

A Look at The Open Space Bond

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The proposed open space bond that will be on the ballot on November 7 is receiving a lot of attention. The open space bond is being promoted as a way to preserve our wide open spaces that are important for agriculture, timber, wildlife and clean water.

According to Missoula county commissioner Jean Curtiss, funds will be used for a “landowner driven, voluntary land conservation program.”

The bond, which amounts to 10 million dollars split between Missoula County and the city of Missoula, is paid by taxpayers, dollars. The cost per household amounts to about \$19.80 for a house appraised at \$200,000.

Here in the Swan Valley, concerns about the bond have been raised. Retired real estate developer Don Erickson has voiced these concerns, and earlier this year he put together a petition against the bond. Approximately half of the valley signed the petition, fearing that our taxes are high enough already.

It is a common belief that residential development will lower property taxes by increasing the tax base. Multiple studies done throughout the west are finding the opposite to be true.

In a study done in Custer County, CO in 1998, county revenues from residential, business and agriculture lands were compared with county expenditures. The findings revealed that for every dollar that the county brings in from residential development, it has to spend \$1.16 in services and infrastructure for things like new roads, septic systems and more kids in the schools. For every dollar of revenue that Custer County collects from agricultural and open lands, the county only has to pay \$0.54 in services.

The study found that while the county is generating revenue off of farm/ranch and timberlands, it is actually losing money on residential development. When our open lands are replaced with new homes or subdivisions, the result is either poor services provided to county residents, or an increase in taxes. The study concludes that there needs to be a balance of residential and business/industrial growth with agriculture and timberlands in order to prevent this from happening.

If the bond passes, a large portion of the money will go to fund land trusts like the Five Valley’s Land Trust that buy conservation easements for private landowners. People may wonder what the motivation for conserving on their property may be. It is a lot to ask people who are having a hard enough time as it is. Lately, the biggest incentive has been to sell agricultural or timberland to developers for a lot of money.

The open space bond attempts to give people more incentive to hang on to their land. Landowners will be paid for the development rights they secede, extracting the value out of the land without having to sell it.

Still, receiving a conservation easement is a risk that takes careful consideration. As Don Erickson stated, “How can you determine today what’s going to happen with this property in the future? It’s fool hardy.”

Don brought up an issue that land preserved for open space

competes with ordinary peoples, ability to continue living and working in their own area. He believes that if more land were available for development, land prices would go down.

But according to Missoula county planner Pat O’Herren, “Land that is being preserved is land where trophy homes would be built anyway.” Pat also brought up the fact that the open space bond is not trying to prevent growth. New people will continue to come into the area, and there will continue to be construction jobs. “Growth will still happen,” he said, “but hopefully not in areas that the community decides are worth saving.”