



MEAGAN THOMPSON, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Skiers prepare to take a double black diamond run on Jan. 26 on the backside of Discovery Ski Area located between Anaconda and Philipsburg.

‘Recreation is the new mining’

Area businesses seek to harness power of Montana’s strong outdoor economy

TED MCDERMOTT
ted.mcdermott@mtstandard.com

Jim Davison spends some time on what he calls “product testing” at Smelter City Brewing, which opened in the historic Electric Light Building at 101 Main St. in Anaconda in 2017. And during his visits, the executive director of the Anaconda Local Development Corp., which works to bring new business to town, has noticed something.

“The people that are in there, they’re the skiers that are coming in,” Davison says. “You see the snowmobilers that have out-of-state or out-of-county plates. It’s new faces all the time. They’re recreating, and they’re stopping by there.”

And it’s not just the brewery where you see the conspicuously outdoorsy who are conspicuously from elsewhere bringing fresh energy — and an infusion of money — to the Smelter City, he says. It’s the restaurants, the stores, the motels. It’s even houses in the Goosetown neighborhood, the historically working class neighborhood where Davison lives and where he’s noticed an uptick in homes being rented out as short-term vacation rentals to folks who often have “racks on the car” and other signs that they’re in town to get outside.

It’s no secret that outdoor recreation makes a major contribution to the Montana economy.

In fact, the Treasure State’s outdoor economy is credited with generating \$7.1 billion in consumer spending, more than 71,000 jobs, \$286 million in state and local taxes, and \$2.2 billion in wages and salaries for workers each year, according to a September report from the Montana Office of Outdoor Recreation.

While economic development officials in Butte, Anaconda and Dillon don’t have localized data showing the precise impact of recreation on area businesses and workers, they agree that it’s already an important driver of growth — and that it will serve a key role in charting future opportunities for investment.



ANNIE PENTILLA, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Smelter City Brewing, 101 Main St., Anaconda, is a popular stop for skiers and snowmobilers visiting the Discovery and Georgetown Lake area.



Changing the narrative

According to Joe Willauer, executive director of the Butte Local Development Corp., Butte is “ideally situated among some of Montana’s best” outdoor recreation opportunities, including hiking, fishing, skiing, skating

and boating. And that, he says, “gives us a really cool opportunity to tell the story of what Butte has to offer.”

That story, he says, allows him and other economic development officials to tell a new story about Butte to businesses that are looking to relocate or expand.

“We want to recruit and retain business, and we also want to change the narrative,” Willauer says. “Instead of dwelling on some of the challenges, we want to talk about the good things.”

To do so, the BLDC has helped push Butte Elevated, a marketing campaign that touts the Mining’ City’s “access to thousands



WALTER HINICK, THE MONTANA STANDARD

The Continental Divide Trail nearly circles Butte and is easily accessed at a trailhead off Highway 2 on the top of Harding Way. Each summer over 100 cyclists participating in the Tour Divide race pass through southwest Montana on a route that follows along the Continental Divide between Banff, Alberta, Canada, and New Mexico.

Recreation

From D1

of acres of pristine wilderness, spectacular mountain views, affordable living, quality schools, extraordinarily clean water, and an unparalleled quality of life.” The BLDC also recently launched Basecamp Butte, a website with interactive trail maps, an outdoor recreation map and other resources designed to demonstrate the accessibility of local recreation opportunities.



Willauer

Willauer says efforts like these are designed to attract not only businesses but also skilled workers who can help solve “one of the biggest challenges we face in economic development”: the area’s limited workforce. By touting Butte’s benefits during a time when Montana as a whole is “so popular,” Willauer believes



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Gina Evans, avid bike rider and owner of Linked Adventures, a bicycle shuttle service in Butte, rides along the trail near Thompson Park outside of Butte last summer. Evans is teaming up with several businesses in Butte to cultivate a bicycle community.

officials can attract more of the highly skilled potential employees who can help draw in new employers.

While he acknowledges it’s “totally a chicken and egg” kind of situation, Willauer says the BLDC and other groups “really focus on it both ways.”

“Everybody knows about our rich history in Butte,” Willauer says. “There’s no shortage of people talking about the past in Butte, but

we want to talk about the future.”

Focus on future

That’s sentiment Gina Evans, a longtime booster of mountain biking in Butte, agrees with.

“Recreation is the new mining for Butte,” says Evans, who has deep roots in the city’s long-lost Meaderville and McQueen

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MEAGAN THOMPSON, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Riders trade a high-five after finishing the 50-mile race at the annual Butte 100 bike race at Homestake Pass. The event is growing, according to Stephanie Sorini, race owner and Butte Chamber of Commerce director. Organizers have already sold out for next year’s race and amassed waiting lists.

Recreation

From D3

neighborhoods and who now owns a mountain biking shuttle, rental and planning service called Linked Adventures.

Already, she says, mountain biking is a “driving force” for both bringing in visitors and for attracting longer-term residents and businesses.



Sorini

Before stepping down in 2017, Evans directed the Butte 100, a long-distance mountain bike race that she helped grow exponentially during her 11 years at the helm.

And according to Stephanie Sorini, executive director of the Butte Chamber of Commerce and owner of the race, the Butte 100 continues to grow. She says organizers have already sold out and amassed waiting lists for the 50- and 25-mile courses in next year’s race.

“It just shows that outdoor recreation is a big deal in Butte and southwest Montana,” Sorini says, “We have people that come from



MONTANA STANDARD FILE PHOTO

A mountain biker exits one of the tunnels on the railbed trail in Thompson Park in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in this file photo. The trail is a popular biking and hiking trail for recreation close to town.

all over to ride our trails and hike our trails”

Evans notes, too, that the season for mountain biking in Butte has been extended and is now “year round” due to the growing popularity of fat bikes, which have oversized tires that allow riders to churn through powder.

But Evans believes a more concerted, data-driven approach could help ensure that resources are efficiently directed to bolster the burgeoning recreation economy.

With more “hard facts” and “stats to back up what most of us know is out there,” Evans says local officials

from the government, business and economic development communities could pursue a “collaborative effort” like that of Advantage Butte, which seeks to boost the local economy by bidding for and hosting sporting events, except geared toward outdoor recreation.

“We should all come together in one pod and say, ‘Let’s roll,’ and drive this to the next level,” Evans says.

Year-round town

One area town that has taken its outdoor economy

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Our Vision

The Butte-Silver Bow Chamber of Commerce is an integral part of the community, offering business and economic support, travel and visitor information and resources. Our vision represents the commitment we have to the community to be the best organization to meet the growing needs.

- Continue to be an integral part of Team Butte for the promotion of economic development.
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- Become the voice for the common goals in our business community.
- Become the source of information for our community.
- When calling the Chamber you will be referred to one of our members and receive the information you are seeking.
- Provide educational forums for the business community.
- Help in the implementation of the Butte Silver-Bow Business Plan.
- Actively involve the Convention & Visitor’s Bureau with The Butte Civic Center and other convention centers and arenas to help promote events to our area.
- Address the work/labor force issues in our community and help to develop programs to address needed areas.
- Help to form a cohesive bond between the community as a whole and Montana Tech. Work in close relation with the Chamber’s Retail Committee to increase retail sales in Butte.
- Continue being actively involved with community enhancement through the “Clean-Up, Green-Up” campaign.
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FILE PHOTO

A hockey tournament is in full swing at Winninghoff Park in Philipsburg in this file photo. A \$104,000 grant was used to improve the quality of the ice surface to allow for a longer ice skating season.

Recreation

From D3

to another level is Philipsburg, where recreation opportunities have a fueled a major growth in the local travel and tourism economy. According to data compiled by Headwaters Economics, employment in the travel and tourism sectors in Granite County increased 139 percent between 1998 to 2016, going from 98 to 234 jobs. (During the same period, non-travel and tourism employment grew only 8 percent.)

Heidi Beck-Heser, who grew up in Philipsburg and serves as the corresponding secretary in the town's chamber of commerce, says relying on the outdoors has led to a "boost" in the economy but that it's not always a steady boost. When the weather's "not cooperative," she notes, "it can hinder us."

One of the main drivers of the weather-dependent outdoor economy can be found just above Philips-



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Skaters take to the ice at the High Altitude Sports Center in Butte in this file photo. "We provide the community something to do in the winter," said Lauri Silk, one of the rink's caretakers.

burg, at the Discovery Ski Area, which sees 60,000 to 70,000 skiers a year and has an annual payroll of about a million dollars, according to Peter Pitcher, who has retired as the hill's manager but "still helps out."

In his 35 years at Discovery, Pitcher said he's seen steady growth not only at the ski area itself but also in "ancillary businesses" in Anaconda, Philipsburg and

elsewhere.

But with Discovery so close and ample opportunities for fishing and snowmobiling all around, Beck-Heser says it's vital for the town to find ways to make visitors see that the town offers more than whatever immediate recreational opportunity they have come for.

"We tend to try to promote ourselves for a

year-round experience," Beck-Heser says. "When it's winter, we talk to our visitors about our summer opportunities, and when it's summer we talk to them about our winter opportunities. ... You have to grab them while you have them."

One example of that "grab them while you have them" approach can be found in the town's ice rink. Last year, the Philipsburg Ice Association received \$104,000 to improve the quality of the ice surface at the Philipsburg Ice Rink to allow for a longer, more consistent ice skating season. In addition to enabling an expansion of the town's annual pond hockey tournament, the improved rink offers an added amenity to keep skiers around longer than they might otherwise stay to "hangout in Philipsburg for a day" and "skate and shop."

Skating in butte

Butte has its own ice-skating attractions, too, to take advantage of a climate where an outdoor

rink can stay frozen for months at a time. In addition to neighborhood rinks spread through the city, the Butte High Altitude Skating Center offers Friday night family skate nights, Saturday and Sunday afternoon

skates, birthday parties and skating lessons.

With no charge to skate and skate rentals only \$3, it's not exactly a major money maker, according to Laurie

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Recreation

From D4

Silk, who serves as caretaker for the center with her husband Dave. But it does offer another outdoor amenity for locals.

“We provide the community something to do in the winter,” Silk says.

That’s an important service, and those who groom the area’s cross-country ski trails provide something similar. At Homestake Lodge, Moulton Reservoir, Mount Haggin and elsewhere, locals and outsiders are drawn to spend time outside at little or no cost.

List goes on

And the list of recreational opportunities in Butte and the surrounding area goes on and on, whether it’s climbing, showshoeing, telemarking, birding, wildlife photography or disc golf.

And then of course there’s regular golf. In Anaconda, there’s the Old Works Golf Course, which brings in visitors to play on a Jack Nicklaus-designed course built on the site of a long-gone smelter. In Butte, there’s Highland View Gold Course, a public course that the county government has spent lots of dollars and effort revamping over the past few years in an effort to ensure this outdoor amenity remains viable.

While the area’s population centers continue to seek ways of harnessing the power Montana’s outdoor economy, people like Tom Davis are doing the same in the remoter reaches of southwest Montana.

As the owner of the Wise River Club in a town of under a hundred people, Davis says he requires outsiders to fill his seven hotel rooms, his six cabins and the seats in his restaurant.

And he says those outsiders that support his business come to the Big Hole Valley for essentially a single, shared reason: the outdoors.

But as the weather changes, so do the conditions outside and the visitors who come to take advantage of them. He breaks the years up into “three distinct seasons.”

First, from about to April to September, there’s fishing season, when “we literally have customers



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A new pond has been added to the Highland View Golf Course as part of \$5.5 million in enhancements to Stodden Park. The pond will help capture and control stormwater while doubling as a feature on the course that will soon include two fountain aerators.

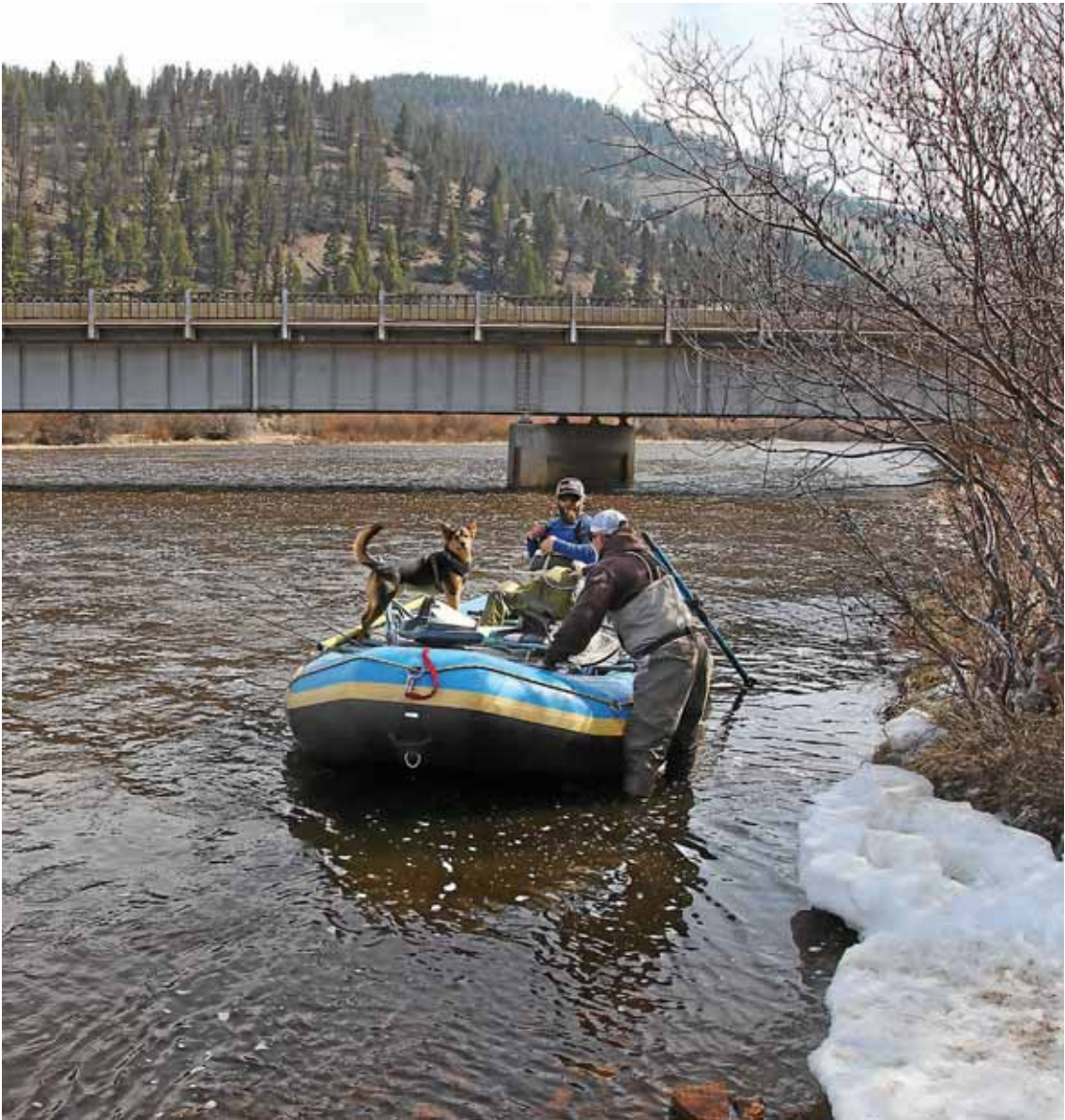
from all over the world: Switzerland, France, Germany, Ireland, Scotland. It’s like the United Nations, actually.”

After fishing season, hunting season starts, attracting a similarly international contingent to Wise River, Davis says.

And then, once the snow starts flying, visitors largely from elsewhere in the state and region come to town, to spend time at what Davis calls “one of the key snowmobile destinations in Montana.” To keep people coming, Davis says locals spend time and effort grooming trails, offering classes and otherwise maintaining the resource and the interest.

“That season will run until March or April, depending on the snow, depending on the weather,” Davis says. “There’s always those diehards that are up here until the last snowflake.”

And once that snowflake melts, of course, it’s fishing season again.



WALTER HINICK, THE MONTANA STANDARD

Fishermen put in at Dickey Bridge on the Big Hole River for a float to the George Grant fishing access 13 miles downriver in this file photo. Communities along the river rely of outdoor recreationists to fill their restaurants, rooms, cabins and bars.



Participants prepare for a Snöflinga event at Homestake Lodge. Homestake, Moulton and Mount Haggin provide inexpensive recreation opportunities for cross-country skiers.

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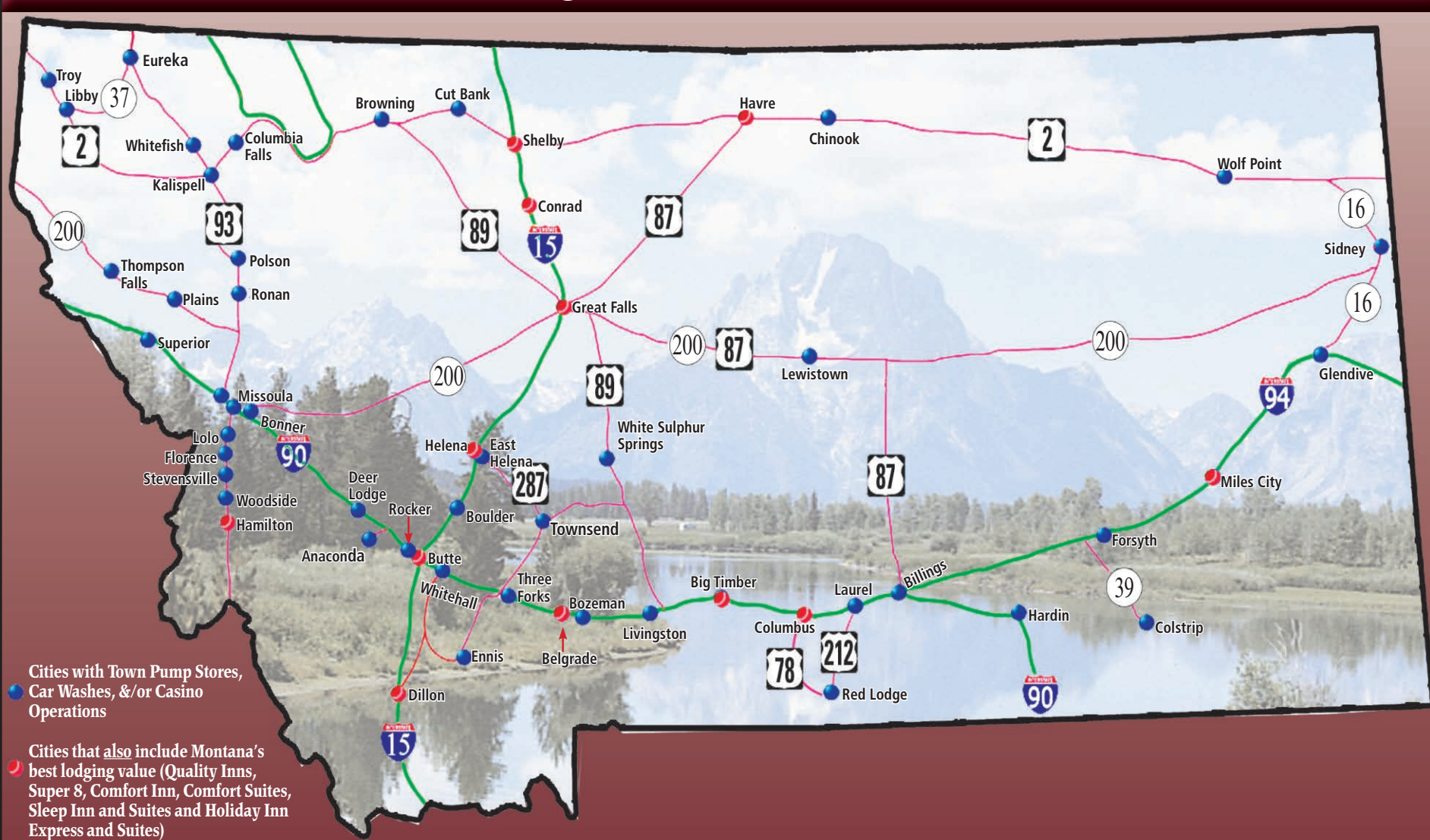
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