SENATE TAXATION
EXHIBIT NO. 10
DATE 2-1-05
BILL NO. SB 332

February 1, 2005

Honorable Chairman Senator Elliott and Senators:

My name is Bea Ann Melichar, I live at 641 Luther Circle, Billings Montana in Senate District 28.

Let me first thank you for the time that you have committed to serving the residents of the Great State of Montana in this citizens legislature. It is indeed a great service that you have committed yourself to.

For the past 17 years I have had the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Yellowstone County Council on Aging in Yellowstone County. This agency has provided essential services for the Senior Citizens of Yellowstone County for the past 30 years. Year after year the requests and needs for these essential services has continued to grow as the elderly population grows. In 1980 there were about 13,000 people over the age of 60 in Yellowstone County, now there are over 23,000. Across the nation about 17% of the population is over the age of 60. In EVERY town in Yellowstone County, people over the age of 60 make up more than 17% of the population.

Those of you who served in the legislature in 2003, know about the paper plate campaign that demonstrated that older people will go to bed hungry without the Meals on Wheels and congregate meals programs. These are frail people who with just a little help can stay in their own homes.

In July of 2002 there were 243 different people on the Meals on Wheels program in Yellowstone County. One year later 46 of that original 243 were still on the program. 84 had died or gone into a nursing home and (113) one hundred and thirteen had left the program because they were able to care for themselves. Without meals on wheels every single person would have had to spend some time in a facility instead of being in their own homes.

By July of 2003 there were 262 individuals on meals on wheels (a 7% increase over July of 2002). One year later 139 of the original 262 were still on the program. 32 had died, 40 had moved into a nursing or assisted living facility and 51 had left the program because they were able to care for themselves.

In July of 2004 there were 261 people on the meals on wheels program. We could not afford to increase the number of participants and we were turning people away from the program and limiting the boundaries of service.

Federal funding for this program has remained flat for the past 16 years while the cost to provide the service continues to increase at approximately $10,000 per year. And that is without meeting all the needs. Our Meals on Wheels Coordinators have one of the

toughest jobs because they are the ones who have to tell an elderly man or woman that there is no more room on the program because the funding is not available.
At the end of the fiscal year, we had a $24,000 deficit in the meals on wheels program. Without the special state fund allocation of a little over $19,000 we would have had a $43,263 deficit. $43,263 is equal to 8,811 meals or almost 1 ½ months of meals to homebound individuals. At an average cost of $4.91 for a home delivered meal in Yellowstone County last year, the State funded $.37 per meal.

Meals are also provided in a group setting at locations across the county. Over the past 5 years there has only been an 8% increase in federal funds or a total of $12,000. This hasn't even kept up with inflation. At the same time the cost of a meal has risen from an average of $3.96 to $5.00 per meal a 21% increase. This past year we had only $4,547 of state funds supporting this program or 8 cents per meal.

One certified, trained Ombudsman in Yellowstone County visits and handles disputes in the 11 nursing homes and 33 assisted living and personal care homes in the county. Because the stress is so extreme with this position, partly because of the number of cases they manage, excellent people can only handle this position for about 18 months. We desperately need funding for another full time position in Yellowstone County to advocate for people who can't or are afraid to speak up for themselves. The approximate cost in Yellowstone County for another Ombudsman would be $40,000 per year.

We are fortunate in Yellowstone County to have received a three year pilot project called "The Resource Center." This project connects seniors and physically disabled individuals to ALL the programs that they are eligible for. Many other agencies are referring their difficult cases to this program. The Resource Center is a federally funded 3 year pilot program with an annual cost of about $150,000 per year. This is one government program that operates 7 days a week and is only closed for four holidays. In the year they have been in operation they have assisted over 1,200 different individuals to connect with essential services. Without the funding to continue this program people will not get connected to all the services that are available to assist them.

We all have experienced driving behind the older person who is driving right down the middle of two lanes and in our minds have said…"what are they doing driving…why doesn't their family take their car away from them." Transportation equals independence and when that vehicle is gone so is the concept of independence. In Billings we are fortunate to have several options for senior transportation, however with the increased costs of fuel, insurance, and health insurance for employees the cost for transportation services rises every year. However, funding from all levels has remained stagnant or decreased…and our only choice is to decrease the number of rides that we provide.

Deficits in last years funding are having a negative affect on services this year and in Yellowstone County we will be making some serious decisions on how much service we can continue to provide. We cannot continue to loose money and while we are dedicated to fundraising to support our essential services, fundraising is not easy…Old people don't have the appeal that a young child has in a fundraising campaign. Aging programs and

services should not have to rely on raising funds through bake sales, and quilt raffles to provide essential services to the older residents of our communities.

Aging programs and services in the State of Montana are on the brink of a huge CRISIS and this is before the first of the aging baby boomers begin to need these essential programs. Across the State some agencies are already reducing services. Last year 37,000 fewer meals were served through out Montana.

The Aging network was asked to come up with a solution to this funding problem and we have one that must be given serious consideration. Please pass out of committee and onto the Senate floor SB~~322~~ 332.

Thank you for your positive consideration to this request.