

January 19, 2026

Granite County Commissioners
220 N. Sansome Street
Philipsburg, MT 59858

TRANSMITTED VIA ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

Re: Formal Objection to Daytime-Only Operations and Deactivation of Rotating Beacon at Riddick Field (U05)

Dear Commissioners:

On behalf of our combined 2,000 members across Montana, we are writing to formally request that the Granite County Commissioners reconsider the decision made during the January 7, 2026 meeting to restrict Riddick Field to daytime-use-only by deactivating the airport's rotating beacon during hours of darkness. This decision is, according to our research, **unprecedented in the century of U.S. public airport history** following the Air Commerce Act of 1926. Reverting a 24/7-capable facility to a restricted-use status introduces immediate safety risks, significant legal liability, and potential financial jeopardy regarding state and federal grant obligations.

Key Negative Consequences

1. Critical Safety and Navigational Risks

The rotating beacon is not a decorative amenity; it is a vital navigational aid.

- **Visual Reference and CFIT Prevention:** In the complex terrain surrounding Philipsburg, the beacon is the primary visual cue for pilots to orient themselves. Removing this aid increases the risk of Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT) or off-airport landings during nighttime VFR (Visual Flight Rules) operations.
- **Emergency Diversions:** Pilots facing mechanical failure or deteriorating weather rely on beacon visibility for rapid airport identification. A non-operational beacon during an emergency can lead to catastrophic outcomes.
- **Inadequate Emergency Protocols:** While the Commission suggested the airport remain available for "emergencies," there is currently no established protocol to instantly activate the beacon for an inbound aircraft in distress.

2. Regulatory and Financial Exposure

By deactivating the beacon, Granite County is moving in direct opposition to FAA guidance and its own contractual obligations:

- **Grant Assurances:** As a member of the **National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS)** and the **Montana State Aviation System Plan**, the County has accepted state and federal funds. These grants typically carry obligations to maintain the airport in a safe, operational condition for the public. Failing to do so may require the County to repay significant grant funding.

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- **Liability:** Should an aviation incident occur, the intentional deactivation of a standard safety aid—against the advice of aviation experts—places a massive liability burden on Granite County taxpayers.
- **Land Use Conflicts:** Under **FAA Grant Assurance 21**, the County is required to promote compatible land use. It is disappointing that the complaints of a small minority of residents—who moved near a pre-existing 1970s-era facility—have outweighed the safety of the flying public and the County’s legal obligations.

3. Impact on Community and Emergency Services

- **Potential Future Medevac Operations:** Although current runway conditions may limit fixed-wing medevac operations, given runway upgrades, emergency responders in the future will likely rely on Riddick Field for life-saving missions. Any ambiguity regarding the airport’s nighttime status may create unnecessary delays for those future air ambulance services.
- **Economic Viability:** Riddick Field is the only county airport with an asphalt runway capable of 24/7 operations. Restricting its use hampers economic growth and discourages the transit of business and recreational users who contribute to the local economy.

Conclusion and Formal Recommendation

The decision to de-rate Riddick Field’s capabilities is a step backward for Granite County’s infrastructure and public safety. We strongly urge the Commission to:

1. **Rescind the motion** to restrict the airport to daytime-only use.
2. **Authorize the immediate operation** of the rotating beacon during all hours of darkness and whenever weather conditions fall below VFR minimums (3-mile visibility or 1,000-foot ceilings).
3. **Implement a standard monitoring protocol** to ensure the beacon remains operational, fulfilling the County’s commitment to safety and federal compliance.

We have provided a supplemental informational document [linked here for your review](#) which outlines the specific "Road Ahead" and the administrative consequences of choosing to de-rate a public-use airport.

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association and the Montana Pilots Association remain ready to assist the County in finding a path forward that balances community concerns with the non-negotiable requirements of aviation safety.



Brad Schuster, C.M.
Northwest Mountain Region Manager
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

///SIGNED///

Tim Robertson, President
Montana Pilots Association

Re: Clarifying Distinction Between FAA Part 77 Airspace Review and Broader Airport-Related Land Use Compatibility Expectations

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CC:

FAA Airports District Office - Helena
Montana Department of Transportation, Aeronautics Division