

Big Sky or Big Sprawl - Montanan's Have a Choice

By Tim Davis, Director, Montana Smart Growth Coalition

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As I spent this summer playing outdoors with my 6 year old daughter, I was constantly reminded how incredibly fortunate we, as Montanans, are to live in such a beautiful place, where we have access to mountains and unspoiled rivers, abundant wildlife, a hometown quality of life, and where, for the most part, people can afford a home.

These are the things that virtually all of us live here for. Not surprisingly these are also the very things that people are coming to Montana for – and, as such, they are key drivers of our economy.

As more baby boomers retire and more businesses look for ways to woo the best and the brightest - our quality of life will draw more and more people to Montana.

The growth we have seen in many western Montana communities over the last ten and twenty years has awoken many people up to the fact we cannot take our quality of life for granted – too many other places in the West made the mistake of not planning to protect their quality of life.

So the question comes down to how can our communities grow and not lose our quality of life and the wide open spaces that define Montana?

There is no easy answer or fix. Often one persons' vision of the future is not the same as others in their community or even across the fence line. As our communities see more growth, as we get more neighbors, we see more and more conflicts because many of our communities and counties have not undertaken the hard work of bringing neighbors together to plan for the future. We have, too often, waited until one person decides to develop their land in a way that will potentially harm their neighbors' ability to farm, or their drinking water quality, or undermine their neighbors' quality of life or the value of their property. This reactionary way of dealing with growth leads to neighbors filing law suits against one another - causing unnecessary conflict across those parts of western Montana that have not planned for future growth or implemented those plans through zoning.

There is a better way – it involves local governments bringing neighbors together to sit down to plan out what they want the future to look like and implementing that plan through local zoning. Planning and zoning are just a new way of neighbors working out their differences at the kitchen table or with a handshake across a fence. When done right, planning and zoning can create a predictable process that really is the only way to protect everyone's quality of life

by bringing people together before a development is proposed and tempers get heated. Zoning is the only tool we have to protect property rights and values from being harmed by some incompatible use locating right next door to your house or business.

If our communities and counties do not undertake planning and zoning, we can expect more lawsuits between neighbors, more traffic congestion and higher taxes because we have not gotten ahead of the infrastructure needed to service future growth efficiently, and a steady erosion of our Montana quality of life.

Without local planning and zoning, you cannot protect your property values, your property rights, nor your quality of life because anything goes and can go right next door.

Luckily, people across Montana are working together to protect their quality of life, to make sure that their hometowns stay attractive and affordable, and to protect the working landscapes, wildlife, and waters that define their lives and lifestyles.

In Ravalli County, for example, citizens passed interim zoning two years ago and have been working hard to find a middle ground solution in the form of more permanent zoning. It is still a question as to whether they, like citizens in Lake County and Powell County before them, will succeed in taking control of their own destiny.

In the Helena Valley, our dramatic growth over the last ten years has led to lawsuits being filed from every side that you can imagine. However, three years ago, an unusual and diverse group formed that included builders, conservationists, and others. The goal of this group was to see if we could come up with a common ground zoning proposal. The road was rocky at times, but all sides compromised and after listening to the public and a variety of experts the group came up with a zoning proposal that they unanimously recommended to the County. This zoning proposal still needs to go through the public hearing process and be voted on by the county commissioners, but if the commissioners continue to support this process and engage the public in implementing it, then that zoning will, almost paradoxically, make development easier while also protecting our quality of life.

This week, on September 19th, at Carroll College in Helena, people from across Montana will be coming together for the Big Sky or Big Sprawl conference to talk about how Montana is growing and what we can do together to ensure that we grow in a way that keeps Montana the last best place. You are welcome to join us and you can find more information by going to our website at mtsmartgrowth.org.

I'm Tim Davis, Director of the Montana Smart Growth Coalition, for the Alternative Energy Resources Organization. My commentary is one of the many conversations we're having at AERO. AERO is a grassroots membership organization that's been building communities by

linking people with sustainable agriculture and energy solutions for 35 years. To join the conversation and become part of the solution, call us in Helena at (406) 443-7272.”