

“Montana, A Federal Park or A Livable State?” by Dr. Jerry H. B. Thompson Falls

My focus today is not to ask for money for public education, or to support one legislative bill over another bill, or to endorse one particular political party over another. Instead, my goal is to appeal to the members of this committee to remember that they are Montana citizens and that their actions during this legislative session should primarily be focused on continuing to make Montana a safe and caring environment to raise a family. Without families and their ability to have children, there would be no future senior citizens nor would there be any future generations to carry on the role of the American citizen. A strong working family contributes towards and is needed for a quality educational system and successful democracy. .

Being born in Conrad, Montana, in 1945, graduating from Flathead High School in 1963, and having three higher education degrees from the Montana University System, I can speak with pride that I have received a top notch education. With a short experience at Cut Bank High School, followed up with two years in the military, and then many years at Ronan, I have seen many changes in the Montana educational system. This includes nine years as an administrator in Wyoming along with the past thirteen years as superintendent of schools at Thompson Falls.

The most significant change that I have seen in Montana over the forty years since I received my first college degree, has been with the reduction of the middle class family worker. I can remember while I was at Ronan Middle School, that our staff would make statements about the low salaries, high degree of poverty, and poor educational systems in Idaho, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Since that time, Idaho has caught and surpassed Montana with its salaries for all workers and its reduction in poverty. Montana has now fallen in the ranks, to join the likes of Mississippi and Louisiana in respect to economic and poverty conditions. See the final page of this document for a table to support this statement. None of our neighboring states are near Montana in this analysis of economic conditions.

Montana is doing an excellent job of educating its students to work outside Montana. I have six children and only one is still working in Montana. The one that works in Montana can only afford to work here since he made some good money in the six years that he was working outside of Montana. He now is using his savings to supplement his wage while he works in Bozeman. It is expected that he will leave the state in the next year to return to a more livable wage.

Thompson Falls Elementary School District has over sixty percent of its students on free and reduced hot lunch. There are no independent basketball or softball leagues for the men in Sanders County since there are not enough working men in this age group to field the teams. At the last count, one out of six of the parents of our elementary students has had experience in jail. One recent report for a grade level indicated 64% of the student's parents had been divorced and only 30% of the students had their original parents, with 28% of these parents having been incarcerated. Poverty does exist outside of our seven Indian reservations. Poverty has no geographical boundaries in Montana.

There are very few jobs that pay the needed salary for a working couple to live in Montana at a level that they can have children and provide for them in a manner that does not cause the family undue stress. This causes many Montana quality workers to leave the state. As they drive across the border, they wave at their replacements. Their replacements are the imported retirees, the vacationers, those with financial resources, and the unskilled workers. Typically, those with the financial resources and those who retire in Montana have children that have already graduated from high school. This group does not contribute towards the future working force in the state.

Recent studies indicate that there are very few college graduates living in Montana. This is no surprise since these individuals can leave the state for higher paying jobs. It appears that Montana has developed an economic philosophy based upon idealism and self-serving interests. Why has Boise, Idaho, become a technology center and not Billings? Why has Wyoming taken a more aggressive approach with its

petroleum resources compared to Montana? Why has Washington, Oregon, and Idaho utilized their timber industry more than Montana? Why have other states allowed their reservations to utilize gambling in a way that will draw more tourist money into their states compared to Montana? Why has Montana not created a vision for future economic development that will provide the taxation to better reduce poverty levels and attract and retain quality Montana workers? Why has the lack of Montana support of its educational system forced school districts to rely on federal dollars to support its schools? Why has the Montana Office of Public Instruction been forced into receiving over sixty percent of its funding from the federal government in order to supervise just fifteen percent of its budget? Has the lack of state financial support forced OPI into becoming just an instrument of the federal government instead of a leader in helping Montana schools?

The federal constitution delegates public education to the states. Only with "real" economic development can Montana afford to support its schools so that federal dependence can be lessened at the local and state levels. This will also allow Montana to attract and maintain quality workers to include quality teachers and administrators. Currently, Montana's choices for funding education at a quality level are to raise taxes or to cut other governmental programs. A strong percentage of the billion dollar surplus should be used to create a Montana economic vision and the implementation of this vision. Only in this manner, will adequate funding of Montana schools be a reality and long lasting.

The information coming out of specific agencies concerning the Montana economy is not reported in a manner that is in the best interests of a Montana family worker. The low unemployment rates published, the higher than average inflationary rates in Montana, and the one billion dollar surplus can't hide the fact that Montana is still along side Mississippi and Louisiana based upon poverty rates, low working family wages, and a lack of health insurance for our children. The affluent are doing fine but for those who want to make a living, get married, and have children while staying in Montana, the outlook is still quite dismal.

It is also quite bleak for a legislative process that does not allow for annual sessions, that allows too many bills to be presented each session, and that does not allow the time for accurate information to be presented and discussed by all legislators. As a result, the legislative process does not create an environment for quality decisions. The political system is broken and has forgotten its purpose.

In summary, I ask that this committee make its decisions, not based upon one's party affiliation but instead, based upon what is best for the future of Montana families. The legislators should schedule a special session that would allow for no legislative bills to be presented but instead would just focus on hearing accurate information about the "real" Montana economy and would then discuss a vision for the economic future of this state. This vision should be based upon consensus and not the typical political format. Family and educational concepts are too important to become political warfare.

Time is running out before the employed Montana worker will be in the minority and the Montana legislature will be controlled by recent Montana imports, to include both the retirees and financially secure individuals, of which both groups have a similar agenda. Their agenda, in most cases, is to allow them to have complete control of their personal lands and homes while keeping the rest of the state from establishing an economy that will allow for a quality family life. In other words, they want their individual rights within a federal park concept and one knows the types of jobs that exist within a federal park. It is now up to the legislature to determine which agenda is best for Montana families. If the legislators do not make this decision then who will do it?

**CREATE A VISION FOR MONTANA THAT ALLOWS FOR
QUALITY WORKERS AND STRONG FAMILIES!**

State	Ave Salary Teacher	Rank Teacher Salary	Rank HH Income	Medium Household Income 3 Yr Ave	Poverty 2 Yr Ave	Rank Poverty
New Hampshire	\$42,689	25	1	\$57,352	5.60%	1
New Jersey	\$53,663	7	2	\$56,772	8.30%	5
Maryland	\$50,303	12	3	\$56,763	9.20%	8
Connecticut	\$56,516	1	4	\$55,970	9.10%	7
Minnesota	\$45,010	19	5	\$55,914	7.20%	2
Alaska	\$51,136	10	6	\$54,627	9.40%	9
Virginia	\$43,936	20	7	\$53,275	9.70%	13
Hawaii	\$45,456	17	8	\$53,123	8.90%	6
Massachusetts	\$53,274	8	9	\$52,354	9.70%	12
Colorado	\$43,318	21	10	\$51,022	9.90%	15
Utah	\$38,976	38	11	\$50,614	9.50%	10
Delaware	\$51,122	11	12	\$50,152	8.20%	3
California	\$56,444	2	13	\$49,894	13.20%	36
Washington	\$45,437	18	14	\$48,688	12.00%	29
Wisconsin	\$41,687	27	15	\$47,220	11.00%	22
Nevada	\$43,211	22	16	\$46,984	10.90%	21
Rhode Island	\$54,809	4	17	\$46,199	11.50%	25
Illinois	\$53,820	6	18	\$45,787	12.40%	33
Vermont	\$43,009	24	19	\$45,692	8.20%	4
Nebraska	\$39,635	35	20	\$44,623	9.60%	11
Michigan	\$54,474	5	21	\$44,476	12.30%	32
Pennsylvania	\$52,640	9	22	\$44,286	10.90%	20
New York	\$55,181	3	23	\$44,228	14.60%	39
Ohio	\$47,791	14	24	\$44,160	11.30%	24
Missouri	\$38,247	44	25	\$43,988	11.50%	26
Kansas	\$38,622	39	26	\$43,725	11.10%	23
Wyoming	\$39,537	36	27	\$43,641	9.90%	16
Georgia	\$45,848	15	28	\$43,217	12.50%	34
Iowa	\$38,381	42	29	\$43,042	9.90%	17
Indiana	\$45,791	16	30	\$43,003	10.80%	19
Oregon	\$47,829	13	31	\$42,617	12.10%	30
Arizona	\$42,324	26	32	\$42,590	13.90%	38
Idaho	\$40,111	32	33	\$42,519	10.00%	18
Texas	\$40,476	30	34	\$41,275	16.70%	47
South Dakota	\$33,236	50	35	\$40,518	13.00%	35
Florida	\$40,598	29	36	\$40,171	12.20%	31
North Dakota	\$35,411	48	37	\$39,594	9.70%	14
Maine	\$39,864	33	38	\$39,395	11.60%	27
South Carolina	\$41,162	28	39	\$39,326	13.80%	37
North Carolina	\$43,211	23	40	\$39,000	15.10%	42
Tennessee	\$40,318	31	41	\$38,550	15.00%	41
Oklahoma	\$35,061	49	42	\$38,281	11.80%	28
Alabama	\$38,282	43	43	\$38,111	16.00%	45
New Mexico	\$38,469	41	44	\$37,587	17.30%	49
Kentucky	\$39,831	34	45	\$37,396	16.00%	44
Louisiana	\$37,123	46	46	\$35,523	16.80%	48
Montana	\$37,184	45	47	\$35,201	14.60%	40
Arkansas	\$39,226	37	48	\$33,948	16.40%	46
Mississippi	\$36,217	47	49	\$33,659	17.30%	50
West Virginia	\$38,496	40	50	\$32,589	15.80%	43

Note: 1.) Average Salaries based upon 2003-04 from AFT data. **2.)** Medium Income based upon 3 year average from 2002-04 U.S. Census. **3.)** Poverty based upon 2 year average from 2003-04 from U.S. Census.