

Missoula County

Media Release

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Missoula County Zoning Updates Promise More Flexibility

To set in motion several updates to zoning rules designed to streamline permitting, add flexibility, and increase predictability in regulations, the County Commissioners and Community and Planning Services (CAPS) department have begun the process of updating zoning regulations. After a series of public outreach forums in January that drew nearly 50 participants, the Planning Board is scheduled to take testimony on the proposed changes on Feb. 21, 2017. From there, the proposal and Planning Board recommendation will head to the Board of County Commissioners in mid-March. Dubbed “Housekeeping Amendments” and “Capital Changes,” the draft regulations are available [online](#). To submit public comment, email jdixon@missoulacounty.us or call (406) 258-4657.

“Missoula’s economy is growing again, and in this climate, it became obvious that our zoning laws have not kept up,” CAPS planner Jennie Dixon said. “Our outdated policies cause longer wait times for permits and contain unclear language that is not easily understood by the general public.”

While only six percent of land in Missoula County has any zoning, no new areas are proposed for zoning in this project. The remaining 94 percent of the land area in Missoula County is not regulated by zoning and will remain unaffected by these changes. The intent of the amendments is to provide improved opportunities for housing and economic growth while protecting quality of life.

“In order to help Missoula County’s economy grow, we need modern land use policies that allow predictability and flexibility for developers,” James Grunke, CEO of the Missoula Economic Partnership said. “The County’s proposal is a great step forward toward that goal, and I believe it will serve the community well for years to come.”

Architects, developers, and planners are among those that historically came into conflict with the county’s land use policy. Missoula-based retired realtor with more than 40 years of experience, who has partnered with Edgell building on many affordable housing projects, Collin Bangs, said he was “pleased to see Missoula County moving in this direction” and believes the changes would accommodate greater opportunity affordable housing.

David Gray, principal architect and owner, DVG Architecture and Planning, agrees.

“The long overdue changes add greater flexibility for multi-use projects that will increase quality of life in the County,” Gray said.

Lori Davidson is the Executive Director of Missoula Housing Authority, which advocates for affordable residential options. Because Missoula's need for affordable housing is at "crisis level," she said that she supports the proposed shift to zoning that allows more mixed use and streamlines the process for responsible development.

"One of the biggest barriers we face is finding available land zoned for housing," Davidson said. "The proposed amendments will allow homes, jobs, and services to be in close proximity, creating a sense of community and reducing auto dependency."

Local agriculture advocates also believe the zoning update will enhance opportunities. "With the recent uptick in subdivision applications and proposals, we need good zoning in place that reflects our community's values and needs," Bonnie Buckingham, Executive Director of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition, said. "Both the newly adopted City and County growth policies emphasize Missoula's desire to keep and enhance our agricultural opportunities, and modifying the zoning code will help accommodate those priorities."

The proposed changes are designed to provide the following:

More Predictability

The proposed "Housekeeping Amendments" ensure the County complies with adopted laws and policies and that zoning regulations align with other departmental regulations. The goal is that any county resident, developer or not, can easily read and understand these regulations and rely on them to be accurate and complete.

Promoting Greater Flexibility

Three of the six proposed "Capital Changes" are designed to increase flexibility in the County's land use regulations. Shifting to "pyramidal zoning" will encourage multi-use developments that respond to residents' increasing desire for entertainment, shopping, and dining options near residential areas and workplaces. This shift will also provide the flexibility needed to allow modern mixes of commercial and industrial uses as well as technology-based industries in more areas of the county.

Revisions to "accessory structures" aim to make it easier to build a shed or garage, including exempting certain structures from needing a permit at all and allowing a greater area devoted to these kinds of buildings.

Another proposed change to the "Hillside Design Standards" removes the 40-foot setback from non-buildable areas, which over the years has been difficult to apply consistently.

Increasing Freedom & Opportunity

The final three "Capital Changes" revise "Home Occupation Standards" to clarify the zoning rules for owners and operators of home-based businesses and streamline permit reviews for such businesses. They also simplify the way to measure "building height," making it easier for designers to draft building plans that conform to the height allowance and a lot's topography. Lastly, CAPS has proposed changing regulations to expand home ownership opportunities on subdivided land in the form of townhomes and condos within the 6 percent of the county that is zoned.



The mission of Missoula County Community and Planning Services (CAPS) is to maintain and enhance a quality of life that makes Missoula County an extraordinary place to live, work, visit, and enjoy. We collaborate with the public to help direct the future of the County and our communities by working cooperatively with residents, landowners, businesses, and not for profit organizations. Our work is devoted to public health and safety, long range land use planning, parkland development and management, trail development and maintenance, community development, and conservation resource management and protection.