

# **Missoulian** online

Land Use/Environmental Trends

Subcommittee 1999-2000

January 21, 2000

## **Flathead County going to pieces**

**Exhibit 4**

By MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian

### **Minor subdivisions far outpace rest of the state, worrying some officials**

**KALISPELL** - Flathead County is losing ground, as land continues to be subdivided at a rate unheard of anywhere else in Montana.

According to annual figures compiled by the state, Flathead County saw 252 minor subdivisions in 1999, creating 464 new lots. That subdivision rate is more than twice that of any other county, and has implications ranging from decreased agricultural acreage to increased tax bills.

"Every year, the Flathead is way ahead of everyone else," said Karla Day, compliance specialist with the state Department of Environmental Quality. The DEQ has final say on subdivisions occurring outside city master plan areas, making sure water supplies and sewage disposal systems are adequate before signing off.

It would be easy to chalk up the overwhelming number of minor subdivisions to an increasing Flathead population, except that the county, while registering twice as many subdivisions, is not registering twice as many newcomers. In addition, the minor subdivision trend isn't reflected in the number of major subdivisions. (A minor subdivision - five lots or fewer - has far less red tape than major subdivisions.)

Although the Flathead is way ahead of other counties in minor subdivisions, it is running neck and neck - even a bit behind - with other booming counties when it comes to major subdivisions. So the vast number of minor subdivisions must be because of something other than population growth.

State officials hinted that one reason for the discrepancy might be the way in which the Flathead is growing. The Flathead is subdividing in a haphazard way, officials said, with individual landowners knocking off an acre or two here and there with no real coordinated direction or plan.

However, in places like Gallatin County, well-planned major subdivisions consisting of hundreds of lots are far more common, meaning far more major subdivisions, but fewer minor subdivisions.

And a big difference between a 300-lot subdivisions and a two-lot subdivision is that the 300-lot development is far more likely to be well-planned, with paved streets, sidewalks, parks and access to a sewage treatment plant.

But Flathead County Commissioner Howard Gipe refuses to believe the numbers indicate the Flathead is any more disorganized than any other place in the state. Gipe says he is keeping a handle on land subdivision by refusing to put his signature on any major subdivision that isn't connected to a sewage treatment plant. A minor subdivision - such as a couple of lots from a family farm - might slip past with a septic system, he said, but as long as he is in charge, no septic systems will be allowed on major subdivisions.

"Septics are backward thinking," he said, "and we're not going to go backward."

But by limiting major subdivisions, some believe Gipe inadvertently may be causing the creation of more minor subdivisions, which have a cumulative effect as great as or greater than their bigger counterparts.

According to Jake Kammerer, sanitarian for Ravalli County, "The overall impact of the minors is far greater than the majors, you just don't see it. It sneaks up on you."

If a developer is refused a major subdivision because of lack of sewer service, he may look to doing several minor projects, which Gipe admits are not as well scrutinized.

The upshot, Kammerer said, is that everyone pays. According to Kammerer, subdivisions "never pay for themselves, no matter what." Instead, he said, the money spent to service those new residents exceeds the amount collected from them in taxes.

A study bolstering that position recently was released by Citizens for a Better Flathead, a group billing itself as a "smart growth" organization. According to that study, for every dollar Flathead County collected in residential taxes, \$1.23 was spent in county and school services. By comparison, for every dollar collected on farmland, only 26 cents was spent in services.

"The greatest impact these subdivisions are having is on the school districts," Kammerer said. "But you can't deny a subdivision solely on the basis of its impacts to schools. The schools take the impact, but the schools can't stop the impact."

The discrepancy between land uses and costs of services, the CFBF report says, plays a large role in the fact that while the population of Flathead County has increased by about 23 percent in the past seven years, real-estate taxes have gone up by about 75 percent. Those numbers, the report concludes, indicate agricultural lands more than pay for themselves and residential subdivisions do not, belying the argument that residential growth supports the local tax base.

Meanwhile, total residential acreage is increasing and the valley loses about 1 1/2 acres of farmland every hour, according to the report. The transfer of land from agricultural use to residential has its own problems, the CFBF report says, not the least of which is weeds.

The subdivided ranchette is too big to maintain, but too small to graze, according to Citizens for a Better Flathead, leading to weed problems that often spill into adjoining farm lands, increasing the strife between urban and rural, newcomer and old-timer.

This is particularly important in a fiscally strapped county where the number of nearly non-regulated minor subdivisions is twice that of any other county. Ravalli County's Kammerer - whose Bitterroot home is No. 2 in minor subdivisions with 119, totaling 229 lots - believes part of the Flathead's problem may be disorganized growth. However, he said, a larger part of the problem is an advertising campaign that perhaps has been a bit too successful.

For years, he said, the Flathead has billed itself as a place to come and play, work and live. The attractions - Flathead Lake, The Big Mountain ski resort, Glacier National Park, world-class golf resorts - have lured lots of wealthy but seasonal residents, all of whom want their five acres of paradise.

And more and more often, Kammerer said, they want to pay for those five acres by selling 10, which only increases the number of minor subdivisions throughout the Flathead.

Gipe, who is in his third term as a Flathead County commissioner, is chairman of the Land-Use Committee (formerly the Subdivision Committee) for the Montana Association

of County Officials. He and his committee colleagues will be in Helena on Wednesday to meet with state lawmakers and talk about subdivisions and planning.

His intent, he said, is to push for strong review of subdivision plans - large and small - and to urge tougher state laws regarding septic systems. Gipe also wants to close a loophole created by the "family transfer exemption," a mechanism designed to allow parents to subdivide their properties in order to pass along a home site or two to their children without any subdivision review.

Although it's a good idea in theory, Gipe said, the exclusion is being misused by some, who give land to their children only to see it immediately sold. The family transfer, he said, never was intended as a loophole to allow people to skirt subdivision review, but that is exactly what some are using it for.

"We have a lot of work to do on subdivision laws, and you can see that's especially true in Flathead County," Gipe said. "I don't believe in telling a fellow what he can or cannot do with his land, but we can't have a septic tank every half-acre down the road. And if we keep going the way we're going, that's just what we'll get."

[ [Return to Montana News index](#) ] [ [Return to Missoulian home page](#) ]

---

[Home Page](#)		[Montana News](#)		[Outdoors](#)		[Sports](#)		[Montana Life](#)		[Obituaries](#)		[Health](#)
[Weather](#)		[Horoscopes](#)		[Classifieds](#)		[At A Glance](#)		[To Subscribe](#)		[Talk To Us](#)		
[Singles Connection](#)		[Archives](#)		[Stock Quotes](#)		[Where On The Web](#)		[Features](#)		[Opinion](#)		
[National/World](#)												

---

If your radio looks like this, →  
it sucks.

