

2025 Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan

**An update to the 1996 Swan Valley-Condon
Comprehensive Plan**

Public Draft - December 1st, 2025



1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Swan Valley, nestled between the Swan Range and the Mission Mountains, is a uniquely beautiful and sparsely populated area. Anchored by the Swan River and surrounded by vast public lands, the valley is defined by its natural environment, abundant wildlife, and strong local community. With limited commercial development, dark night skies, and minimal noise, the Swan Valley offers a rare sense of solitude, clean air, and quiet increasingly difficult to find in today's world.

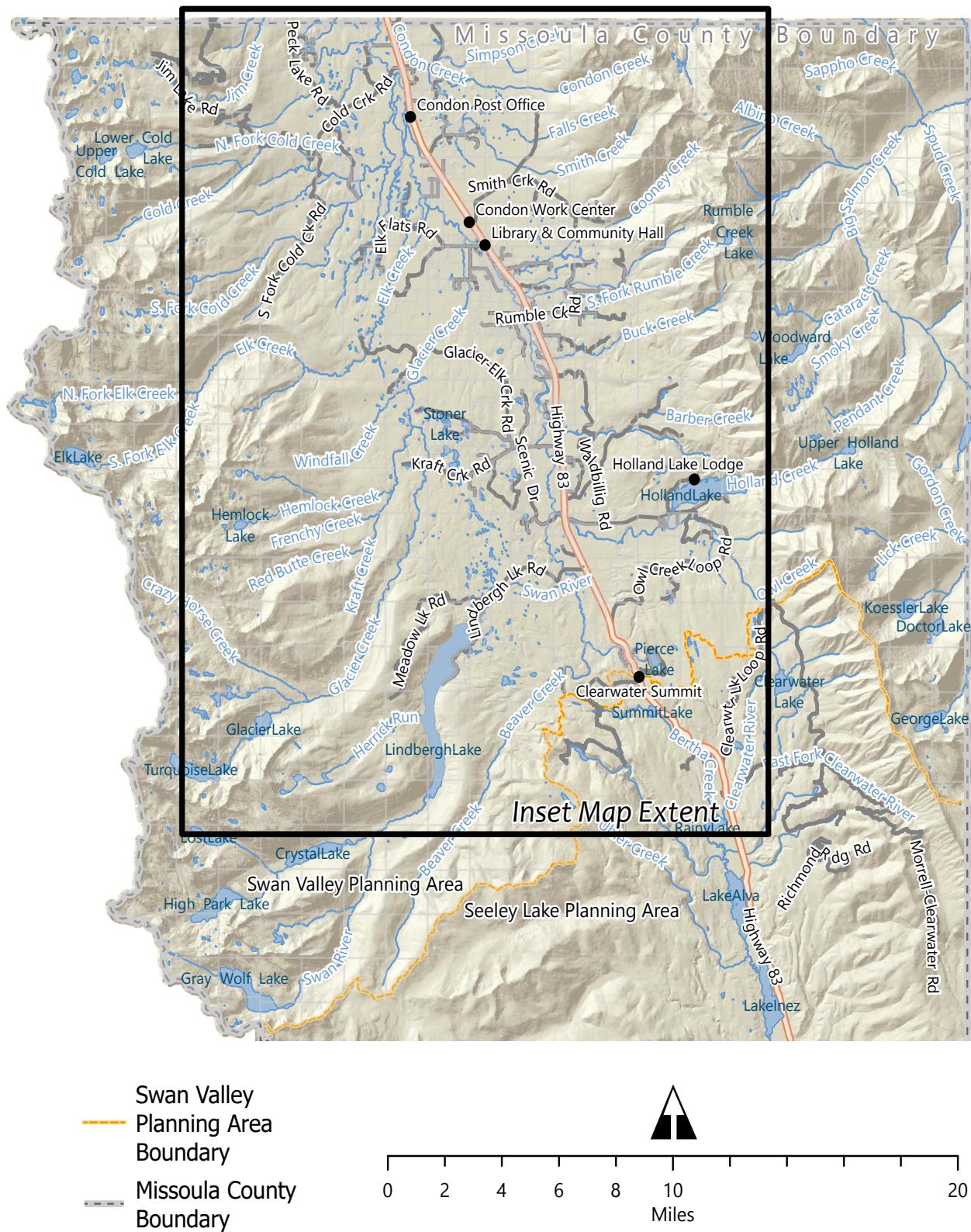
Residents of the Upper Swan Valley deeply value the open landscape, clear waters, forested slopes, and the opportunity for people and wildlife to live in close proximity. These qualities are not simply amenities—they define a way of life. Preserving the valley's integrity, rural traditions, and community engagement is central to the vision for its future. The objectives, strategies, and land use map in the Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan are designed to protect these values while supporting a sustainable future for both residents and the landscape.

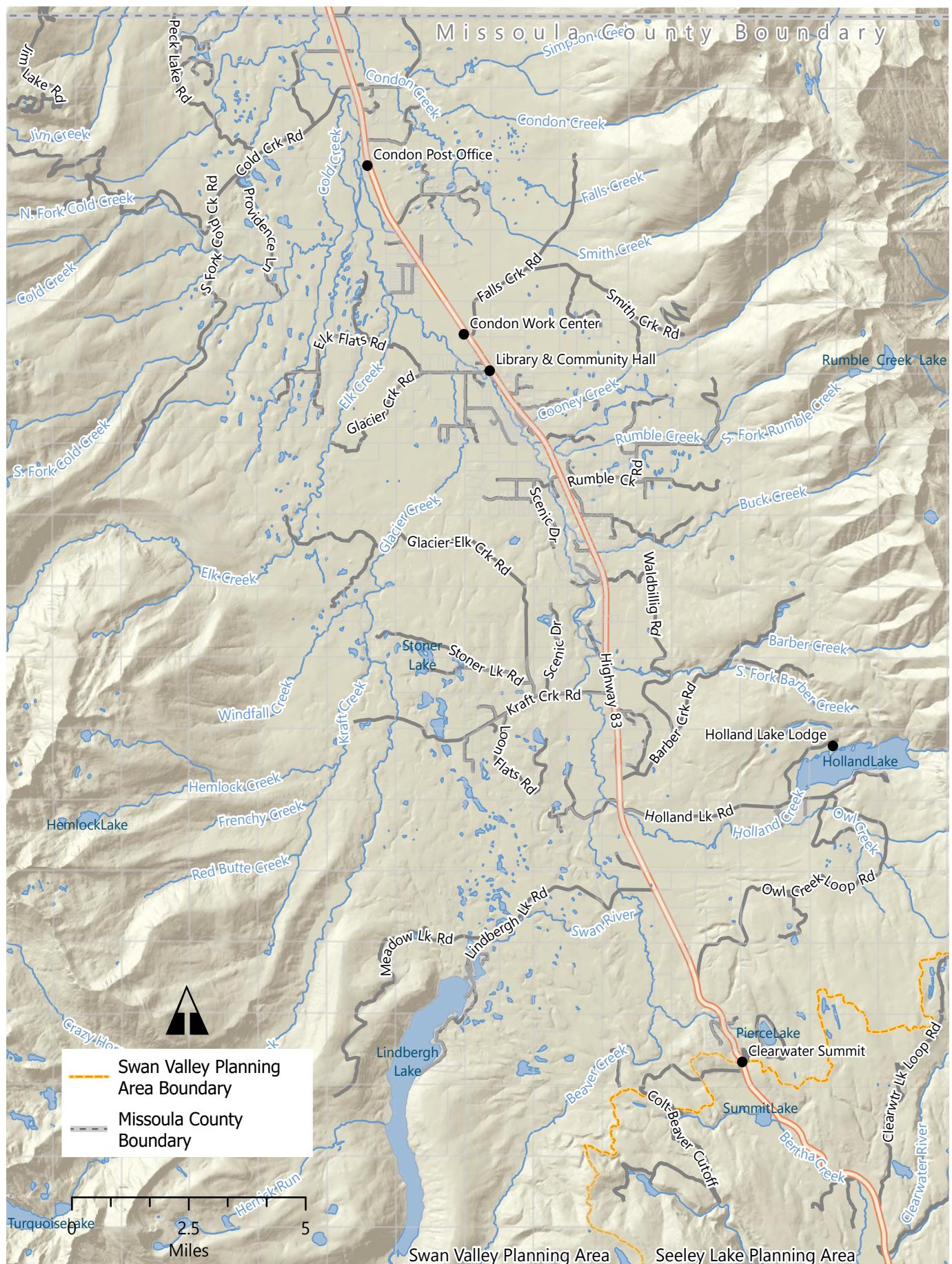
The plan outlines a vision for future growth, development, infrastructure, and services in the Upper Swan Valley. It is a vital tool for maintaining rural character and protecting natural resources. This revised document builds on an earlier drafts released June 9 and September 29, 2025. It incorporates public and agency feedback received during the summer of 2025 and changes recommended by the Swan Valley Community Council on November 18th, 2025.

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1.1 Planning area

This Swan Valley Comprehensive Planning Area covers the portion of the Swan Valley located in Missoula County. This 244,189-acre planning area is approximately sixteen miles long and corresponds with the Swan Valley Community Council boundary and Swan Valley Elementary School attendance area. In the text that follows, references to the Swan or the Swan Valley refer to this planning area. Many of the maps that follow focus on the valley floor and the mosaic of public and private land that is found there.





1.2 Community Core Values

Despite these significant changes, Community values have remained remarkably consistent, as reflected in the 2025 Community Survey and other outreach efforts. Residents continue to prioritize the following core values:

- Preserving the rural character of the Swan Valley. (low-density housing, open spaces, small family-run businesses, and strong community volunteerism).
- Protecting clean air, water, and a resilient forest with abundant wildlife; and
- Ensuring accessibility to our public lands for hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, and riding.

Though the Valley is evolving, these enduring values offer a clear foundation for the updated 2025 Neighborhood Plan and the objectives and strategies that follow.

1.3 Challenges

The Upper Swan Valley has changed significantly since the adoption of the 1996 Neighborhood Plan. At that time, land use was shaped primarily by the forest products industry, historical homesteading patterns, and a growing number of seasonal residents. By 2025, four major shifts have transformed the scale, scope, opportunities, and challenges of development in the area:

1. Land Ownership and Use

In 1996, 15% of the planning area was privately owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company, while 76% was publicly owned and managed by the Flathead National Forest. Between 2008 and 2010, the Montana Legacy Project transferred 35,585 acres of private land to the U.S. Forest Service and state agencies. Approximately 4,800 acres (14%) were sold to private individuals in the years preceding the Montana Legacy Project.

As of 2025, 88% of the land is publicly owned. Of the remaining 12%, approximately 1% is residential, 1% supports institutional uses (such as churches, schools, utilities, and parks), and 4% is protected under conservation easements. The remainder, about 6%, is privately owned, undeveloped land. Much of this undeveloped land faces access, terrain, or environmental constraints, making developable land a scarce and critical resource.

2. Residential Growth

The number of homes increased from 398 in 1990 to 677 in 2023, a 70% rise. The 1996 Plan promoted low-density development, recommending zoning of one structure per 10 acres (rural residential), one per 40 acres (resource lands), or one per 5 acres (clustered development). These guidelines, however, have not been consistently followed.

Today, 58% of the 908 parcels are under 10 acres, 17% are 10–20 acres, and 25% are over 20 acres. Although the year-round population has remained relatively stable, the number of homes—and thus wells and septic systems—has grown substantially. Many of these homes are unoccupied for much of the year but still affect water quality, wildlife, and population density.

3. Demographic Shifts

The community is aging, shrinking in household size, and increasingly composed of retirees and seasonal residents. The median age rose from 45.8 in 2000 to 64.5 in 2022. The average household size has fallen below two persons. School enrollment declined from its peak in the 1990s but has remained stable over the past 15 years.

With the decline of the forest products industry, local employment has shifted toward retiree spending and hospitality services. Seasonal residents now account for nearly 50% of the population,

which is further complicating community planning and service delivery.

4. Economic Transformation

The local economy has evolved significantly since 1996. While the decline of timber-based industries was already underway at that time, it has since accelerated. Plum Creek's transition to a real estate investment trust and the subsequent land transfers reduced logging activity, affecting not only forestry jobs but also associated sectors such as trucking. The 2024 closure of Pyramid Lumber Mill in Seeley Lake further weakened the timber economy. Nonetheless, logging and construction remain important, with four log home builders and 14 registered contractors still active in the area.

Tourism and retiree spending now anchor the economy. There are 49 short-term rental (STR) properties in the area, most of them small and independently owned, with some also hosting events. Holland Lake Lodge remains the largest tourism facility. A proposed corporate expansion of the Lodge in 2023 was withdrawn following strong community opposition.

Retiree income supports much of the local economy but also increases demand for senior services. Growth in nearby urban centers such as Missoula and Kalispell has brought more day visitors, weekenders, and remote workers. Improved satellite internet has enabled a small but growing number of residents to work remotely.

Animal graphics featured on the front and rear of this document are stylized photos of carvings by John Stark (1904-1989) that were presented to the Swan Valley Community Library in 1983. All images in this document were taken by Missoula County staff unless noted.



1.4 Authorization and Purpose

Under Montana law [Montana Code Annotated 76-25-214], Missoula County may adopt neighborhood plans for parts of its jurisdiction to provide a more localized analysis of a county's comprehensive plan, or "growth policy," as it is referred to in that section of the law. An area plan must be in substantial compliance with the county's growth policy, and the adoption, amendment, or update of a neighborhood or area plan must follow the same process as the growth policy itself. Growth policies and neighborhood plans are not zoning. They are nonregulatory documents and may not be used to prohibit or deny new development. State law requires that growth policies be reviewed and updated, if necessary, every five years.

Like the county's growth policy, a neighborhood plan reflects what a community was yesterday, what it is today, and what it envisions for the future. The plan serves as a guidance document, not a regulatory one, and does not necessarily require new regulations to be adopted. However, in Montana, land use plans provide the legal framework and foundation for future regulations, community services, and infrastructure decisions.

In summary, a neighborhood plan guides decision-making and provides a road map that expresses what the Swan Valley community wants to change, what it wishes to preserve, and how it intends to achieve those goals.

1.5 Prior Planning Efforts

The Swan Valley's first neighborhood plan dates to the 1987 Swan Valley-Condon Comprehensive Plan Amendment. The plan was last updated in 1996. An effort began in 2008 to update the Valley's plan with the formation of a planning committee. That committee published the Swan Valley and Condon Community Profile in 2010, and in 2012, 10 visioning sessions were held. This work culminated in 2018 with a draft neighborhood plan that was never finalized or adopted. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted planning efforts, and it wasn't until 2023 that interest rekindled in updating the area's plan.

1.6 Process description

The Swan Valley Community Council appointed members to the Planning Committee on November 21, 2023. The Committee was tasked with examining land use issues most important to the community and exploring which planning tools might best address them.

To begin, the Committee focused on learning about planning tools that could be applied locally. Early meetings covered the purpose of a neighborhood plan and what zoning can—and cannot—do. These presentations helped both the Committee and community members build an initial understanding of how planning tools can support solutions to local land use challenges. Based on this exploration, the Planning Committee recommended updating the 1996 Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan—a decision supported by the Community Council. This early phase laid the groundwork for a shared understanding and informed the next steps.

The official plan update process began in May 2024. During the initial phase, the Committee gathered community concerns and helped shape the scope of the project. One of the first tasks was preparation of an Existing Conditions Report, completed by Missoula County staff with assistance from the Committee. This report provided a comprehensive overview of current conditions in the Swan Valley, including population, housing, transportation, land use, parks and cultural resources, education, and the natural environment.

To better understand community priorities, the Committee distributed a questionnaire to all tax addresses within the planning area and made it available online. The survey closed in January 2025, and the results informed the goals and strategies of the updated plan. A summary of the results is

provided on the following page. In March 2025, the Planning Committee presented the survey results to the Community Council.

With community input, the Committee drafted core values, goals, and strategies for the plan. These, along with a draft future land use map, were shared at a public meeting on April 26, 2025. Community feedback from that meeting was incorporated into a revised draft, which was presented at a second public meeting on June 14, 2025.

The plan entered a public review period during the summer of 2025. It was revised in a September 29th draft and presented to the Swan Valley Community Council for a recommendation. On November 18th, the Council moved to recommend the plan with amendments, with three votes in favor, one opposed, and one abstention.

1.7 Public Participation

Community members were actively encouraged to participate in the Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan update. Opportunities for involvement included reviewing draft materials, providing feedback, and attending public meetings.

All meetings of the Swan Valley Planning Committee were open to the public. The Committee met monthly on the third Monday of each month at 5:00 p.m. (unless otherwise posted), with additional meetings held as necessary. Regular meetings were held at the Community Hall in Condon, while some additional meetings were hosted in private homes. All meetings could also be attended remotely via a publicly available web meeting link. Agendas and minutes for all meetings were posted on the project website, Missoula County Voice. Metrics for the Missoula County Voice indicated that 87 visitors participated on the website (e.g., left a comment, filled out a survey), 575 went to the website and opened a document or viewed a key date and there were over 1,000 unique visitors to the site.

The Committee held two open houses, one in April and another in June 2024. Feedback and discussions at these open houses helped the Committee refine the goals and objectives of the plan and provided input on the future land use map. The first draft of the Neighborhood Plan was presented at the second open house, and community feedback on this draft was collected during a public comment period.

The Committee also engaged the public through other channels, including editorials in the Seeley Swan Pathfinder and discussions with local interest groups. Opportunities for public participation continue through the review and adoption phase of the plan.

1.8 Swan Valley Community Questionnaire

As a part of its public participation process, the Swan Valley Planning Committee initiated a community questionnaire, distributed both in print and online, to all tax addresses in the Upper Swan Valley. The survey aimed to gather public input on local values, challenges, and visions for the future of the valley.



Participation Overview:

- A total of 754 surveys were distributed, with 232 responses received (31% response rate).
- Of the responses, 69% were submitted via paper copies, and 31% online. Paper copies were returned via mail or in person to the community library.
- The questionnaire response period lasted almost three months, from mid-October 2024 to January 2025.
- Efforts to boost participation included a follow-up mailing with a community letter, local events, and promotion through social media and community venues.

Key Goals of the Questionnaire:

- Engage residents in the planning process.
- Understand demographics and residency patterns.
- Identify community values and land use priorities.
- Guide future planning strategies and decision-making.

Community Values and Themes:

- Natural Environment: Respondents overwhelmingly value the Swan Valley's wild, pristine landscapes, including its forests, rivers, lakes, and mountain views.
- Wildlife and Ecosystems: Many describe the valley as a rare, intact ecosystem where diverse species thrive. The presence of grizzly bears, moose, wolves, and native fish was often highlighted.
- Rural and Undeveloped Character: A recurring sentiment emphasized maintaining the valley's low-density development, solitude, and absence of commercial sprawl.

- Community and Culture: Residents noted strong community ties, self-reliance, and support for one another, with many expressing a desire to preserve the area's traditional values and rural way of life.

Concerns and Challenges:

- Development Pressure: Many voiced concerns about increasing development and the potential loss of the valley's natural character.
- Limited Services and Infrastructure: Some noted challenges related to healthcare, transportation, and employment opportunities.
 - Tourism and Recreation Impacts: While outdoor recreation is widely enjoyed, residents worry about its growth leading to environmental degradation or increased crowding.

The input gathered helped guide the Planning Committee to create policies that align with the community's values and concerns.

The full report on the community questionnaire was posted to the project website and is included as an appendix to the plan.





The North Fork Neighborhood Plan

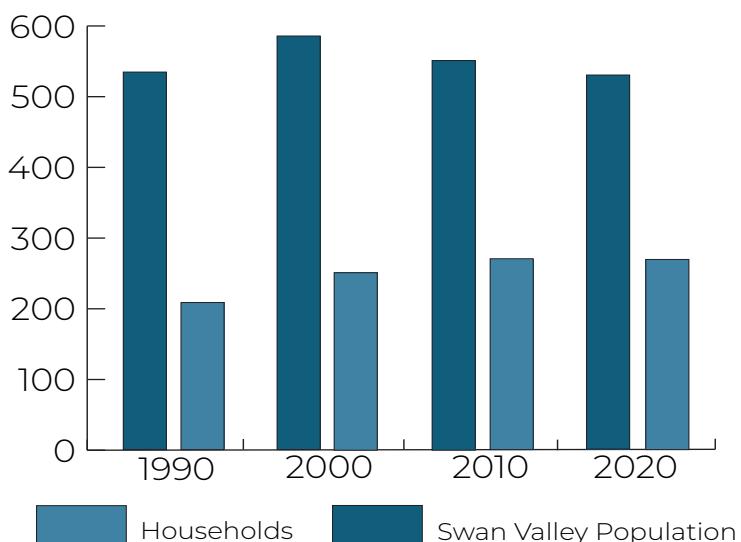
During the process of updating the Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan, the Committee drew inspiration from their neighbors in the North Fork of the Flathead River. The North Fork of the Flathead River Valley, located in the northeast corner of Flathead County along the western edge of Glacier National Park, shares many similarities with the Swan Valley. Both are remote, rural areas surrounded by mountain ranges, characterized by abundant wildlife, intact habitat, and largely undeveloped landscapes. The residents of the North Fork were passionate about protecting their rural landscape, especially in the face of quickly developing areas in the Flathead Valley and near the west entrance to Glacier National Park.

The North Fork's first neighborhood plan was adopted in 1987 and updated in 1992. In 1998, Flathead County adopted zoning in the North Fork based entirely on the neighborhood plan. Without the plan, the zoning would not have had the legal or community support needed for adoption. This zoning regulates the size of new parcels, requires river setbacks, and restricts certain commercial activities—tools that help preserve the valley's rural character.

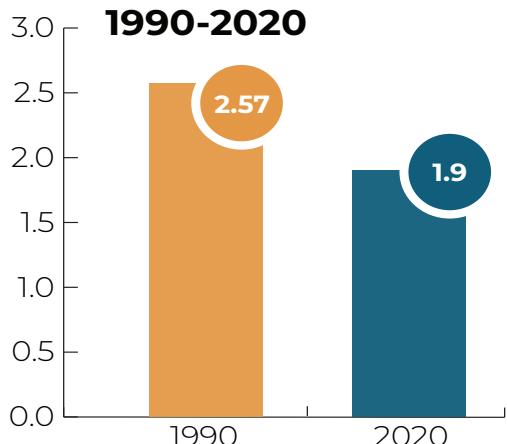
The most recent planning effort in the North Fork was completed in 2008, following extensive public outreach. Given the shared community values, vision, and geographic context, the North Fork's experience provided a valuable reference point that helped guide the Committee's approach to updating the Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan.

Swan Valley Community Profile

Population and Households, 1990-2020

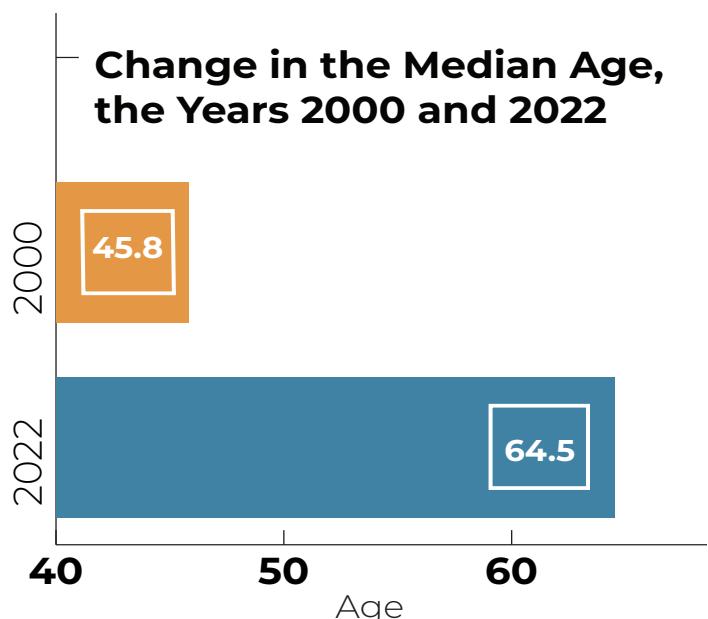


Persons per Household*, 1990-2020

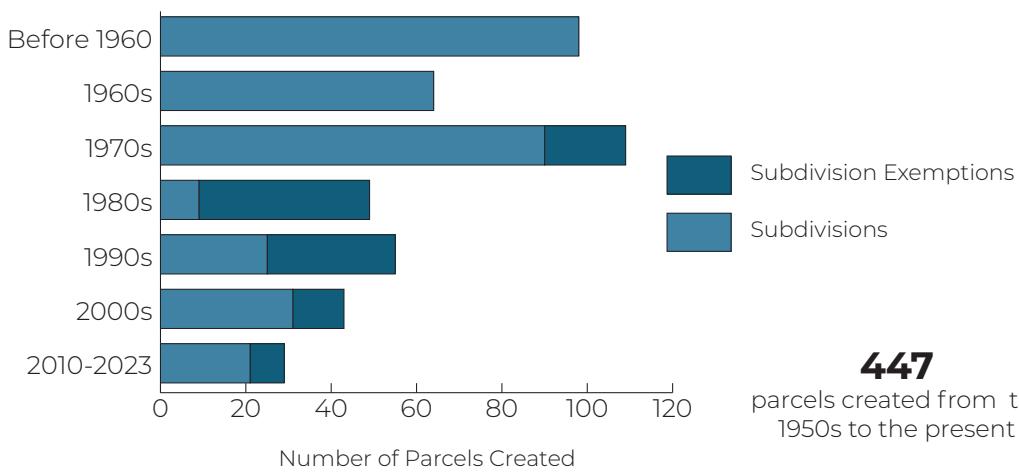


*The US Census has used the term "household" instead of the word "family" since 1930. A household consists of all the people who occupy a house or housing unit and, in most cases, a household and a family are synonymous.

Change in the Median Age, the Years 2000 and 2022

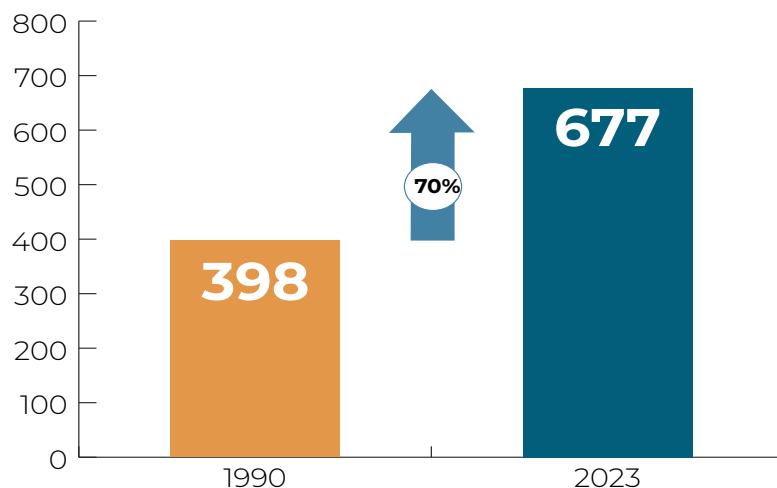


Parcels Created per Decade in the Swan Valley (1950s to 2023) by Type of Parcel Division

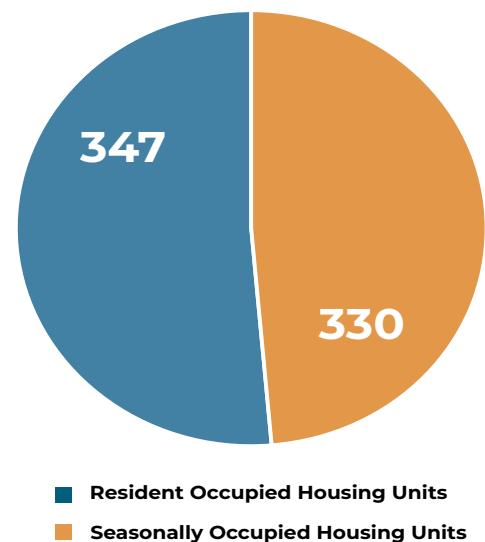


The table at left shows the number of parcels created by decade from the 1950s to 2023 and the mechanism of creation: subdivision and subdivision exemption. This version corrects earlier versions which included several subdivisions, one which was platted and finalized (i.e., divided into legal parcels) and another which expired and was never platted.

Change in number of houses 1990 - 2023



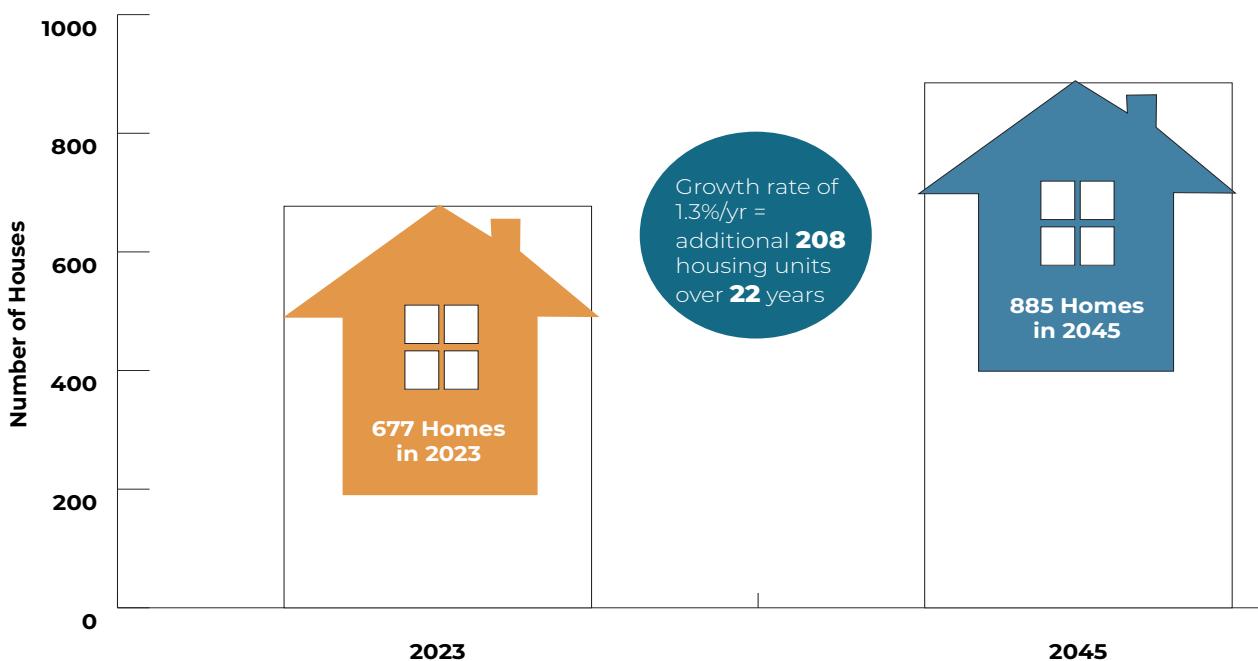
Estimated Proportion of Resident and Seasonal Residents - 2024



Short-term Rentals listed or for Sale in the Swan Valley, 2024



Using the average annual growth rate since 2000 (1.3%), the Swan Valley would increase the total number of houses from 677 to 885 by year 2045



2.0 OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OVERVIEW

The following objectives and strategies reflect the Swan Valley community's commitment to preserving the area's rural character, natural resources, and overall quality of life. Informed by existing conditions in the Swan Valley, the Committee's experience living and working in the area, and community input received during the planning process, they provide a framework for guiding decision-making on land use, community services, and the conservation of wildlife and natural resources. An appendix provides additional details on the strategies, including supporting entities and clarification of which are strictly advisory and which may require regulatory or policy changes.

3.0 MAINTAIN THE RURAL CHARACTER OF THE VALLEY

Residents of the Swan Valley—both long-time locals and newer arrivals—understand the extraordinary nature of this place. They also recognize that, as in many Montana mountain valleys, rapid change is occurring and the Swan Valley is particularly vulnerable to development pressures. The core values expressed in the 1996 Neighborhood Plan remain consistent among residents today. The community seeks to preserve its rural character, with both the benefits and limitations that entails. Residents value a place where neighbors support one another, water is clean, air is clear, the night sky remains dark, forests are resilient, and wildlife can coexist successfully with people. The community also places high priority on maintaining access to surrounding public lands, which provide opportunities for hiking, hunting, fishing, riding, and other outdoor pursuits central to its identity.

In 1996, the community debated and ultimately approved a Neighborhood Plan. That Plan identified key issues and offered concrete strategies to protect the Swan Valley's character. While there is little criticism of the 1996 Plan's vision and recommendations, there is widespread concern that many of its good ideas were not implemented in the years following adoption.

Since 1996, major changes have occurred. Housing density increased, with a 70% growth in the number of structures between 1990 and 2025, even as the overall population remained relatively stable. Households became smaller, older, and more seasonal. The local economy shifted dramatically with the decline of the forest products industry, long a major employer. The Montana Legacy Project facilitated one of the largest transfers of private forest land to federal ownership. Pressures to create large-scale commercial tourism development in the valley have intensified. While many residents expressed a desire in the 1996 Plan to "keep things the same," change has occurred, and additional pressures are inevitable.

A recent example underscores this reality. In 2022, a Utah-based developer proposed a major expansion of Holland Lake Lodge, including demolition of 10 existing structures and construction of new facilities, most notably a 13,000-square-foot building with 28 rooms. The proposal would have increased the Lodge's capacity from 50 to 156 guests per night. The project sparked immediate controversy and highlighted the community's ability to organize quickly to defend the valley's rural character.

The results of the community questionnaire and other forms of public engagement reaffirm that residents oppose large-scale, transformational development—such as destination resorts, ski areas, wind farms, water bottling plants, and major subdivisions—that would profoundly alter the valley. These are the types of developments that have transformed places like Big Sky and Whitefish from small communities into international tourism destinations. The residents of the Swan Valley are united

in their determination to avoid a similar fate and to preserve the valley's distinctive rural and natural character.

3.1 Land Use

Future Land Use Objectives

1. **Keep it the same** – Preserve the valley's rural character by maintaining low population density and keeping large-scale new development out. Residents value the peace, quiet, and dark skies that distinguish the area from urban environments.
2. **Keep it wild** – Maintain the distribution of federal lands in the Swan Valley to ensure access for hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, and riding, ensuring continued outdoor opportunities for the public.
3. **Use the minimum number of rules possible** – The residents of the valley value freedom alongside the rural character, wildlife, and open spaces. Land use strategies should employ the minimum number of regulations, focusing only on what's necessary to protect these qualities. The ability for residents to have home occupations and home businesses should not be infringed upon.
4. **Focus Regulations on Future Development Only** – Land use rules should apply only to future development. Existing lots and uses will be "grandfathered" in and unaffected. Rules will be enforced only through subdivision review and building permits. Existing vacant lots can still be built on, and zoning should not create non-buildable lots.

Future Land Use Strategies

1. Large-scale commercial development that does not align with the valley's rural character or infrastructure capacity should not be allowed. Prohibited uses include destination resorts, large hotels (over 30 beds), amusement parks, golf courses, RV parks, bottling plants, and utility-scale renewable energy facilities.
2. Commercial development should be limited to small-scale businesses that serve local residents and visitors. These should preferentially be located along Highway 83 or in other appropriate areas and sized to meet community needs. Light industrial uses related to forestry and timber are allowed and encouraged, but should preferentially be sited along the Highway 83 corridor to minimize impact.
3. To the greatest extent possible, protect scenic views and dark night skies by prohibiting telecommunication towers over 200 feet high. These facilities should be encouraged to co-locate on existing towers, mandate appropriate screening and buffering, and develop in a way that is aesthetically consistent with the rural nature of the area.
4. Home-based businesses and occupations should be broadly permitted.
5. The 2025 revision of the Neighborhood Plan does not alter existing land use or parcel sizes. Parcels and structures that do not align with the plan's recommendations will be "grandfathered in" or otherwise recognized as legal non-conforming uses or parcels. If a parcel was legally created prior to this or earlier plans, it may still be developed with a single-family home and accessory buildings, even if it does not conform to current plan guidelines. Similarly, existing legal non-conforming commercial and industrial uses are allowed to continue. These uses may be modified or replaced with another use that is similar or less intensive.
6. The 2025 Neighborhood Plan updates the 1996 Future Land Use Map to reflect current land use patterns and developments. The map should remain advisory, and its recommendations regarding residential density and minimum lot sizes should be treated as guidance, not a regulatory requirement. Only Future Land Use Strategies 1–5 are intended to be implemented through a land use regulation, such as zoning.

7. Continued access to public lands for recreation is a core value. The community strongly opposes the sale or transfer of general USFS forest lands and urges elected officials to collaborate with the USFS to assure continued access to our public lands for hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, and riding.
8. Special attention should be given to the conveyance of the Condon Workstation. Considering the shortage of affordable housing in the valley, the Planning Committee strongly encourages the county and other partners to take a constructive role, ensuring the transfer of this parcel to the county government or a community-based nonprofit that will utilize the infrastructure for public benefit.
9. Given that the USFS controls almost 90% of the land in the area, it is essential for elected leadership, county government, and the Swan Valley Community Council to work closely with the USFS Flathead National Forest leadership to ensure that the USFS is aware of and incorporates community input and preferences. While the federal government isn't bound by a land use plan or regulations like zoning, it often attempts to follow them. If federal lands are sold or traded, the new private owner must adhere to them.
10. The zoning district for the Lindbergh and Cygnet Lakes area was established in 1970 and expanded in 1994 under Part 1, Title 76, Chapter 2 of the Montana Code Annotated, commonly known as "citizen-initiated zoning." The district permits single-family residential use, non-commercial recreation, home occupations, and accessory structures, while prohibiting commercial, institutional, multifamily, lodge, and resort development. This updated Neighborhood Plan, and any future zoning regulations, should not alter the Lindbergh Lake zoning district.

3.2 Future Land Use Map

All neighborhood plans and growth policies are required by state law to include a future land use map. The map serves as a policy guide for future development and reflects a vision for the community's future. As a policy guide, this map is not zoning and does not have regulatory authority. New development proposals or subdivisions cannot be denied solely based on the neighborhood plan's future land use map, per state law. However, in Montana, future land use maps provide the legal framework and policy needed to create land use regulations such as zoning.

Any zoning adopted in the future should be based on the future land use map. After the 1996 plan was adopted, zoning was never adopted as a part of the implementation strategy of the plan.

The draft future land use map presented here retains many similarities to the future land use map adopted as a part of the 1996 plan.

Future Land Use Designations

Low Density Residential (1 home per 10 acres)

- I. Location: This is the land use designation for most land throughout the valley. Future development in this area should maintain rural, low-density characteristics.
- II. Character: The principal use of these lands is for residential purposes, with the allowance of home-based occupations. The overall density should not exceed 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres. However, smaller parcels are acceptable when parcels and homesites are grouped, leaving the remainder of the land as open space, and the overall density of 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres. Development of these parcels should respect the natural resource concerns of the area. This land use designation also allows for rural residential cluster development to allow for development at higher densities while the development considers the character and environmental sensitivity of the area. A clustered development reduces the size of

building lots and concentrates homesites together so that the development does not exceed the recommended overall density of one dwelling unit per five acres. Subdivision proposals may be considered by the Board of County Commissioners to determine compliance with this plan, specifically using the criteria suggested in Section 9.9, Clustered Subdivision in Missoula County Zoning Regulations. The designation corresponds with the Missoula Area Land Use Element Land Use Designation "Rural Residential and Small Agriculture" in terms of recommended minimum lot sizes and projected population density per acre.

III. Preferred Land Uses

- Residential development
- Accessory dwelling units in accordance with Montana state law, where septic capacity supports.
- Other accessory structures: garages, barns, shops, etc.
- Small-scale commercial and light industrial uses are allowed along the Highway 83 corridor only.
- Forestry and timber harvesting activities

Open and Resource Lands (1 home per 40 acres)

- I. Location: Areas with environmental constraints, such as areas of natural hazards (i.e., steep slopes, floodplain, wildlife habitat, and other natural resources).
- II. Character: The principal use of these lands is defined by open space and protection of the natural resource. Secondary uses should be residential, with a density of one dwelling unit per 40 acres. Development in these areas should be clustered near existing facilities. The designation corresponds with the Missoula Area Land Use Element Land Use Designation "Agriculture" in terms of recommended minimum lot sizes and projected population density per acre.

III. Preferred Land Uses:

- Open Space
- Forestry and timber harvesting
- Ranching
- Watershed protection
- More limited residential development with similar allowances for accessory dwelling units and accessory structures as defined in Low Density Residential

Public and Quasi-Public Lands and Facilities

- I. Location – These facilities include structures or uses such as schools, parks, community buildings, cemeteries, and utility facilities. This designation would include the Swan Valley School, Community Hall, Community Ball Park, and the Condon Workstation.
- II. Character – These locations should provide for public benefit and allow for administrative and recreational uses. These locations should have limited residential use unless the physical site of the existing school has existing space and infrastructure (water, septic, electric) to support a limited number of housing units to accommodate housing for the local workforce. The designation corresponds with the Missoula Area Land Use Element Land Use Designation "Open, Resource and Recreation" in terms of recommended minimum lot sizes and projected population density per acre.



III. Preferred Land Uses:

- Schools
- Parks & playgrounds
- Community buildings
- Utility facilities
- Cemeteries
- Limited residential housing, if appropriate

Public Lands and Open Space

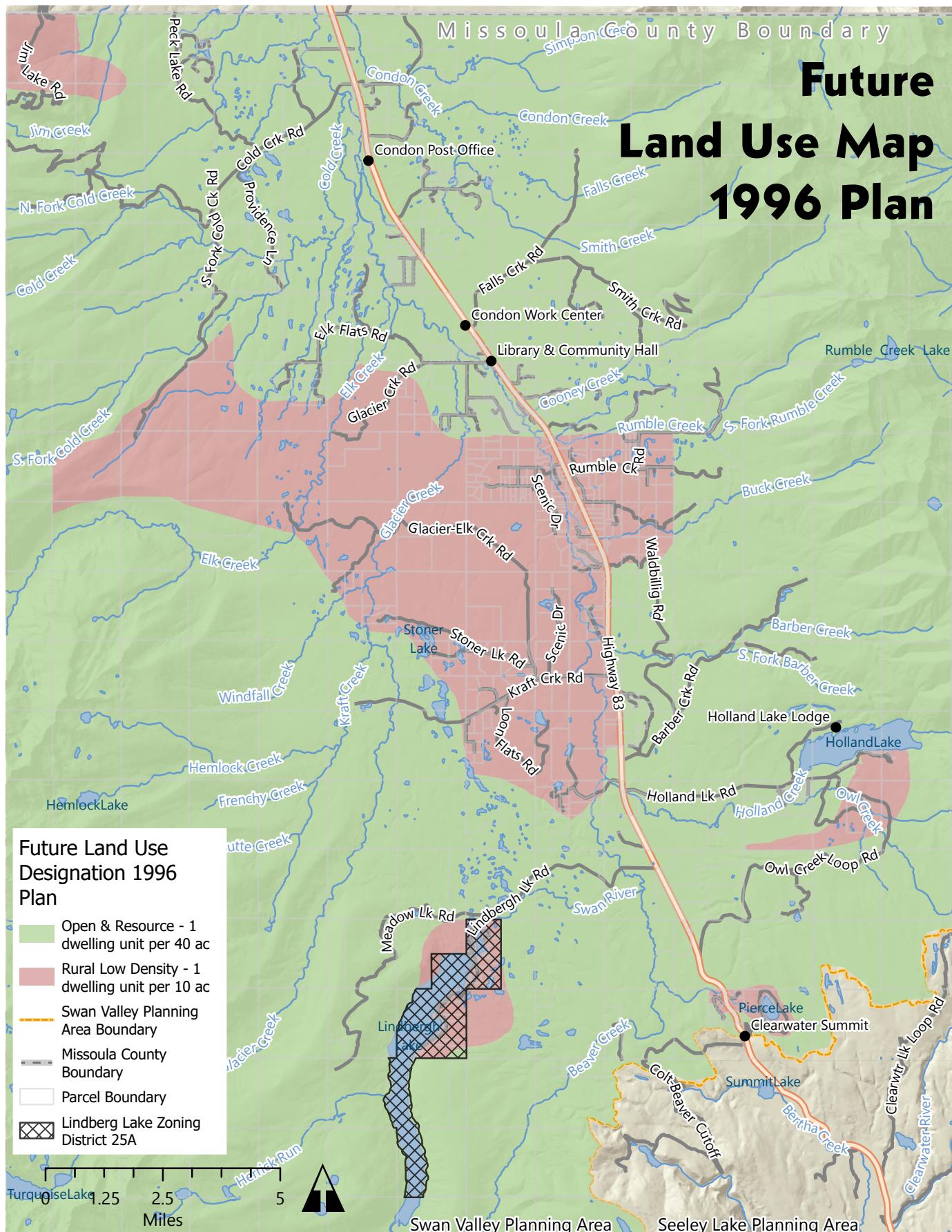
- I. Location – Publicly owned property that allows for public access. This designation applies to all federal, state, and county-owned lands that are managed primarily for natural resource conservation.
- II. Character – If public lands are sold, new lots created under Missoula County regulations should be a minimum of size of 160 acres. The designation corresponds with the Missoula Area Land Use Element Land Use Designation “Open, Resource and Recreation” in terms of recommended minimum lot sizes and projected population density per acre.
- III. Preferred Land Uses:
 - Outdoor recreation on publicly accessible land
 - Watershed protection
 - Conservation Easements
 - Hazard Mitigation (i.e., floodplain management, steep slope, high wildfire hazard)

The 2025 map proposes a few changes to the 1996 map. All designations have been described in the previous section.

- Private land inholdings (i.e., private land surrounded by USFS public land) at upper Elk Creek, upper Glacier Creek, upper Owl Creek, South Holland Lake, and east of Lindbergh Lake (outside of the zoned area) have changed from Low Density Residential to Open and Resource Lands.



Future Land Use Map 1996 Plan



The 1996 Future Land Use Map used two land use designations, Open and Resource which recommended 1 dwelling unit per 40 acres (40 acre minimum lot size) and Rural Low Density, which recommended 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres (10 acre minimum lot size).

Future Land Use Map 2025

This map is a policy guide for future development, it is not intended to be a map of what is on the ground currently. As a policy guide, it is not a law- it is not zoning and it has no regulatory authority. New development proposals or subdivisions can't be denied based on the neighborhood plan's future land use map.

	Swan Valley Planning Area Boundary
	Missoula County Boundary
Future Land Use Designation (2025)	
	Public Lands and Open Space
	Open and Resource Lands - 1 dwelling unit per 40 acres
	Low Density Residential - 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres
	Public and Quasi-Public Lands and Facilities



- Areas along Highway 83 in the developed area of Condon, Flint Ridge Road, Remicks Road, Charles Road, Hollopeter Road, and Old Barn Road have changed from Open and Resource Lands to Low-Density Residential. These areas are the most densely developed in the valley and have good access to Highway 83 and represent areas more appropriate for development than the remote inholding areas described above.
- Public and Quasi-Public Lands and Facilities have been clearly designated. These locations include the community hall and library, community ball field, Condon Workstation, and the Swan Valley School.
- The Public Lands and Open Space designation has been added and applied to USFS-managed lands only. These areas are primarily USFS lands and do not include any private land or private lands under conservation easement.

A map of the 1996 Future Land Use Plan is included on page 19. At left, on page 20, is the draft 2025 draft future land use map and on following pages, key changes between the 1996 future land use map and the 2025 draft are highlighted.

4.0 CREATE OPPORTUNITY

4.1 Population and Housing

According to the 2020 United States Census, approximately 529 people permanently reside in the planning area. The year-round population has remained relatively steady over the past several decades, with 534 residents recorded in 1990. Population counts have likely fluctuated over the past 30 years, with the 2016 Census estimating a higher population of 629. This stability contrasts with trends in the rest of Missoula County and western Montana, where population has increased steadily during the same period.

What land use regulations are (and aren't) present currently in the valley?

Aside from the zoning in place at Lindbergh Lake, there is no zoning within the planning area. However, the County does administer building codes (including plumbing, electrical, and energy codes), sanitation standards, and floodplain regulations. Buildings intended for lease or rent are also subject to review through a process similar to subdivision review. In addition, the Missoula County Conservation District administers Montana Stream Protection Act (310) permits for work in and around waterways.

In Montana, new parcels of land are generally created through two mechanisms: subdivision and subdivision exemptions. All local governments in Montana are required to adopt subdivision regulations that are consistent with state law. Subdivision regulations establish standards for dividing land and creating new tracts of record. These regulations are intended to ensure adequate provision of roads, utilities, water availability, sanitation, and vehicular access. Subdivision review also considers whether a proposal complies with an adopted neighborhood plan; however, a subdivision cannot be denied on the basis of the neighborhood plan alone.

Montana law further limits the authority of local governments to restrict certain land uses. Montana Code Annotated § 76-2-109 provides that local regulations may not infringe upon grazing, horticulture, agriculture, the growing of timber, or the complete use, development, or recovery of any mineral.

Demographically, the population of the Swan Valley has grown older since the 1990s. In 2022, nearly 47% of the permanent population was over the age of 65. According to the U.S. Census, the median age rose from 45.8 in 2000 to 64.5 in 2022.

While the year-round population has remained steady, the number of housing units in the valley has grown substantially, far outpacing permanent population and household growth. This trend reflects the growth of the seasonal population. The number of houses increased from 398 in 1990 to 677 in 2023—a 70% increase over 33 years, or about 1.3% annually since 2000. Many of the homes built since 1990 are more likely to be seasonally occupied than year-round residences. An analysis of state tax parcel data, comparing parcel addresses with owner tax addresses, indicates that just under half (49%) of all homes are seasonally occupied. By contrast, a 1996 economic study found that only 23% of residents were seasonal at that time. As more homes have been constructed, a greater share has been devoted to seasonal rather than permanent occupancy.

Housing occupancy in the Swan Valley has traditionally favored ownership over rental. The 2022 Census American Community Survey estimates that 92% of occupied housing units are owner-occupied, while only 8% are renter-occupied.

Housing development in the Swan Valley is constrained by several factors, foremost among them the lack of infrastructure. The area has no centralized potable water or sewer system; nearly all development relies on individual wells and septic systems. The high cost of labor and building materials, coupled with the remote nature of the valley, makes construction costly. Missoula County's building codes, which set higher standards than some other Montana counties, and the limitations imposed by subdivision laws may also contribute to challenges in new housing development. Although zoning can restrict housing growth in some areas, the Swan Valley is almost entirely unzoned.

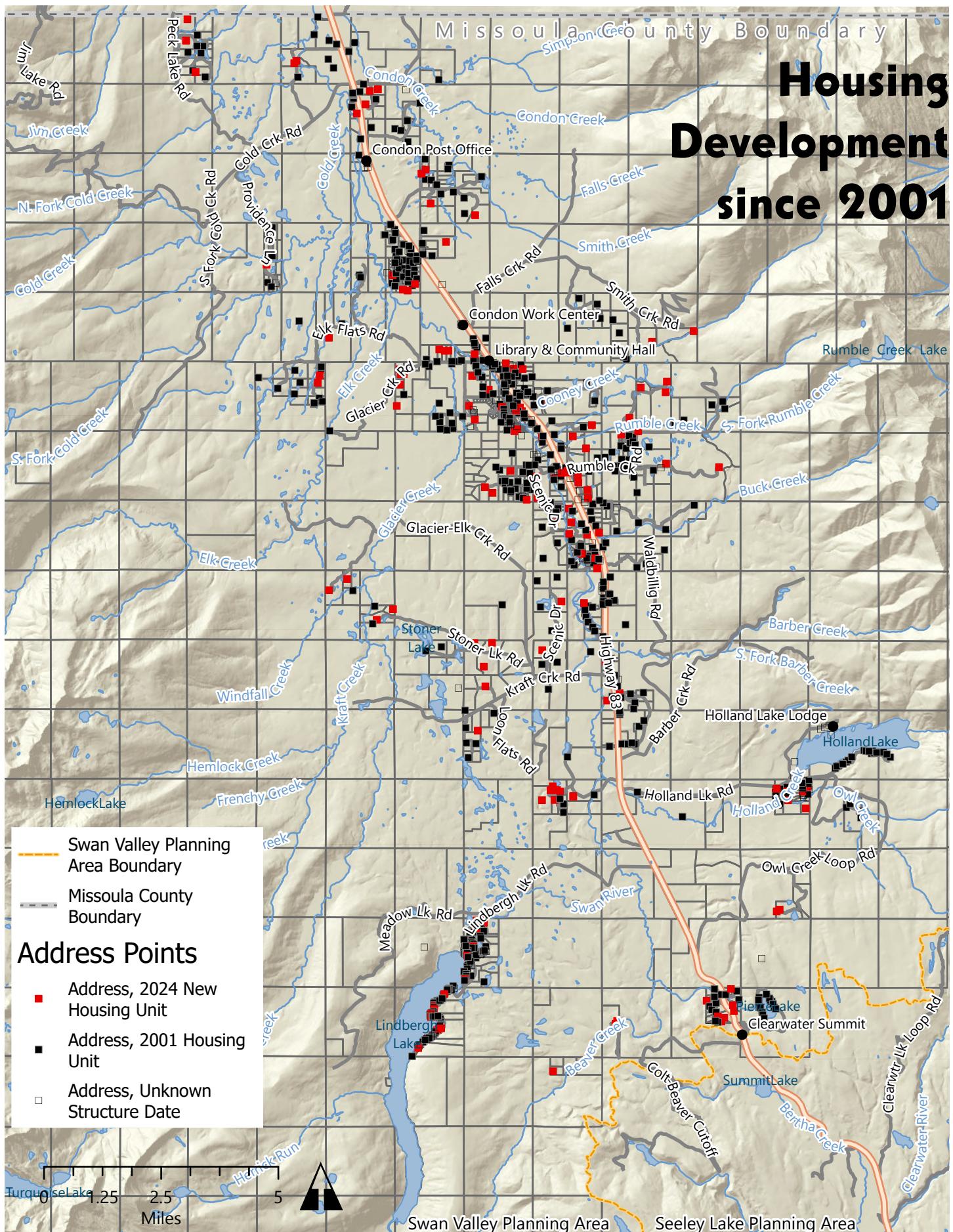
Housing affordability presents a significant challenge. Clearwater Montana Properties, Inc. reported in 2024 that the average home price in Condon rose from \$644,000 to \$716,000 within the previous 24 months, an increase of 10%. Since 1996, the average new home in the Swan Valley has been 1,940 square feet, compared to 1,778 square feet in Missoula County as a whole. By contrast, most affordable housing in Missoula County is considerably smaller; for example, Habitat for Humanity is developing four homes in East Missoula, each approximately 750 square feet.

Affordable housing for community members requires a mix of ownership and rental options in diverse forms. Unlike typical market-rate housing, affordable or workforce housing often includes smaller homes on smaller lots, duplexes, manufactured homes, townhomes, condominiums, or apartments. These units are generally built at higher densities to reduce land and construction costs per unit. However, higher-density housing often cannot rely on conventional septic systems and may require alternative wastewater treatment solutions, both of which add cost and complexity. Affordable housing concerns are particularly acute for teachers and seasonal employees, who face very limited housing options.

Several locations have been identified as having potential for affordable housing development, including the Swan Valley School and the Condon Workstation. Partnerships with public agencies and nonprofit organizations will be essential to evaluate feasibility, secure funding, and ensure that any new housing supports the community's workforce and long-term residents.

Houses and housing development shown in the map uses address points. The US Census records the number of homes but doesn't show their location or age. Address points are collected and tracked by Missoula County for addressing and emergency services purposes and as such, don't always represent the exact location or number of homes but help provide an approximation.

Housing Development since 2001



Housing Objectives

1. Increase housing opportunities for the Swan's residents and seasonal workers, providing public benefit (teachers, fire crews, trail crews), in strategic and appropriate locations.
2. Promote efforts that create opportunities for the long-term rental of homes for resident workers.
3. Promote efficient and timely development and building review.



Housing Action Strategies

1. Identify and support opportunities to develop workforce housing.
2. Evaluate opportunities to expand housing at the Swan Valley School for teachers and education specialists.
3. Missoula County, in collaboration with local organizations, should pursue housing opportunities at the Condon Work Center, assuring that firefighters, seasonal workers, and other vital community members have access to housing.
4. Promote efforts that streamline and promote efficiency and consistency within Missoula County's building and development review programs.
5. Identify and pursue policies that encourage long-term rental of homes for residents.

4.2 Economy

The 1996 Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan observed that the local economy relied heavily on tourism, retirees, and special events—a trend that continues today. A network of commercial and professional businesses serves year-round residents, seasonal residents, and tourists.

Due to the valley's rural character, reliable economic data is limited. The Montana Department of Commerce reports 29 business establishments employing 84 individuals. The Montana Department of Labor and Industry's contractor registry reflects a diverse range of professions beyond construction, including a farrier, a naturalist consultant, and a nurse.

Family-owned outfitters and guides remain a cornerstone of the local economy, offering services for hunters, anglers, and sightseers. Many permanent residents are self-employed, and remote work is becoming more prevalent. A 1993 economic report noted that many year-round residents held multiple jobs, and anecdotal evidence suggests this remains the case today.

The Montana Logging Association lists three logging companies based in Condon, along with additional independent contractors engaged in logging and thinning. In 2024, the closure of Pyramid Lumber in Seeley Lake—then the area's largest employer—dealt a significant blow to the forestry industry, followed by the closure of the Roseburg particleboard plant in Missoula. As a result, local loggers must now transport timber to mills in Flathead County and beyond.

The log home and general contracting industries continue to play an important economic role, particularly as logging has declined. According to the Department of Labor and Industry, at least four

log home builders and 14 registered contractors in the valley specialize in construction, carpentry, and excavation.

Over the past 15 years, short-term rentals (STRs) have had a notable impact on the local housing market and economy. Most STRs are marketed as vacation rentals, with only a few featuring on-site owners or managers. While STRs provide income opportunities for homeowners, they have reduced the availability of long-term rental housing and contributed to rising home prices. According to AirDNA, a vacation rental tracking service, there were 49 STRs in the Swan Valley in 2024. While most are independently operated, some are clustered under a single owner or manager and host events such as weddings and family gatherings.

Holland Lake Lodge, built in 1924, operated seasonally for decades as one of the valley's few guest hotels. After a redevelopment proposal was rejected in 2022, the lodge did not reopen. In 2025, a new ownership group secured a new operating permit from the U.S. Forest Service. The valley's only other hotel closed in 2014, leaving just one year-round bed-and-breakfast outside the STR market.

While earlier plans indicated residents were somewhat indifferent to the types of industries entering the valley, there was consistent support for independent, small-scale businesses. The results of the 2024 community questionnaire affirmed this preference, with a strong majority of respondents favoring small businesses and services in the Swan Valley.

Economic Objectives

1. Encourage opportunities for economic development in the Swan Valley that meet the skills and needs of current residents and their children. Economic development should be consistent with the rural and wild character of the Swan, including small-scale commercial, service, tourism and light industrial development in areas consistent with the land use designation.
2. Prohibit large-scale commercial and resort developments that alter the character and degrade wildlife habitat, water quality, and the quality of life for residents.
3. Maintain and support the ability for residents to have home occupations.

Economic Action Strategies

1. Maintain and support small manufacturing and log home building enterprises.
2. Individually and collectively, develop better markets for resources from and products created in the valley.
3. Pursue a land use regulation that prohibits large-scale commercial and resort developments in the planning area.
4. Maintain sustainable timber harvesting in designated areas to ensure long-term forest health and economic viability.
5. Maintain the ability to allow for home-based businesses while maintaining the neighborhood character.

4.3 Transportation

Highway 83 serves as the primary north-south route through the Swan Valley, providing access to Seeley Lake and Missoula to the south, and Bigfork and Kalispell to the north. The valley's location between the Swan and Mission



Mountain ranges precludes an east–west highway connection. As a state highway, Highway 83 is controlled and maintained by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). The posted speed limit is 70 mph for passenger vehicles and 60 mph for trucks, with a nighttime limit of 55 mph. In August 2018, a 55-mph speed limit was implemented near Swan Valley Elementary School during morning and afternoon bus and parent pick-up and drop-off periods. Highway 83 lacks dedicated bicycle lanes or pedestrian facilities.

Annual average daily traffic (AADT) on Highway 83 in 2023 was 1,437 vehicles at a counter located one mile north of Condon. AADT represents the annual average; daily traffic volumes fluctuate considerably, ranging from 2,677 vehicles on July 30 to 1,131 vehicles on April 11. A second counting station, located south of Condon and north of Pierce Lake, recorded averages 80–100 trips lower than the northern station.

A network of county roads provides access to most private lands on the valley floor. Missoula County is responsible for the maintenance of these roads, focusing primarily on routine grading, sweeping, and dust abatement. Maintenance operations for the Swan Valley are based out of the Missoula County road shop in Seeley Lake, which employs a staff of five. Snow plowing constitutes a significant portion of the County's labor in the valley. One staff member is dedicated to the Swan Valley, with additional operators deployed as needed.

There are 13 structural bridges within the Swan Valley under the jurisdiction of Missoula County, most constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. Seven span the Swan River, with the remaining bridges crossing Glacier Creek (3), Holland Creek (2), and Elk Creek (1). The County's Public Works Department has several bridge replacement projects in the planning phase, including the Cold Creek Bridge over the Swan River and the Glacier Creek Bridge.

General road maintenance includes snow plowing, grading, reapplication of gravel, and dust suppression as required. Forest Service roads provide access to trailheads for the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountain Wilderness areas. No form of public transportation currently serves the valley. Commercial air service and long-distance bus routes are available in Missoula and Kalispell, while passenger rail service is accessed in Whitefish.

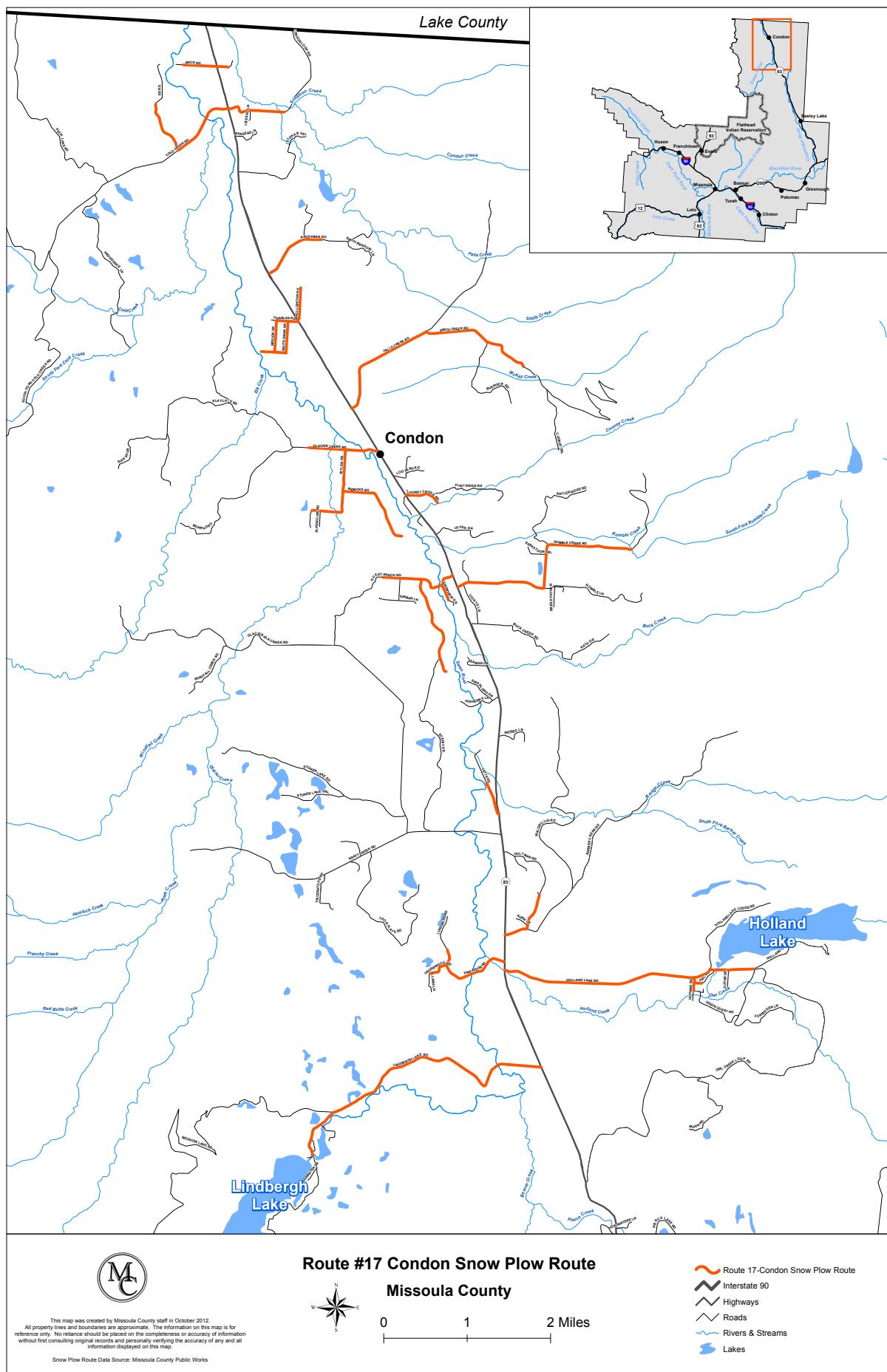
The Montana Wildlife and Transportation Partnership, a collaborative program of MDT and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, has identified priority areas for wildlife and transportation accommodations. Their planning framework assesses five criteria:

1. Risk to human safety and property damage resulting from wildlife–vehicle collisions.
2. Important daily or seasonal habitats for big game and carnivores.
3. Important habitat for at-risk or struggling species.
4. Habitats supporting a wide range of species.
5. Highways or adjacent linear infrastructure that impede wildlife movement.

Highway 83, particularly the “Summit–Condon–Salmon Prairie” segment, has been identified as a high-risk area under criteria 2, 3, and 4.

Transportation Objectives:

1. Ensure Highway 83 is safe, scenic, and fits the valley's rural character.
2. Improve road maintenance for County and US Forest roads.
3. Complete infrastructure needs for the Swan Valley planning area bridges.
4. Enhance human and wildlife safety by exploring wildlife crossings and improving visibility along Highway 83.



5. Minimize road maintenance impacts on natural landscapes.

Transportation Action Strategies:

1. Identify and improve the road maintenance and conditions for Swan Valley's County and US Forest roads, such as the Old Condon Loop, Holland Lake road, and other high-recreation area roads.
2. Identify, prioritize, and complete infrastructure needs for the Swan Valley planning area bridges.
3. Work with the US Forest Service and State Government to locate an off-road trail system route that connects lands within the valley for non-motorized use, between Kraft Creek Road and Holland Lake Road.
4. Work with MDOT and private property owners to identify areas along Highway 83 where the visibility of animals entering the road is limited.
5. Evaluate where major wildlife corridor crossings occur and identify the high wildlife mortality areas on Highway 83 (Summit, Owl Creek to Beaver Creek, and Salmon Prairie, for example) and assess features like highway guard rails, private fencing, and wildlife crossing solutions.
6. Increase the use of dust abatement and right-sized culverts and bridges on roads near rivers, streams, and wetlands to improve fish and water health (review recommendations from the 2008 ITEEM Highway 83 study).

4.4 Education

Students residing in the Missoula County portion of the Swan Valley attend Swan Valley Elementary School (Kindergarten–8th grade) and Seeley Swan High School (9th–12th grade). Swan Valley Elementary School District #33 boundaries align with the Swan Valley Planning Region boundaries, while Seeley Swan High School is part of High School District #1.

For the 2024–2025 school year, enrollment at Swan Valley Elementary School is twenty-five (25) students. Enrollment has fluctuated significantly over the past thirty years. During the 1990s and early 2000s, enrollment increased steadily, approaching 100 students and placing the school facilities near capacity.

Following this period, enrollment declined as a result of shifts in the local population's age and family structure, driven by the downsizing of the logging industry, the closure or reduction of local businesses, the expansion of homeschooling, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, enrollment has stabilized and remained relatively steady.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures accelerated changes in education delivery. Faculty rapidly developed online instructional materials, and hybrid learning continued after the lifting of mandatory closures. Challenges with online access and variable student participation were notable. Post-pandemic, homeschooling has persisted and may have accelerated as families adapted to the new educational environment.

School leadership transitioned with the appointment of a new principal in 2023. The principal brings extensive experience, including expertise in special education, and has introduced a range of strategies to enhance curriculum and school operations. Implementation is constrained, however, by limited resources and low enrollment numbers. The small but dedicated teaching staff, supported by several younger paraprofessionals, has demonstrated resilience and commitment during these challenging periods. Attracting and retaining recently trained educators or lateral transfers of younger, experienced teachers remains difficult due to Montana's public school pay scale, the high cost of housing, and the limited availability of rental properties in the Condon area.



Photo by the Swan Valley School

A high-performing primary school is a key institutional asset in the Swan Valley. The presence of a primary school that attracts young families is essential for the valley's long-term well-being, as it, along with more affordable housing, is a critical factor in attracting and retaining young families.

Education Objectives and Challenges

1. Maintain and further improve the facilities and staff for educational excellence at the Swan Valley Elementary School.
2. Retain and expand student enrollment.
3. Address critical infrastructure needs like upgrading the electrical system, renovating the library, and having facilities to address the lack of hot lunch opportunities for the students.
4. Working with the community, County and State government, and potential benefactors, investigate the willingness, feasibility, and estimated costs of building teacher housing on the existing campus to help address the teacher labor force issues (recruitment and retention).

Education Action Strategies

1. The Swan Valley Community Council and local organizations like the Swan Valley Community Foundation, local businesses, and private individuals will support and expand the School Board-supported initiatives to improve the facilities (library renovation, electrical upgrading,

cafeteria).

2. The Swan Valley Community Council will ask the County Commissioners to request the County and State educational planning departments to initiate, finance, and conduct a comprehensive feasibility study of the feasibility and cost of creating a residential campus.

4.5 Utilities

Electrical service in the Swan Valley planning area (District 5) is provided by Missoula Electric Cooperative.

Heating in the valley is supplied through a variety of sources, including wood, electricity, propane, and solar. Current propane providers in the Seeley/Swan Valley include Energy Partners, 406 Propane, AmeriGas, and Mountain View Coop. Natural gas service is not available.

Telecommunications, telephone, and internet services are provided by Blackfoot Communications (District 1). Satellite systems are also available and used by residents and businesses to access television and high-speed internet. There are two registered cell towers (Missoula County and American Towers LLC) and two non-registered cell towers (Missoula County and Harmoni Towers LLC) located in Condon, Montana. Cable television service is not available in the region.

Utility Objectives

1. Improve the utility systems in the Swan Valley, ensuring safe and efficient service.
2. Provide the best communication technology to the planning region while minimizing visual and environmental impacts, whenever possible.
3. Ensure dependable heating sources throughout all seasons.

Utility Action Strategies:

1. Work with Missoula Electric Coop (MEC) and private property owners to identify and remove dead and fallen trees and vegetation in and along the powerline right of way.
2. Assist and help enable MEC to bury power lines in the Swan Valley. This eliminates the risk of falling powerlines, which are a significant source of wildfire ignition.
3. Enable Blackfoot Communications to provide reliable & fast broadband speeds of 1 Gbps, enabling access to state-of-the-art communication by allowing access to private properties to replace the aging copper loops with new fiber-optic loops.
4. Ensure clear location identification and unobstructed access to underground and above-ground propane tanks. Propane tank installations should follow the Uniform Mechanical Code, Uniform Fire Code, and the National Fire Protection Agency Standards.
5. Work with Missoula County and the State of Montana to minimize the number of cell towers in the Swan Valley by requesting/requiring multiple providers to share cell towers. The towers should also be below 200 ft to eliminate strobe light requirements and be compatible with the environment.

4.6 Community Services

Solid waste materials

Pick-up and disposal of solid waste in the Swan Valley planning area is provided weekly by Republic Services for a fee. Residents may also transport waste to transfer stations located in the Seeley Lake area or Lake County, where it can be deposited for a fee. Recycling services are limited in the area. Cardboard recycling is available for a fee at the transfer stations, and glass recycling is offered

quarterly in Seeley Lake on a donation basis.

Postal Services

The Swan Valley–Condon Post Office is located adjacent to the Mission Mountains Mercantile. The United States Postal Service provides mail delivery along Highway 83 to area residents, covering 272 mailboxes, including both permanent and seasonal residents. The post office also offers approximately 500 post office boxes and standard postal services. The number of rented post office boxes and residential mail deliveries serves as an important indicator of community growth or decline. Private parcel delivery companies, primarily United Parcel Service (UPS) and Federal Express (FedEx), also serve the area.

Swan Valley Library Services

The Missoula Public Library maintains a branch in the Swan Valley, housed in a 624-square-foot log building attached to the Community Hall. The building, constructed in 1978, is operated and maintained by one half-time employee (20 hours per week) and a five-member local board.

The Swan Valley Library is part of a shared catalog system, allowing collections to be exchanged with the main library and other branches, providing patrons access to a broad range of materials. In addition to fiction, non-fiction, and reference materials, the library offers books on CD and DVDs. Wi-Fi and public computer access are also available on site.

Aging Services

A Missoula Aging Services Resource Specialist is based in Seeley Lake and serves residents of the Seeley–Swan area. The Specialist provides assistance and referrals for transportation, Medicare and Medicaid services, nutrition programs, in-home services, caregiver support, and volunteer opportunities for seniors in Missoula County.

Transportation to medical appointments is available for veterans and senior citizens of the Upper Swan Valley through the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and the Veterans Transportation Service (VTS).

The Seeley Lake Community Foundation also provides volunteer services, including:

- “I Ride” Seeley Swan Van Service: A joint initiative between Swan Valley Senior Services and the Seeley Lake Community Foundation, offering transportation to medical appointments—including medical, dental, vision, chiropractic, and mental health appointments—in Missoula. Outlying areas, such as Condon, may not always be accommodated due to limited capacity.
- Computer Tech Support: Monthly sessions at the Seeley Lake Community Foundation building to assist residents with troubleshooting technology and answering questions related to computing devices

Law Enforcement Services

Law enforcement, fire, and medical response services are locally available in the Swan Valley. The Missoula County Sheriff’s Department provides a resident Deputy Sheriff in the valley year-round, with additional deputies stationed in nearby Seeley Lake.

The Missoula County Sheriff’s Department coordinates with regional law enforcement personnel, including the United States Forest Service, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Highway Patrol, and the Lake and Powell County Sheriff’s departments. Under an agreement with the Forest Service, the Missoula County Sheriff patrols area campgrounds and the packer camp near Holland Lake. Law enforcement personnel also assist the Missoula County Search and Rescue services, dispatched through the Missoula 911 center.

Emergency Services

The Swan Valley Emergency Service (SVES) provides volunteer structural and wildland fire suppression, prevention, and emergency medical services through the Condon–Swan Valley Quick Response Unit (QRU), serving the Upper Swan Valley planning area and extending into southern Lake County. SVES operates from two stations: Station One in Condon, located just south of the Community Hall, and Station Two in Salmon Prairie, Lake County, primarily for vehicle placement to facilitate faster response times in that area.

As of September 2024, SVES had received 93 calls for service since January, averaging approximately 10.3 calls per month. Of these, 48 were medical calls and 45 were fire-related. Service demand is strongly seasonal: from Memorial Day through Labor Day, SVES responded to 66 calls, representing 71% of the year-to-date total, while only two calls were received in April 2024. Many calls are associated with accidents on Highway 83.

In 2024, SVES maintained a volunteer force of 32 members, including 18 active firefighters, 10 emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and 4 members in training. Like many volunteer fire and emergency service districts in Montana, SVES faces ongoing recruitment challenges due to an aging population and a growing number of part-time residents. All members meet state certification requirements annually. Financial support for fire and emergency medical services is provided through a \$75 annual assessment on each property owner's tax bill, an amount that has remained unchanged for more than ten years. Private donations and fundraising supplement the organization's budget.

The QRU's ground ambulance unit responds to medical emergencies in the Swan Valley, generally between Clearwater Summit and the southern edge of the Swan Lake community. In certain cases, the QRU may respond beyond these boundaries. The team can transport patients from home to a helicopter ambulance (LifeFlight or Alert) or to medical facilities in Missoula or Kalispell.

Community Services Objectives

1. Reduce human and wildlife conflicts through improved refuse handling
2. Ensure the efficient operation and adequate capacity of the Swan Valley Library to serve the local community.
3. Provide long-term in-home health care and living assistance in the Condon area, including support from trained, non-medical personnel for bathing and personal hygiene, medication management, and minor household tasks.
4. Leverage the resources of the Swan Valley Community Foundation to secure grants and programs supporting medical, recreational, cultural, and community services and facilities.
5. Collaborate with Missoula Aging Services to expand access to medical services in the Swan Valley, including home health care.

Community Services Action Strategies

1. Require bear-resistant garbage cans and dumpsters throughout the Swan Valley community, enabled through funding assistance from agencies and organizations.
2. Collaborate with Seeley Lake & Republic Services, or other recyclable businesses, to develop a recycling collection location where recyclable materials such as newspapers/magazines, aluminum, and plastics can be collected, picked up, and moved to a recycling center.
3. Require all new subdivisions to include wildlife-resistant waste disposal bins.
4. Work with Missoula County to continue to upgrade the library facilities, the capacity, and capabilities in support of the increased Swan Valley population, in particular, high-speed internet capabilities for both the Library and the Community Hall.



Swan Valley Emergency Services Station #1

The Swan Valley and the Qlispé People

The Qlispé (Kalispel or Pend d’Oreille) are a tribal nation whose homelands stretch from the upper Flathead River system down to the Pend Oreille River (and surrounding areas) in what is now Eastern Washington. Culturally and linguistically, they are closely related to the Séliš (Salish or “Flathead”) whose territories encompass much of western Montana on both sides of the Continental Divide, including the Bitterroot Valley, the Upper Clark Fork, and the Three Forks areas. The Qlispé were also closely related to a Salishan nation called the Tuñáx n, based in the Rocky Mountain Front area, that was wiped out in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A number of Tuñáx n survivors joined the Qlispé, who then claimed the old Tuñáx n territories.

Qlispé history in the Swan Valley extends back millennia. Qlispé place-names offer a glimpse into the profound tribal relationship with this place. In the Qlispé language, Swan Lake is called Snlaqí Čłqlí (Sweathouse Lake) and the river, Snlaqí Sewłkʷs (Sweathouse’s Waters).

One of the keys to the long-term success of the Séliš-Qlispé way of life, as Qlispé elder Mitch Smallsalmon said, was the water—the clear, cold, abundant waters of the tribes’ territories, and the fish that teemed in almost every creek, river, and lake. Many tribal and non-tribal residents would agree that the Swan Valley’s water, clear and cold, continues to be one of its most important elements.

Fish played a critical role in the traditional Qlispé diet, abundant almost everywhere and at all times of year. Aáycčst (bull trout), especially the adfluvial form (those that spawn in tributary streams and then migrate to lakes where they grow to maturity) form, were of great importance due to their large size. But other fishes were also important: pisł (westslope cutthroat trout), xʷyú (mountain whitefish), ssławs (largescale sucker), čleñe? (longnose sucker), and qʷoʔqʷé (northern pikeminnow). During the seasonal spawning runs, in spring and fall, tribal people caught bull trout, cutthroat, whitefish, and other fish using expertly crafted weirs and fish traps along many of the streams and rivers. In other times of the year, they used bow and arrow, hooks, spears, and nets.

As recounted in Aáy u Sqélixʷ: A History of Bull Trout and the Salish and Pend d’Oreille People (1), multiple tribal elders recounted stories of their parents and grandparents fishing for bull trout in the area. Several stories described fishing on the South Fork of the Flathead River, just east of the Swan Valley. One story described the way tribal members would build rafts to harvest bull trout at Big Salmon Lake, east of Holland Peak.

Fish provided a valuable source of high-quality protein that complemented other plants and animals that were harvested by the Séliš-Qlispé people. Plants provided key sources of food and medicine. Several Ponderosa pine trees at the USFS Condon Work Center are “culturally scarred.” Pend d’Oreille, Kootenai, Salish and people, who historically camped in the area, removed strips of bark for the cambium, which is sweet, without killing the tree. The Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee noted,

We came to the Potomac Valley and Holland Prairie [near present day Condon] to harvest camas, which the women pit-bake in a careful and precise process, in combination with other foods such as tree lichen. The area’s importance for these foods is reflected in the name of Holland Prairie, called Ept ʔitxʷe? (Has Camas), and nearby Summit Lake, called Ept Qʷomqn, after one of the names for tree lichen (Snčlé Qʷomqeys, “Coyote’s Hair”). During the summer, in the Swan Valley and surrounding mountains we gathered a profusion of berries, from staq (serviceberries) to stša (huckleberries) to t̤xʷlo (chokecherries), among others. Throughout the year, but especially in fall, we hunted the great abundance of deer, elk, and other animals. We nurtured and augmented all of those plants and animals with the careful and highly skilled use of fire, which had many beneficial effects, including increasing forage for game and revitalizing berry patches and camas fields.

The Swan Valley was also the site of a great outrage in 1908, when a Montana game warden and a

deputized civilian killed four members of a tribal family hunting party; the warden was himself killed in self-defense by one of the women. The massacre occurred in the upper Swan Valley within Missoula County. This history is recounted in *The Swan Valley Massacre: A Brief History* (2), by the Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee. While the history draws from many sources, many elements were recounted in the 1990s by the last survivor of the Swan Massacre, John Peter Paul (Čnpo, meaning Holds on Tight to the Enemy).

For millennia, the Séliš, Qlispé and Kootenai people traveled in and out of the Swan Valley using a network of trails. A heavily used north-south path followed the general route of today's Highway 83. There were multiple passes used for traversing the Mission and Swan River Mountains. The Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee writes,

Perhaps the easiest and most traveled path was the one taken in 1908 by the Qlispé family hunting party at the center of this story: Čusšni(čn), meaning "Long Ridge." This trail climbs out of the Jocko drainage and then descends gradually in a northeasterly direction for some ten miles on the unusually straight ridge that parallels the upper Swan River and Ept Člene (Has Longnose Sucker—Lindbergh Lake).

Today the Séliš, Qlispé and Kootenai people continue to live, travel, hunt and fish in the Swan Valley. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, in partnership with Swan Valley Connections own the Elk Creek Conservation Area. The land was acquired in 2006 to protect vital fish and wildlife habitat, forest resources and public access. A joint management plan was completed in September 2007. A five-person committee, made up of two SVC representatives, two CSKT representatives, and one at-large representative, oversees management of the Elk Creek Conservation Area. In 2022 the CSKT and SVC were recognized by Missoula County and awarded for their exemplary co-stewardship of the Elk Creek Conservation Area.

1. <http://www.csksalish.org/index.php/documents/download-file?path=Ay+u+Sqlhx+-+Bull+Trout+history+1.pdf>
2. http://www.csksalish.org/index.php/documents/download-file?path=2023_SwanMassacreBriefHistory3.pdf



Culturally modified ponderosa pine at the Condon Workstation

5.0 CLEAN AIR, CLEAN WATER, RESILIENT FORESTS AND ABUNDANT WILDLIFE

5.1 Water and Sanitation

The Upper Swan Valley has a relative abundance of water compared to other areas of Missoula County and Montana, making it unusual in a state dominated by a semi-arid climate. The region falls within the Inland Maritime climatic zone.

Groundwater

In the Swan Valley, nearly all households and businesses rely on private wells for drinking water, with wastewater treated by individual septic systems and drain fields. This was true in the 1996 Plan and remains so today. The only centralized wastewater treatment facility in the valley is at Holland Lake, designed to serve the lodge, campground, and dump station.

Properly installed, used, and maintained septic systems typically last about 20 years, though site conditions may shorten or extend their lifespan. Routine maintenance—including periodic pumping and avoiding disposal of fats, oils, and food waste—helps preserve system function.

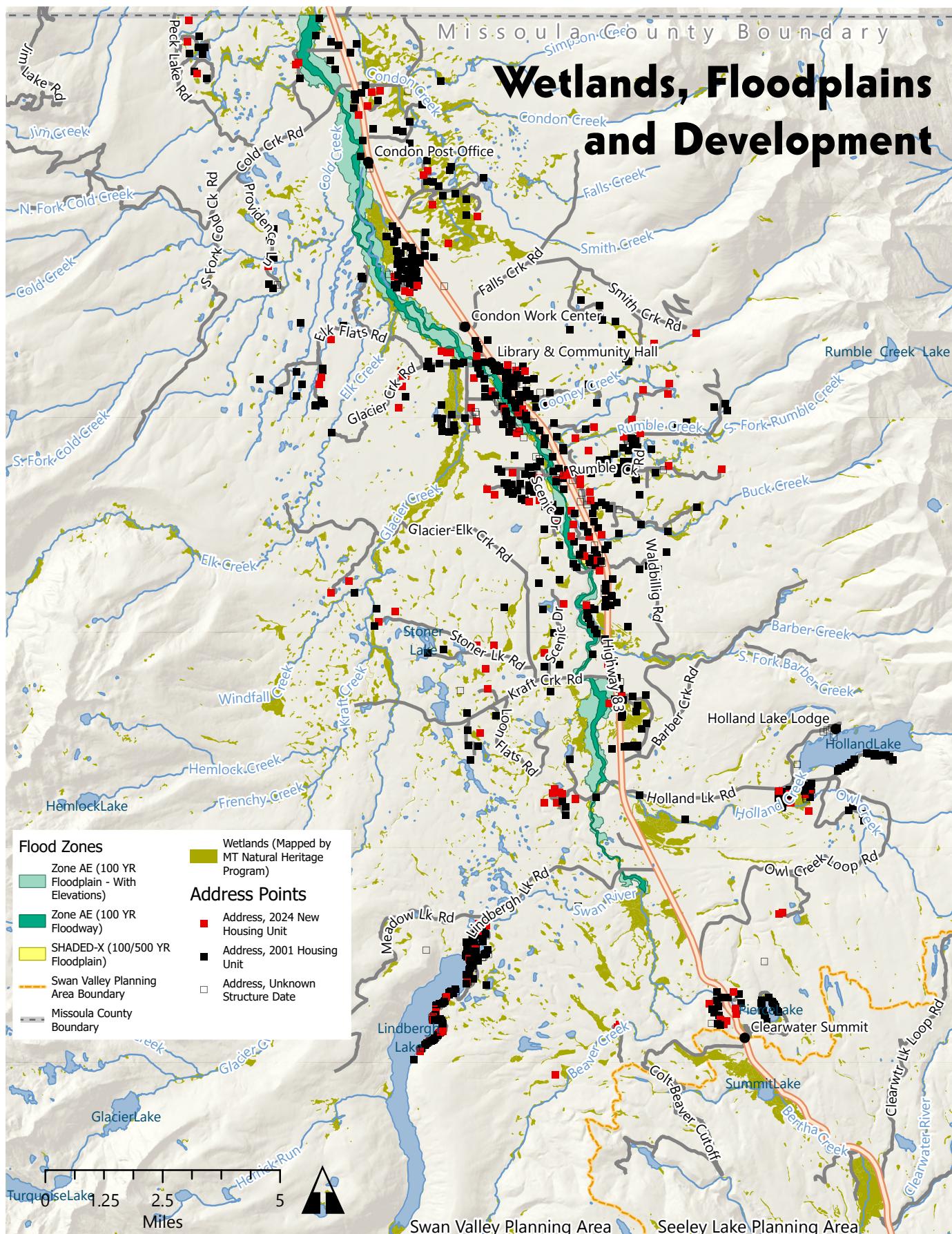
Septic system failures have been linked to water contamination in Lincoln, Seeley Lake, and other Montana communities. According to the Missoula County Public Health Department (MCPHD), the Swan Valley has 682 septic systems, closely aligned with the 677 households reported in the 2023 U.S. Census. Growth in septic systems parallels residential development.

Nitrates, phosphorus, and bacteria are the primary contaminants associated with septic systems. Private wells, which supply drinking water in the valley, are not state or federally regulated; owners are responsible for testing and treatment. Nitrate occurs naturally in groundwater, but concentrations above 1 mg/L may indicate contamination. Long-term exposure to low levels of nitrate has been associated with health concerns particularly for children. Concentrations above 10 mg/L, the US EPA standard for nitrate in drinking water, can cause immediate health problems.

The relationship between septic density and water quality is complex. Areas with high septic concentrations, such as Seeley Lake, have documented groundwater contamination. Susceptibility to contamination depends on the number and concentration of septic systems, as well as the geohydrology of the aquifer. Areas of fractured bedrock and stagnant groundwater tend to be the most vulnerable, while aquifers with higher, unrestricted flow are more resistant to contamination.

Missoula County's 1994 Carrying Capacity Study: Effects of Septic System Loading on Groundwater Quality analyzed septic system impacts on aquifers. It identified "carrying capacity" thresholds for nitrate in the upper mixing zone (7–15 feet below the surface), with the state non-degradation standard set at 5.0 mg/L. At the time, some areas in the Swan Valley sections already exceeded this baseline, likely due to slow groundwater movement.

Currently, no comprehensive groundwater monitoring program exists in the valley. The Montana Groundwater Information Center records 590 known wells in the valley, with an average depth of 98 feet. County health officials have not detected elevated nitrate levels or other contamination in wells, but neither new private wells or existing private wells are monitored. Only public water supply wells or non-public water supplies serving a licensed establishment are routinely tested. MCPHD recommends annual testing by private well owners, as localized contamination may go undetected. High water tables have been identified as an issue by MCPHD. Septic systems installed in areas with a high-water



Houses and housing development shown in the map above uses address points. The US Census records the number of homes but doesn't show their location or age. Address points are collected and tracked by Missoula County for addressing and emergency services purposes and as such, don't always represent the exact location or number of homes but help provide an approximation.

table often function poorly, increasing the risk of contaminating the upper aquifer and potentially, surface water as well.

Concerns about groundwater contamination were heightened in 2023 when the U.S. Forest Service identified leakage from a wastewater lagoon serving Holland Lake Lodge and Campground. Although monitoring wells showed no groundwater impact, local group Save Holland Lake questioned the findings, citing elevated nitrogen levels in test wells. The lagoon was shut down, and the Forest Service, in coordination with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), began replacing the liner and expanding monitoring. The system remained offline in 2024 and 2025. The incident highlighted community concerns about water safety and the risks of poorly managed wastewater systems.

Overall, limited hydrogeological understanding and poor data availability make it difficult to assess how past, current, or future development affects groundwater quality. Nonetheless, community priorities are clear: in the 2024 Community Survey, nearly 95% of respondents rated clean rivers and lakes as "Extremely Important."

Surface Water

The Upper Swan Valley contains more surface water than any other watershed in Montana. Roughly 16% of the land is classified as wet, with more than 4,000 potholes, ponds, lakes, marshes, wetlands, and a 1,300-mile network of streams. Precipitation averages 20 inches annually on the valley floor and 100–140 inches in surrounding mountains.

Past logging, particularly road building and clear-cutting prior to the 1990s, contributed significantly to surface water sedimentation. Since 1995, the U.S. Forest Service has implemented streamside buffer zones and more sustainable practices on federal lands, but much of the Swan River corridor remains privately owned.

Surface water quality is better studied than groundwater. The U.S. Forest Service's PacFish/InFish Biological Opinion Effectiveness Monitoring Program (PIBO) tracked stream habitat and water quality in the Swan Valley from 2001 to 2020. The program compared "managed" sites (affected by roads, logging, or grazing) with "reference" sites in undisturbed watersheds, controlling for natural variability to isolate human impacts.

Results indicated that managed sites in the Swan Valley scored higher and showed less variability than those in most other Flathead National Forest watersheds. Overall, findings suggest relatively good water quality and aquatic habitat, though continued monitoring is recommended as residential and commercial development increases.

Today, water quality concerns center more on development than forestry. Septic systems and roads associated with development pose risks to both surface and groundwater. Protecting lakes, streams, wetlands, and rivers remains essential to supporting human health, wildlife, and fisheries.

Water and Sanitation Objectives

1. Ensure the Swan Valley maintains clean, contaminant-free water now and in the future.
2. Protect and sustain the valley's rivers and lakes.

Water and Sanitation Action Strategies

1. Establish a Community Council subcommittee on water quality. This group should coordinate with federal, state, and county agencies, share relevant data, and provide regular updates to the Community Council.



Late summer rain on Holland Lake

2. The subcommittee should assess options for a groundwater testing program in the Swan Valley, including:
 - Coordinate with the Missoula Public Health Department and the Board of County Commissioners to explore what options the community has to expand water quality monitoring to the valley.
 - Explore opportunities for citizen-science efforts to expand water quality monitoring. Models include the Missoula Valley Water Quality District's volunteer surface water program. Persuading residents to test their own water and share their results is often critical to identifying problems in rural areas where problems may be highly localized.
3. Reduce contamination risks from septic systems by encouraging regular maintenance and promoting upgrades to more effective technologies where feasible.
4. Pursue federal, state, and private funding to help offset the costs of septic system upgrades and replacements, particularly in higher-density areas.
5. Work with the Forest Service and state and county road departments to minimize sedimentation from roads and protect waterways across the valley.

5.2 Fire Resilience

Wildfire is an inevitable and essential ecological factor, crucial for maintaining fire-adapted ecosystems. The Swan Valley is a fire-adapted ecosystem, with many plants and animals that rely on regular burns. The Swan Valley historically experienced high-frequency, low-intensity wildfires in the valley bottom and low-frequency, high or mixed severity wildfires in the mountains and foothills of the Mission Mountains and Swan Front. Indigenous burning also maintained conditions that promoted low-intensity fires in the valley bottom and helped reduce fuel loading and favored older, more fire-

resilient tree species such as ponderosa pine.

After more than a century of wildfire suppression in the Swan Valley, many forest types are more densely stocked than what would have occurred historically and have led to areas of high risk of uncharacteristic wildfire behavior due to fuel accumulations. This has created a wildfire paradox, where suppression efforts have led to escalating wildfire severity in some fire regimes, jeopardizing ecological resilience and an array of community values. This condition has led to the classification of 85,000 acres within the Swan River Watershed as priority areas in need of treatment in Montana's Forest Action Plan. The Swan Valley also contains three of the 19 high-risk 'fire sheds' in Montana identified by the U.S. Forest Service. These conditions are likely to be exacerbated by hotter, longer wildfire seasons that have been documented in recent decades.

Historically, wildfire mitigation work has focused on wildfire response and wildland fuel treatment efforts. However, these efforts will not sufficiently reduce wildfire risk to homes and communities. Research demonstrates that a home and its surroundings within 100 feet principally determine a structure's ignitability from wildfire—an area known as the "home ignition zone." Consequently, landowners and communities must increase focus on the home ignition zone and community fire spread as methods to improve wildfire resilience and the potential for co-existence with wildfire on the landscape. This shift will help lead to alternative approaches to safer and more effective response outcomes for wildfire professionals and emergency managers. High-intensity, extreme fire events will always occur, in which cases no amount of suppression effort will completely protect communities; in such circumstances, mitigation efforts within the home ignition zone are the primary means to reduce the risk of homes lost in and around communities.

Effective wildfire risk reduction will require a combination of the following efforts:

- Emphasize Home Preparedness – Focus community protection efforts on the Home Ignition Zone (HIZ). Clearing vegetation, using ignition-resistant building materials, and maintaining defensible space can prevent homes from igniting, breaking the cycle of suppression and destruction. Smoke preparation, including HVAC upgrades and air cleaners, should also be preparedness considerations.
- Restore Fire-Adapted Ecosystems – Focus management of forest and grassland on creating healthy, resilient landscapes and ecosystems. Prescribed burns and managed wildfires help fire play its natural ecological role. In some cases, prior to reintroduction of fire, fuel reduction may be necessary to both restore the composition and structure of forest vegetation and to manage prescribed fire intensity.
- Reduce Wildfire Exposure for New Development – Recommend land use policies that discourage development in high-risk areas to reduce exposure to wildfire.
- Increase Community Engagement & Education – Empower residents with knowledge about the natural role that wildfire plays in the environment. Develop community understanding about wildfire risk and options for property and smoke preparedness. Foster a proactive approach to risk reduction to ensure property owners and residents take responsibility for property adaptation.
- Expand Wildfire Management Options – When fires escape initial attack, empower land management agencies to utilize pre-planned, pre-identified natural control features, known as Potential Operational Delineations (PODs) and Potential Control Lines (PCLs), which may result in a larger fire footprint, but ultimately provide the greatest opportunity for successfully reducing risk to communities and firefighters while also allowing fire to play its natural role on the landscape. This flexibility can only be realized when there is a commitment to wildfire resilience that involves both fuel management and structural hardening, resulting in shared accountability with homeowners and local communities.



Seeley Lake Special Management Area

Seeley Lake's groundwater is the source of drinking water for much of the community. In 2011, the community's groundwater was found to be contaminated with elevated levels of nitrates. The elevated levels were linked to a combination of dense development served completely by on-site septic systems and the geology of the aquifer below the community. Staff at the Missoula Public Health (MPH) Department became aware of the nitrate contamination issue in Seeley Lake in 2011. In 2015, a Special Management Area was created that doesn't prohibit new septic systems but does require advanced nitrate-removing treatment units to be installed when a new or increased use is proposed. The community has found itself in a very difficult and unfortunate situation.

By far the most effective way to address this contamination problem is to construct a community-wide sewer system in Seeley Lake and stop disposing of human sewage into the ground above the contaminated aquifer. In 2024, the current Sewer District Board has recently gained momentum toward a community-wide solution. A consulting firm is evaluating several sewer system options for the community and compiling a list of pros and cons in terms of cost, level of treatment, and location. The Sewer District, MPH, and the State and County Offices of Emergency Management are working to secure funding for the planning and construction of the chosen sewer system.

- Strengthen Community Facilities & Infrastructure – Utilities, road systems, water and sewer systems, schools, hospitals, and other critical infrastructure must be planned, sited, designed, and maintained with wildfire resilience in mind. Vegetation management in the vicinity of these facilities may also be important. Strategies should include fire-resistant building upgrades, “clean air” centers for smoke events, and integrating emergency planning into facility operations.

Wildfire is the subject of its own planning process: Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). A CWPP determines what is at risk and provides a roadmap of actions for the community to address and mitigate wildfire risk. The Seeley-Swan Fire Plan (SSFP) was adopted as an element of the 2018 Missoula County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The SSFP compiles available information for use in responding to fires or in reducing the risk of fires, furthering the existing coordination and cooperation of firefighting units in the area, and developing action steps for addressing fire risks and firefighting capabilities in the Valley. The first version of the SSFP was completed in 2004, with updates in 2008 (which expanded the fire plan into the Swan Valley), 2013, and 2019. An update to the 2018 CWPP, which will cover the Seeley-Swan area, is scheduled to begin in 2025.

The Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department, a component of Swan Valley Emergency Services, primarily responds to fires on private land. Fire equipment and trucks are stored at the Swan Valley Fire Hall in Condon. This volunteer crew, consisting of local residents, responds to fire emergencies between the summit at the south end of the valley, northward to about Goat Creek, or the Swan Lake Volunteer Fire District boundary. If the need were to arise, the Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department would respond to fires outside these boundaries. Additional information about the fire department, including objectives and strategies, is included in the section on Community Services.

Fire Protection Objectives

1. Improve structural and rural fire protection services.
2. Increase the pace and scale at which cross-boundary forest fuels reduction treatments are occurring, particularly within the Wildland Urban Interface in the valley bottom.

Fire Protection Implementation Strategies

1. All new roads serving individual residences and residential areas should be built to comply with the minimum standards of the Missoula County Subdivision Regulations.
2. Road Signs and house numbers or addresses should be legible from the street or access route fronting a property. Signs that display the road name should be clearly displayed eight feet off the ground and made of metal posts and signs. Personnel in emergency vehicles should be able to read the road name from at least 100 feet away. County road signs are maintained by the county.
3. Residents should create a defensible space of 100 feet around all residential structures should be maintained. When slopes exceed 10%, the defensible space should be based on slope. For more information, refer to MTFireInfo.org.
4. All construction should use Class A and Class B roofing materials (as rated by the U.L. and N.F.P.A.).
5. All developers and realtors should inform purchasing parties of fire protection status.
6. The Swan Valley Volunteer Fire Department should be contacted prior to any new development in the area to provide input on the impact of the development on existing fire protection services and potential mitigation strategies.
7. A viable recruitment and training program needs to be established so a core of volunteer firefighters is available.

8. Current equipment needs to be maintained in a heightened state of readiness.
9. The U.S. Forest Service and private landowners should be encouraged to reduce the fire hazard on their respective lands by reducing the accumulation of fuels. This can be accomplished by the appropriate use of mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, slash pile burning, chipping, mastication, and other treatments.
10. The Swan Valley Community Council should participate in collaborative efforts to increase the pace and scale of cross-boundary fuel reduction treatments.
11. The Swan Valley Community Council should work with the Volunteer Fire Department and other partners as necessary to purchase new fire apparatus.

5.3 Abundant Wildlife and Resilient Forests

The Swan Valley is part of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE). This includes the Bob Marshall Complex, the Rocky Mountain Front, and Glacier Park. Part of the community's challenge is to guide future growth in a manner that respects wildlife and the habitat on which they depend, balanced against other objectives in the plan. Many objectives and strategies listed in previous sections relate directly to the natural environment, especially the Land Use and Water and Sanitation sections.

The natural environment of the Swan Valley is a large and evolving topic. The information presented here was summarized from the plan's Existing Conditions Report. Additional information and expertise are available from local organizations, the University of Montana and the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Residents and visitors who are interested in the Valley's natural environment are encouraged to do their research, get out in the field, and meet with local organizations.

The Upper Swan Valley spans elevations from 3,500 feet in the river bottom to over 9,300 feet at Holland Peak.

The area is geologically dominated by sedimentary rock with glacial till and fluvial deposits on the valley floor and slopes. Soils consist primarily of gravelly loam and silt loam. There are no significant mineral, oil, or gas resources, and no active mining operations, although a new gravel extraction site near Barber Creek Road is being developed for County and USFS road maintenance purposes.

The region's forests are some of Montana's most diverse, influenced by both maritime and continental climates. Tree species range from western red cedar and Pacific yew to Douglas fir and lodgepole pine. Whitebark pine, now threatened, occupies higher elevations. Extensive wetlands—covering 16% of the lower elevations—support rare plant species and provide vital ecological services such as water filtration, fire resistance, and habitat. Among these plants is the water howellia, found only in this valley in Montana.

The Swan Valley is home to a wide array of wildlife, including elk, moose, and mule deer, all reliant on low-elevation winter range. Notably, the valley supports a full suite of mid-sized and large carnivores such as mountain lions, bobcats, Canada lynx, grizzly bears, and wolves.



Endemic snails like the carinate and alpine mountainsnail inhabit talus slopes above the valley floor. Over 160 bird species are found here, with 110 breeding locally. The Swan Valley is also one of the few areas in the western U.S. where common loons regularly breed.

The Swan River and its tributaries offer critical habitat for native bull trout and Westslope cutthroat trout, though both have suffered due to barriers like the Bigfork Dam and competition from non-native species. Federal, state, and tribal conservation efforts aim to restore habitats and reduce sedimentation, as well as address non-native fish species.

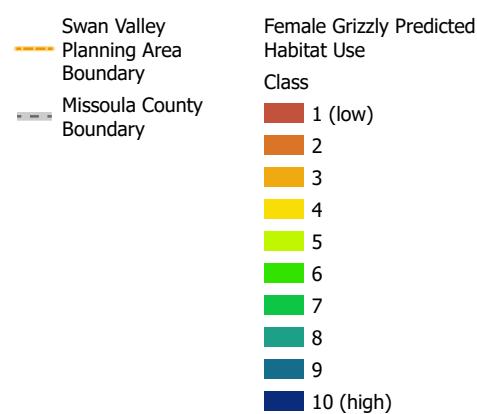
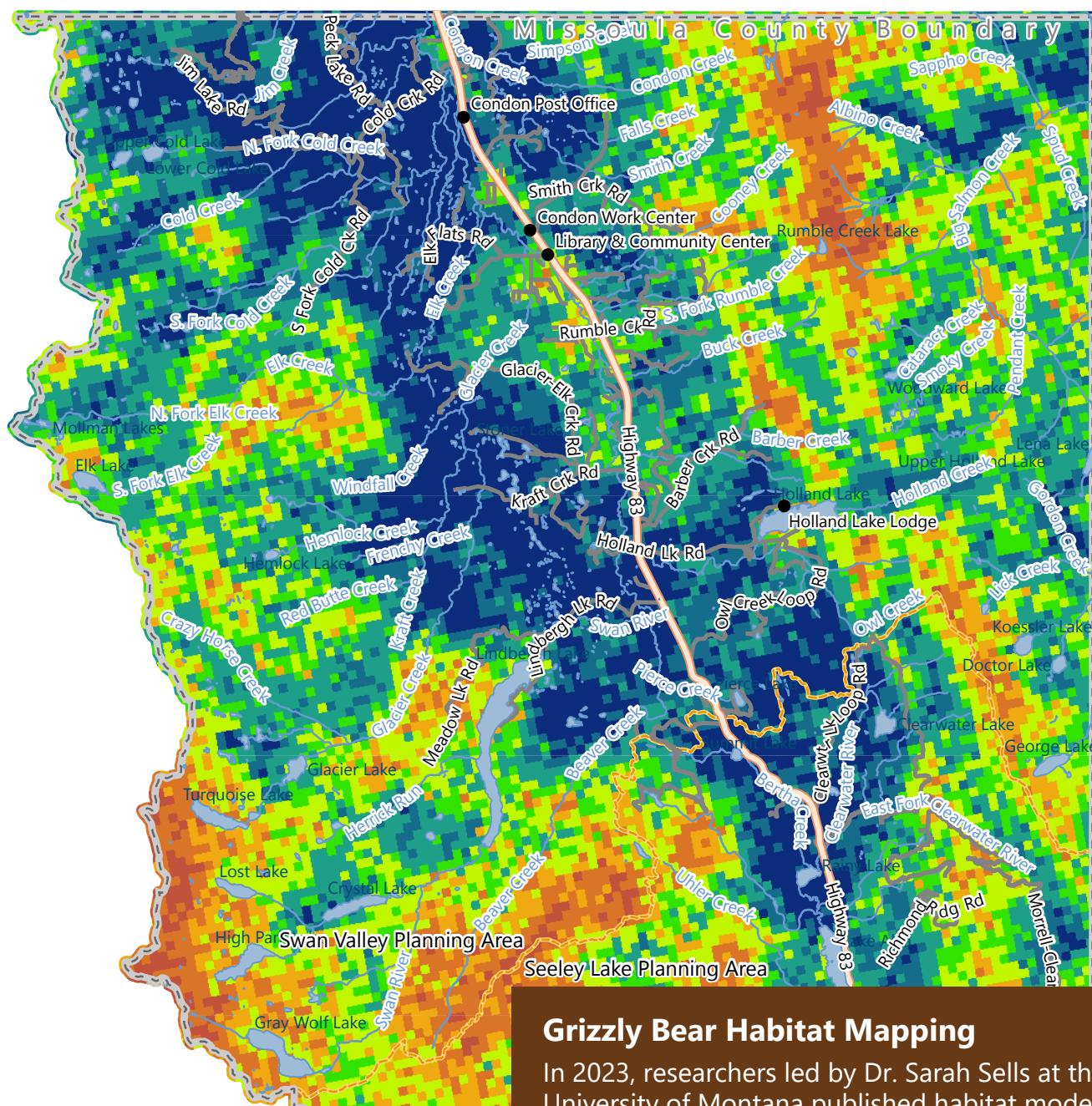
Grizzly bears and wolves are key apex predators in the region. While grizzlies roam freely throughout the valley, coexistence with humans is an ongoing challenge. Local organizations, such as Swan Valley Bear Resources working group, provide education and bear-resistant infrastructure. Wolves, delisted from federal protection in 2011, are now managed as a furbearer species. Recent long-term studies confirm the presence of rare carnivores like lynx and wolverine. These findings underscore the valley's ecological importance and the need for continued stewardship on both public and private lands.

Abundant Wildlife and Resilient Forest Objectives

1. In recognition of the conservation success of the Montana Legacy Project and its value in maintaining a rural, largely undeveloped landscape with abundant natural resources, it will be paramount to retain the existing pattern of public land ownership.
2. Promote sustainable forestry, wildlife management, and Threatened and Endangered Species protections on all lands.
3. Maintain and promote large, connected patches of habitat that facilitate wildlife travel connectivity.
4. Maintain the water quality, quantity, and sustained flow of groundwater and surface water, including the Swan River, its tributaries, lakes, and wetlands.
5. Maintain air quality.
6. Maintain a multiple-use balance between developed, roadless, and wilderness lands in the area.

Abundant Wildlife and Resilient Forest Actions:

1. Missoula County, in cooperation with communities, other agencies, and organizations, should collect relevant natural resource data throughout the planning area and use that data to continually inform and designate environmentally acceptable locations for all types of development and land use. This data should be made widely available to the public.
2. Protect and promote wildlife habitat, water quality, open space, and private property rights through conservation easements and the use of Missoula County Open Space bond funds where applicable.
3. Promote sustainable forestry practices and treatment of fuels within the Wildland Urban Interface and other strategies that create fire-adapted communities on public and private lands.
4. Promote the conservation and retention of existing public lands and the public's access to those lands.
5. Encourage 'Bear-Smart' community actions that reduce human-bear conflicts.
6. The Swan Valley Community Council should engage with any proposed actions by the U.S. Forest Service or any other land and wildlife management agency in the planning area and effectively communicate those proposed actions to the community.
7. Work with elected officials and other partners to officially designate the Swan Front Recommended Wilderness area classified as Wilderness under the Wilderness Act.
8. Explore implementing the objectives and strategies in the Climate Ready Missoula Plan.



Grizzly Bear Habitat Mapping

In 2023, researchers led by Dr. Sarah Sells at the University of Montana published habitat models for grizzly bears in the two largest recovery zones. The study mapped bear movement, habitat use, and connectivity, identifying key areas for conservation, conflict mitigation, and transportation planning. The maps here show predicted habitat use by female grizzlies in the Swan Valley, based on GPS collar data from 67 bears tracked in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem between 2003 and 2021. Habitat use is ranked from 1 (low use, red) to 10 (high use, blue). Results indicate that female bears are well distributed across the valley floor (dark blue), with lower use around and south of Condon (green and orange). Habitat use declines sharply at higher elevations and on steep slopes.

The Condon Work Center

The Swan Valley and the US Forest Service share an entwined economic and cultural history. The Condon Work Center, formerly known as the Condon Ranger Station, is central to this history and remains an important community asset. Construction of the Condon Ranger Station began in 1957 during a time of great expansion in regional logging activity to combat a devastating spruce forest beetle infestation. The original station included two permanent residence sites, a garage, and a warehouse building. The addition of the kitchen and bunkhouses was developed in 1962. The surrounding forest was intentionally preserved, and the original stand of Ponderosa Pines remains on site.

The expansion of logging activity and associated infrastructure development necessitated an enlarged workforce, and this became part of the economic development and culture in the valley. Many Swan Valley residents worked their entire lives for the US Forest Service as trail maintenance workers, fire crew members, and conducted general forestry operations. The work center provided a central base for operations as well as a community gathering and information hub.

The 1990s were a tumultuous time for USFS logging operations in the Northwest. An ad hoc committee was formed representing the greater Swan Valley community, which collaborated with the USFS to navigate the challenges of the time. In 1995, following a decade of partnership between the USFS and the committee, including restoration of 30 acres north of the work center, the forest service announced it would be closing the center. In response, community members came together and formed the Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC), and with USFS support, the work center stayed open as a visitors' center and headquarters of the SEC. The SEC's focus was on forest stewardship, outdoor education, local history, and scientific research. Partnerships with local government and the forest service led to many restoration projects and regional conservation programs.

In 2016 SEC merged with another organization active in the valley, Northwest Connections, and formed Swan Valley Connections (SVC). SVC occupied the Condon Work Center until winter of 2025 when they relocated to a new building.

There are culturally significant attributes on the site. Culturally modified Ponderosa Pine trees, identified by strips of bark torn away, have served as both a food source and signage for safe passage for hundreds of years. Kevin Askan, with the tribal preservation office for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, said these trees and the Condon area are hugely important to the tribes. "Scarred trees were like billboards", Askan said, "signs that an area could be lived in for a long time." He explained that culturally modified trees often indicate a culturally significant longer-use and seasonal area providing plenty of fresh water, food, medicinal gathering, and hunting opportunities.

Sale or Conveyance of the Condon Work Center

The Condon Work Center provided a base camp for the Great Northern Fire Crew, a visitors center for the numerous tourists exploring the area, a community gathering space, and headquarters to SVC. In 2024, the district ranger announced the impending conveyance of the work center. Deferred maintenance and the cost of maintenance are the main reasons given for the decision. The Condon Work Center has accrued over \$1 million in maintenance costs for things like the deficient septic system and aging infrastructure. The Great Northern Fire Crew and the SVC have since relocated, and the work center has been entirely vacated.

Conveyance of the site could be carried out in a couple of different ways such as selling just the buildings or selling some of the land along with the buildings combined. The USFS has stated that it intends to keep the airstrip, which will require subdivision of the site. The conveyance will require an appraisal, a public evaluation process including NEPA, subdivision review, and a right of first refusal



Housing at the Condon Work Center

bidding period. This process could take several years to accomplish and will be complicated by the presence of significant cultural resources. Federal land policy states that the State of Montana or a local government agency, such as Missoula County, is given the right of first refusal in a conveyance process.

Future of the Condon Work Center

The future of the Condon work center will be determined by the conveyance outcome and the objectives of the future owner/s. There is an effort to retain local ownership of the property for public benefit and conversations on how this might happen will continue. The historical significance and limited alternative sites for stewardship operations and seasonal worker housing make preserving the work center as a community asset a priority.

This history relies heavily on the work of the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society and an article published in the Seeley Swan Pathfinder in August, 2024.

6.0 ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY TO PUBLIC LANDS

One of this plan's core values is to "ensure accessibility to public lands for hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, riding, and other non-motorized activities." Many elements discussed in previous sections of the plan directly support this core value.

It is essential that county officials, elected leaders, and the Swan Valley Community Council maintain strong coordination with the Flathead National Forest. Although federal agencies are not required to follow local land use plans or zoning regulations, they often consider them in decision-making. When federal land is sold or exchanged, any new private owner must comply with applicable local regulations.

The future of the Condon Workstation is a priority. Given the ongoing shortage of affordable housing, the County and its partners should support transferring the property to the County or a community-based nonprofit for use in maintaining public access and meeting public needs. See "The Condon Work Center" on page 48 for further details.

6.1 Parks and Recreation

Organized recreational sporting activities on Missoula County lands generally take place in two areas in the valley: the Swan Valley Community Ball Park and the Swan Valley Community Center and grounds. The ballpark has a baseball field and other improvements developed by the Swan Valley American Legion Post under a Special Use Permit from the United States Forest Service and leased from Missoula County. The Community Center and surrounding grounds are owned by the County but managed by the Swan Valley Community Club. This is a central gathering place for meetings, celebrations, and other events. Other organized recreational activities take place at the Swan Valley Elementary School. Dispersed recreation takes place on nearby Forest Service lands, wilderness areas, lakes, streams, and the Swan River.

Most of the Swan Valley is publicly owned, primarily managed by the U.S. Forest Service. These lands are experiencing increasing recreational use, which has placed additional pressures on existing infrastructure, wildlife, and the wild, resilient character of the valley's ecosystems. Such impacts are expected to grow in the future, further straining recreation infrastructure, management staffing, and the carrying capacities of specific areas.

While increased recreational use may provide economic benefits to local businesses, it also has the potential to diminish the wild character that residents value. Consequently, opinions differ within the community regarding the future of recreation management in the Swan Valley, including whether to promote increased recreational opportunities or to limit use in certain areas.

Parks and Recreation Objectives

1. Establish a shared vision for recreation in the Swan Valley, identifying areas where increased recreational opportunities are encouraged, areas where recreational use should be limited, and the community's desired limits of acceptable change.

Parks and Recreation Implementation Action Strategies

1. The Swan Valley Community Council, in coordination with all relevant stakeholders involved in recreation management—including the U.S. Forest Service, nonprofit organizations, outfitters, and local business owners—should convene facilitated meetings and discussions to guide responsible and sustainable recreation in the Swan Valley. The Council should work toward

developing recreation management plans for specific areas, including Wilderness areas, Recommended Wilderness areas, general National Forest lands, National Recreation areas, and County lands. Oversight of this effort may be delegated to a subcommittee appointed by the Swan Valley Community Council.

2. The Swan Valley Community Council, in coordination with relevant stakeholders involved in recreation management at both the local and regional levels, should participate in and coordinate with Regional Recreation Working Group meetings.





For More Information

<https://missoulacountyvoice.com/swan-valley-planning-committee>

The Swan Valley Planning Committee, a subcommittee of the Swan Valley Community Council, is pleased to share this revised public draft of the Swan Valley Neighborhood Plan, which outlines a vision for the future growth, development, infrastructure and services in the Swan Valley. This plan is a vital tool for maintaining the rural character, protecting natural resources, and ensuring that infrastructure and services can support the community.