

January 18, 2005

Brian Schweitzer
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620-0801

Dear Governor Schweitzer:

We are writing on behalf of the Montana Consensus Council (MCC) to urge you to find a way to fund this essential state agency. The MCC is currently attached to the Department of Administration and receives no state funding. The MCC only receives funding through grants and fees for service, both of which saw a tremendous decline during the last fiscal year. MCC's primary grantor is redistributing funding after June 2005 and will not provide future funds for consensus council work.

The MCC began as a collaboration between Montana's ranchers, conservationists, legislators and federal officials, who were seeking a better way to make natural resource decisions and to resolve controversial issues.

Despite the size of this agency, it has evolved to become a recognized and respected resource for Montana's citizens and officials. This small agency helps foster meaningful public participation, build agreement and resolve complex public issues. The MCC staff also offers leadership and valuable training to Montana's citizens to improve their ability to build agreement and resolve public disputes.

The undersigned attended an educational symposium sponsored by MCC. Several have gone on to create a research and grant writing cooperative for Montanans, which will help level the playing field between the rural and urban parts of our state. The skills needed to resolve the rural/urban conflict and, consequently, work toward establishing the cooperative were learned at the symposium sponsored by MCC.

Across the state, the MCC has touched the lives of many Montanans by helping build consensus on the following issues:

- Coal bed methane and water quality standards
- Sanitation and subdivision rules
- The water management plan for the Clark Fork River
- Medicaid redesign
- Work place mediations
- Natural resource conflicts

Benefits

We think the benefits to the people of Montana are substantial.

First, agency staff trained by the MCC can serve Montanans better, and Montanans trained by the MCC can ensure they have a voice in government. Both will benefit from learning a collaborative way to resolve issues.

Second, it is clear to us that the MCC is valuable in workplace mediation. According to MCC data, the state is losing hours of productivity because of contentious work environments. A fully funded MCC can help resolve this problem.

Third, Montana will be stronger with a state funded MCC, because the more disagreements are addressed through conflict resolution rather than the courts, the less likely Montanans will spend millions of dollars in litigation.

Finally, the MCC's outreach, research and conflict facilitation are essential services that will move Montanans forward together.

Future Work

The MCC is poised to bring tremendous good to Montana. With state funding, they could assist the Legislature in resolving contentious bills before the legislative process begins, help state agencies with tribal consultation, assist county governments on local issues, and work with federal partners to assure Montana citizens are heard on issues of concern.

With state funding, their target audience could move beyond state and federal agencies to include tribal governments, county governments and non-profit organizations.

With state funding, the MCC could continue to provide ongoing training in conflict partnerships to help agencies reduce the number of conflicts that lead to litigation.

The Montana Consensus Council makes it possible for Montanans to have their voices heard, and for state employees to better serve their constituents.

The Montana Consensus Council is good for Montana and good for the nation. We urge you to provide state funding for this essential state agency.

Sincerely,

Mary Sexton, Director
Montana Department of Natural Resources

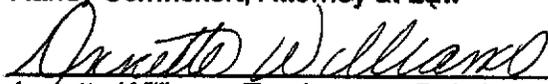
Toni Barclay, Administrative Support
Montana Department of Corrections

Lynn Cochran, Records Management Supervisor
Student Assistance Foundation


Jeannie Huntley, Housing Promotion Manager
Montana Department of Commerce

Cynthia Manning, Regional Social Scientist
USDA – United States Forestry Service

Randy Schwickert, Attorney at Law



Annette Williams, Employment Relations
Department of Labor & Industry

cc: Judy Edward, Director
Montana Consensus Council