

IX. INTERVIEWS

Over the past year we have conducted numerous interviews with business owners, developers, realtors, and others who have a first-hand knowledge of the encouragement and the challenges facing those who want to build our local industrial base. Their insight has helped shape the lines of research we followed in this Study as well as the recommendations made as a result of this research. Early in the process, we realized that many of these individuals were more likely to be candid with their comments and suggestions if we did not directly attribute the comments to them. Therefore, we have grouped the comments by topic, rather than by their source. The following topics are organized generally according to their relative importance.

There of course were differing opinions on many of these topics, and we have listed them as such. So there is certainly a need for debate on how best to address these needs.

The collective comments within the following topics are not exclusive to the listed interviewees. During the many discussions that we had with local entrepreneurs, developers, realtors, business owners, public administrators, fellow consultants and others in the community, we have gleaned information that we believe is important to pass along through this Study.

Here is a list of the interviewees:

1. Steve Nelson and Michael Boehme – Owners of Bonner Property Development
2. Alex Philp – Local entrepreneur, and owner of Geographic Communication Systems, among other businesses
3. Brad Reid - Owner of Diversified Plastics
4. Caitlin Copple – Principal at Hilltop Public Solutions
5. Dan Daly – Roseburg Forest Products
6. Hatton Littman – Director of Technology and Communications, Missoula County Public Schools
7. James Scott – Vice President, First Interstate Bank
8. Jeff Moore – NAI Crowley Moore Brokerage
9. Jim Beiber, Mike McKay, Tom Costen – Montana Rail Link
10. Ken Johnson – Owner of CM Manufacturing

Infrastructure issues:

Most of the comments regarding existing infrastructure were that the currently occupied industrial lands were served generally well by basic infrastructure. Exceptions were the

wide-ranging opinions regarding broadband service, the need for water to be extended to The Wye, and the need for sewer to the Bonner area.

Broadband issues:

Need more competition among providers. Our costs are comparatively higher than in other states, or even other areas of Montana.

The “Open Access Model” has been created in parts of Oregon and Washington. We need to see if this is a conceivably good fit for Missoula’s needs. Do our needs for this network support the public investment required for building it?

In the past, it was difficult to determine the locations of either copper or fiber optic lines. This was partly due to the lack of good records on their location, and also because it gave the providers more control over where and when to extend service.

The recent mapping project indicated a surprisingly well-developed network of fiber-optic lines throughout the urban area.

The Broadband Task Force has enabled open discussion of the future needs for the community and it has created an opportunity for the providers to come to the table and work toward solutions.

Regulations

Regulatory review of building and development proposals was mentioned frequently as an impediment to business expansion. Whether real or perceived, Missoula has a reputation as a difficult place for businesses to obtain necessary permits and approvals for various land use applications. The problems broke down into the following categories:

1. Excessive time to complete review of land use applications.
2. Interpretation of regulations in a limiting way; this was done by taking regulations that seem on the surface to apply to a totally different situation and re-directing them to create an impediment to a particular case.
3. Lack of certainty about whether a proposed use would be able to gain approval. Overlapping and confusing zoning regulations mean that sometimes the decision on whether or not a proposal is accepted may take months of review.

Conflicts with other land uses

The encroachment of residential use into an industrial area creates potential conflicts related to noise, dust, traffic, etc. So there is a need for “buffering” some industrial uses to protect against these perceived or real conflicts. In some cases, the business owner

takes on this responsibility by acquiring adjacent land. This can serve as a buffer and also as an opportunity for future expansion, should the need arise. In other cases, the industry may choose to locate at some distance from less intensive residential uses, such as the areas northwest of the Airport and near the Wye.

Public Sewer

Public sewer can be an important service for some industries, such as breweries, or businesses that process food products. When there is a discussion about extending sewer to any area, it needs to be done in a way that does not create a financial burden on the industries that sewer is intended to serve. The extension of public sewer is a clear stimulus for residential and commercial growth for an area, and it can also address the need to protect groundwater resources for areas that have a concentration of older septic systems.

Real Estate Costs

High property costs can be an impediment to an industry that needs to expand and has outgrown its current facility. The transition of a fledgling industry from its initial location into a facility that can accommodate its potential for growth can be hindered by high real estate costs, as well as lack of suitable sites with needed infrastructure to serve the business.

Clustering of Interdependent Businesses

Many industries will locate adjacent to facilities or businesses that serve their production needs. A local example is Borden Chemical adjacent to Roseburg Forest Products; Borden supplies some of the adhesives that Roseburg uses in its products. Other industries may benefit from clustering near businesses that can share technology or basic office services such as copying or lunch/food services.