



Rain
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By LYNNETTE HINTZE
The Daily Inter Lake

It's 8:45 a.m. on Thursday and Mayre Flowers is the lone audience member at the Flathead County commissioners' chambers.

A few minutes later she's joined by a couple of colleagues, but it's Flowers who takes the stand to speak on behalf of Citizens for a Better Flathead about proposed changes to the county growth policy.

As executive director of the land-use planning advocacy group for the past several years — and well before she took the director job — Flowers consistently has been a strong voice for Citizens. She's been with the group since it formed 20 years ago.

It's not an easy job being the voice for planning and policies that protect the pristine nature of the Flathead. Citizens has been called an anti-growth group, its members referred to as liberal extremists.

"Sticks and stones..." Flowers says, shrugging off the critical words hurled at her and the group over the years. She's used to the bullying, the intimidation. It doesn't take her off course in consistently delivering the organization's message.

"I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to represent and work to engage so many people who care so much about this valley," she said. "There's a bit of a Pollyanna gene in me. I'm so passionate about the democratic process. If you can stay focused on research and science and listen to diverse voices, that's what's so rich, to craft solutions. Democracy is a messy process; it takes a long time."

And Flowers points out she's not a one-woman band.

The 20th anniversary has prompted Citizens to put together an accounting of its life's work.

"Ours is indeed a story of people and places, and as writer Terry Tempest Williams puts it, 'the hope of bedrock democracy, standing our ground in the places we love

together,'" Flowers wrote in a recent anniversary publication.

"I'm standing on the shoulders of lots of folks committed to the democratic process who want an open, deliberate process," she said.

Citizens has around 1,500 paid members and a broader pool of 3,000 contacts on an email list. Membership has been consistent; 10 years ago the group had more than 1,400 subscribing members.

WORKING TOWARD democratic solutions in the planning arena doesn't always produce tangible results.

Take the embattled Glacier Mall/Glacier Town Center proposal in North Kalispell that was stymied by a lawsuit filed by North 93 Neighbors and eventually shelved when the economy crumbled.

"We don't look at [Glacier Mall] as a victory, but as a broken public process," Flowers said. "The question is, if we're going to add commercial development, how do we do it well? To simply say our highways should be open to [myriad] uses is not the kind of development this community should embrace."

Citizens has taken legal stands on rare occasions.

Most recently the non-profit organization sued the county over its adoption of a new "greenbelt" zoning classification, claiming the new zoning allows for strip commercial development and retail sales and service uses along all major roads in the county, and that it's inconsistent with the county growth policy.

The organization has sued over planning issues only twice before — and won both lawsuits. In 1994 Citizens sued over a closed landfill meeting, alleging a violation of the

'Our work is never done'



MAYRE FLOWERS, executive director of Citizens for a Better Flathead, reads over the comments she will be make to county commissioners on Thursday morning.

open meeting law. The result was a court ruling reversing the county's decision not to line the landfill.

THE OTHER lawsuit took the state of Montana to task for not requiring an economic analysis of school trust lands prior to the development of Spring Prairie Center where Costco is located.

Limiting commercial sprawl along highway corridors has been a big focus for Citizens because it goes hand in hand with the group's work to protect the valley's water quality and preserve natural beauty and open space.

The rapid development of the North Kalispell area several years ago during an unprecedented growth spurt in the Flathead was a good learning

effort for the community, Flowers said, and a hard lesson on the challenges that rapid growth brings when local government doesn't have adequate standards in place to address traffic, lighting and other issues.

Money that should have gone to the original bypass plan for Kalispell was diverted to create roads around Glacier High School to make the intersection of U.S. 93 and



FLOWERS HANDS out a response to a letter from the Montana Environmental Consultants Association about revisions to the growth policy to Commissioner Pam Holmquist on Thursday morning.

Citizens has sued three times over planning issues

West Reserve Drive functional, Flowers said, noting the city didn't have adequate traffic guidelines in place at the time. As a result, it took away funding from the bypass effort to fund roads that should've been paid for by that development, she said.

Lynn Stanley, co-chairperson of the Citizens' board of directors, said "it should've been obvious that it (North Kalispell area) should have been designed with frontage roads."

And it didn't help the situation when the county shelved a proposed transportation plan that could have provided guidance for a better road grid, Stanley said.

Citizens has participated in the public process surrounding growth policies for not only the county but also the county's incorporated cities. It has watchdogged the creation of several neighborhood plans. The group was involved in a lengthy review of subdivision regulations. In short, any time there's planning involved, Citizens is involved.

THE RESULTS of the group's work in the public arena may not always be immediately evident, but it's there, board member BJ Carlson said.

"There are quantifiable things," she noted, "like the education of children."

One of Citizens' most tangible success stories is the WasteNot Project started in 1995 as a collaborative effort with Flathead Valley Community college's Service Learning Program and the County Solid Waste District. Today the project provides in-class and/or landfill tours to 1,600 students who learn about recycling and composting.

Over the years Citizens has helped create programs for collecting hazardous household and business waste for safe disposal.

Commissioner Dale Lauman agreed the recy-

cling efforts have been one of the organization's most visible successes.

"They've worked a lot with the Solid Waste District," he said. "They've done a lot of good work in that area."

Lauman said through the years Citizens has offered another viewpoint to county issues such as revisions to the growth policy, and he said the commissioners consider all input submitted to them.

IN 2009, CITIZENS organized a "Re-Powering the Flathead for a New Energy Economy" conference, after which a steering committee formed to conduct community conversations about energy-saving opportunities. With support from that steering committee, Stanford graduate Lauren Casey returned to the Flathead to write a comprehensive "Re-Powering the Flathead" report on energy.

Stanley pointed out that the "Re-Powering" effort became a springboard for local energy-related businesses to talk with the public about challenges as well as opportunities. It also helped energy companies network and collaborate with one another.

Citizens also helped launch the Go Local Flathead Guide to promote local businesses because economic research shows that entrepreneurs and skilled workers are more likely to invest and settle in places that preserve their one-of-a-kind businesses and distinctive character, Flowers said.

She pointed to the National Parks Conservation Association's recent "Pathways to Prosperity" publication that states: "As we consult with business owners and investors looking to relocate, we hear that quality of life is as key to their decisions as are tax rates, labor costs and broadband networks."

CITIZENS WAS A founding member of the Montana Smart Growth Coalition when it joined that effort in 1999, and the organization continues as a board member.

"We work with the coalition to address planning legislation on a state level," Flowers said.

Smart Growth is one of the terms that comes in the crosshairs for property-rights advocates such as Russ Crowder, a perennial critic of Citizens' efforts.

He formed the American Dream Montana property rights group several years ago as a vehicle to combat the state Smart Growth Coalition, but said he found himself drawn to local planning battles instead.

"We were hoping to become a lobbying group on the state level to fight Smart Growth," Crowder said, "but we had little time for that during the Harris-Brenneman reign of terror."

Crowder was referring to former Planning Director Jeff Harris and former county Commissioner Joe Brenneman, both of whom he was highly critical.

Smart growth refers generally to planning policies that concentrate growth in walkable urban centers to avoid

sprawl. Crowder said the movement has a "radical" agenda and does little to protect property rights.

Flowers chalks Crowder and other opponents up as some of those "diverse voices" that are part of the democratic process.

Carlson said the frustration for her "is those attacks close down dialog."

Citizens vows to create more opportunities for community dialog about growth and planning over the next few years.

Last year the group hosted a series of short "TED" talks focusing on technology, education and design.

"They were short, thought-provoking presentations, and were received very well," Flowers said. "It's that kind of deliberate discussion we embrace."

FUNDING FOR Citizens took a hit during the economic downturn, Flowers acknowledged, but the group has continued to get its message out on a budget that had total revenue of \$147,861 last year. About 55 percent of the organization's funding comes from individuals, with 20 percent from local foundations — Cinnabar Foundation and High Stakes Foundation are

two faithful supporters — and 25 percent from events.

Citizens spends 78 percent of its income on programs, with 8 percent going to administration — the group has three paid, full-time employees — and 14 percent to fund-raising.

Although growth has slowed from its break-neck pace of a few years ago, Citizens' involvement in local planning has not diminished.

"I think it's a misperception that because growth has slowed there's not as much going on," Flowers said. "Shaping the policies is a day-to-day process. Our challenge is to limit what we get involved with. The emphasis is to be proactive."

Citizens is now working on a visual preference survey, a tool that will take complex policies and convert them into visual images to drive home the questions: "What's the image of growth you want to see? What are the standards that make sense?"

The survey will focus on sidewalks, signs, setbacks and architecture, among other elements.

"Our work is never done," Flowers said. "We must keep our eyes on the long-term vision of what is needed to keep the Flathead special forever. Development pressures will always be with us; the choice is not will we grow, but how."



Daily Inter Lake file photo

MAYRE FLOWERS holds up a sign in December 2007 that she had made for a planning meeting. Flowers and Citizens for a Better Flathead were concerned about extra traffic lights proposed for the Glacier Town Center project — a project that never materialized.