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## **Huge addition - School hopes to buy part of mountain for education, preservation**

*By KIM BRIGGEMAN / Photographed by LINDA THOMPSON of the Missoulian*

BONNER - Bonner Mountain does what mountains do. It sits there, sentinel to the millennia, presiding over the passings-by below and shrugging timbered shoulders at the triumphs and follies it bears witness to.

Wait another thousand years, the mountain seems to sigh. These things, too, will pass.

In the spring of 1943, eighth-graders at Bonner School climbed its steep slope to a clearing midway up the mountain face. There they assembled flat rocks in the shape of a "B" and whitewashed them.

For most of the next half-century, while men and women labored in the giant lumber mill across the street, graduating classes from the school made the annual climb to refresh the "B." The mountain wore its badge proudly. The students often wore white paint.

It's a tradition Superintendent Doug Ardiana wants to revive. But first he wants the mountain, or at least the nearest 102 acres.

If Ardiana's plan bears fruit, Bonner will become perhaps the only school in the nation to own its own mountain - a hillside forest park on which to conduct outdoor classrooms, to deter development and to preserve what Ardiana calls the "huge emotional attachment" to an outdoors-oriented culture in Bonner.

"The mountain represents a longstanding connection for our community to the forest and timber industry," Ardiana said. "I think it'll fit into what our community wants to preserve - our rural heritage and the pristine environment of our campus."

Michele Mitchell agrees. She grew up in Bonner and her two daughters go to school there now. She takes them sledding down a trail on Bonner Mountain, just as her father, John Price, took her and her brother Terry a generation ago.

"I think we laugh harder now as adults than we did as children," she said. "And it hurts more, too."

Mitchell is on the school board at Bonner that last month gave its wholehearted consent to try to buy the mountain.

"I don't want to sound negative when I say this, but with the way everything is changing out here, with the uncertainty of everything, I would like to see something just remain as it is," she said.

The school sent a letter of support for a grant application submitted to the Natural Resource Damage Program, the state Justice Department program created in 1990 to prepare Montana's

lawsuit against Atlantic Richfield Co. Some settlement funds are currently in use for restoration planning for the Milltown Dam cleanup.

The grant was submitted by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Milltown Superfund Redevelopment Working Group and Missoula County. It included the 101.92 mountain acres the school has its eyes on, along with three smaller parcels in the area in which FWP is interested.

Those smaller parcels are adjacent to an envisioned river confluence park - 19 1/2 acres south of the former dam reservoir, 47 acres across the Blackfoot River from the shuttered Stimson Lumber mill, and 11 acres along the Blackfoot just upstream from Bonner.

Final disposition of those properties, once they're purchased from Plum Creek, is up to The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land.

"It's viable. It's unusual," the Nature Conservancy's Jim Berkey said of the school's proposal. "It's probably not how we envisioned a lot of the land disposition happening, but we've learned sometimes there are unusual situations that meet all the community and conservation goals that we've identified."

Those goals include protecting watershed, wildlife and fisheries. But Berkey said they are also intended to maintain or enhance the overall public benefits of the land - public access and future economic sustenance.

The school would work with locals versed in environmentally friendly logging practices "to provide an appropriate fire zone so we wouldn't have standing dead (trees) in there," Ardiana said. At least two local loggers have expressed interest in helping out.

The mountain was scarred during recent timber cuts by a zigzagging logging road.

"That's one of the things that we would probably get re-established, a meadow feel to the mountain, and look to have those roads go away," the superintendent said.

Berkey said the decision on the grant is expected by December, but there should be some indication of its chances before that. It's not a slam-dunk. The granting program focuses on replacing or restoring resources affected by mining in the basin over the past century.

"That's the filter they look at," Berkey said. "From my standpoint, personally, the innovative and unique nature of (the school's proposal) is wonderful. It certainly meets and exceeds some of our goals as The Nature Conservancy. ... We can really enhance some kind of community element here. Whether or not that fits perfectly with NRD's goals is another question."

Grant or no grant, Ardiana is intent on obtaining the mountain, which is priced at \$1,000 an acre.

"If it fails we'll be looking at other options, which could be a general bond," he said. "It'd be \$100,000, but in the big picture, priceless. For our community to be able to purchase that kind of quality piece of land for all eternity for our school to have, \$100,000 is a great deal."

"It's always been the backdrop to the school," agreed Mitchell. "We want it to stay that way, and we want people to be able to go up there and enjoy it."