diversity creates tremendous opportunities to accomplish great things but also creates a challenge to coordinate actions.

The influence of federal agencies is a major part of each community. The federal government manages about half of the land in Missoula County. The Flathead Indian Reservation, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, also covers about 6% of Missoula County. This pattern of land ownership requires cooperation among all levels of government to create a compatible system of land management that

protects the natural resources and supports the residents' lifestyles.

Montana, in general, and much of Missoula County experience limited regulations on the decisions and actions of private individuals. However, strong population growth brings challenges in protecting the wonderful characteristics that make Missoula County an attractive place. According to Regional Economic Models, Inc., the county's population grew by 30,363 people between 1990 and 2010 and is projected to grow by more than 27,612 between 2010 and 2035. This growth creates a challenge of balancing the protection of beloved assets in the county with the strong desire for limited governmental regulation.

Vision

A vision statement is a preamble that sets the stage for the growth policy. It is intended to describe what the growth policy is designed to help achieve. It reflects the community's self-image, articulates its aspirations, and describes what the county wishes to be in 20 years.

Missoula County residents enjoy a quality of life that is the envy of many communities. We work to protect this while balancing a transitioning economy and meeting the needs of a growing population in the face of a changing climate. Missoula County residents have access to good jobs in new and emerging industries, high quality services, and a variety of affordable housing choices for a diverse citizenry. Natural resources, including public lands, rivers, lakes, streams, wildlife, mountains, clean air and agriculture will continue to flourish, support an active life style, and create opportunities for economic prosperity. The distinctive local communities throughout the county thrive and their uniqueness is encouraged, as the area's overall interests are advanced. Missoula County continues to be home to an engaged population and a leader in culture and education.

Figure 1 - Word Cloud Illustrating the Vision Statement

This word cloud illustrates words used in the vision statement that were generated during the growth policy public process, using size to emphasize some critical words over others.





Document Organization

The document is structured to outline how the vision might be achieved; to provide a framework for continued community development, resource conservation, and planning efforts; and to meet state legal requirements.

Chapter 1 includes an introduction and vision statement that describes what the growth policy is intended to help achieve.

Chapter 2 contains the main policy portion of this document, containing guiding principles, goals and objectives for how the county plans to address community challenges in the coming years. It also includes the implementation plan which describes what actions are planned to achieve the goals and objectives, a timeframe, and identifies entities that are expected to take the lead in carrying out the actions. The end of the chapter includes a discussion on the county's land use mapping strategy, which is a key implementation measure.

Chapter 3 describes how Missoula County will coordinate efforts with other jurisdictions.

Chapter 4 provides a description of two types of locally driven planning efforts

Missoula County intends to support in coming years, area and issue plans, as well as how the review, amendment, and retirement of current plans would occur.

Chapter 5 defines the criteria used for subdivision review, describes how the criteria will be used, and also how public hearings on subdivisions will be conducted.

Chapter 6 includes a strategy for the development, replacement, and maintenance of public infrastructure.

Chapter 7 provides guidance on how to use this growth policy, including how to assess consistency of local area and issue plans with the goals and objectives and how to assess compliance of development applications with the growth policy.

Chapter 8 describes how, when, and under what conditions the growth policy may be amended and revised.

Chapter 9 provides the background information on which the growth policy is based including conditions, trends and projections regarding land use, population, housing needs, economic conditions, local services, public facilities, and natural resources.