

July 19, 2006

Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office
1035 First Avenue West
Kalispell, MT 59901

RE: Letter of Support: Flathead County Growth Policy Draft

Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of Kalispell Chamber of Commerce, representing 700 businesses of every size, sector, and area of the county, I am writing to share with you the Chamber's support and comments on the Flathead County Growth Policy Draft.

The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce has long recognized the important role of good planning to business health and community prosperity. Yet, the unprecedented population growth of the last few years and the surge in residential, retail, and commercial development, cause us to raise the priority of these issues to a new level. In this new environment, the Chamber acknowledges that business, citizens, and local government must do a better job of planning for the future.

As you continue your process of refining the County's Growth Policy, we would like to take this opportunity to offer you the assistance of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce. Some areas of our focus will include the following:

- Providing predictability in the planning, zoning, and development process
- Directing growth to areas where cost effective public services can be provided
- Aligning the payment for growth with the cost of growth
- Creating community prosperity while preserving Montana values and natural resources

General Comments:

This is a well-organized and well-prepared document that has benefited from a fair and comprehensive public process. The complex issues addressed in the Policy will no doubt be subject to discussion and further review as individual portions of the document are brought forward and because of their importance to the citizens of Flathead County.

Specific Comments:

Education and Workforce (P.20.4). The importance of this issue area is understated in the document. There is a growing crisis in the availability of skilled workers. This challenge is identified by Flathead County businesses as their top priority and is the most frequently requested area for business assistance. We must ensure that our education and workforce skills meet those being demanded by employers today and in the future. The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce offers to assist you through initiatives like *Workforce 2020* and *Business Education Partnership*, which are working to leverage the influence of member companies to help shape local and state education and workforce policies to meet this challenge.

Small Business and Entrepreneurial Development (P.20.3). More emphasis should be placed on the development of small business and entrepreneurs as a strategy for creating a healthy and vibrant economy. "Home grown" businesses have a higher affinity for an area and account for

80-90 percent of job growth in the typical market. The *Small Business Development Center* and the *Flathead Regional Business Center* can assist in this endeavor.

Affordable Housing (P.16.2). The county would be well-served if policies that addressed affordable housing were moved up on the priority list. Long considered a purely social service issue, affordable housing is now widely-recognized as a workforce and economic development issue as well. Interviews with local CEO's indicate that housing affordability is a growing impediment to the attraction of workers – particularly entry level workers.

Coordination with other Jurisdictions (G.46). The desire for better City-County cooperation is a common theme we hear in our meetings with local CEO's. The goals and policies in this section are appropriate and welcome.

Evaluation and Implementation (Chapter 9). Attaining this vision for the County will require ongoing oversight. Existing goals and policies must be evaluated, reshaped, and sharpened, while at the same time new goals and policies must be created which will further good planning for the County. This evaluation should lead to recommendations for improving the Growth Policy, or to terminating policies that are not working or if the objectives have been reached. We recommend that the procedures for amending this Policy be clearly laid out, and that evaluation and progress on this plan be reported annually.

In the next year, we will emphasize the voice of business in the implementation of the Growth Policy. Upon approval, we urge you to immediately begin to prioritize and act on the plan. The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce offers its support and assistance to your staff.

Sincerely,

Joe Unterreiner, President
Kalispell Chamber of Commerce