

## 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 changes 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 future needs of the community.

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 American homeowner 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 stay that way.

## CHAPTER 5: THE FLATHEAD ECONOMY

Northwest Montana's economy is characterized by diversity. Flathead County has been identified as having the most balanced employment compositions in the Rocky Mountain West,<sup>1</sup> with no one sector of the economy providing the most significant employment or wages. Region specific export products such as Flathead Cherries, the tourism draw of Glacier National Park and Flathead Lake, and the growing areas of healthcare, specialized services, construction, and retail trade have produced the diverse Flathead County economy of today.

The county's natural environment is one of its chief economic assets contributing significantly to the high quality of life. This quality of life is characterized by natural scenic beauty, clean air and water and access to outdoor and recreational opportunities. The county's growing population fueled mainly by in migration is a sign of the area's attractiveness and confirmation that the quality of life is a major economic asset.

Rapid population growth, detailed in Chapter 3, has been the major driver in the county's economic vitality. The population of older, working, financially established adults has rapidly increased as those in their early 40's to late 50's have chosen to relocate to Flathead County. With time and demographic changes, the economy has transitioned to reflect an increase in the number of incomes resulting in more business activity and job growth.

## CHAPTER 6: TRANSPORTATION

The quality and quantity of a transportation system can define a community. A transportation system 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.

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<sup>1</sup> State of the Rockies; Report, Colorado College, 2004

Chapter 6 is intended to provide information on future transportation needs in the context of projected growth and development. Any transportation system must be flexible and capable of adapting to a rapidly growing Flathead County. Transportation planning examines travel patterns and trends and creates policies that meet mobility needs without creating adverse impact 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 and mass transit. Glacier Park International Airport is also 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. Services cost money and increasing services costs more money. 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 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, the beneficial use of natural resources has been to sustain lives and livelihoods. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, industries such as timber harvest, milling, mining, farming and ranching in the county have shared a balance with real estate development, tourism and outdoor recreational activities. Flathead County in the past, as well as today is, dependent on the availability and utilization of natural resources.

The Montana state constitution states that all citizens are entitled to clean air and water, and this growth policy affirms that for Flathead County. Air and water are basic elements of the natural resources that are part of a complex environmental system. The water cycle encompasses all the aspects of water quality, flooding and drought. The carbon and oxygen cycles affect air quality. There are many other nutrient cycles that have an effect on the quality 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. There are over 40 lakes and 3 major rivers surrounded by or adjacent to public lands. Flathead Lake extends from Flathead County into Lake County and encompasses 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 and is 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 including over 200 lakes and streams and over 730 miles of hiking trails<sup>2</sup>.

Private timberlands generate positive contributions to Flathead County's economy through timber production and maintenance of healthy forests, watershed protection, wildlife habitat, and other 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 to accommodate agricultural uses, extractive industries and residential and commercial development. The two main tributaries that flow through the valley floor, the Flathead River and Swan River, create prime agricultural soils and critical riparian areas.

Flathead County has a long history of beneficial utilization of its natural resources. Agriculture and timber production have provided a solid economic base for residents and a record of stewardship that has effectively preserved the abundant natural resources that are enjoyed today. These resource industries are based on stable, ongoing production of essential products. Their role in the protection of natural resources is recognized, as is the importance of their continued presence.

The Flathead County Growth Policy public input meetings from 2005 to 2006 had 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 were developed from a public involvement process and are intended to promote and protect the public health, safety, and welfare of Flathead County.

## **CHAPTER 9: 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 by defining a community's goals and policies to reach those goals (76-1-106 M.C.A.). A growth

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<sup>2</sup> National Park Service, Glacier National Park

policy is also created for the sake of efficiency and economy in the process of community development (76-1-106 M.C.A.). This Growth Policy has fifty Goals and over two hundred supporting Policies. Some of those policies (such as P. 16 .5 - Promote the rehabilitation of historic and/or architecturally significant structures for the purpose of conversion to housing) can be implemented by the Planning Office in the normal course of business as various proposals are processed. There are over one hundred policies that call for specific actions that are beyond the scope of the normal daily application processing activities undertaken by the Planning Office. These policies call for such things 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 strategy and their recommended use is explained. There are existing instruments, such as subdivision regulations, zoning districts and regulations, and neighborhood plans, which are logical segments of the strategy. Some new instruments should be considered and these are suggested. Public participation and hearings are an integral part of the 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. It is important to note that even the best Growth Policy has no impact if it is not implemented. In keeping with Chapter 1 of this document, regulations should protect the public health and safety with a 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. Just as no Growth Policy is a panacea, no implementation technique is perfect. The implementation tools described in this chapter are reasonable and appropriate suggestions for Flathead County based on numerous suggestions received from the public (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary)

## **CHAPTER 10: NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS**

The Montana Code Annotated, MCA 76-1-601, allows any county and municipality in Montana to prepare a growth policy. While the growth policy is designed to be a more general and 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 reflect the intent of the community. In the absence of a neighborhood plan, land use decisions will be guided by the growth policy and existing regulatory documents. The intent of this chapter is to provide a general framework to facilitate the preparation of neighborhood plans.

## **CHAPTER 11: STATEMENT OF COORDINATION**

The Growth Policy does not have jurisdiction over all lands within Flathead County. Multiple individual planning jurisdictions are present. 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 will impact all other areas as people, goods and services travel and live between jurisdictions. It is essential that Flathead County have a plan for coordinating with other jurisdictions on 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.).