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# Growth, Land Use, and Planning in Bonner County, Idaho

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*Growth, Land Use, and Planning in  
Bonner County, Idaho*

**Situation Assessment**

December 2016

Prepared by the  
*Environmental Dispute Resolution Program*

at the University of Utah



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## About the Environmental Dispute Resolution Program

The University of Utah's EDR Program promotes collaboration, mediation, stakeholder engagement, and other alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes as a means to address environmental and public policy conflicts in Utah and the mountain west. We do so through providing process design, facilitation, mediation, stakeholder engagement, public education, and capacity building services, as well as through academic instruction, research, and analysis.

The EDR Program approach redefines the meaning of ADR, which is usually thought of as an alternative to litigation, to mean "additional dialogue required." In line with this philosophy, we emphasize creating opportunities for dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem solving. This approach builds long-term relationships and produces enduring and creative on-the-ground results.

# Contents

<b>SITUATION ASSESSMENT BACKGROUND</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>VISION AND PRIORITIES FOR BONNER COUNTY</b> .....	<b>7</b>
PRESERVE AND ENHANCE COMMUNITY CHARACTER AND COHESION .....	7
MAKE BONNER COUNTY A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE IN ALL STAGES OF LIFE CAN AFFORD TO LIVE, WORK, AND PLAY.....	7
FOSTER AND INVEST IN BUILDING A VIBRANT ECONOMY .....	8
PROTECT THE COUNTY’S RURAL CHARACTER .....	8
PROTECT THE COUNTY’S WATER QUALITY, LAKES, AND OTHER WATER BODIES.....	9
PRESERVE THE COUNTY’S GREEN SPACE, NATURAL BEAUTY, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECREATION AND HUNTING .....	9
DEVELOP IN A THOUGHTFUL, INTELLIGENT, ORDERLY, AND RESPONSIBLE WAY .....	9
BALANCE PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS WITH COMMUNITY CONCERNS .....	11
MAKE GOVERNMENT EFFICIENT, EFFECTIVE, AND TRANSPARENT .....	11
<b>SOURCES OF TENSION AND DISAGREEMENT</b> .....	<b>13</b>
PERSPECTIVES ON PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS, FREEDOM, AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY .....	13
PERSPECTIVES ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY .....	14
STRONG POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES .....	14
<b>SPECIFIC CONCERNS</b> .....	<b>14</b>
RISK OF UNSUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AREAS OF CITY IMPACT .....	15
RISK OF SPRAWL AND UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH .....	16
RISK OF CREATING A “BUYER BEWARE” SITUATION FOR PROPERTIES AND BUILDINGS .....	16
CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH AFFORDABILITY OF HOUSING AND COST OF LIVING .....	17
THREATS TO WATER QUALITY .....	18
CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH DIVISIVE POLITICS.....	19
GEOGRAPHIC AREAS OF PARTICULAR CONCERN .....	19
<b>PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGING KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND THE PUBLIC</b> .....	<b>19</b>
REINSTATE THE PRIOR BONNER COUNTY ENGAGEMENT AND REVIEW PROCESS FOR PLANNING RELATED DECISION-MAKING .....	20
HOLD LEARNING FORUMS PRIOR TO DECISION-MAKING FORUMS .....	20
MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS AND THE PUBLIC IN REVISITING COMPREHENSIVE PLANS .....	20
MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY IN CLARIFYING COUNTYWIDE VALUES .....	21
MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS IN REVIEWING AND STREAMLINING POLICIES AND PROCESSES .....	21
FOSTER PRODUCTIVE PUBLIC CONVERSATION ABOUT GROWTH, LAND USE, PLANNING, AND RELATED CONCERNS .....	22
ILLUMINATE WHAT IS AT STAKE BY VISUALIZING SCENARIOS AND OPTIONS.....	22

IMPROVE EDUCATION AND INFORMATION SHARING .....22

ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO UTILIZE EXISTING OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE – AND TO ENGAGE  
PRODUCTIVELY .....23

USE MULTIPLE APPROACHES TO GET THE WORD OUT .....24

ENGAGE THE “SUNBIRDS” .....24

**PERSPECTIVES ON COUNTYWIDE COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION .....24**

BENEFITS OF IMPROVED COUNTYWIDE COLLABORATION .....25

POTENTIAL MODELS AND APPROACHES FOR COUNTYWIDE COLLABORATION .....26

CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES FOR COUNTYWIDE COLLABORATION AND/OR REGIONALIZATION OF  
SERVICES.....27

**APPENDIX A: LIST OF STAKEHOLDER GROUPS AND JURISDICTIONS REPRESENTED .....28**



## SITUATION ASSESSMENT BACKGROUND

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During the summer and fall of 2016, Environmental Dispute Resolution Program staff conducted in-depth confidential interviews with 30 individuals representing a diverse range of stakeholder groups in Bonner County, Idaho. The intent of these interviews was to illuminate the diversity of perspectives, areas of agreement and disagreement, and opportunities and challenges related to growth, land use, and planning in the county. A list of stakeholder groups and jurisdictions represented by interviewees is provided in Appendix A.

This report shares the findings from this assessment, which are organized according to: summary of findings; vision and priorities for Bonner County; sources of tension and disagreement; specific concerns; perspectives on engaging key stakeholders and the public; and perspectives on countywide coordination and collaboration.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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Interviewees generally agreed on the following priorities for Bonner County:

- *Preserve and enhance community character and cohesion*
- *Make Bonner County a place where people in all stages of life can afford to live, work, and play*
- *Foster and invest in building a vibrant economy*
- *Preserve and enhance the county's rural character*
- *Protect the county's water quality, lakes, and other water bodies*
- *Preserve the county's green space, natural beauty, and opportunities for recreation and hunting*
- *Develop in a thoughtful, intelligent, orderly, and responsible way*
- *Balance private property rights with community concerns*
- *Make government efficient, effective, and transparent*

Interviewees commonly identified the following growth, development, and planning related sources of tension and disagreement:

- *Perspectives on private property rights, freedom, and personal responsibility*
- *Perspectives on the inevitability, desirability, and risks of countywide growth*
- *Perspectives on economic development and fiscal responsibility*
- *Strong political ideologies*

Specific growth, development, and planning related concerns identified included:

- *Concerns associated with recent Bonner County planning changes*
- *Risk of unsustainable development in Areas of City Impact (ACIs)*
- *Risk of sprawl and unsustainable growth*
- *Risk of creating a “buyer beware” situation for properties and buildings*
- *Concerns associated with affordability of housing and cost of living*
- *Threats to water quality*
- *Concerns associated with divisive politics*
- *Concern about development in the following geographic areas:*
  - *Lakefront and floodplain properties*
  - *The corridor along Highway 95*
  - *The Selle Valley*

Interviewees generally saw significant value in stakeholder and public education and engagement around growth, development, and planning related concerns. They recommended the following strategies for enhancing stakeholder and public education and engagement:

- *Reinstate the prior Bonner County engagement and review process for planning related decision making*
- *Hold learning forums prior to decision making forums*
- *Meaningfully engage stakeholders and the public in revisiting comprehensive plans*
- *Meaningfully engage the community in clarifying countywide values*
- *Meaningfully engage stakeholders in reviewing and streamlining policies and processes*
- *Foster productive public conversation about growth, land use, planning, and related concerns*
- *Illuminate what is at stake by visualizing scenarios and options*
- *Improve education and information sharing*
- *Encourage people to utilize existing opportunities to engage, and to do so productively*
- *Use multiple approaches to get the word out*
- *Engage the “sunbirds”*

Almost all interviewees saw great value in—and identified a number of benefits associated with—improved communication, coordination, and collaboration among local governments. They identified some potential coordination models and approaches that might assist with improved countywide coordination around growth, land use, and planning related concerns. They also identified some concerns and challenges that need to be considered when undertaking these kinds of efforts.

Many interviewees also saw value in regionalization of certain services. However, there was less agreement about this than there was about the value of greater countywide collaboration. Interviewees identified a number of challenges and concerns that should be considered when thinking about the possibility of regionalizing services.

## VISION AND PRIORITIES FOR BONNER COUNTY

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All interviewees were asked to share their visions for Bonner County and, where appropriate, their visions for the jurisdictions they represent or live in. The following are key themes that emerged in terms of priorities and values related to growth, land use, and planning concerns.

### *Preserve and Enhance Community Character and Cohesion*

Interviewees generally shared the belief that Bonner County is a special place and that Bonner County residents are passionate about where they live. Many people expressed appreciation for the “quaint, small town feel” and “friendliness” of Bonner County and its municipalities. Interviewees often reflected on the fact that people in the county tend to be very community-oriented, they work well together, and they generally prioritize working through differences. As one interviewee said, “People here have a heart for each other – that’s what makes this area special.”

As discussed further below, some interviewees expressed concern about recent political shifts at the national and local level creating more divisiveness in the county and the implications of this for the community feel.

The general sentiment among interviewees who spoke about community character was that they would like to see the small town feel, friendliness, and community-oriented nature of Bonner County and its municipalities preserved and enhanced.

### *Make Bonner County a Place Where People in All Stages of Life Can Afford to Live, Work, and Play*

Numerous interviewees expressed a desire for Bonner County to be a place where people in all stages of life can afford to live, work, and play. Many people noted that land and housing have become more expensive, voicing a concern that this is making it harder for residents to stay in Bonner County. Some interviewees attributed this increase in housing prices to the desirability of Bonner County as a place to live and have a second home, and the resultant influx of people, particularly the wealthy. Others ascribed housing price increases to regulations constraining development and/or the lack of developable land in the county.



Regardless of what they saw as the cause of increasing housing prices, interviewees who talked about housing affordability and cost of living seemed to agree that making Bonner County a place people can “grow up and stay” requires addressing both the affordability of housing and also creating more year-round jobs with salaries commensurate to the cost of living.

### *Foster and Invest in Building a Vibrant Economy*

Interviewees seemed to generally agree that they would like Bonner County and its municipalities to have vibrant, thriving, diversified economies. Many people noted the need for more year-round, sustainable jobs and economic opportunities that are on par with the cost of living in the region. Some interviewees mentioned that they want Bonner County to be a place where businesses “come and stay.” A few interviewees said that investing in effective digital infrastructure and creating a well-educated and trained workforce could help make Bonner County an attractive place for businesses. Interviewees mentioned tourism, timber, food production, aerospace, biomedical, and other “high tech and knowledge-based industries” as key economic sectors.

### *Protect the County’s Rural Character*

The majority of interviewees expressed a desire to preserve Bonner County’s rural character. Interviewees also noted that residents throughout the county seem to share this sentiment, citing the results of the 2014 *Bonner County Community Survey* and previous Bonner County surveys.

A number of interviewees said it is clear that Bonner County residents value the rural character of the county and want to protect it, but it is less clear what “rural” means. Interviewees themselves expressed somewhat differing ideas of the definition. For example, some interviewees indicated rural areas should be largely residential. Others suggested that they would like to see Bonner County’s rural areas be a “working landscape” with agriculture, light industry, and dirt roads.

Despite differing perspectives on exactly what rural means, people seemed to agree that protecting ruralness requires organized development and/or avoiding sprawl. Some people felt that preserving rural character in the face of growth pressures will require increasing the density of urban areas, but others questioned the desirability of increased density.

Some interviewees noted that the Bonner County *Comprehensive Plan* emphasizes protecting the rural character of the county. A couple people indicated they are not worried about Bonner County losing its rural nature due to development, saying a large portion of the county is not currently developable by private entities because it is federal or state public land, or another type of protected land. Other interviewees expressed significant concern about how failing to effectively plan ahead and easing land use regulations, permitting processes, and development oversight could jeopardize

the rural landscape by allowing haphazard, “willy-nilly,” or unmanaged growth and development.

### *Protect the County’s Water Quality, Lakes, and Other Water Bodies*

Protecting Bonner County’s clean, safe water, Lake Pend Oreille, and the other lakes and water bodies in the county was cited as a key priority by most interviewees. These interviewees also commonly felt that most people in the county share this perspective. *Bonner County Community Survey* respondents also identified water quality as a top value.

Interviewees seemed to agree that certain land uses could impact the county’s lakes, other water bodies, and water quality, and that negative impacts should be avoided. However, they differed in their perspectives about the extent to which recent changes in county land use planning, regulations, and permitting requirements presented a risk to water quality. They also held differing perspectives regarding the role that government planning and regulation should play in protecting water quality and water bodies.

### *Preserve the County’s Green Space, Natural Beauty, and Opportunities for Recreation and Hunting*

Many interviewees noted that the region’s green space, natural beauty, and recreation and hunting opportunities are part of what makes Bonner County special and such a great place to live and visit. Respondents of the 2014 *Bonner County Community Survey* also identified recreation and access as a key value. There seemed to be general agreement among interviewees that people do not want to lose or compromise these amenities.

### *Develop in a Thoughtful, Intelligent, Orderly, and Responsible Way*

The strong majority of interviewees, including people from diverse stakeholder groups and political leanings, held the perspective that regional growth is unavoidable and that the county needs to focus on growing in a way that is, to use interviewees’ words, “intelligent,” “orderly,” “good,” “thoughtful,” and “responsible.” Interviewees described their vision of how this should occur in somewhat differing ways. However, they seemed to share an aspiration for the region to avoid “willy-nilly” and “haphazard” development and to grow in a way that protects the values discussed above.

Interviewees commonly said they would like to see development happen in such a way as to: avoid sprawl; leverage existing services, such as water and sewer systems; and avoid unnecessarily increasing the financial burden on local government and tax payers. Many people also expressed an interest in preventing traffic, increasing access to basic services and improving walkability in the county’s communities (not just Sandpoint), and continuing to expand public transportation and non-motorized transportation options throughout the region.

Some interviewees said they would like to prevent Bonner County from developing like Kootenai County, which was perceived to be sprawling. Many interviewees specifically cited sprawl along Highway 95 near Coeur d' Alene and Hayden as a development pattern they would like to avoid.

Some interviewees suggested the region should think about developing in a “polycentric” way, i.e., by focusing on developing urban villages and preserving open space between these centers of development. Some people felt that increasing urban density in Sandpoint and the surrounding municipalities could help manage growth, provide more affordable housing, and increase tax revenues for the cities and the county. One emphasized the fact that increased density in the cities would generate more tax revenue for the county without greatly increasing use of county services. While a number of interviewees expressed support for increased density in the cities, others raised questions about the desirability of, and appropriate locations for, increased urban density.

Almost all interviewees indicated that growth is inevitable. One interviewee, however, expressed a strong desire to have the area not grow or change, although he did not offer any ideas about how to prevent growth and development. According to interviewees, many county residents share this desire to not have the area change. Interviewees generally felt this desire to “close the door” is not realistic.

A number of interviewees felt that growth is not only unavoidable, but that it is desirable. These interviewees indicated that countywide growth presents important opportunities for economic development, job creation, increasing the tax base for local government, and enhancing community services.

It is important to note that, as further discussed below, there were striking differences in interviewee perspectives on the role that regulation, government planning, and land use policies should play in supporting and ensuring that growth and development occur in “intelligent,” “orderly,” “good,” “thoughtful,” and “responsible” ways. That said, many interviewees noted development should happen in such a way as to protect individual property rights as well as the rights of their neighbors and community members.

It is also important to note that interviewees generally steered away from using the term “smart growth,” indicating that term has developed a negative stigma that might get in the way of productive conversation about how to achieve “good growth” and avoid “bad growth.”

A few interviewees indicated they would like Bonner County to become an example of a place that “does it right” and maintains community character, ruralness, and

affordability in the face of intense growth pressures. These interviewees cited the following as some examples of places they felt had not steered growth in intelligent and/or good ways: Coeur d’Alene and Hayden, Idaho; Tahoe, California; Jackson, Wyoming; Bozeman, Montana; and Aspen, Colorado. It was suggested that Bonner County could perhaps learn from these negative examples and avoid similar pitfalls.

### *Balance Private Property Rights with Community Concerns*

As noted above, a common theme in almost all interviews was the need to balance private property rights with government land use planning and regulation – and the challenges associated with doing so. Interviewees seemed to agree that private property rights are important and should be respected. The majority of interviewees also noted that one individual’s private property rights can interfere with another’s private property rights or freedoms. Most interviewees argued that a balance needs to be struck between protecting individual freedoms and managing the impact people can have on one another, shared resources, and each other’s property values. One person summed up this sentiment: “One person’s right to punch ends at the tip of another’s nose.”

People seemed to agree that there is a balance between, as one person put it, “proper regulation” on one hand and “over regulation” on the other. They also noted that people in the county seem to have different perspectives on where this line falls. Interviewees embodied this divide. A few said land use and development in Bonner County are currently overregulated, while many others indicated that additional planning and oversight might be helpful for protecting the things people hold dear and furthering county and municipal goals.

Some interviewees said thoughtful planning and zoning processes actually help protect property rights. A few suggested, for example, that planning and zoning can ensure that neighborhoods “do not grow up around industry and push industry out” or create other major conflicts. They gave examples including the conflicts Wildwood Grilling on Shinglemill Road has experienced with the nearby neighborhood, and issues created by neighborhoods abutting timber lands. It was suggested that government planning can help neighborhoods stay neighborhoods and industry areas stay industry areas.

A few interviewees noted that many people have recently moved into the region who highly value private property rights and, as some described it, want their “own private Idaho.” They feel this is accentuating the tension around balancing private property rights and government planning, and recommended fostering a productive community conversation about how to achieve this balance.

### *Make Government Efficient, Effective, and Transparent*

Interviewees commonly expressed a desire for local government to be efficient, effective, and transparent.

Many people felt there should be proper “checks and balances” on individual behavior, and they see value in local government playing a role in that process. These interviewees would like to see local government help ensure regional growth and development happen in thoughtful, intentional, and not “willy-nilly” or “ramshackle” ways that are mindful of private property rights. These interviewees seemed to hold the perspective that local government can provide meaningful oversight without “bogging things down” or imposing unnecessary costs on residents.

Interviewees who reflected on local government function seemed to agree that government should be as streamlined and efficient as possible. Most of those people also noted, however, that streamlining should not come at the expense of achieving the intended goals of government departments, programs, and policies. They also seemed to agree that local government should be as user-friendly as possible, but – again – that being user-friendly should not compromise the ability of local government to achieve its intended oversight and support objectives.

Many people agreed there are important opportunities for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of local government planning efforts and that they would like to see local government work collaboratively and transparently to identify these opportunities and make positive changes. The following strategies were identified:

- **Ensure effective two-way communication with stakeholders and the public around proposed changes.** Many interviewees suggested that meetings should be well publicized and held at times that are likely to work for a diversity of residents. They often expressed a perspective that effective communication requires creating forums for educating the public and listening to people’s concerns prior to making decisions. In line with this, many interviewees expressed frustration with the lack of well publicized workshops prior to hearings on Bonner County’s recent proposed planning related changes. On a similar vein, some interviewees felt that both local government representatives and citizens need to do a better job of active listening and truly trying to understand what others are saying. Many emphasized how important it is for members of the public to take responsibility for ensuring they are informed about local planning issues. The topic of public engagement is discussed further below.
- **Digitalize records, such as deeds and septic permits.** A couple interviewees said that digitalizing records, such as deeds and septic permits, would facilitate quick document retrieval, improve inter-departmental information sharing and coordination, and likely reduce fees and timelines associated with getting building location permits and other approvals. It was specifically suggested that digitizing and electronically sharing basic property information – e.g., owner name, street address, etc. – could greatly streamline the process of getting septic reviews for building permits. It was also mentioned that the Bonner

County Planning Department is expecting to receive new software in January 2017 that will facilitate deed retrieval.

- **Engage stakeholders in helping to make systems as efficient and effective as possible.** A couple interviewees suggested collaboratively engaging diverse groups of stakeholders in reviewing policies, ordinances, and permitting processes to identify ways of improving their effectiveness and increasing efficiency.

## SOURCES OF TENSION AND DISAGREEMENT

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Interviewees were asked whether they think Bonner County residents generally agree about the vision and priorities for the county, or whether there are major sources of disagreement. The majority of interviewees believe people agree on the big picture vision for the county and share the priorities and values discussed above. That said, interviewees also generally agreed that there are strong divides within the community regarding how to achieve these goals and priorities. The following are key sources of tension identified by participants.

### *Perspectives on Private Property Rights, Freedom, and Personal Responsibility*

As noted above, interviewees commonly felt that there are strong divides within the county about private property rights and how to balance private property rights with community concerns. Similarly, some interviewees identified the meaning of “freedom” and “whose freedom to do what” as points of tension. For example, interviewees noted that some people in the county seem to prioritize the freedom to do what they want on their properties and/or to carry guns, whereas others prioritize the freedom to move around freely and/or to not feel threatened by other community members carrying guns.

Related to the question of how to balance private property rights and government planning and regulation, interviewees noted that people seem to have differing perspectives about whether people will “do the right thing” if left to their own devices (i.e., without government oversight and regulation). Some interviewees thought of this as a spectrum, with regulation and no personal responsibility on one side and no regulation and total personal responsibility on the other side. Others said that regulations and government planning are intended to help people be responsible and “do the right thing.” Regardless, interviewees noted and embodied a community divide in thinking about the extent to which people will act responsibly without government oversight.



### *Perspectives on the Inevitability, Desirability, and Risks of Countywide Growth*

Interviewees indicated that, as noted above, people in the county hold different perspectives on the inevitability and/or desirability of regional growth. Many said there are individuals in Bonner County who have been there their entire lives and “don’t want to see it change.” Interviewees also noted there are people who moved to Bonner County “to get away from people” and who would prefer to see absolutely no growth or development. In contrast, they said, many people see growth as inevitable and/or as a potential benefit.

Interviewees also noted that people seem to have divergent levels of concern about the extent to which unregulated growth presents a threat. They suggested this might have more to do with a desire to preserve private property rights than a lack of concern about unmanaged growth. Related to this, one interviewee said there appears to be disagreement in the county about the notion of “sustainable growth,” what it means, and whether it is desirable.

### *Perspectives on Economic Development and Fiscal Responsibility*

Some interviewees said there are differing perspectives – and perhaps some confusion – among county residents and local public officials about economic development and fiscal responsibility. More specifically, they indicated different people hold different perspectives about what counts as a wise investment in economic development and how to strike the right balance between short-term and long-term economic development and fiscal responsibility. Nevertheless, they pointed out that most people value economic development and fiscal responsibility.

### *Strong Political Ideologies*

A number of interviewees said there is a faction of very conservative and very pro-private property and anti-regulation folks residing in Bonner County, and that more people with this ideological leaning are moving into the area. They felt this group tends to be very politically active and divisive, and expressed concern that the growing presence of this contingent is causing additional tension in Bonner County.

## SPECIFIC CONCERNS

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Interviewees were asked whether they are particularly concerned about any particular impacts or risks associated with regional growth, land use, and development in Bonner County. Interviewees identified the following specific concerns:

### *Concerns Associated with Recent Bonner County Planning Changes*

Many interviewees expressed significant concern about recent developments within the Bonner County Planning Department. The strong majority of interviewees, including those who work directly with land owners and developers or work in real estate and building-related industries, felt that Bonner County's recent subdivision ordinance and permitting changes were not necessary. They felt the system worked fine prior to these changes and, as a few people said, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In contrast, the few interviewees who were supportive of these changes suggested they were needed to reduce the cost, time, and headache associated with getting building location permits and subdividing properties within the specifications allowed by zoning.

Additionally, many interviewees expressed concern about the loss of certain Bonner County Planning Department staff and the related loss of institutional knowledge.

Interviewees representing a diversity of stakeholder groups and political leanings, including those who were supportive of the changes, felt that the changes themselves and the reasons for them were not well communicated to key stakeholders and the general public. Some people expressed concern that the lack of transparency around these changes may have decreased public trust in county government. It is worth mentioning that a number of interviewees were confused about the changes to the Bonner County subdivision ordinance and building location permitting process and what these changes meant; one interviewee was entirely unaware that these changes were being made.

As noted above, interviewees were broadly supportive of making local government efficient and effective, and many people noted there might be opportunities to streamline processes, increase effectiveness, and reduce costs of programs and policies. However, many questioned whether the county changes were actually going to address these issues and/or whether there might have been more effective ways to do so. For example, a few people noted there are many subdivisions in the county that have been divided by deed and are non-compliant, and that this issue should be addressed. However, others questioned whether the county's proposed changes to subdivision ordinances would actually address this problem. Similarly, a handful of people noted that the Panhandle Health District review process probably could have been made more efficient and less expensive, rather than being entirely removed from the county's building location permit and minor land division processes. As noted above, some interviewees suggested local governments might engage diverse stakeholders in collaboratively figuring out how to address such issues and improve regulations and programs.

### *Risk of Unsustainable Development in Areas of City Impact*

Many interviewees, particularly those working with local municipalities, expressed concern about potential growth and development in the Areas of City Impact (ACI) around Sandpoint, Dover, Ponderay, and Kootenai. ACIs are county land around the



cities that have been identified as areas for city growth. People noted that the cities have an agreement with the county that requires the County Commission to solicit input from the cities on proposed changes in those areas, but that the agreement does not bind the county to adhere to the city's plans or wishes for those regions. Some interviewees are particularly concerned about unmanaged growth and unplanned development in the ACIs, which would be "inherited" by the cities down the line when these areas are annexed. For example, they said, if sprawling development occurs in those areas, it could make the eventual installation of sewer and water lines to those areas either a significant financial burden or entirely impossible.

Some interviewees said they would like to see ACI agreements strengthened to ensure planning and zoning in those areas fits with the cities' plans and strategies. It was also suggested that "area plans" might be considered as a way to address planning in ACIs and that Bonner County might look at other counties for examples of how to do this.

### *Risk of Sprawl and Unsustainable Growth*

Directly related to the concern about ACIs: Numerous interviewees expressed strong concern about the potential for unmanaged growth to lead to sprawl and unsustainable development throughout Bonner County. These interviewees are worried that sprawl would erode the county's rural character and open spaces, significantly increase the cost of delivering services and infrastructure, and increase the cost of housing due to increasing service delivery costs and transportation costs. Some interviewees also expressed concern that sprawling development would make people in the region even more car dependent; this, they said, pushes cities to use land for parking rather than for tax-generating purposes such as business space.

As noted earlier, a few interviewees felt sprawl is unlikely to be an issue due to the fact that a large portion of Bonner County is federal, state, or other non-developable land.

### *Risk of Creating a "Buyer Beware" Situation for Properties and Buildings*

Multiple interviewees, including those working with landowners and those who are involved in the building industry, expressed a concern that Bonner County might be creating a "buyer beware" situation for property and home buyers by reducing regulations and oversight for land use, septic siting, and buildings. They felt local government policies and regulations should be in place to protect land owners, land developers, and their neighbors.

Some interviewees said many people do not know they need to get a septic permit, as mandated by Idaho State law. They added that excavators often assume land owners have a septic permit and will dig a septic hole without checking. Interviewees indicated this can lead to the installation of problematic septic systems (such as those that are poorly sited), which can lead to impaired water quality and create issues for property buyers and sellers when that property transfers hands. Interviewees also noted that

people sometimes build structures where their septic system should be, making proper septic siting impossible or very expensive for that property. Many interviewees felt that the Panhandle Health District building permit review was a good process and a helpful part of a check and balance system intended to prevent people from causing themselves problems or accidentally breaking the law.

It was also noted that similar issues exist with the structural integrity of buildings, due to the lack of a county building inspection process and building department. Some interviewees, including those familiar with the building industry, worried this will cause long-term liabilities for property owners, builders, and local government.

A few interviewees felt that individuals should be and will be responsible for getting septic permits and ensuring buildings are properly built. They felt that recent changes to county permitting and review processes are not going to lead to long-term problems or liabilities.

### *Concerns Associated with Affordability of Housing and Cost of Living*

As noted above, there was general agreement among interviewees that they would like to see Bonner County be a place where people at all stages of life can afford to live, work, and play. It is therefore not surprising that many people expressed a concern about the affordability of housing in Bonner County and the possibility that it could become an increasingly expensive place to live.

A few interviewees said that making it easier to subdivide properties and lowering development fees would assist in making housing more affordable. In contrast, many interviewees expressed concern about county efforts to streamline the subdivision process, indicating that making subdividing easier does not make housing and property prices more affordable. Instead, they suggested, it may have the opposite effect, citing examples such as Bozeman, Montana, where rural land was bought and subdivided by “real estate moguls,” thereby driving higher property values.

A number of other interviewees recommended focusing on providing affordable housing options in the municipalities, with some suggesting that increasing urban density and providing public transit options are key ways to increase housing affordability. It was suggested that efforts to increase housing affordability should take into account the cost of transportation, which can greatly increase costs of living.

One interviewee noted that the lack of affordable housing in Sandpoint pushes people with lower incomes out to surrounding communities, such as Priest River, which can lead to imbalances in community diversity. This interviewee recommended focusing on making all of the county’s municipalities affordable for working folks, to avoid certain towns becoming “bedroom communities” or experiencing other problematic community dynamics.

Some people expressed concern about low salaries and unemployment in the county, suggesting that addressing these issues through economic development could increase people's ability to stay and thrive in the county.

### *Threats to Water Quality*

In light of the fact that protecting water quality and the county's water bodies was a priority for many interviewees, it is not surprising that many of them expressed serious concern about water quality in the region. Many people noted that the county's lakes, rivers, and clean water are a major amenity for locals, as well as a major draw for tourists. Interviewees generally expressed an interest in ensuring proper septic and sewer treatment throughout the region to help protect water quality.

As noted above, many interviewees expressed concern that changes to the Panhandle Health District review of building permits could lead to improper siting and use of septic systems and related water quality issues. Some people saw it as a step backward in terms of protecting water quality. Those involved in working with landowners indicated the recent changes have confused people, saying some people now believe they are entirely exempt from all Panhandle Health District review. They also noted that many people build "sheds" and "storage units" that are actually bunkhouses, and that these structures are often being built without the necessary septic capacity. Multiple interviewees felt that, while landowners often want to do the right thing, many people do not understand septic systems and why they matter. It was noted that, problematically, septic issues may not manifest for some time, and it is very expensive and hard to fix the issue once they do. For these kinds of reasons, many interviewees felt that the Panhandle Health District's review of building permits is critical to avoid creating problems for property owners, their neighbors, potential future property buyers, and water quality.

In contrast, a few interviewees felt that the changes in the permitting process have streamlined the process and should not lead to any issues. They noted that people building plumbed structures are still required to get a septic permit by state law. A couple people who do not work for Panhandle Health District felt that the old process was largely an unnecessary inconvenience, saying they believed only a small portion of people had problems that merited Panhandle Health District's review. Other interviewees disagreed, saying Panhandle Health District's building permit review process prevented many septic problems.

A number of interviewees emphasized that the State of Idaho requires a septic permit, saying the inclusion of Panhandle Health District sign off on building location permits was designed to help ensure property owners actually got this state required permit – and to help them proactively avoid these issues in doing so.

### *Concerns Associated with Divisive Politics*

As noted above, multiple interviewees expressed concern about increasingly divisive politics at the local and national level, and the effect this seems to be having on community character and local decision-making. They expressed an interest in keeping Bonner County a place where people can, as one person put it, “sit down, talk things through, work things out, and not have to go to court.”

### *Geographic Areas of Particular Concern*

In addition to the above discussed concerns, interviewees identified the following geographic areas as being of particularly at-risk or of particular concern:

- **Lakefront properties.** Some interviewees felt that regulating septic and land use on lakefront properties is particularly important, in light of the potential for uses on these properties to affect water bodies and the county’s water quality.
- **Corridor along Highway 95.** A number of interviewees identified the corridor along Highway 95 south and north of Sandpoint as an area that will be prone to sprawling development, if growth is not managed and planned for.
- **Selle Valley.** Many people expressed appreciation for the rural character, natural resources, and beauty of the Selle Valley. Some felt that it is particularly vulnerable to sprawling growth and haphazard development.

## PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGING KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND THE PUBLIC

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When asked what would be helpful for achieving key priorities and addressing challenges associated with growth, development, and planning in Bonner County, interviewees commonly said they think more effective public education and engagement is needed. Additionally, all interviewees were asked how important they think it is that stakeholders and members of the public are involved when changes are being made to policies and regulations that affect land use and planning. In response to this question, almost every interviewee said they think public engagement is very important.

While interviewees commonly noted the importance of education and engagement, they also often emphasized how difficult it is to get people to meaningfully engage. They cited examples of poorly attended workshops and town hall meetings. Many people expressed an interest in encouraging the public to take responsibility for being informed, engaged, and part of local problem-solving efforts.

As discussed further below, interviewees generally felt that decision-makers need to take responsibility for ensuring there are forums, such as workshops, where stakeholders and the public can learn about issues and options and share their concerns

prior to official decision-making hearings. Additionally, many interviewees noted that these forums should be held at times that are convenient for general public, and that they should be well advertised to help make sure people know about them. That said, interviewees also often noted that stakeholders and members of the public need to take responsibility for ensuring they are informed about issues and options, such as by attending workshops and doing their research, so that their involvement can meaningfully help inform decision-makers.

Interviewees shared the below ideas for how to better educate and engage stakeholders and the public around growth, land use, and other planning related concerns.

### *Reinstate the Prior Bonner County Engagement and Review Process for Planning Related Decision-Making*

Many interviewees said that the process Bonner County used until recently to make planning and zoning changes worked well. They felt this process has not been followed recently and recommended reinstating this process, which included a review of suggested changes by the Planning and Zoning Commission and well publicized public education workshops prior to decision-making hearings.

### *Hold Learning Forums Prior to Decision-Making Forums*

Many interviewees expressed a desire for forums where people can learn about growth land use, and planning-related issues and options, talk through differences, share their informed concerns with public officials, and truly be heard prior to decisions being made. It was suggested these should be held at times of the day that are convenient for people who cannot step away from their jobs, that they should include opportunities for information sharing and learning as well as for an “open mic,” and that it might be helpful for these forums to be professionally facilitated to make sure people are kept on task and that conversation is civil. It was also suggested that there should be many opportunities for input, such as through online systems, submitting letters, and in-person comments. An interviewee recommended working with the media to make sure they are reporting accurately on the fact that this is happening so that people in the community know what is going on and that they have a chance to learn and share their thoughts.

### *Meaningfully Engage Stakeholders and the Public in Revisiting Comprehensive Plans*

Multiple interviewees indicated that comprehensive plans are important tools and that they should be “living documents.” They indicated that comprehensive plans are intended to provide a guide for land use planning, and that they should be updated periodically to reflect realities and emerging needs. These interviewees generally felt this periodic updating should be done through a thoughtful public process.

The general sentiment among interviewees was that the Bonner County *Comprehensive Plan* was developed through an effective public engagement process, and that updates to the plan should similarly occur through an equally thoughtful public and engagement effort. Some people said the *Comprehensive Plan* should be revisited every 2–3 years, whereas some said it should be revisited annually to assess whether any revisions are needed. It was suggested this could be done through a series of public workshops, including some specifically aimed at engaging land surveyors, planners, realtors, and other stakeholder groups who are familiar with land use and development concerns, as well as some aimed at engaging members of the general public. These conversations, interviewees said, could focus on questions such as “Is this who we want to be now?” and “Is this where we’re going?” and should be very transparent and well publicized, with specific invitations to key stakeholders and/or stakeholder groups.

### *Meaningfully Engage the Community in Clarifying Countywide Values*

Many interviewees suggested local government planning efforts should be community-led. They suggested it would be helpful to periodically engage county stakeholders and community members in clarifying countywide priorities and values. It was suggested this could be done through some form of visioning exercise. That said, it was also noted that “visioning” may have a negative connotation in certain circles and therefore might not be the appropriate term. It was also suggested that countywide surveys could be conducted every couple of years, like they used to be, to help take the temperature of county residents in regards to county concerns and planning and land use priorities. One interviewee recommended tying these efforts to things such as *Comprehensive Plan* updates, since people need a reason for engaging and engagement needs to have a beginning and an end.

### *Meaningfully Engage Stakeholders in Reviewing and Streamlining Policies and Processes*

As noted above, some interviewees suggested engaging key stakeholders in helping local government increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its programs and regulations. Interviewees suggested engaging knowledgeable stakeholders in identifying bottlenecks, determining what is working well and what is not working well, and exploring ways of better meeting the intended goals of policies and programs. Interviewees specifically mentioned that this approach might be helpful for figuring out how to: bring non-compliant subdivisions into compliance; ensure future subdivisions are compliant; and improve the Panhandle Health District’s building location permit and subdivision review processes to ensure they are effective and efficient while still achieving their intended goals.



### *Foster Productive Public Conversation about Growth, Land Use, Planning, and Related Concerns*

Some interviewees suggested focusing on creating a productive public conversation about regional growth, planning, and related concerns. Interviewees indicated this conversation might focus on questions such as “What do we want to be when we grow up?”; “Do we want to grow or not?”; “What is good growth? What is not good growth?”; “How do we balance private property rights with public interests?”; and “What kinds of economic development do we want to focus on?”

Some interviewees suggested using the newspaper and other print and online forums to catalyze a community conversation about certain issues. Others focused on creating in-person forums for people from diverse walks of life to civilly and productively engage in dialogue about these issues, so as to find common ground and start to work through differences. One interviewee suggested that fostering productive public conversation might help people appreciate their responsibility for being informed and engaged in local decision-making and problem-solving.

### *Illuminate What Is at Stake by Visualizing Scenarios and Options*

A number of interviewees noted that many people do not understand why land use planning matters and what is at stake. They suggested helping people engage with the tradeoffs and considerations through visualizing options, changes, and potential growth and development scenarios. This could take the form of anything from a simulation people can interactively engage with to structured scenario planning that engages community members in helping to develop and explore the implications of potential futures.

### *Improve Education and Information Sharing*

Interviewees noted a number of areas where improved education and information sharing with stakeholders and the general public could be helpful, mainly:

- Better explaining recent changes in county planning and zoning procedures and regulations, and the implications of these changes. Many interviewees, including those who are supportive and those who are not supportive of these changes, felt that people are confused about recent developments.
- Educating people about septic systems: how they work, why properly siting and maintaining them matters, and other related concerns. Interviewees said contractors, lenders, excavators, builders, and realtors all need to be educated so that they can help land owners do the right thing. Similarly, interviewees suggested it might be helpful to educate people about the difference between a sewer and a septic system and why it matters.
- Provide information about what to expect when applying for a permit (such as for building location or septic) and why permits are required. This might answer

common questions such as “How much is it likely to cost?”, “What do fees cover?”, and “How long is this likely to take?”

Based on interviews and observation of community events, it seems likely that the following information might also be helpful:

- Examples of similar regions and/or communities that *have not* managed growth and development pressure well, with information about what they wished they had done differently.
- Examples of similar regions and/or communities that *have* managed growth and development pressures well, with information about what they have done and how this has helped.
- Information about cost of housing and/or cost of living in Bonner County as compared to other similar areas. Information about changes in cost of living in Bonner County over the last 20 years compared to changes in other similar regions may also be helpful.
- Information about what is driving the cost of living, how much transportation contributes to housing costs, and strategies for increasing housing affordability and/or affordability of day-to-day activities.

Interviewees mentioned the following existing educational and assistance programs:

- *Natural Resource Conservation Services (NRCS) programs*: The NRCS is available to provide technical assistance to county government, municipalities, and individuals through a variety of programs, such as their Conservation Stewards Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program.
- *2014 and 2015 Realtors Classes*: These classes were a collaborative effort by local agencies – including municipal and county governments, Panhandle Health District, and the NRCS – covering water quality, erosion, pollution prevention, land use laws and regulations, wetlands, floodplain and floodway issues, and septic regulations. Some interviewees encourage those responsible for hosting this course to continue to offer it.

### *Encourage People to Utilize Existing Opportunities to Engage – and to Engage Productively*

Many interviewees noted that there are many opportunities for citizens to learn about and engage in local government decision-making that are not being well utilized. For example, one interviewee noted that the County Commissioners meet weekly and that their business meeting is open to the public, but only a few people and usually the same people come to those meetings. Interviewees felt it would be helpful to have greater and more diverse representation from citizens at those meetings. This, they suggested, can help prevent the problem of the “squeaky wheel getting the grease.” Other interviewees noted that citizens have the opportunity to submit written comments to their decision-makers and to contact their decision-makers directly, but that these



methods are often only used when people are really frustrated about a change (and therefore are often used to vent rather than to provide meaningful comment).

On a similar note, interviewees commonly said people should make sure to come to these forums informed about issues and prepared to engage productively. This includes asking intelligent, thoughtful questions and actively listening to really understand what is going on, not just stating positions or expressing frustration with decision-makers.

Interviewees noted that people may not know about these forums, so there may be an opportunity for local groups to help get the word out.

### *Use Multiple Approaches to Get the Word Out*

Interviewees recommended using many approaches to spread the word about planning-related concerns, proposed government and regulation changes, and educational and engagement opportunities. Some strategies they suggested included:

- Working with local newspapers to ensure accurate information is being shared;
- Using innovative community ads and social marketing to get the word out and increase awareness;
- Effectively using e-communication, such as online platforms, for getting information out and soliciting feedback;
- Doing simple surveys every so often to get information on community perspectives and concerns;
- Using social media to get information out and increase awareness; and
- Sending mailings, even though they are expensive, since some people in the county are not likely to get information through the Internet.

### *Engage the “Sunbirds”*

A few people noted that many landowners in Bonner County are “sunbirds” who are only around during the summer months. They said that these people are often not very aware of and involved with local decision-making, but are directly affected by it and sometimes are very unhappy with it. These interviewees recommended putting energy into finding ways to meaningfully educate and engage Bonner County’s part-time residents. That said, they also recognize this is a challenge.

## PERSPECTIVES ON COUNTYWIDE COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

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One of the questions interviewees were asked was whether they see value in better coordination and collaboration among local governments in Bonner County. The strong majority of interviewees said yes in response, often emphatically. Additionally, prior to being asked this question, many interviewees suggested that better countywide

coordination and collaboration would be helpful. Only one interviewee expressed concern about countywide collaboration, voicing a concern about “decision making by committee.”

Some interviewees noted that Bonner County’s local governments have historically had some tense relationships and that they have tried to protect their “fiefdoms.” That said, a few interviewees indicated that the municipalities in Bonner County, particularly Sandpoint, Dover, Ponderay, and Kootenai, have greatly improved their coordination and working relationships in recent years. Regardless, almost everyone interviewed said they see opportunities and a need for greater coordination and collaboration among these municipalities, as well as with other municipalities and county government.

### *Benefits of Improved Countywide Collaboration*

Interviewees identified the following reasons for and benefits of greater coordination and collaboration, in no particular order:

- Communication and exchange of information among jurisdictions, which can help ensure everyone is “on the same page,” build trust, and improve working relationships
- Integration of services, where appropriate, which should increase efficiency and result in cost savings
- Increased focus on common concerns and interests and improved ability to work across differences
- Ability to create value and implement innovative solutions by bringing together different ideas and perspectives
- Cohesion of planning and land use efforts among jurisdictions, which will help avoid conflicting, duplicated, and “piecemeal” efforts
- Ability to jointly pursue and achieve countywide priorities, such as economic development and affordable housing, and meet objectives, such as water quality standards
- Improved ability to identify, pursue, and secure funding for local and countywide projects
- Development of a countywide vision and coherent strategy for achieving that vision
- Development and exploration of county growth, development, and land use scenarios to inform current and future decisions
- Better engagement of and resource sharing with the small communities and unincorporated areas in the county

A number of interviewees mentioned the Spot Bus, the Highway 2-200 effort, and trail planning as examples of successful countywide collaboration, saying they would like to see more such successes.

### *Potential Models and Approaches for Countywide Collaboration*

Interviewees had somewhat differing perspectives on exactly what form countywide coordination and collaboration might take, particularly in regards to whether it might lead to or involve regionalization of services, such as sewer and/or emergency medical services. That said, interviewees seemed generally supportive of creating some sort of working group, comprised of local government representatives and other key stakeholders, to facilitate information sharing and potentially engage in joint strategizing.

Some interviewees mentioned the Bonner County Area Transportation Team (BCATT) as a successful countywide coordination model; they felt this would be a good model to learn from to inform a countywide collaboration effort focused on broader land use and planning concerns. The Kootenai Valley Resource Initiative was also mentioned as an approach that could be learned from. Additionally, an interviewee suggested thinking about creating a regional council that would consist of local government representatives as well as other key stakeholders.

A number of interviewees noted that Bonner County used to host quarterly Growth Summits, which involved the local mayors, county commissioners, and other local public officials. Interviewees who had participated in these summits thought they were productive and recommended reinvigorating them. One interviewee noted that, if these summits are revived, greater effort should be put into ensuring unincorporated areas of the county are effectively represented, which can be a problem due to the fact they do not have councils to represent them.

One interviewee noted that countywide collaboration and coordination would be very helpful, but suggested that, to be fully effective, this effort would probably need a facilitator and perhaps administrative support.

While there was almost unanimous agreement among interviewees that better coordination and collaboration among local governments would be helpful and perhaps necessary, there was less agreement about the desirability of regionalizing services. Many interviewees felt that regionalizing sewer and possibly other services would increase efficiency and effectiveness. Others felt that services are just fine as they are. Some said that, even if it would be more efficient and effective to regionalize services, the politics of doing so would be very challenging. While people held different perspectives on the desirability of regionalizing services, there seemed to be general agreement that this is something local governments should at least discuss, explore, and consider working together on.

Some interviewees said it might even make sense for certain municipalities to consider merging. While they noted there might be strong pushback from certain constituents, they also thought this move might garner strong support. As with regionalizing services,

those who mentioned the possibility of municipalities merging felt this was something the local municipalities should discuss and explore.

### *Concerns and Challenges for Countywide Collaboration and/or Regionalization of Services*

Interviewees expressed the following concerns related to countywide collaboration, coordination, and the possibility of regionalizing services and governance:

- The term “regionalization” might trigger negative responses and suspicion among certain constituencies
- Collaborative processes take time and can be cumbersome, even if they are ultimately effective
- Jurisdictions have their own processes and procedures for doing things, which may make it hard to collaborate on certain things
- There have been “turf wars” historically, which may make some people suspicious of or opposed to regionalization efforts
- You need to ensure entities are effectively represented in whatever collaboration or coordination effort is created
- Small towns value their independent feel, which might create challenges for regionalizing services and merging municipalities
- The larger anything gets, the more likely it will become detached from the purpose it was intended to achieve. While it may be less efficient to have many local governments providing similar services at a smaller scale, doing so may make these services feel a lot closer to the people they are intended to serve
- Each government entity has authority over its jurisdiction. Collaborative efforts should not compromise this jurisdictional authority or lead to “decision making by committee”

## APPENDIX A: LIST OF STAKEHOLDER GROUPS AND JURISDICTIONS REPRESENTED BY INTERVIEWEES

### *Stakeholder Groups Represented*

Interviewees included individuals from the following stakeholder groups and organizations:

- Builders and contractors
- Developers
- Real estate agents
- Surveyors
- Professional planners
- Local businesses
- Municipal elected officials and staff
- County elected officials and staff
- State of Idaho elected officials
- Conservation organizations
- Timber industry
- Bonner County Economic Development Corporation
- Panhandle Health District

### *Jurisdictions Represented*

Interviewees include individuals who officially represent, work for, and/or live in the following Bonner County jurisdictions:

- City of Clark Fork
- City of Dover
- City of Hope
- City of Kootenai
- City of Ponderay
- City of Priest River
- City of Sandpoint
- Bonner County
- The unincorporated areas of:
  - Sagle
  - Selle Valley
  - Sunnyside