

**Missoula County Open Lands Working Group
July 1, 2006**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Missoula County's agricultural lands, forests, river corridors, wildlife habitats, and scenic open spaces are experiencing dramatic change as a direct response to widespread development pressure from land subdivision, construction and increased residential housing density. When a critical area is converted to other uses, the county's landscape is dramatically changed and this change is often irreversible. Many county residents view this land change as a threat to the county's rural character and unique natural resources. Perhaps equally importantly, it is seen as an impediment to the ongoing productivity of agricultural and forest lands and a threat to the very county characteristics that are valued by all residents. In view of the county's rapid growth, there is little time left before this development pre-empts the possibility of effectively preserving our open land and county character.

The county's future landscape legacy depends on the choices rural landowners make today for their lands. These choices rely, at least partly, on the range of options available to these landowners as they implement short- and long-term plans for their property. To address this important need, the Missoula Board of County Commissioners (BCC) contracted with Five Valleys Land Trust to convene, facilitate, and staff a citizen-driven countywide working group to make recommendations to it concerning open-lands protection. The BCC then appointed eighteen citizen landowners, two from each of nine planning regions, to serve on the Missoula County Open Lands Working Group (Working Group). This Working Group explored a wide range of tools Missoula County might employ to help private landowners interested in voluntarily conserving their land. The Group explored other communities' achievements and, more importantly, listened to Missoula County residents, and then developed recommended conservation mechanisms tailored to the county's unique conditions and needs. This report is the group's recommendations to the BCC.

As used in this report, 'Tools' are defined as techniques Missoula County citizens might use to protect agricultural lands, timberland, open space, wildlife habitat, wetland and riparian resources, or public access. The researched tools consisted of a combination of incentives, market mechanisms, and support for directing development in a way that preserves the unique character of the county (see Section 4).

The term 'Open Lands' refers to land that is undeveloped and has agricultural, timber, recreational, wildlife habitat, scenic, or historic value. The project focus is on private lands where development might take place and the land's use change dramatically. (Please see Appendix B for a summary of the types of ownership in each region of the county).

The Working Group saw itself as an important liaison between the citizens of Missoula County and the BCC. The Working Group researched tools used in other geographical

areas, studied land-use change in Missoula County and then held two outreach meeting with citizens in each of the county’s nine areas. They then developed criteria for recommendation recommended tool selection and worked to incorporate the specific citizen concerns and interests into the group’s recommendations.

The Working Group recommends the following tools receive strong Missoula County backing and be implemented at the earliest opportunity. This report presents rationale and recommended actions for each tool and its technical aspects are detailed in Appendices D-G.

HIGHEST- RANKED TOOLS	OTHER RECOMMENDED TOOLS
Conservation easements/PDR	Comprehensive planning
Clearinghouse for rural landowners	Regional planning
Natural resource regulations	Infrastructure concurrency
Recognition for unique/historic landscape	Transfer development rights
Agricultural property taxation	Fee simple acquisition
Forestland property taxation	Bridge funding
Subdivision regulations with mitigation requirements	Income tax credits for conservation easements
Impact fees	Estate planning assistance
Zoning	Income tax credits or loans for capital improvements
Right-to-farm/ranch	Agricultural districts
Education for newcomers about living in agricultural and forest landscapes	Value-added processing/branding of local products
	Agritourism
	Local, direct and cooperative marketing
	Product planning and diversification

Although the Working Group worked to understand the relevant economic, social, and ecological ramifications of each tool, many are complex and in some cases, more research, community involvement, and background work will be needed to implement certain tools.

To be effective in the limited time remaining for our open lands, Missoula County should immediately pursue multiple and wide ranging tools and strategies. The Working Group has kept the tool kit comprehensive to emphasize incentives and market-based techniques

for open lands preservation. Nearly all tools are proactive to ensure landowner opportunity for conservation of land and open areas. For some tools, particularly incentive-based techniques, their effective implementation may require the use of county or state regulation.

For effective implementation of these tools, the County needs to quickly take the following steps:

- Create an Open Lands Board to oversee an Open Lands Program within Rural Initiatives.
- Produce a long term open-lands conservation work plan.
- Seek support for necessary state-level legislative changes to support some tools and initiatives.
- Raise funding for support of critical open-land programs.
- Conduct additional studies that will augment open-lands conservation in Missoula County.
- Create a county educational program addressing rural land-use change.

Implementation of these tools will be complex, time-consuming and, in some cases, costly. Many of these tools could require years to have a significant impact. As outlined in the report, some recommended tools can be applied across all regions while others are tailored to specific regional resources and situations. The nine county regions are an effective framework for supporting open-land conservation and some of our recommendations are shaped for specific regions. The county government will need to build more capacity in some regions for continued work on certain issues. We believe the Rural Initiatives Program will work directly in each region and will be instrumental for continued progress in open lands conservation. Therefore BCC's strong support for this type of program is critical to the county's retention of its open land and rural character.