

Bonner–Milltown Community Council
P.O. Box 726
Bonner, MT 59823

Date: December 17, 2025

Missoula County Commissioners
199 W. Pine Street
Missoula, MT 59802

RE: Community Thoughts, Support, and Concerns Regarding the Blackfoot Crossing Property and Proposed Zoning Changes

Dear Commissioners,

This letter is not intended as a final endorsement or opposition. Rather, it reflects the community dialogue to date, acknowledges the applicant's engagement with the community, and identifies the issues residents believe require careful attention as deliberations move forward.

On behalf of the Bonner–Milltown Community Council (BMCC), we submit this letter to summarize the themes, perspectives, areas of support, and remaining concerns expressed by residents and council members during our December 8, 2025 public meeting, as well as several prior meetings where the Blackfoot Crossing proposal and associated zoning and land-use changes were discussed.

Acknowledgement of Developer Engagement

The Council believes it is important to acknowledge the efforts made by the property owner and development team to engage with the Bonner–Milltown community. The developer has participated in multiple public meetings, responded to specific neighborhood concerns, supported community efforts such as trash cleanups, and allowed public access to the property for community hikes. Many residents appreciate this willingness to listen and engage and recognize that this level of outreach has helped improve understanding of the proposal. Moving the project forward, however, will require continued attention to detail and clear, binding commitments to address outstanding concerns.

Areas of Community Support

1. Housing Availability and Affordability

A consistent message from community members is the urgent need for attainable and affordable housing options. Residents expressed concern that children, workers, and families currently living in Bonner, Milltown, West Riverside, and surrounding areas will be priced out of the local housing market in the future. The potential for new housing is widely viewed as a positive component of the Blackfoot Crossing concept. That said, the community has expressed a desire

for a clear commitment to a defined level or percentage of attainable/affordable housing within the development.

2. Reconsideration of Current Industrial Zoning

The property's current Industrial Center, Heavy has long raised concerns for residents. Community members have expressed discomfort with the potential for future Industrial Center, Heavy uses—such as gravel crushing or mining operations, asphalt or concrete plants, oil-related uses, or refuse transfer facilities. Many residents see a transition away from Industrial Center, Heavy as an opportunity to better protect the area's long-term livability.

3. Public Access, Outdoor Recreation, and Connectivity

Residents overwhelmingly support improved river access, trail connectivity, sidewalks along 1st Street, and public-space amenities referenced in prior discussions. Community members value recreational opportunities that encourage gathering, outdoor activity, and connection to the Blackfoot River corridor and Woody Mountain.

4. Schools, Jobs, and Community Benefits

Initial concerns about impacts to Bonner School were largely addressed following discussion with school leadership, who strongly support the potential of increase in student enrollment and obtainable housing for teachers. Residents also acknowledged that jobs generated through a mixed-use development could be a positive for the community, provided development remains compatible with community character.

5. Wastewater Planning

Community members recognize that wastewater treatment is a long-standing challenge in the area. The developer's proposal to establish a sewer district serving the development, while leaving optional future access for surrounding properties, is appreciated—particularly as it may help avoid annexation by the City of Missoula, which residents strongly oppose.

Primary Community Concerns

1. Density, Scale, and Binding Limits

Residents continue to express significant concerns regarding residential density and overall scale. Key questions include:

- The total number of housing units and whether the proposed density is appropriate for surrounding neighborhoods
- Impacts on existing neighborhoods, viewsheds, noise levels, and rural character
- Whether any proposed density limits will be legally binding and permanent

The community appreciates the developer's willingness to discuss density limitations and the stronger of a deed restriction or development agreement; however, residents request clear, enforceable limits—such as a maximum number of units (for example, no more than 400 units, with units-per-acre clearly defined)—that would apply to current and future owners.

2. Commercial Uses

One of the most frequently expressed concerns remains the inclusion of a travel plaza or similar high-intensity, highway-oriented commercial use. Residents cited:

- Redundancy with the existing Town Pump, which already serves regional travel demand
- Concern that a travel plaza could crowd out community-serving businesses such as a grocery, café, or small local retail
- Increased traffic, truck activity, exhaust, noise, and light within the immediate vicinity of West Riverside
- Concerns regarding additional fuel storage and parking lot runoff near residents' wells and Blackfoot River

The community consistently expressed a preference for commercial uses that primarily serve local residents rather than pass-through highway traffic.

Examples of Commercial Uses Supported by the Bonner–Milltown Community

The Bonner–Milltown community supports commercial uses that are scaled, locally oriented, and designed to serve residents and nearby workers, rather than high-traffic, highway-oriented development such as a travel plaza. Examples of compatible commercial uses include:

- Neighborhood-serving retail, such as a small grocery market, hardware store, pharmacy, or convenience store focused on daily needs rather than long-haul traffic
- Local food and beverage businesses, including cafés, bakeries, small restaurants, or coffee shops that create community gathering spaces
- Professional and service offices, such as medical, dental, physical therapy, counseling, veterinary, or small business offices that provide essential services locally
- Small-scale light industrial or maker spaces, including workshops, artisans, fabrication, or trades that support local employment without excessive truck traffic
- Recreation-oriented businesses, such as bike shops, outdoor gear retailers, guiding services, or fitness and wellness studios that align with community recreation and river access
- Local business incubator or mixed-use commercial spaces, designed to support locally owned startups rather than national chains
- Childcare, early learning, senior services, or community-serving facilities that meet demonstrated local needs
- Small lodging or workforce-support uses, if appropriately scaled and designed to serve regional workers rather than transient highway traffic

These uses are generally lower-impact, generate less heavy truck traffic, and are more consistent with the scale, character, and infrastructure capacity of the Bonner–Milltown community while supporting long-term economic resilience.

3. Traffic Safety and Infrastructure Capacity

Traffic flow and safety—particularly at the Highway 200 and Town Pump intersection—remain a major concern. Residents recognize and appreciate proposed mitigations such as a dedicated left-turn lane and a roundabout at Cowboy Trail and 1st Street but emphasize that traffic impacts must be fully analyzed and addressed prior to final approvals. Emergency access, pedestrian and school safety, and peak-hour congestion are key considerations.

4. Water, Wells, and Aquifer Protection

Residents expressed serious concern about water availability and long-term aquifer sustainability, particularly given record-low Blackfoot River levels in recent years. Many homes in West Riverside rely on shared wells and lack individual water rights. Community members want assurance that existing residential water supplies will be protected and not subordinated to new commercial or lodging uses, which may have significantly higher water demands.

Request to the Commissioners

As you review this proposal, the Bonner–Milltown Community Council respectfully asks that you:

- Consider binding, permanent limits on residential density
- Prioritize community-serving commercial uses over highway-oriented development zoning and land-use
- Ensure negative traffic and water impacts are fully mitigated before approvals are finalized
- Require transparency and sufficient public review opportunities
- Recognize both the developer’s engagement to date and the community’s desire for clear, enforceable protections moving forward

The Bonner–Milltown community has engaged in good faith and seeks a balanced approach that supports housing needs, protects public resources, and preserves the character of our historic mill town. We appreciate your thoughtful consideration and remain available for continued dialogue.

Sincerely,

Bonner–Milltown Community Council

Rick Hall – Chair*

Jane Kipp – Vice Chair

Emily Herndon – Secretary

Kaaren James – Treasurer

John Wilke – Member

Jessica Glebke – Alternate Member

*Rick Hall recused himself from this discussion per conflict with his participation on Missoula County Planning Boards