

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 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 frequently was 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.

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 rights to the use and enjoyment of their property. 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 over regulation, 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.

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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