

October 15, 2018

County Commissioners
Stillwater County
PO Box 970
Columbus, MT 59019

Dear Commissioners:

I offer the following comments on the planning document you are about to adopt. First let me say that I am at fault for not noticing the various ways you state that you used to alert the public to the planning effort that is in the final stages. I would take exception, however, to one way you state that you used to notify interested publics: that is, you reached out to those individuals and groups that you believed would be materially interested in the issues involved in county planning (Page 2-1, Section 2-3, first paragraph, exact wording: "outreach to potentially interested individuals and organizations"). Yet, I nor any of our group who have been working towards a Citizens Initiated Zone in southern Stillwater County were ever notified of the effort to reach out for comments. Since our group numbers over 800 landowners, and between 25 and 60 of us have turned out for various public events, meetings and commissioners' meetings during the last four years, it would appear to an inexcusable omission to not reach out to at least a few of us.

I think there are some serious omissions from the County planning document, particularly for south Stillwater County, but in some cases for the county as a whole. I hope that in spite of the late date of my comments, you will consider these issues.

Details follow:

- Chapter 3: Historical Background has at least two serious omissions. On Page 3-3, Section 3-6 discusses **Mineral Development**. There is no mention of oil and gas development, even though there have been several episodes of development of these minerals in the county. In particular, in the foothills of the Beartooths there have been several development pushes for both oil and natural gas, yet no mention was made in this chapter. In fact, one of the salient points about exploration and development of oil in this area of the county is that it would need special methods, including hydraulic fracturing to have successful production, a point mentioned in oil and gas industry documentation as early as the 1950's. Yet there was not a mention of these minerals in this entire section.
- In Section 3-10, Page 3-4, the **history of planning** is summarized. While several topics in this section are at least outlined for what attention has been directed to them, a principal item of county infrastructure, Roads and Bridges, is merely stated to have had a plan prepared in 1990, with

- no indication that it has ever been updated to reflect new industrial uses and increased recreation traffic. So, there is no attempt to develop this important topic at the historical level to be pursued in following sections
- Chapter 4, Existing Characteristics and Features, begins in its introductory paragraph on Page 4-1 addressing Land Uses in Section 4-1, with a summary of land ownership and reference to a map with **conservation easements** delineated. A quick examination of this map (Page 4-2) shows a considerable number of such easements, but no further mention of them in the document until Chapter 7, which is more procedural than issue oriented. It would seem that these easements would bear some discussion, since a fair number of landowners have felt the need to place easements on their lands to ensure future conservation efforts and maintenance of rural characteristics. With these values given such expression this would seem to warrant attention in county planning, particularly in the trends section.
 - On Page 4-3, in the Land Use section, is a subsection entitled **Tract Land**, with a somewhat vague description that these are lands in larger tracts, previously not governed by subdivision law. The description begs any explanation of how they are governed under present law, and what requirements might be considered under County planning. It is obvious from the text that there are two concentrations of rural subdivisions, 1) along the major roads near the larger rivers—Yellowstone and Stillwater near Columbus and Park City, and 2) then further south near the rivers and streams coming out of the Forest Service controlled mountainous lands. While a little effort would identify the main functions of these subdivisions—commuters to city jobs near the major rivers and roads, and recreation and amenity uses near the mountains, no attempt is made to set the stage for county planning for the very different functions of these groups of county residents or land owners.
 - The subsection on the same page entitled **Other** (land uses) entirely omits a recent totally new instance of Land Use in southern Stillwater County: Tippet Rise Music and Art Center. The center has an extensive web site, yet its presence and goals of being a major destination bringing in visitors to the county for classical music, sculpture and other arts, outdoor recreational use as well as experimental ranching practices is entirely omitted. This facility could profoundly affect the surrounding community near Fishtail, including infrastructure and visitor numbers, but is not listed as a land use.
 - Section 4-6, **Public Facilities**, among other topics contains the road and bridge portion of the county infrastructure. Maintenance and replacement of bridges and roads apparently comes from property taxes, fuel taxes and “other nontax resources” which are not identified. There is no description of the relationship between major industrial or recreational development in the county and maintenance of this infrastructure. That includes no recognition of the role Stillwater Mining Company has played in paying for the impacts it has on the road and bridge system, nor any recognition of the impacts that may come with oil and gas development, or Tippet Rise related traffic, nor identification of how such developmental

- impacts might be paid for. Subdivision related road and bridges are not mentioned either. It appears that the road and bridge program is still primarily related to farm to market impacts and not to future oriented planning (pages 4-26 to 4-31).
- Section 4-7, **Natural Resources**. The **Oil and Gas** subsection on Page 4-44 has apparently not been updated since either the 1990's for southern parts of the county, or 2007 for the northern part of the county. Considerable other planning has been done for the area of Stillwater County in documents such as the Land Use Plans for the Bureau of Land Management Billings Field Office area and the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Both have sections on oil and gas that are more up-to-date, and surely the State of Montana has more recent descriptions of the results of oil and gas development than are present in the County's document. Perhaps county records could be used as well.
 - There is no mention of **solar resources** in this section (4-7) on natural resources, including the recent development of a utility-scale solar facility at Reed Point.
 - In the **Ground Water** section of Natural Resources (pp. 4-51 to 4-53 , Section 4-7) there is no mention of the recent work by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology on the limitations on groundwater within the overthrust geological belt of formations near the mountains in southern portions of the county. This tilted geology may require future planning limitations on industrial and residential development because of water scarcity.
 - There is an **error** after page 4-60, where the next page is 5-61. Page 5-61 is labeled Chapter 5, Existing conditions, although it is part of Chapter 4.
 - A similar pagination and chapter labeling **problem** exists on "Page 5-62".
 - Chapter 5, **Projected Trends**. The first section, Land Use, (Page 5-1) does not address any of the land use trends seen in southern Stillwater County, including:
 - **Oil and Gas development**, including the known planned use of **hydraulic fracturing** with its problems affecting water use, air quality, private structures, scenic setting, and its heavy effect on county infrastructure.
 - **New recreational** and amenity uses in the landscape, such as represented by Tippet Rise Art Center and other potential tourist and visitor related activities. Any new planning should take into account the exploding public visitation numbers for outdoor sites like nearby Yellowstone National Park, the recreational use of rivers, and other similar activities potentially impacting Stillwater County.
 - **Hard Rock mining activity** (the planned doubling of mineral production from Stillwater Mine) not only affects the Forest Service lands where the mining occurs, but will require increased waste rock disposal and tailings facilities, which are not mentioned in this section.
 - **Disappearance of traditional** ranch operations in the southern portion of the county and its effect on present school operations, and other public service functions.

- Section 5.5, Natural Resources (Page 5-10) does not even mention **climate change**. All science studies point to much more variable weather, with increasing temperatures. Perhaps the county planning should look at community resilience in the face of increasing wildfire occurrence, and occasional catastrophic flooding, especially along built-up communities.

I hope that my comments can be considered in the updated county growth planning document, in spite of my being unaware of its creation or review periods in a timely way.

Sincerely,

Burt Williams
Fishtail, MT 59028