

Madison County Board of Commissioners Work Session

10:00 am Monday, March 16, 2026, until concluded

First Floor Public Meeting Room
Administrative Office Building, Virginia City, Montana

WebEx Login:

<https://madisoncounty.my.webex.com/madisoncounty.my/j.php?MTID=m07ca414a470500a811062b9438d9dfc5>

Meeting Number: 2554 056 7742 Password: VCMadison

Join by Phone: 1-650-479-3208 Password: 82623476

Press *6 to mute or unmute

Duke Gilman, District 1 Commissioner
Ron Nye, District 2 Commissioner, Chairman
Bill Todd, District 3 Commissioner

CALL TO ORDER, PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, ROLL CALL

PUBLIC COMMENT (PLEASE LIMIT TO 5 MINUTES PER PERSON)

REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

- Madison County Courthouse Rehabilitation and Addition

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- None

NEW BUSINESS

- Brownfields Letter of Support – Madison County Inventory Project
- Big Sky Resort - One Way Letter
- Ennis Community Center LATCF Disbursement Logistics

ADJOURNMENT



March 9, 2026

Jason Seyler, Brownfields Coordinator
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Brownfields Program

Dear Brownfields Program Staff,

The Madison County Board of Commissioners is pleased to support the Montana Department of Environmental Quality Brownfields Program in its request for EPA Brownfields funding to support community discovery, site prioritization, and technical assistance work in Madison County in partnership with Headwaters RC&D.

Madison County's communities face many challenges common to frontier and micro-rural regions. Our five largest communities range in population from approximately 100 to 1,159 residents, and local governments often operate with limited staff capacity to investigate environmental conditions, pursue redevelopment planning, or navigate complex state and federal funding programs. Access to Brownfields technical assistance and coordination can provide valuable support in helping our communities better understand environmental conditions, protect public health, and make informed decisions about important local properties.

Through this effort, Headwaters RC&D will work closely with county leadership, local governments, and community partners to listen first and better understand local priorities. This work will help identify properties where environmental information, assessment, or planning support could reduce uncertainty and help communities evaluate future options. We appreciate the commitment that this effort will reflect Madison County's priorities and respect the county's preferred pace of change.

Early identification and prioritization of sites can help small rural communities prepare projects that are more competitive for future Brownfields assessment, cleanup, and redevelopment funding. Building a clearer understanding of environmental conditions and redevelopment barriers will allow Madison County to thoughtfully evaluate opportunities while maintaining local control over future decision-making.

One project that has generated particular local interest is the Children's Center property in Twin Bridges. Community partners have begun exploring ideas that could return portions of the property to productive use while also supporting education and workforce training opportunities related to building rehabilitation and environmental hazard mitigation. Continued collaboration with Headwaters RC&D and DEQ Brownfields will help local

partners better understand potential environmental considerations, identify appropriate assessment resources, and evaluate next steps.

Madison County also welcomes the opportunity to host state and regional partners during a potential site tour later this year. Providing funders and technical partners with an opportunity to visit Madison County and see priority sites firsthand will help build a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing frontier rural communities.

The Board of Commissioners values the partnership between DEQ Brownfields and Headwaters RC&D. Their experience helping rural communities identify environmental barriers, navigate technical resources, and move priority projects forward has already benefited communities across Southwestern Montana.

This effort will also help position Madison County to take advantage of lessons learned through regional Brownfields work underway in Butte–Silver Bow and Deer Lodge. By identifying priority sites and understanding environmental conditions early, Madison County will be better prepared to leverage future state and federal Brownfields investment when opportunities arise.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued support of rural communities across Montana.

Sincerely,

William A. Todd
Chair, Madison County Board of Commissioners
Madison County, Montana

DRAFT

DRAFT

Big Sky Resort Village One-Way

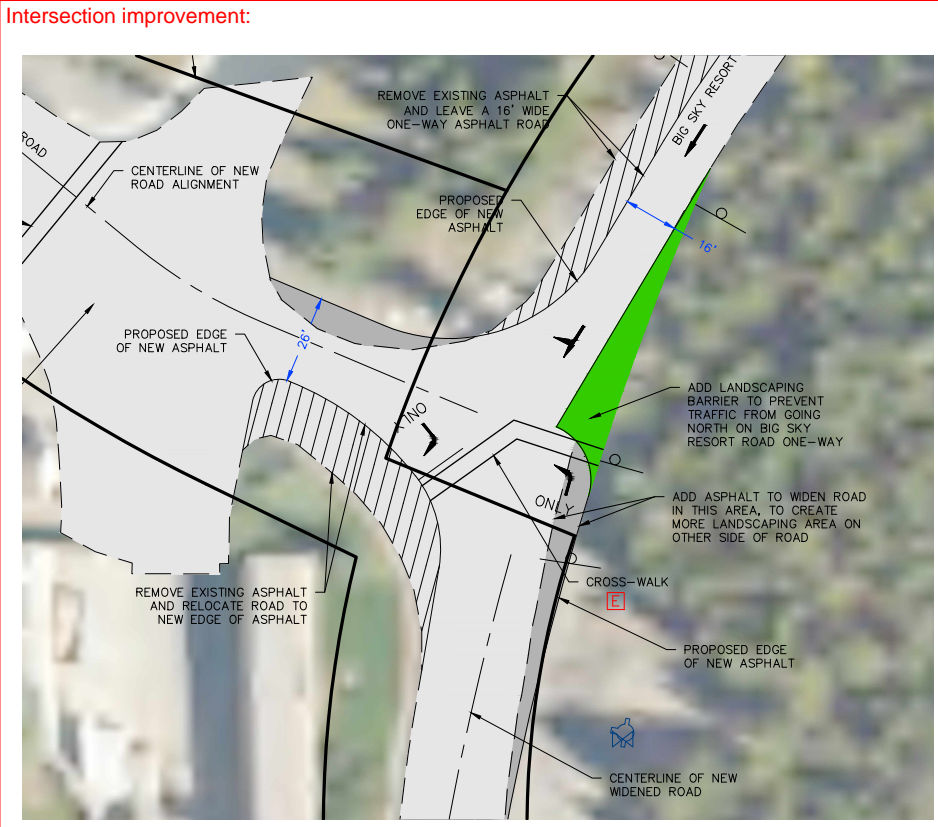
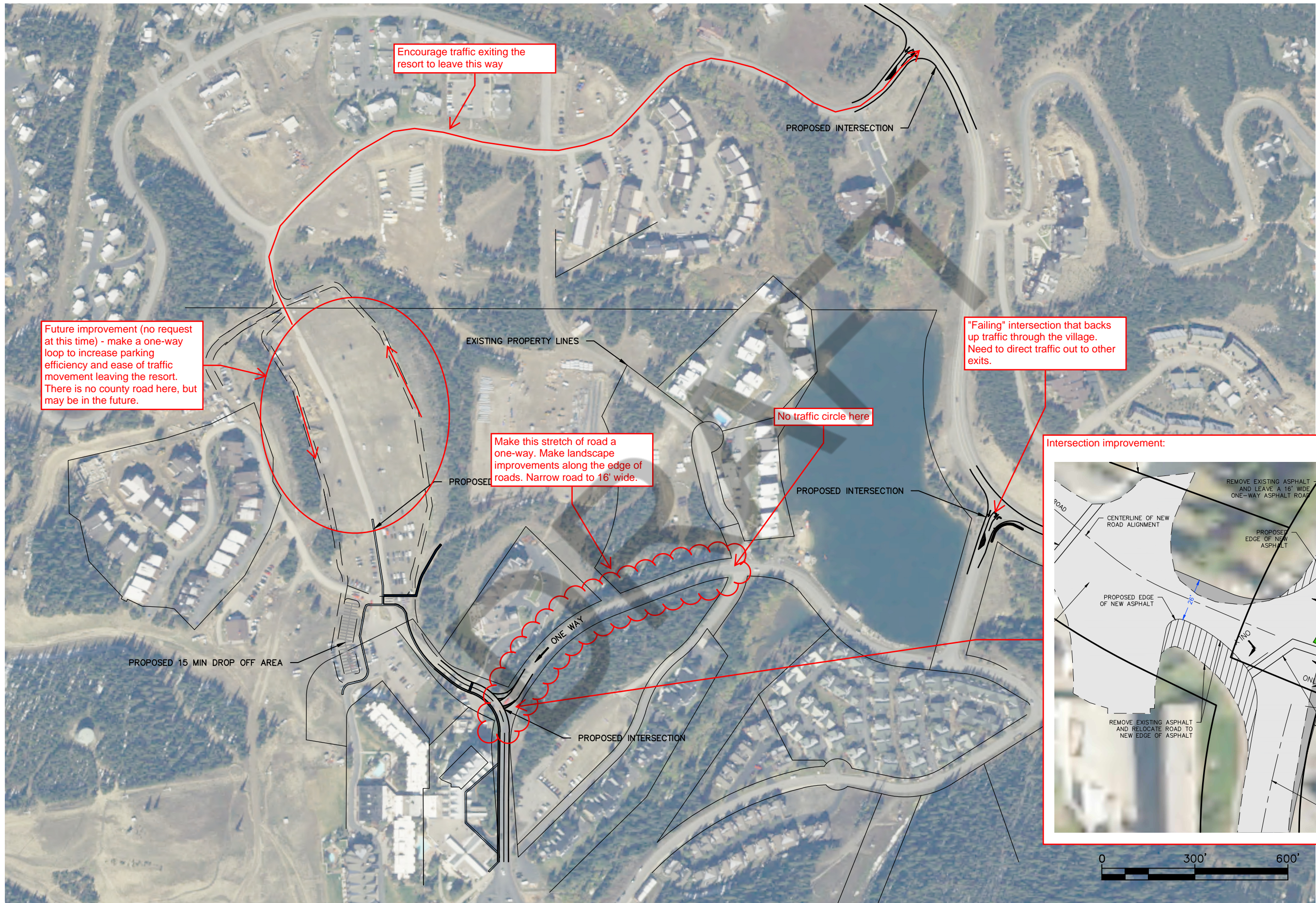


- Goals
 - Improve traffic safety at the 3-way by the dam
 - Improve traffic safety for vehicles leaving the resort
 - Improve traffic flow leaving the resort

- Anticipated Work to Achieve Goals
 - Make Big Sky Resort Road in the clouded area on the attached a one-way road.
 - Improve the intersection at Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull.
 - Provide landscaping and lighting improvements on either side of the road.

- Madison County
 - See public easement access from 1975. We would like to determine correct action with Madison County to make these adjustments.

- Supporting Documentation
 - Overview of existing conditions
 - Revised road widths and Sitting Bull/Big Sky Resort Road Intersection
 - Traffic engineering analysis recommendation
 - Legal easement documentation



GASTON ENGINEERING & SURVEYING, PC
 PROFESSIONAL PROGRESSIVE PERSONAL

NO.	REVISION DATE	DESCRIPTION

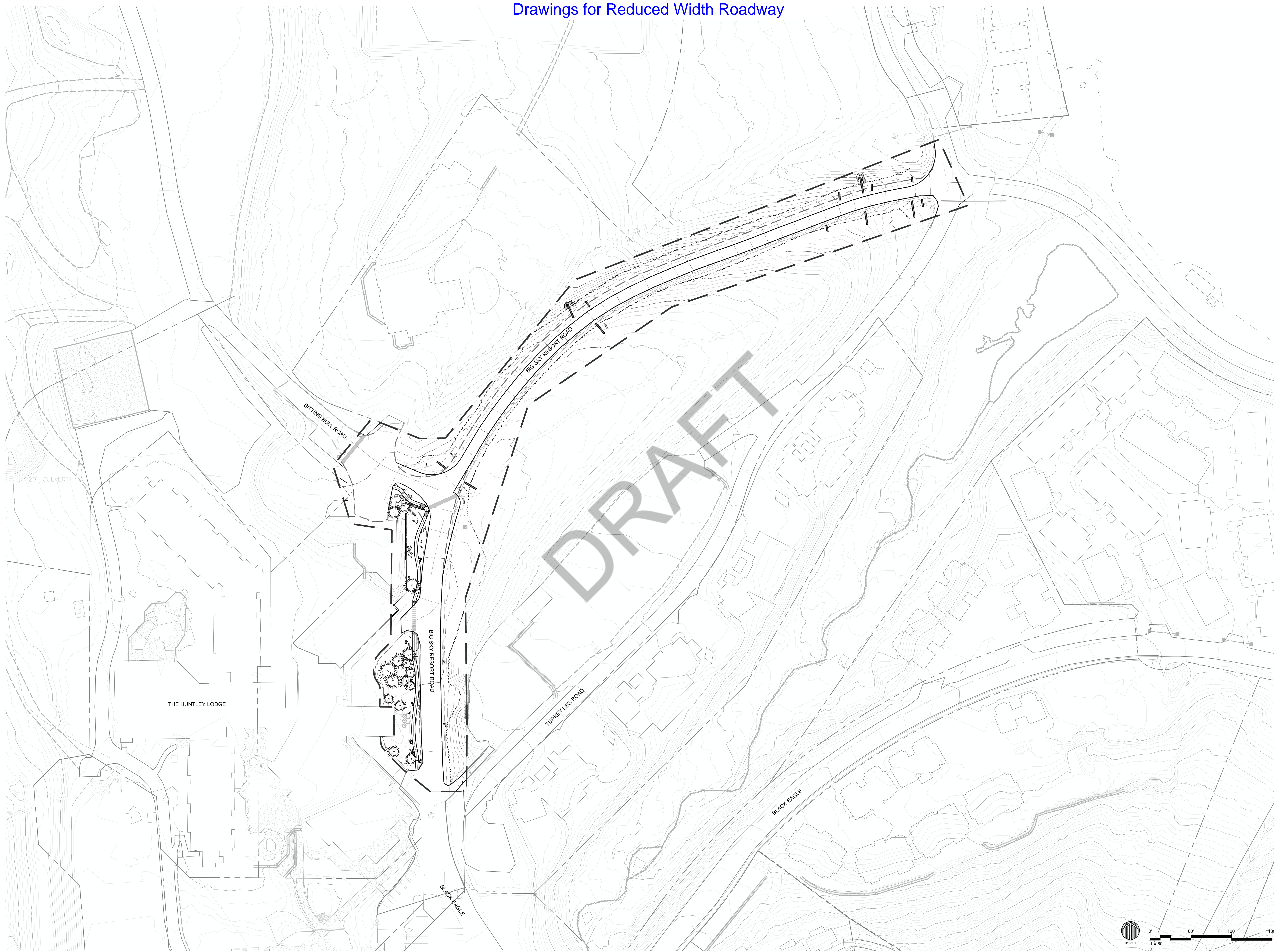
DRAWING: 22-533 ROUND ABOUTS 2.DWG

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LOGO: G

DRAWN BY: BF
CHECKED BY: JO
WORK: 22-533
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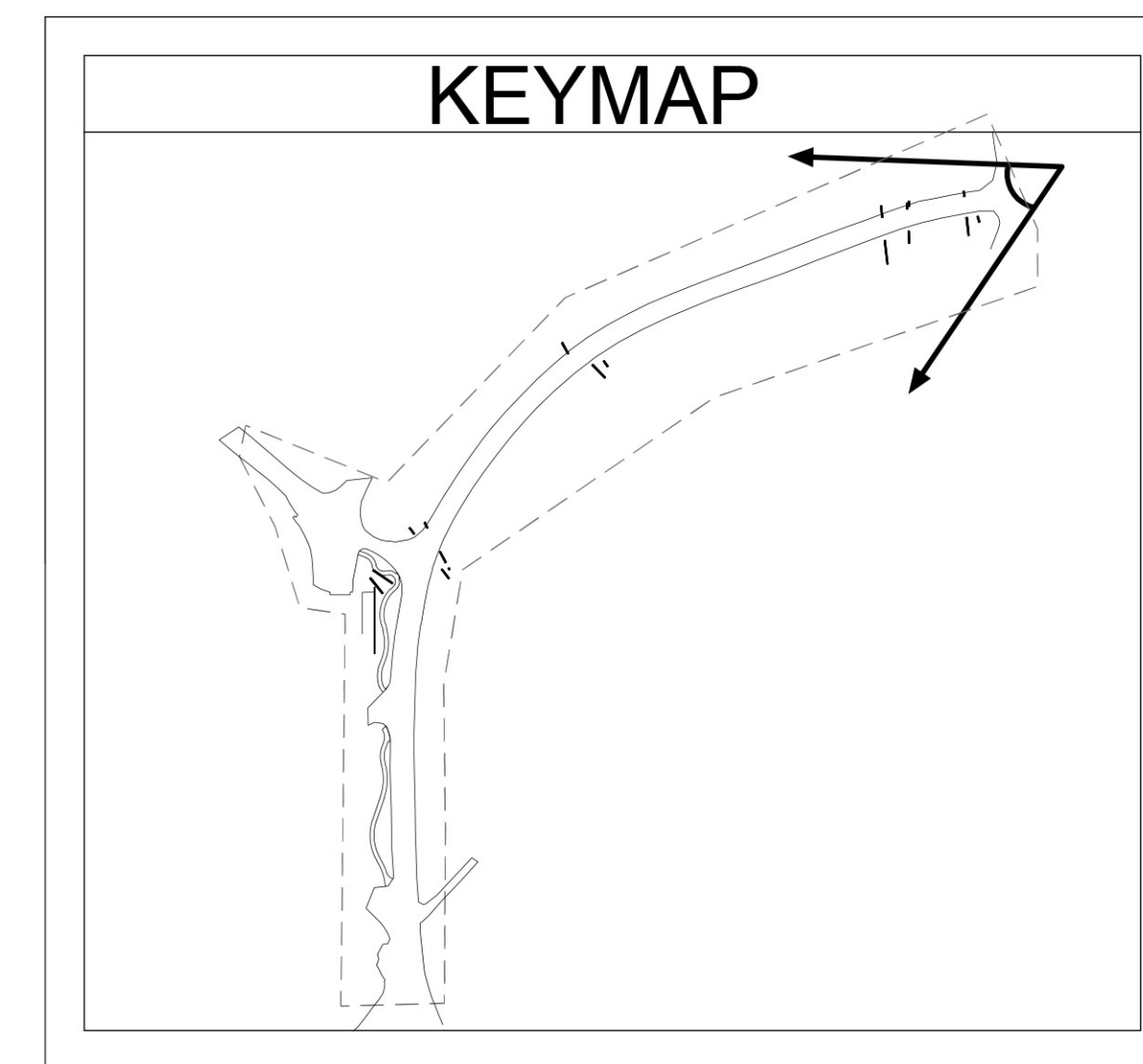
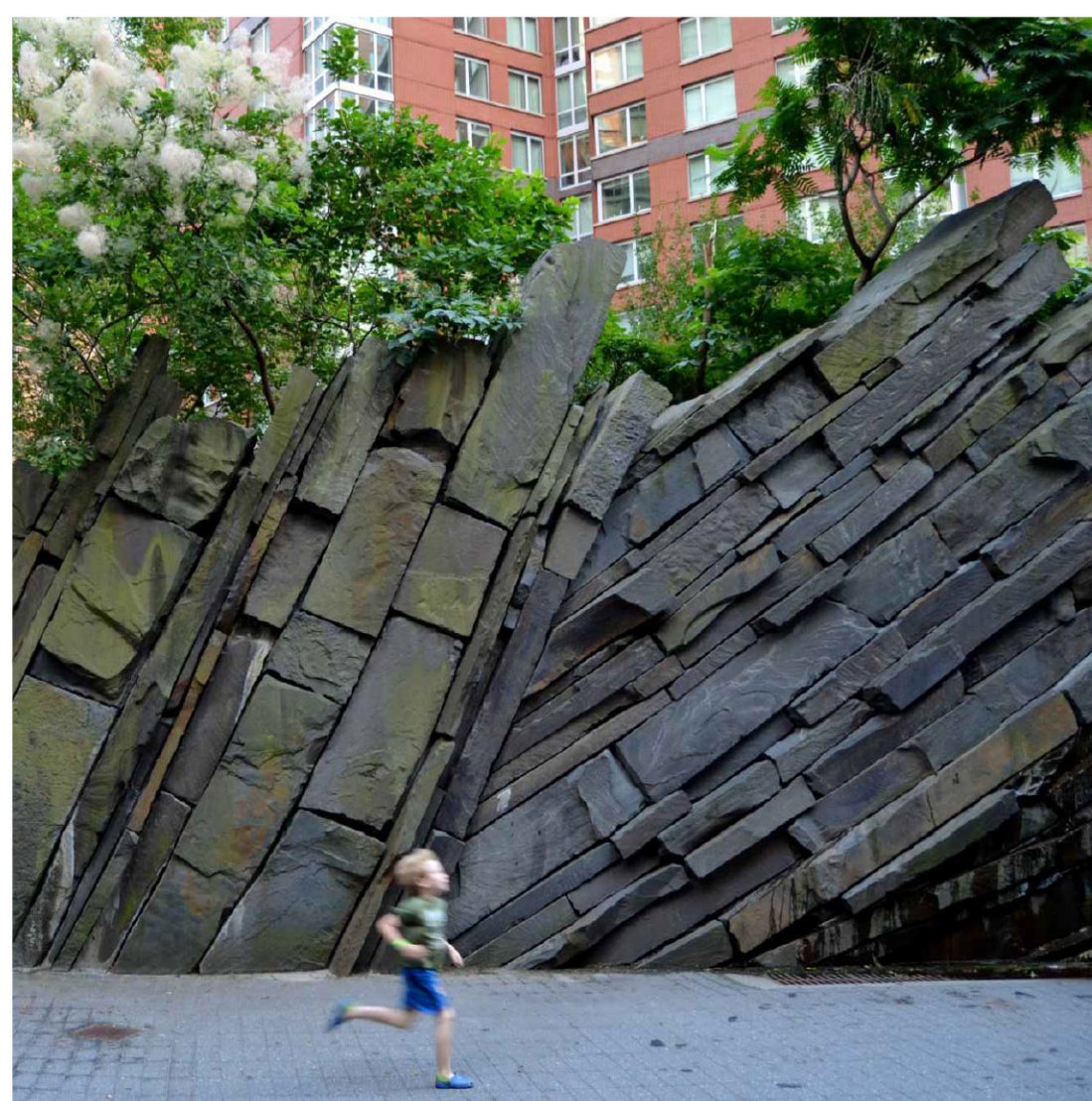
DRAFT





ARRIVAL REDEVELOPMENT
50% DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

BIG SKY RESORT
BIG SKY, MT



1 ENTRY
L300 3/4" = 1'-0"

3D PERSPECTIVE

DRAWN BY:	RT, JF
CHECKED BY:	JT, JTR
PROJECT NO.:	2024051.30
ISSUE DATE:	12/19/2025
REVISIONS:	

SHEET TITLE:
ENTRY
PERSPECTIVE
SHEET NUMBER:
L300

Drawing: UA\2024051.30 Big Sky Redevelopment\05 CAD\Sheets\01 DD BSR Arrivals\L300 SITE DIAGRAMS.dwg
Last Saved: December 19, 2025 4:40:25 PM
Last Plotted: 12/19/2025 5:01:44 PM
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January 23, 2026

Big Sky Resort
50 Big Sky Resort Road
PO BOX 160001
Big Sky, MT 59716

Attn: Chad Wilson
Vice President of Development & Construction

Re: Big Sky Resort Master Plan – Big Sky Resort Road One-Way Conversion
Traffic Study Letter
Big Sky, Montana

Dear Mr. Wilson,

This traffic study letter has been prepared for the proposed Big Sky Resort Master Plan in Big Sky, Montana. It is understood that Big Sky Resort is considering the conversion of Big Sky Resort Road from two-way vehicular traffic to one-way southwestbound (uphill) in the roadway segment between Sitting Bull Road and Turkey Leg Road. As such, this traffic study letter evaluates the preliminary findings associated with this one-way travel conversion along Big Sky Resort Road.

Intersection Scope and Access

The following intersections were incorporated into this traffic assessment:

- Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull Road
- Big Sky Resort Road and Turkey Leg Road

Regional access to Big Sky Resort is provided by Lone Mountain Trail (MT-64) while direct access is provided by Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull Road. An aerial image of the limits of the one-way travel conversion along Big Sky Resort Road and its vicinity is provided as follows.



DRAFT

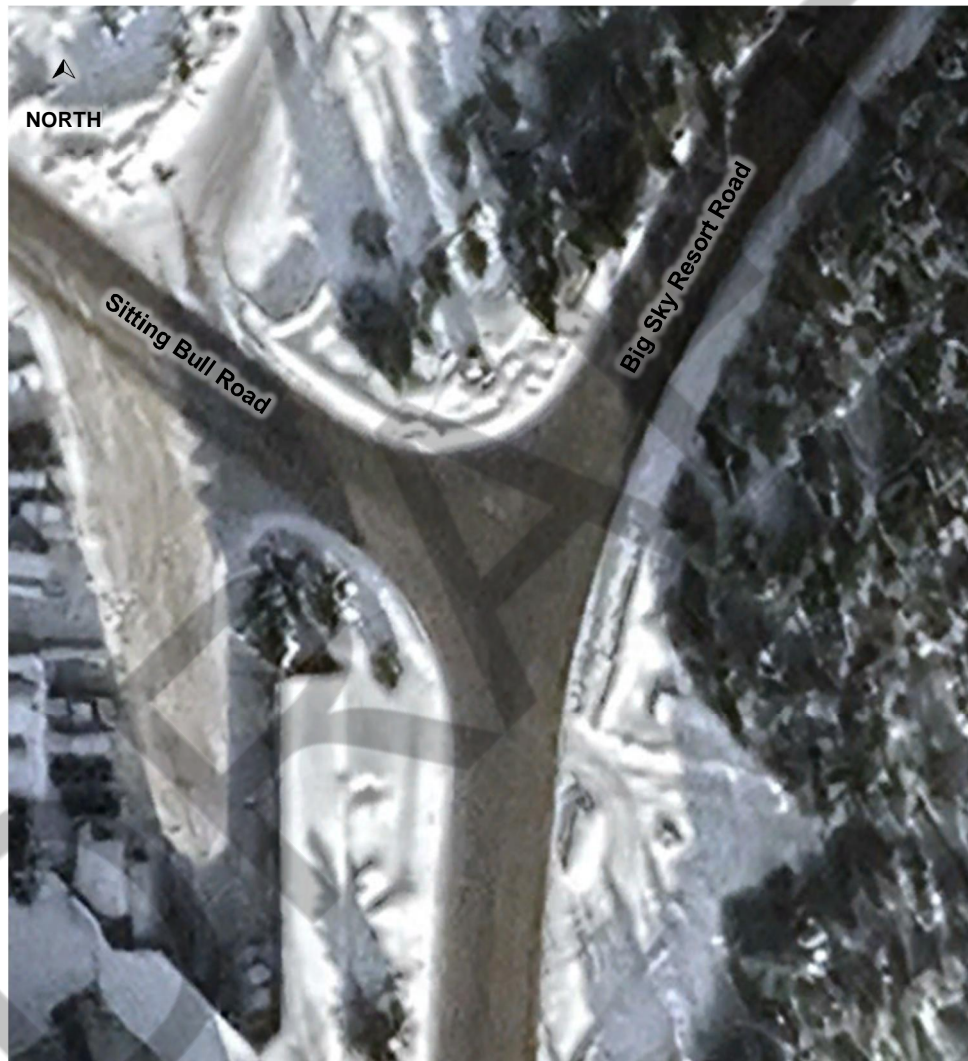


Existing Roadway Network

Big Sky Resort Road extends primarily east/west with one through lane in each direction with no pavement markings within the study limits. Big Sky Resort Road has a downhill (northeastbound) posted speed limit of 15 miles per hour (mph). Turkey Leg Road and Sitting Bull Road both extend primarily north/south with one through lane of travel in each direction with no pavement markings within the study area.



The intersection of Sitting Bull Road and Big Sky Resort Road operates with stop control on the eastbound approach of Sitting Bull Road. The three approaches of this intersection all provide a single lane shared for the applicable movements. An aerial photo that illustrates the existing intersection configuration is below.



Sitting Bull Road and Big Sky Resort Road



The intersection of Big Sky Resort Road and Turkey Leg Road operates with stop control on the northbound and southbound approaches of Turkey Leg Road. The four approaches of this intersection all provide a single lane shared for all movements. An aerial photo that illustrates the existing intersection configuration is below.



Big Sky Resort Road and Turkey Leg Road

Existing Traffic Volumes

Existing morning and afternoon peak hour turning movement counts were collected at the key intersections during the entire month of March and the first week of April in 2022. These traffic counts were obtained from the Big Sky Resort Traffic Study Letter dated June 17, 2022. The highest traffic was observed on Saturday, March 12, 2022 with the morning peak hour occurring from 8:45 AM to 9:45 AM and the after peak hour occurring from 4:00 PM to 5:00 PM. An annual traffic growth rate of two (2) percent was applied to the existing traffic counts to estimate 2026 peak season traffic counts. The two percent annual growth was determined through coordination with Big Sky Resort based on historic skier growth data.



Intersection Operational Analysis

Kimley-Horn's analysis of traffic operations in the site vicinity was conducted to determine potential capacity deficiencies at the project key intersections for the 2026 horizon. The acknowledged source for determining overall capacity is the Highway Capacity Manual¹.

Capacity analysis results are listed in terms of Level of Service (LOS). LOS is a qualitative term describing operating conditions a driver will experience while traveling on a particular street or highway during a specific time interval. It ranges from A (very little delay) to F (long delays and congestion). For intersections and roadways, standard traffic engineering practice recommends LOS D as the minimum threshold for acceptable operations for intersections and LOS E for movements. **Table 1** below shows the definition of level of service for unsignalized intersections.

Table 1 - Level of Service Definitions

Level of Service	Signalized Intersection Average Total Delay (sec/veh)	Unsignalized Intersection Average Total Delay (sec/veh)
A	≤ 10	≤ 10
B	> 10 and ≤ 20	> 10 and ≤ 15
C	> 20 and ≤ 35	> 15 and ≤ 25
D	> 35 and ≤ 55	> 25 and ≤ 35
E	> 55 and ≤ 80	> 35 and ≤ 50
F	> 80	> 50

Transportation Research Board, *Highway Capacity Manual*, Seventh Edition, Washington DC, 2022.

Under the unsignalized analysis, the level of service (LOS) for a two-way stop-controlled intersection is determined by the computed or measured control delay and is defined for each minor movement. Level of service for a two-way stop-controlled intersection is not relevantly defined for the whole intersection. Synchro traffic analysis software was used to analyze the study area key intersections and accesses drives for level of service and vehicle delays using Highway Capacity Manual (HCM) methodology.

The movements at intersections of Big Sky Resort Road/Sitting Bull Road and Big Sky Resort Road/Turkey Leg Road currently operate with level of service C or better during the peak season peak hours. With the conversion of Big Sky Resort Road from two-way travel to one-way travel southwestbound from Sitting Bull Road to Turkey Leg Road, the movements at these two intersections are expected to operate with level of service B or better.

¹ Transportation Research Board, *Highway Capacity Manual*, Seventh Edition, Washington DC, 2022.



Considerations for One-Way Travel Conversion

Although the intersection level of service is reported acceptably at both key intersections with two-way travel along Big Sky Resort Road, the level of service category is expected to improve from LOS C to LOS B at the two key intersections with the one-way travel conversion along Big Sky Resort Road. Further, the one-way vehicle travel conversion along Big Sky Resort Road will reduce vehicle volumes at the higher demand intersections of Big Sky Resort Road/Low Dog Road and Big Sky Resort Road/MT-64 and provide appropriate volume balancing to Big Sky Resort street network system. The vehicle balancing will reroute a portion of vehicle demand to the lesser traveled Sitting Bull Road access to MT-64. Long vehicle queues have been experienced on the eastbound approach of the Big Sky Resort Road and Low Dog Road intersection during the exiting peak hour of peak season while the reroute associated with the one-way street conversion will reduce this vehicle demand.

Big Sky Resort Road is downhill northeastbound with steep downward grades within the one-way conversion limits. These steep grades have caused difficult travel conditions when snow and ice is present on Big Sky Resort Road. Restricting this segment of Big Sky Resort Road to one-way travel southwestbound and uphill will increase safety at both key intersections and the entire segment of Big Sky Resort Road.

Concept Plan for One-Way Travel Conversion

If the one-way travel conversion is implemented along Big Sky Resort Road from Sitting Bull Road to Turkey Leg Road, it is recommended that appropriate intersection signage and restrictions are implemented at the Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull Road intersection. The following signage and elements should be incorporated at the Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull Road intersection in association with one-way street conversion along Big Sky Resort Road:

- Travel should be physically restricted on the east side of Big Sky Resort Road north of Sitting Bull Road with OM1 object marker and W1-8 chevron signs installed facing northbound on the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road in front of the restricted travel area. Native landscaping should be installed in the restricted travel area to further identify prohibited travel;
- A R3-5L “Left Turn Only” sign installed on the northbound Big Sky Resort Road approach;
- A R1-1 “STOP” sign and R3-5R “Right Turn Only” or R3-2 “No Left Turn” sign installed on the eastbound Sitting Bull Road approach;
- A R5-1 “Do Not Enter” sign with two R6-1 “One-Way” signs on both sides of the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing northbound; and
- R5-1a “Wrong Way” signs installed on both side of the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing northbound.

It is recommended that the following signage be incorporated at the Big Sky Resort Road and Turkey Leg Road intersection:

- R6-1 “One-Way” signs on both sides of the west leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing westbound.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the traffic analysis presented in this report, Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc. recommends the one-way southwestbound vehicle travel conversion along Big Sky Resort Road between Sitting Bull Road and Turkey Leg Road. The one-way conversion is believed to increase vehicle safety while reducing some congestion at the higher vehicle demand intersections in the Big Sky Resort area.

If the one-way travel conversion is implemented along Big Sky Resort Road from Sitting Bull Road to Turkey Leg Road, it is recommended that the following signage and elements be incorporated at the Big Sky Resort Road and Sitting Bull Road intersection:

- Travel should be physically restricted on the east side of Big Sky Resort Road north of Sitting Bull Road with OM1 object marker and W1-8 chevron signs installed facing northbound on the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road in front of the restricted travel area. Native landscaping should be installed in the restricted travel area to further identify prohibited travel;
- A R3-5L “Left Turn Only” sign installed on the northbound Big Sky Resort Road approach;
- A R1-1 “STOP” sign and R3-5R “Right Turn Only” or R3-2 “No Left Turn” sign installed on the eastbound Sitting Bull Road approach;
- A R5-1 “Do Not Enter” sign with two R6-1 “One-Way” signs on both sides of the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing northbound; and
- R5-1a “Wrong Way” signs installed on both side of the north leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing northbound.

It is recommended that the following signage be incorporated at the Big Sky Resort Road and Turkey Leg Road intersection:

- R6-1 “One-Way” signs on both sides of the west leg of Big Sky Resort Road facing westbound.

If you have any questions or require anything further, please feel free to call us at (303) 228-2300.

Sincerely,

KIMLEY-HORN AND ASSOCIATES, INC.

Curtis D. Rowe, P.E., PTOE
Senior Vice President

Jeffrey R. Planck, P.E. (AZ, CO)
Associate

57235

BOOK 246 PAGE 683

Indexed D.B.
Platted D.B.

EASEMENT

BIG SKY OF MONTANA, INC., hereinafter referred to as Grantor, for and in consideration of the sum of One Dollar (\$1.00) and other good and valuable consideration, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, hereby grants and conveys to the County of Madison, State of Montana, its successors, assigns and permittees, hereinafter jointly and severally referred to as Grantee, a perpetual easement for roadway purposes over a strip of land sixty-six feet in width, being thirty-three feet on either side of the centerline across the lands described in Exhibit A attached hereto and incorporated herein by this reference.

Grantor reserves the right to use and maintain and to grant to others the right to use and maintain the easement for roadway purposes herein granted to Grantee.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, Grantor caused this instrument to be executed by its duly authorized officer, and its corporate seal to be hereunto affixed on this 6th day of May, 1975.

BIG SKY OF MONTANA, INC.

BY J.R. Blakley
President

STATE OF MONTANA)
) ss
COUNTY OF MADISON)

I, Mary A. Nelson, a Notary Public, do hereby certify that on the 6 day of May, 1975, personally appeared before me V. D. Blakley, who declares that he is President of the corporation, executing the foregoing document, and being first duly sworn, acknowledged that he signed the foregoing document in the capacity therein set forth, and declared that the statements therein contained are true.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and seal the day and year before written.

Mary A. Nelson
Notary Public for the State of Montana
Residing at Big Sky, Montana
My Commission Expires 2-20-76

Filed for record on the 25th day of August A.D. 1975
at 4:30 o'clock P. M. and recorded in Book 246 of RECORDS
on Page 683-686 Records of Madison County, Montana.
By Lorraine H. McWhorter
LORRAINE H. MCWHORTER, County Recorder Deputy
Fee: None, County Return to: Filed #58

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Qualitative Community Needs Assessment for a Rural Town in Montana, USA: Documenting an Emerging Identity of a Community Undergoing Unprecedented Growth

Authors: Ania Bartkowiak, Heidi Baumgartner, Lindsay DeGroot,
Olympia Gioulekas, & Jessica Gerthe

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Qualitative Community Needs Assessment for A Rural Town in Montana, USA: Documenting an Emerging Identity of a Community Undergoing Unprecedented Growth

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Abstract

This study conducts a qualitative community needs assessment in a small, rapidly growing rural town in Montana, aiming to engage local residents in discussions about their cultural identity, priorities, and social service gaps. Over the past 15 years, previous initiatives for community development have struggled to achieve lasting change. Utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the research involved 36 participants from a population of 972, gathered through surveys and focus groups. The findings highlight specific needs for improved services and infrastructure while uncovering deeper community dynamics, such as isolation, a longing for belonging, and reactions to growth. Organized into four primary themes, the results reveal that the studied town's community faces challenges related to limited access to services, workforce retention, aging population, and cultural shifts. Participants expressed concerns about the impact of these transitions and a desire for solutions that enhance recreational and social opportunities. This research emphasizes the ongoing challenges faced by rural areas in adapting to evolving needs, reflecting broader issues experienced across similar Montana communities.

Keywords: Community needs assessment, rural population, population growth, Montana, focus groups, qualitative method, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Évaluation qualitative des besoins d'une communauté rurale du Montana (États-Unis) : Documenter l'émergence d'une identité au sein d'une communauté en pleine croissance

Résumé

Cette étude présente une évaluation qualitative des besoins d'une petite ville rurale du Montana, en forte expansion. Elle vise à impliquer les résidents locaux dans des discussions sur leur identité culturelle, leurs priorités et les lacunes des services sociaux. Au cours des 15 dernières années, les initiatives de développement communautaire ont peiné à induire des changements durables. S'appuyant sur l'analyse phénoménologique interprétative, la recherche a impliqué 36 participants sur une population de 972, recueillis par le biais d'enquêtes et de groupes de discussion. Les résultats mettent en lumière des besoins spécifiques d'amélioration des services et des infrastructures, tout en révélant des dynamiques communautaires plus profondes, telles que l'isolement, un désir d'appartenance et les réactions à la croissance. Organisés en quatre thèmes principaux, les résultats montrent que la communauté de la ville étudiée est confrontée à des défis liés à l'accès limité aux services, à la fidélisation de la main-d'œuvre, au vieillissement de la population et aux mutations culturelles. Les participants ont exprimé leurs inquiétudes quant à l'impact de ces transitions et leur souhait de trouver des solutions pour améliorer les possibilités récréatives et sociales. Cette recherche met en lumière les défis persistants auxquels sont confrontées les zones rurales pour s'adapter à l'évolution des besoins, reflétant des problématiques plus générales rencontrées par des communautés similaires du Montana.

Mots-clés : évaluation des besoins communautaires, population rurale, croissance démographique, Montana, groupes de discussion, méthode qualitative, analyse phénoménologique interprétative

1.0 Introduction

Needs assessments serve as a crucial tool for understanding the intricate dynamics within communities, highlighting their unique strengths, challenges, and aspirations (Billings & Cowley, 1995; Reeves et al., 2008). As communities evolve, existing resources may become strained, and new needs emerge. By identifying gaps in resources and services, these assessments guide the development of intentional and targeted programs. Involving community members fosters a deeper comprehension of local relationships while encouraging greater engagement and investment from stakeholders in project initiation and execution.

The community assessed in this study is a small town in a large county in Montana. This town has experienced exponential growth over the past decade compared to other United States cities of similar size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The population has increased by about 8.5%, from 838 residents in 2010 to 917 residents currently. The town's growth is largely attributed to its geographical location, abundant natural resources, and recreational opportunities. The region's rich history includes early inhabitants from several Native American tribes, who

valued the valley for its abundant wildlife. The town was then established by pioneers during Montana's gold rush. While the area retains its ranching and farming roots, recent years have seen its transformation into a residential hub for commuters from nearby growing cities, spurred by rising housing costs in those areas. However, like many similar rural towns across Montana, this town's geographical seclusion, severe winters, and constrained infrastructure create challenges in meeting the community's evolving needs.

Over the past decade, various organizations have conducted community needs assessments in the area (Allhands et al., 2022; Kishbaugh et al., 2016; Stack, 2011). These primarily survey-based quantitative studies effectively identified resource gaps, such as the need for expanded mental and behavioral health services, local educational programming, and infrastructure improvements. However, they often overlooked the nuanced experiences that shaped these perceived needs.

In response to this limitation, a QCNA was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the safety and social services needs in the town and the county. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study explored the individual and collective experiences of community members, capturing the depth, breadth, and texture of their perspectives. Beyond its research aims, conducting this QCNA proved to be a meaningful intervention in itself. Participants and later consumers of the study's findings expressed the importance of the process, particularly the value of the community forum, and demonstrated a willingness to engage in defining leadership needs.

This study also highlights the value of conducting a QCNA as an educational opportunity for graduate counseling students. The process underscores the vital role counselors can play in community leadership and advocacy, equipping students with practical experience in addressing systemic issues while promoting their professional growth (Burkhalter et al., 2012; Skehan et al., 2024). Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to inform the design of effective programs and services that can better address the diverse and growing needs of the town's community during a time of significant transition.

2.0 Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach (Smith et al., 2009) that aims to explore how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences. This methodology is built on the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, and seeks to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experiences. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA involves a dual process of interpretation where the researchers attempt to make sense of the participants' experiences while the participants themselves are trying to make sense of their own experiences. This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining an in-depth, idiographic focus, typically achieved through thorough and flexible semi-structured interviews with a relatively small sample size. IPA is particularly suited for our study since our objective is to understand how the town's residents perceive and articulate their experiences within the context of their community.

2.1 Study Design

The town under study is located in a large but sparsely populated county in Montana, with a projected population of under ten thousand in 2025. The town has been experiencing significant growth, with an annual increase of nearly 4% and a 22% rise since the 2020 census, which recorded a population of under 1,000. The demographic profile of the town reveals a predominantly white population (99%), with a median age of 52-53 years for males and 55 years for females. The average household income is \$70,084, accompanied by a poverty rate of 12%. The limited ethnic diversity of the community is indicative of broader trends in rural Montana, where recent growth has been driven largely by an influx of affluent, mostly white newcomers.

To explore the community's perspectives, we utilized convenient sampling and a referral method, leveraging personal networks to recruit participants. We conducted six focus groups at the public library, inviting all interested adults to participate without discrimination or vetting. This approach yielded 36 participants—predominantly white females—reflecting a range of ages and accounting for approximately 3.5% of the general population, including those who completed surveys.

While our sample's limited diversity mirrors the demographic realities of Studied town, our recruitment strategy was essential in navigating social dynamics that may have discouraged broader participation. The qualitative method employed emphasizes the value of capturing the nuanced voices of community members, providing insight into their struggles and aspirations. This community-based research approach was intentionally chosen to enrich our understanding of the dynamics within Studied town, highlighting the experiences of those willing to share their perspectives.

Convenient sampling, utilizing the personal network and referral method (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to ensure as diverse a range of participants as possible. Project consultants leveraged their personal and professional networks, along with dissemination efforts including local newspaper advertisements, flyers, Facebook posts, and email invitations, to recruit 18 diverse community members for the study. This approach ensured the inclusion of varied perspectives and enhanced the richness of the data collected.

Participants were requested to allocate at least 1 hour for face-to-face meetings with the research team during the primary interview phase. They were given six chances to participate in an in-person focus group over a 4-day period. The focus groups convened in a conference room at the town's local public library. If participants could not attend the face-to-face meetings, they were encouraged to complete the online survey.

To address potential concerns regarding power dynamics within the focus groups, we focused solely on recruiting adults for this study. While we initially considered dividing participants based on their self-identified occupational categories—such as helping professionals, tourism workers, and agricultural workers—this approach was adjusted due to low response rates.

To mitigate power differentials, we employed qualitative interviewing techniques that emphasized collaborative discussion and individual narratives. Facilitators encouraged participants to share their experiences by using paraphrasing and reflective questioning, which fostered an open environment for dialogue. It is

noteworthy that male representatives from positions of power in the community predominantly attended only the final presentation of results, where they engaged in discussions addressing the concerns of the participants, most of whom were female and had actively contributed to the focus groups. This strategy aimed to create a supportive atmosphere that empowered participants to speak freely.

Regarding the focus group structure, we did not divide participants by gender. Instead, we aimed to gather insights into the needs of male, female, and non-binary community members through the perspectives of all participants, regardless of their own gender identities. This approach allowed us to capture a broader understanding of community needs and facilitated discussions about gender-specific issues.

During the discussions, two male participants shared their perceptions of the needs of women, particularly acknowledging the presence of domestic violence within the community. Female participants highlighted how the prevailing culture of self-reliance affects not only women but also men, as they observed the impact on their partners, family, and friends.

We recognize that discussing gender identity in a small-town focus group can be sensitive. Participants were not required to disclose their gender identity to contribute; rather, we encouraged an environment where individuals could share their perspectives freely. We also conducted an online survey to complement the focus group findings. This dual approach allowed us to capture a wider range of experiences, particularly from individuals who might feel more comfortable expressing their identities in an anonymous online setting. The differences between online and in-person responses are significant; online surveys can provide more anonymity and may lead to more honest disclosures about sensitive topics, while focus groups can foster deeper discussions but may constrain openness due to social dynamics. By integrating both methods, we aimed to create a comprehensive understanding of the needs of all community members, including those who identify as non-binary.

The research question guiding this study was: How do residents of this small rural town in Montana perceive and interpret the community's needs? To facilitate semi-structured discussions within each focus group, we developed a set of interview questions that were also utilized in an online survey conducted using Microsoft Forms. The questions aimed to elicit rich, qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. They included:

- In your experience, what are the needs for social services and safety in this county?
- What is your experience of living in/around this town in rural Montana?
- If you could have a dream county community center, what would it offer? What facilities would it have? How would it address the most pressing needs in this community?
- What do women need? What could you use?
- What do men need? What could you use?
- What do the non-binary folks in your community need? What could you use?

The research team, composed of members who were not residents of the town, conducted the interviews, ensuring an objective perspective in the discussions. Each focus group was audio-recorded, with no personal identifiers linked to the recordings or transcripts, to protect the anonymity of participants and encourage open dialogue.

2.2 Participants

Eighteen people participated in the in-person focus group interviews, while another 18 completed the online survey, with no known overlap between the two groups. All participants were at least 18 years old and residents of this rural Montana town. In compliance with ethical standards, all participants provided written informed consent.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the study participants. Notably, a significant majority of respondents were women, which reflects the community's social dynamics and may indicate an inherent gender imbalance in our sample. While we did not specifically inquire about the duration of residence for each participant, it is essential to acknowledge that this convenience sampling approach was influenced by the practical constraints of engaging with available community members. This sampling method, although resulting in limited gender diversity, allowed us to gather valuable insights from a group deeply embedded in the community's social fabric.

2.3 Researchers

In interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher serves as the primary lens through which data is interpreted. The research team comprised both residents and non-residents of the town. All team members share the common identity of being white women with a professional interest in counseling, including licensed clinical professional counselors and those in the final stages of their graduate training at Montana State University. The team also represented a range of age identities, with members identifying as either middle-aged or young adults.

The researchers' perceptions of community needs in the town were shaped by their interactions with residents both before and during the study. They recognized two key assumptions they held: (a) small communities tend to be resilient and cohesive, and (b) addressing identified needs in communities can drive cultural change.

Table 1. *Demographics of Study Participants*

Gender (n)	Age (n)	Racial affinity (n)	Income level (n)
FOCUS GROUPS PARTICIPANTS			
Women (16)	18-24 (0)	White (17)	≤ \$10k (0)
Men (2)	25-34 (4)	RND (1)	\$10-20k (0)
Non-binary (0)	35-44 (4)		\$21-40k (3)
Rather-Not-Disclose – RND (0)	45-54 (3)		\$41-65k (4)
	55-64 (0)		\$66-80k (4)
	≥ 65 (7)		\$81-100k (5)
	RND (0)		\$101-125k (0)
			\$126-150k (0)
			>\$150k (0)
			RND (2)

Table 1 continued

SURVEYS PARTICIPANTS

Women (17)	18-24 (1)	White (18)	≤ \$10k (0)
Men (1)	25-34 (2)	RND (0)	\$10-20k (0)
Non-binary (0)	35-44 (7)		\$21-40k (4)
Rather-Not-Disclose – RND (0)	45-54 (4)		\$41-65k (1)
	55-64 (1)		\$66-80k (3)
	≥ 65 (3)		\$81-100k (1)
	RND (0)		\$101-125k (3)
			\$126-150k (1)
			>\$150k (0)
			RND (5)

Note: Gender, age, racial affinity, and income level of focus group and survey participants are displayed. n = number, RND = rather not disclose.

3.0 Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the five face-to-face focus groups were transcribed verbatim using a transcription service that complies with privacy regulations. Each researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis to code the transcripts and create matrices of personal experiential themes, according to the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Themes were identified based on the repetition of an idea or statement at least threetimes by more than two participants in each focus group transcript. The research team worked together to recognize and discuss common emerging themes and subthemes for each focus group, as well as to establish connections across themes and groups in order to develop a final meta-matrix of group experiential themes. The written feedback from the online surveys was analyzed by a single researcher using the same coding process to identify and incorporate themes into the meta-matrix group experiential themes.

3.1 Trustworthiness

In our study, we utilized various methods, including "generating a rich, thick description" (Cresswell & Poth, 2017, p. 263), to ensure the trustworthiness of our research. The detailed descriptions and direct quotes from the transcripts reflect our dedication to transparency. We also conducted peer debriefing on the data and the inquiry process (Cresswell & Poth, 2017) to consistently validate our team's approach to data analysis. Additionally, we carried out an independent audit, which involved organizing the data in a way that allows an external reviewer or a research recipient to access the raw data and trace the process (Smith et al., 2009). This demonstrated our commitment to scientific rigor and enhanced the credibility of our study.

3.2 Ethics Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Montana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol number IRB-2023-780. All procedures followed ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and confidentiality of participants.

4.0 Results

The analysis of focus group transcripts and online survey responses using interpretive phenomenological methods revealed four main themes that captured the shared experiences of the study participants. We decided to present those themes with a brief narrative and then strengthen the story by choosing and adding direct quotes from study participants. We organized the quotes in categories (subthemes) under the umbrella of each main theme in a way that offers our interpretation and a story about this community. We selected quotes and presented themes and subthemes in order of priority based on the frequency and emphasis placed on the issues and experiences discussed by the participants in the study.

4.1 Identified Themes

4.1.1 The community experiences tensions during its growth, as it seeks to define its collective identity. This theme explores the main issue arising from both in-person and online feedback from community members. Every focus group underscored the noticeable evolution and transformation within the community. Participants pointed out changes in the community's demographics, infrastructure, and needs. They also conveyed concerns about the observed changes and growth in their community. The researchers observed a diversity of community opinions regarding new developments and proposed changes within the community.

Within this theme, the following subthemes were isolated:

- *There is opposition to change and attachment to how things are:*
I want a small town. That's why I moved here" (TE 16, 17). "There are people who've lived here a long, long time and like the way it is" (TA 1, 3). "I see in communities like ours kind of a denialism going on 'cause everything's changing, but nobody wants it to change. So, the infrastructure to support the change never happens (TD 14, 14).
- *There is tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness:*
I would say I'd like to see some of the dirt roads fixed, but as soon as we fix the dirt roads, there'll be too many people here" (TA 5, 1). "Well, I moved here 17 years ago, and I'm not a real outgoing person by nature, but I found people to be pretty welcoming. With the caveat that if you are new, you better not try to change anything (TD 5, 7).
- *A polarization of viewpoints is present in the community:*
There's like a bitterness, like a frustration of there's not enough to do or there's not enough for our kids to do. And so, I think with that shift, there's come some like, momentum to create more things, you know, and I felt the pushback from some people where they're like, don't mess with our community. We love it the

way it is. But we also have this momentum from these young families who just want they want more, more opportunity, more things (TB 11, 11).

- *Participants describe paradoxes within individualism and community-mindedness, describing the current state of the community:*

I think part of the issue when somebody moves into town, nobody trusts them because they don't know them. Stranger danger. Yeah. I mean, it's just a fact. It's but once they warm up to the person, then it's fantastic. So, it's finding that balance (...) (TC 9, 10).

I love the community here, everybody. I won't say everybody, but we have, you know, everybody when you know they need to, everybody gets together. You know, like I said, when your neighbors get snowed in, those that have the equipment to plow people's driveways and things like that, they do. They go out and help and they make sure that everybody's, you know, taken care of. (TB 8, 14).

I would say that's a good description of this community: disjointed (TA 21, 10).

4.1.2 Gaps in social safety and community services drive the identification of community needs—community services, facilities, centralized information system. Participants highlighted community needs by discussing the current shortcomings in services and the constraints they face. They emphasized the necessity for a bigger and more adaptable space to accommodate recreational activities, education, events, and to act as a central gathering point for community engagement and the sharing of information about other available services and resources. There were concerns about the community's ability to consistently provide staff, upkeep, and funding for such a space. Within this theme, the following subthemes were isolated:

- *A need for a facility large and versatile enough for connection and community events—parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information—was identified:*

And the school has, you know, a big gym and a big cafeteria, but they're busy all the time. They can't do community events. They can't. They're just busy. And so, where else do you go? To the basement of the [local church] that might hold 100? The [local church of a different denomination] probably holds 70 round tables. The [local church of a third different denomination] out there on the highway probably holds 50, but there's no place that would hold, say, 200 people. And this is a population of I'm guessing we're up to 2500 now [in fact the town's population hovers around 1,000 residents]. So if somebody has a big funeral or a big wedding or something, there's no place" (TA 7, 13).

- *Space for a healthy outlet—pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park—to meet social needs was identified:*

The state does a prevention needs assessment. And this touched my heart since the first time I read it six years ago. But one of the largest risk factors for youth and substance abuse, violence, suicide, depression and overall poor mental health is low neighborhood attachment or low community attachment TC (23, 17).

- *A position is needed for a resource manager or coordinator to serve as a connection to resources:*

I would agree that the advocacy of having someone to disseminate that knowledge of how to get what you need would be amazing” (TC 8, 22). “It’s like we have these little pockets of interesting programs, but you really got to know somebody to figure it out” (TC 32, 27).

- *A need for expansion of services for the community (domestic violence support, childcare, LGBTQ+ support, housing, hospice, crisis support, disability) was identified:*

There’s not after-school options” (TB 25, 13). “There is a great need for domestic violence services, sexual assault services, education in those areas as well” (TC 3, 8).

- *There is concern about the ability to staff new facilities:*

It was once just brain drain, but now it’s like able-bodied drain [away from] rural communities, become just increasingly elderly. And there’s... There’s no one to provide these resources. Or provide the labor for them, I should say” (TC 29, 16).

4.1.3 Community members expressed a need for leadership to support connection and want to see the impact of their contributions as a way of experiencing leadership. Researchers have noted a strong desire for unity among various segments of the community. Participants have expressed the need for effective leadership that can drive residential town development, expand park systems, and establish a cohesive community identity for people to rally around. Within this theme, the following subthemes were identified:

- *A need for connection between individuals, between facilities and parks, and between individuals and facilities/parks was identified. A sense of community ownership through contribution was identified as a driver of buy-in:*

And just for example, the library is hoping to get new doors that have the push button for handicapped folks, and I’m like, ‘Oh, these doors aren’t that bad.’ And then I open them with that in mind. And it’s like, ‘yeah, they are’, it’s hard to get in the library, even though it’s on the same level. And if you try to get someone in a wheelchair to the churches, for example, it’s like, yeah, they’ve got a ramp, but there’s gravel at the bottom or whatever, and it’s just, it’s difficult (TD 13, 2).

- *The participants expressed valuing being together and having meaningful in-person interactions:*

So, she does. The kids do fiddle camp and all that. She works at the co-op down here. She put the Boy Scouts back together. Wow. Yeah, she's a force. She does it all. She really does. And. And she. And she loves it. She loves to be in the community. She loves to get out and do all that stuff. Which is really good. And like I said, she probably she probably knows three times the people I do, and I get to interact with them every day (TB 10, 10).

4.1.4 A sense of isolation and need for belonging weaves through the participants' stories. The prevailing theme highlights feelings of solitude, seclusion, and pressure expressed by respondents in various research settings, including focus groups and online surveys. Participants pointed out the town's remote location, emphasizing its geographical isolation with hills on either side of the county serving as natural barriers to neighboring communities. Moreover, they discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has influenced the dynamics of relationships within the community. Through these conversations, it became clear that the town is perceived as an outdoor-oriented community that treasures its identity and is committed to preserving its intimate, small-town character and unique outdoor opportunities. Within this theme, the following subthemes were noted:

- *The COVID-19 pandemic impacted community ties and strained relationships:*

And we haven't really recovered from it. Just as humans like people have not let go of that frustration and anger and resentment like it is. It has created. That's been a huge part of this divide because now it's like now we were it's you or me on everything, whether I want to be on your side or not. If I didn't, if you weren't on my side two years ago, then, yeah, I'm not coming to you now (TB 14, 14).

We had people that wouldn't come in the library because they didn't want to wear a mask and they haven't been back (TB 14, 19).

We watched when Covid happened. We watched the school shut down. We watched the shut down and then we watched it when it reopened. There was so much, you know, like everywhere else. There was just so much concern about how they were going to open and how that it was really, really slow to welcome the community back in. I mean, it's 2023 now and parents still can't go in and visit their kids' classrooms like it is. There's been a big like closed off fitness, I think, of the school. In terms of us feeling welcome. There aren't very many. I mean, they just got prom back a year ago. You know, it took them a while to let those things happen and to feel safe about doing it again, I guess (TB 13, 12).

- *The geographical and environmental location of [the town] contributes to and mirrors social isolation, leading to a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion—“winter is hard”, “valley living”, “disconnected trail and sidewalk system:”*

And you know the hill between [this county] and [the next county]? ...It makes a huge barrier psychologically. People are like, ‘Oh, I don't want to go to the [the next county].’ It's like there's a barbed wire fence up there” (TD 4, 23).

I think we're geographically isolated. You can't get to this town without going over a mountain pass (TD 5, 9).

And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired, and everyone is burnt out. And so our apathy right now is strong and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to. Stick it out. And I think it exists (TB 33, 8).

- *The perpetuation of invisibility and stigma is a barrier to receiving help:*

And I hope that we can find a way to reduce the stigma. And be able to be proud of who we are, no matter who we are” (TC 25, 19).

It's very isolating. I moved here 18 months ago, and I will tell you, people would physically leave a room when I would walk in at my job when I started. So, I've managed because I can. But I think it would be one of the things that I think is frustrating and even a challenge is just even connecting community (TC 13, 5).

- *The need to hold on to the vision of a small outdoor Montana community where one belongs, socializes, and has a good time was identified:*

But anyway, I just think that a sense of value, a sense of worth is part of what contributes to healthy outlook and less loneliness and less paranoia and all those things” (TG 2, 33).

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>1. The community experiences tensions during its growth, while searching for a needed collective identity.</p>	<p><i>a. There is opposition to change and attachment to how things are.</i></p> <p><i>b. There is tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness.</i></p> <p><i>c. A polarization of viewpoints is present in the community.</i></p> <p><i>d. Participants describe paradoxes within individualism and community-mindedness, describing the current state of the community.</i></p>	<p>“I want a small town. That’s why I moved here” (TE 16, 17).</p> <p>“There are people who’ve lived here a long, long time and like the way it is” (TA 1, 3).</p> <p>“I see in communities like ours kind of a denialism going on ‘cause everything’s changing, but nobody wants it to change. So the infrastructure to support the change never happens” (TD 14, 14).</p> <p>“I would say I’d like to see some of the dirt roads fixed, but as soon as we fix the dirt roads, there’ll be too many people here” (TA 5, 1).</p> <p>“Well, I moved here 17 years ago, and I’m not a real outgoing person by nature, but I found people to be pretty welcoming. With the caveat that if you are new, you better not try to change anything” (TD 5, 7).</p> <p>“There’s like a bitterness, like a frustration of there’s not enough to do or there’s not enough for our kids to do. And so I think with that shift, there’s come some like, momentum to create more things, you know, and I felt the pushback from some people where they’re like, don’t mess with our community. We love it the way it is. But we also have this momentum from these young families who just want they want more, more opportunity, more things” (TB 11, 11).</p> <p>“I think part of the issue when somebody moves into town, nobody trusts them because they don’t know them. Stranger danger. Yeah. I mean, it’s just a fact. It’s but once they warm up to the person, then it’s fantastic. So it’s finding that balance of the right individual, like you said, whether they already live here and they become educated on all the resources or they’re from here, they leave, they come back” (TC 9, 10).</p> <p>“I love the community here, everybody. I won’t say everybody, but we have, you know, everybody when you know they need to everybody gets together. You know, like I said, when your neighbors get snowed in, those that have the equipment to plow people’s driveways and things like that, they do. They go out and help and they make sure that everybody’s, you know, taken care of..” (TB 8, 14).</p> <p>“I would say that’s a good description of this community. Disjointed” (TA 21, 10).</p>	<p>1. Fear of change and attachment to how things are.</p> <p>Tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness. Polarization through this attitude</p> <p>2. Community growth means the change in culture</p> <p>3. Social mirroring of geographical isolation → in Theme D</p> <p>4. Mixed feelings</p> <p>5. Individualism vs community-mindedness</p> <p>6. Pros and cons of living in a rural area</p> <p>Missing: polarization (7)</p>

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>2. Gaps in social safety and community services drive the identification of community needs (community services, facilities, centralized information system).</p>	<p><i>a. A need for a facility large and versatile enough for connection and community events (parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information) was identified.</i></p> <p><i>b. Space for a healthy outlet (pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park) to meet social needs was identified.</i></p> <p><i>c. A position is needed for a resource manager or coordinator to serve as a connection to resources.</i></p> <p><i>d. A need for expansion of services for the community (domestic violence support, childcare, LGBTQ+ support, housing, hospice, crisis support, disability) was identified.</i></p> <p><i>e. There is concern about the ability to staff new facilities.</i></p>	<p>“And the school has, you know, a big gym and a big cafeteria, but they're busy all the time. They can't do community events. They can't. They're just busy. And so where else do you go? To the basement of the Catholic Church that might hold 100? The Assembly of God Church probably holds 70 round tables. The Baptist church out there on the highway probably holds 50, but there's no place that would hold, say, 200 people. And this is a population of I'm guessing we're up to 2500 now. So if somebody has a big funeral or a big wedding or something, there's no place” (TA 7, 13).</p> <p>“The state does a prevention needs assessment. And this is touched my heart since the first time I read it six years ago. But one of the largest risk factors for youth and substance abuse, violence, suicide, depression and overall poor mental health is low neighborhood attachment or low community attachment” TC (23, 17).</p> <p>“I would agree that the advocacy having someone to disseminate that knowledge of how to get what you need would be amazing” (TC 8, 22).</p> <p>“It's like we have these little pockets of interesting programs, but you really got to know somebody to figure it out” (TC 32, 27).</p> <p>“There's not after-school options” (TB 25, 13).</p> <p>“There is a great need for domestic violence services, sexual assault services, education in those areas as well” (TC 3, 8).</p> <p>“It was once just brain drain, but now it's like able-bodied drain [away from] rural communities, become just increasingly elderly. And there's. There's no one to provide these resources. Or provide the labor for them, I should say” (TC 29, 16).</p>	<p>1. Facility large enough for connection and community events that would be versatile (parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information)</p> <p>2. Space for healthy social outlet (pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park) that would be an alternative to bars to meet social needs.</p> <p>3. A position of a resource manager and coordinator (a “new Sue”) to serve as a connection hub for outside resources to meet community's needs.</p> <p>4. Needed expansion of services for the community: DV, Childcare, LGBTQ+ housing, hospice, crisis support, disability.</p>

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>3. Community members expressed a need for leadership to support connection and want to see the impact of their contributions.</p>	<p><i>a. A need for connection between individuals, between facilities and parks, and between individuals and facilities/parks was identified. A sense of community ownership through contribution was identified as a driver of buy-in.</i></p>	<p>“And just for example, the library is hoping to get new doors that have the push button for handicapped folks, and I’m like, “Oh, these doors aren’t that bad.” And then I open them with that in mind. And it’s like, “yeah, they are,” it’s hard to get in the library, even though it’s on the same level. And if you try to get someone in a wheelchair to the churches, for example, it’s like, yeah, they’ve got a ramp, but there’s gravel at the bottom or whatever, and it’s just, it’s difficult” (TD 13, 2).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accessibility to resources/connection 2. Human lending library 3. Parks, social public spaces 4. Healing happens in present process 5. Leadership in community as hope for unification 6. Impact of environment on community cohesion
	<p><i>b. The experience of strong community leadership in the past fuels the yearning and need for the next generation of leaders.</i></p>	<p>“It feels like we’re bumping onto this like engagement piece. It seems like there’s like an initiative, something happens, volunteers kind of get engaged, and then either the lack of structure or lack of organization or some kind of leadership that makes that effort fizzle out over time, in short time, and then it just disappears” (TD 8, 18).</p>	
	<p><i>c. The participants expressed valuing being together and having meaningful in-person interactions.</i></p>	<p>“So she does. The kids do fiddle camp and all that. She works at the co-op down here. She put the Boy Scouts back together. Wow. Yeah, she’s a force. She does it all. She really does. And. And she. And she loves it. She loves to be in the community. She loves to get out and do all that stuff. Which is really good. And like I said, she probably she probably knows three times the people I do, and I get to interact with them every day” (TB 10, 10).</p>	
<p>4. A sense of isolation and need for belonging weaves through the participants’ stories.</p>	<p><i>a. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted community ties and strained relationships.</i></p>	<p>“And we haven’t really recovered from it. Just as humans like people have not let go of that frustration and anger and resentment like it is. It has created. That’s been a huge part of this divide because now it’s like now we were it’s you or me on everything, whether I want to be on your side or not. If I didn’t, if you weren’t on my side two years ago, then, yeah, I’m not coming to you now” (TB 14, 14).</p> <p>“We had people that wouldn’t come in the library because they didn’t want to wear a mask and they haven’t been back” (TB 14, 19).</p> <p>“We watched when Covid happened. We watched the school shut down. We watched the shut down and then we watched it when it reopened. There was so much, you know, like everywhere else. There was just so much concern about how</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Covid wounds 2. Resistance to change and a growing town (Already under theme A.) 3. “My bootstraps are broken” 4. Impact of environment on community cohesion (*winter is hard)

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
		<p>they were going to open and how that it was really, really slow to welcome the community back in. I mean, it's 2023 now and parents still can't go in and visit their kids' classrooms like it is. There's been a big like closed off fitness, I think, of the school. In terms of us feeling welcome. There aren't very many. I mean, they just got prom back a year ago. You know, it took them a while to let those things happen and to feel safe about doing it again, I guess" (TB 13, 12).</p>	<p>5. Sportsman Sign 6. Barriers/stigma around seeking help 7. Perpetuation of invisibility and stigma 8. Facebook</p>
<p><i>b. The geographical and environmental location of Studied town contributes to and mirrors social isolation, leading to a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion. ("Winter is hard," "valley living," "disconnected trail and sidewalk system")</i></p>	<p>"And you know the hill between [redacted] A Valley and [redacted] B Valley? ...It makes a huge barrier psychologically. People are like, 'Oh, I don't want to go to the B Valley.' It's like there's a barbed wire fence up there" (TD 4, 23).</p> <p>"I think we're geographically isolated. You can't get to Studied town without going over a mountain pass" (TD 5, 9). "And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired, and everyone is burnt out. And so our apathy right now is strong and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to. Stick it out. And I think it exists" (TB 33, 8).</p>		
<p><i>c. The perpetuation of invisibility and stigma is a barrier to receiving help.</i></p>	<p>"And I hope that we can find a way to reduce the stigma. And be able to be proud of who we are, no matter who we are" (TC 25, 19).</p> <p>"It's very isolating. I moved here 18 months ago and I will tell you, people would physically leave a room when I would walk in at my job when I started. So I've managed because I can. But I think it would be one of the things that I think is frustrating and even a challenge is just even connecting community" (TC 13, 5).</p>		
<p><i>d. The need to hold on to the vision of a small outdoor Montana community where one belongs, socializes, and has a good time was identified.</i></p>	<p>"But anyway, I just think that a sense of value, a sense of worth is part of what contributes to healthy outlook and less loneliness and less paranoia and all those things" (TG 2, 33).</p>		

5.0 Discussion

Denzin et al. (2008) have discussed how qualitative research has historically been intertwined with colonial knowledge, power, and truth. Researchers often positioned themselves as outsiders and asserted their superiority over the studied population. They tended to impose their interpretations of findings without much regard for the best interests of the study's subjects. In this study, the research team adopted a constructivist approach (Morrow, 2005) and focused on reshaping the power dynamic between researchers and the community under study. To break away from colonial traditions, they (a) involved community representatives as consultants and team members; (b) empowered the community by allowing them to share their experiences, and formulated findings based on their voices; and (c) prioritized the best interests of the town residents throughout the study.

The town's remarkable expansion evoked strong emotions among community residents. In interviews, they expressed the belief that this growth necessitated a cultural shift beyond the community's control, or—in different words—having its own momentum within the community. A notable theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the contradiction between acknowledging unmet needs within the community and resisting change. Participants indirectly addressed the conflict between their desire for independence and self-sufficiency and their need for social interaction. The need for connection extended beyond interpersonal relationships to include the desire for physical connections through sidewalks and trails and access to services and resources through centralized advocates. Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness and fatigue stemming from the tensions within the community, revealing a sense of being unable to surmount their challenges. One participant encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired and everyone is burnt out. And so, our apathy right now is strong, and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're... it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to stick it out. And I think it exists. (TB 34, 4).

The results of the previous quantitative needs assessments correspond with the identified needs of our study participants. They underscore the importance of enhancing services in multiple areas, including (a) mental health, (b) domestic violence support, (c) childcare, (d) parental assistance, (e) LGBTQ+ education and support, (f) event facilities, (g) centralized resource information dissemination, and (h) indoor recreational amenities.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, we gained valuable insights into past experiences addressing these needs, current barriers, and the requirements for meaningful

community engagement. Researchers have used such methods with success (Bennett-Levy et al., 2021; De Weger et al., 2020). Members of the focus groups expressed a shared and ongoing desire to actively engage with the town's community. However, they also identified areas within the community that might hinder connection and cohesion, reflecting a perceived barrier to progress. One participant aptly articulated this challenge.

...then people started disagreeing about how it could be done. It is kind of like what [another participant's name] talked about with the pool. You know, it was a board that started out—and it started out small—but then people kept bringing these... 'big ideas.' And then it got bigger and then it got bigger and then it got bigger and then it...disbanded. Let's do something! Start, and then we'll see what happens from there (TC 32, 5).

The anecdotes shared by participants highlighted two potential strategies for managing the town's rapid growth and changing community needs. A crucial recommendation was the necessity for strong, proactive leadership to address internal disconnection within the community. Residents expressed a desire for leaders who would uphold the community's values and identity while fostering connections among members and facilitating access to resources, facilities, and parks. It was repeatedly emphasized that effective leadership would provide structure and organization to keep community members engaged. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of instilling a sense of individual ownership of the community to overcome barriers to change. They emphasized the significance of community members' contributions in fostering a sense of ownership and active engagement. The town's residents are eager to actively participate in shaping the community's future and witnessing the impact of those changes.

The participants expressed their frustrations, differences, and letdowns, but they did so together as a community. The residents came together to share their rural life experiences and to envision a positive future. They dedicated time from their schedules to gather at the community library, bravely opening up to outsiders in order to support their community. The participants found that being in the group, sharing their knowledge and resources, was rejuvenating and in line with the community's requirements.

5.1 Limitations

In line with the qualitative nature of this research, it is important to recognize the limitations associated with subjectively interpreting the stories of participants. The researchers have made a transparent effort to present their experiences and biases that could influence the study results. To ensure a balanced perspective, the research team comprised both non-residents and residents of this town. It is acknowledged that the focus groups and survey participants may not have fully represented the community, as those who participated may have been especially interested and engaged in seeking change within the community to meet evolving needs. The demographic analysis revealed that there were no disclosed non-binary individuals who participated in the study. Additionally, there was a lack of representation from individuals aged 18–24 and 55–64, suggesting that the needs of these populations may not have been fully captured. Furthermore, there was a clear overrepresentation of female respondents, prompting consideration about the perspectives that could have been provided by more male participants.

6.0 Conclusions

Our research team presented the study results at the county's Mental Health Advisory Council, followed by a public evening meeting at the county's public library on March 4, 2024. The themes of tension and transition in the town's identity deeply resonated with participants at both meetings. Throughout our study, we observed the community's pride, investment, hope, and struggle to reach a consensus on its priorities. Themes of change and tension accompanied the town's growth, alongside geographical, physical, and emotional isolation, and the need for more resources, particularly a community gathering space.

We also observed a paradox: The immobilization alongside a sense of momentum in a new effort, underpinned by unwavering hope in the success of the current attempt to build a community center. The emergence of rapid leadership in the community, addressing the diverse needs of the town's demographics, signifies another crucial need for the town. The new energy and financial means invested in this community imply that the establishment of a community center is a tangible possibility.

Conducting this QCNA has proved to be a community intervention in and of itself (Bennett-Levy et al., 2021; De Weger et al., 2020; Denzin et al., 2008), and this was no exception. Study participants expressed a strong appreciation for the community forum created by the research process and demonstrated a willingness to engage in defining leadership needs for this town. Similarly, stakeholders who consumed the results of this study acknowledged the value of the findings in shaping actionable goals and fostering collaboration. The process of engaging with participants and stakeholders highlights how qualitative methodologies can serve not only as tools for understanding but also as catalysts for community engagement and development.

This project also underscored the importance of QCNA as an educational opportunity for graduate counseling students (Burkhalter et al., 2012; Skehan et al., 2024). Involving students in this study emphasized their potential roles as leaders and advocates within the communities they serve. By participating in this QCNA, students experienced firsthand the intersection of research, leadership, and community advocacy, reinforcing their professional development as counselors equipped to facilitate change.

Our primary recommendation is for the town to invest in creating a master plan in partnership with all community representatives. This would provide a roadmap for addressing the town's evolving needs while fostering a sense of shared purpose. Our secondary recommendation is for the county's leadership to invest in effective communication strategies that empower the resilient and independent community to achieve common goals. Given the unique rural and remote character of the county, it is essential to address the communication challenges specific to rural areas and ensure that information reaches all residents while respecting the community's collective culture and diverse viewpoints.

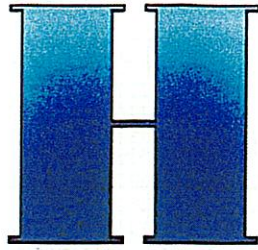
Lastly, we recommend conducting a longitudinal design study to track the transformation and growth of this rural community. Long-term engagement through listening sessions could provide valuable insights, with results shared with the community as they were in this study. Additionally, further research is needed to better understand the needs of rapidly growing rural communities. Similar studies replicated in other rural communities in the mountain West would enhance our understanding of the challenges and opportunities these communities face.

Funding Statement

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H O U S E R E N G I N E E R I N G P . C .

2115 DURSTON ROAD, UNIT 11 BOZEMAN, MONTANA 59718
ph. 406-548-7820 email: justin@houserengineering.com

March 5, 2026

TO: Adjacent Property Owners
Lien Holders
Easement Holders
Potentially Affected Water Users
Potentially Affected Property Owner Associations
Review Agencies
Nearby Municipality

FROM: Ennis School District No. 52
PO Box 517
Ennis, Montana 59729

Houser Engineering, P.C.
2115 Durston Road, Unit 11
Bozeman, Montana 59718
Jared: 406-461-5636

RE: Minor Subdivision of Tract 2, McMillian No. 1 Minor

To Whom It May Concern:

This is to notify you that we are preparing a minor subdivision application for review by Madison County. Enclosed for your information is a pre-application packet describing the proposed project.

Please contact Jared Northrup at Houser Engineering P.C. at the address listed above with any questions, comments, or suggestions you may have, within the next 30 days.

Sincerely;

HOUSER ENGINEERING P.C.

Jared Northrup

Enclosures

**Minor Subdivision of the Third Amended Plat of McMillian No.1 Minor Subdivision
Information Letter**

The Minor Subdivision of the Third Amended Plat of McMillian No.1 Minor Subdivision near Ennis proposes subdividing a five acre Tract (Tract 1) from the existing Tract 2. The total *net* acreage from proposed Tract 2 (45.25 acres) and proposed Tract 1 (5.00 acres) will remain the same as existing Tract 2 (50.25 acres).

The landowner of the Tracts and the subdivider of this project is as follows:

Ennis School District No 52
c/o Jared Moretti, Superintendent
223 S. Charles St.
Ennis, MT 59729
Phone: 406-682-4258

The landowner's representative of this project is as follows:

Jared Northrup, Houser Engineering P.C.
2115 Durston Road, Unit 11
Bozeman, Montana 59718
Phone: 406-461-5636

The owner of Tract 2 is interested in creating a five-acre tract with the intention selling the property to fund the school district. The parent parcel is not incorporated into the Town of Ennis. Tract 2 has the existing Ennis Schools bus barn (supported by an onsite well and septic system) and sporting fields; these developments will remain. Proposed Tract 1 will likely be incorporated in the future.

Please reference the following map for further details.

DRAFT

Madison Valley Community Center

Comprehensive Community Input Survey Results (Online + Paper)

Dataset: 87 online responses + 14 paper surveys = 101 total responses (n=101).

Percentages for single-choice questions are calculated out of n=101. For multi-select questions, percentages reflect the share of respondents who selected each option (totals may exceed 100%).

1. How important do you think a shared community gathering space is for Ennis and the Madison Valley?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	66	65.3%
Somewhat important	21	20.8%
Neutral/unsure	12	11.9%
Not very important	2	2.0%
Not at all important	0	0.0%

2. Which age groups do you think would benefit most from a community center? (Select all that apply)

Option	Count	% of respondents
The whole community	90	89.1%
Families	34	33.7%
Adults	35	34.7%
Teens	33	32.7%
School-aged children	32	31.7%
Young children (0-5)	27	26.7%
Seniors	30	29.7%

3. What types of activities would you personally be most likely to use a community center for? (Select up to 3)

Option	Count	% of respondents
Community events / celebrations	79	78.2%
Meetings or civic events	53	52.5%
Classes or workshops	58	57.4%
Fitness / recreation	52	51.5%
Arts, music, or performances	64	63.4%
Emergency shelter / disaster response	35	34.7%
Conferences or trainings	27	26.7%
Youth programming	36	35.6%
Senior programming	28	27.7%
I don't think I would personally use it	2	2.0%

4. Which types of programming do you feel are most important to include? (Select all that apply)

Option	Count	% of respondents
Arts, culture, and music	69	68.3%
Community meetings	54	53.5%
Educational classes	52	51.5%
Private events (weddings, memorials, etc.)	54	53.4%
Fitness or recreation	64	63.4%
Senior activities	53	52.5%
Youth activities	65	64.4%

Teen space / programming	62	61.4%
Health & wellness programs	54	53.5%

5. How important is it that the space be flexible and multipurpose (able to change use depending on need)?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	71	70.3%
Somewhat important	19	18.8%
Neutral/unsure	9	8.9%
Not very important	2	2.0%
Not at all important	0	0.0%

6. How important is it to you that a community center be able to serve as an emergency shelter (for example, during wildfires or severe weather)?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	45	44.6%
Somewhat important	29	28.7%
Neutral/unsure	20	19.8%
Not very important	5	5.0%
Not at all important	2	2.0%

7. How important is it that the space could be used as a reunification center or coordination site during emergencies?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	51	50.5%
Somewhat important	31	30.7%
Neutral/unsure	17	16.8%
Not very important	2	2.0%
Not at all important	1	1.0%

8. Before today, were you aware that multiple locations were evaluated for the community center?

Response	Count	Percent
Yes	36	35.6%
Somewhat	14	13.9%
No	51	50.5%

9. How important is it to you that the site has access to town water and sewer?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	47	46.5%
Somewhat important	18	17.8%
Neutral/unsure	24	23.8%
Not very important	5	5.0%
Not at all important	7	6.9%

10. How do you feel about the community center partnering with the school district if the land is purchased at fair market value?

Response	Count	Percent
Supportive	44	43.6%
Somewhat supportive	22	21.8%
Neutral/need more info	28	27.7%
Concerned	4	4.0%
Not supportive	3	3.0%

11. How important is it to you that this project does not result in new local taxes?

Response	Count	Percent
Very important	29	28.7%
Somewhat important	15	14.9%

Neutral/unsure	34	33.7%
Not very important	14	13.9%
Not at all important	9	8.9%

12. How confident do you currently feel about how this project is being approached?

Response	Count	Percent
Very confident	16	15.8%
Somewhat confident	29	28.7%
Neutral	43	42.6%
Somewhat concerned	9	8.9%
Very concerned	3	3.0%

13. What would help build or increase your trust in this project? (Select all that apply)

Option	Count	% of respondents
Clear communication and updates	89	88.1%
Transparency around funding	86	85.1%
Opportunities for public input	75	74.3%
Clear governance and oversight	59	58.4%
Phased or smaller-scale approach	25	24.8%
Seeing similar projects succeed elsewhere	20	19.8%

14. Overall, how do you feel about continuing to explore a community center for the Madison Valley?

Response	Count	Percent
Supportive	77	76.2%
Open but cautious	20	19.8%
Unsure	4	4.0%
Not supportive	0	0.0%

15. Demographics: Do you currently live:

Response	Count	Percent
In Ennis town limits	35	34.7%
In the greater Madison Valley	57	56.4%
Part-time/seasonal resident	7	6.9%
Other	2	2.0%

Short Answer Survey Summary

This summary highlights themes from the open-ended survey responses and selected quotes that reflect supportive and constructive community feedback.

What do you think is most missing right now when it comes to shared community space in Ennis?

Selected Quotes:

- "Programming for all ages in one space. Need a bigger space than the library conference room (which is wonderful meeting place but quite small)"
- "A gathering place for community members, fitness/recreation/pool the Jackson, WY community center pool has provided huge opportunity for youth and water fitness classes for all ages"
- "a public event space, a mingling opportunity to meet new people through a shared interest (e.g. fitness, a performance, a class/workshop)"
- "A larger space for the community to use for various events and uses"
- "a place for locals to gather, host events, bring income into our community"

- "A large well thought out space for weddings, special events, celebrations as well as everyday use for all ages especially in the winter time."
- "Somewhere to hold events that is set up for year round use. Somewhere to hold dance recitals and graduation parties and Marine Balls and fundraiser dinners. A place for kids to hang out as well."
- "A space to go and casually connect yourself within the community without having to plan or spend money. A good coffee shop where people can connect, activities or sports for kids and families to do in the winter would be nice without having to go to Bozeman. Building community in a rural town is possible but requires hard work. A community center would alleviate some of that hard work and provide opportunities for social connection and belonging."
- "There is not an uplifting, grand space for gatherings of the community that captures the spirit of a collective purpose and interests. Such a space should be the focal point of the facility and should be a multi-use space to allow myriad activities/events to unfold within it."
- "A place for the talent in the valley to exhibit their work, or perform. A place for large groups to gather for community information, panels, speeches."
- "An art room would be fun. Pottery, sculpture area, some classes that go along with all kinds of disciplines of art. With some kind of open art studio time. Maybe some gardening areas outside and an indoor greenhouse where the plants could be started. Could have yoga classes in the gardens during summertime or book clubs could meet there. Lots of art to decorate the interior. Keep it inspiring."
- "Space to hold more people than the fire hall or library community room and space for indoor fitness activities that is not the school."
- "Somewhere to gather that isn't a bar or the senior center. I would personally like an indoor sport court with community hours."

Are there any programs or uses you feel strongly that should or should not be included?

Selected Quotes:

- "Youth after school activities, activities for seniors, community and mental health support, family fun programs should all be included."
- "I think a fun, safe space for teens would be most important. While I wouldn't prioritize private events, it would be a good source of income for the center."
- "Nothing political ... This community has too much division as it is."
- "Not fishing or hunting. Those programs are everywhere. We need options for kids teens, parents, retirees and seniors for fun and learning and building community."
- "Inclusive in nature, music programs, continuing education. Ideally not religious or political programs."

Are there specific emergency or safety needs you think the community should be planning for?

Selected Quotes:

- “The community has done a great job in the past for planning for emergency spaces, including if the emergency were community wide or one family. This space would enhance what is already done.”
- “Wildfire, flooding, earthquakes, major winter and summer storm events”
- “I feel like we are pretty prepared for weather here, and we also have the school as a potential option if the need arose under very unique circumstances. So to me, this part is not as important but could certainly be a secondary use.”
- “Fire coordination, earthquake disasters, temporary housing for emergency workers in these situations... or for those needing immediate shelter if affected by these events.”
- “Potential fire evacuation for those that need temporary shelter or centralized pickup/drop off for food and water, etc.”

What questions or concerns do you have about the proposed location or partnerships?

Selected Quotes:

- “This is a great idea and I am very excited about the future.”
- “I would hope it would focus on the whole community”
- “My concern is lighting at night and using what we can to preserve a night sky so we can see the stars. Of course that doesn’t count when events are at night but afterwards I’d like night sky preserved”
- “Great location for a multi purpose Community Center. Partnering with the school district would be a good partnership for both entities.”
- “I believe the location needs to be close to or in town so our youth have easy access to it. And needs plenty of parking.”
- “Access. Can school age children walk to it safely if there will be activities there for them. Parking for large events.”

What would you need to see or know to feel more comfortable with this project?

Selected Quotes:

- “While I don’t mind giving my money back to my community, a lot of people don’t want higher taxes and I don’t blame them. I think self-funding (eventually) community center would be ideal. So that it generates income for its own maintenance and staffing etc. SO that community events and classes and teen programs can be very cheap, but ideally free.”
- “Publicly accessible plans and a diverse board of people with previous experience across fundraising, construction, community leadership, education to make sure all aspects are considered”

- “At least the possibility of a phased project that might be more currently affordable instead of the “all or nothing” approach.”
- “Knowing the proposed size, cost and funding sources would be most important to me.”
- “Just sharing information is helpful, not interested in the comparison to other cities Ennis is different and it should be personalized to meet our community needs.”

Is there anything else you would like the Board to know as we move forward?

Selected Quotes:

- “This is a much needed endeavor for the community and I am excited to see it come to life!”
- “Phases would create community buy in as well as very transparent financials and transparent board members. Great that you reached out to Winnett, maybe, if needed, reach out to folks in Ennis who may have skills to offer that would help move this forward.”
- “Nope! Just excited to see the project proceed & another amenity for our community come to life.”
- “Get people excited. Put yourself out there. Participate in local events. Champion your dream. Good luck. Rooting for this.”
- “This can have a major positive impact for generations. Thinking long term is key. This plan needs to be executed with excellence. If this works out we can continue to build and grow the community with trust knowing it’ll get done correctly. Having a great attitude and being open minded will only help lead this project to greater success. Again, generational impact. This has the potential to develop kids and youth into being better versions of themselves. I am very eager to see this information compiled and to see the next steps of this amazing project.”
- “Keep the public informed. Seek advice from other communities that have successfully created a multi-purpose community center.”
- “Transparency is vital, and all concerned parties involved in a location must be informed, especially members of an organization if the site is being considered.”
- “Excited to see/hear everyone’s ideas! And would love to help out in any way too!”

Listening Session Comment Box Highlights

- "Will there be a community fitness center?"
- "The community center does need a kitchen."
- "The survey questions about possible uses do not align with the layout of the building. I was excited about the possibility and disheartened by the visual plan."
- "Create a plan that shows the community actual quality uses - i.e., a teaching kitchen, pool, and multiple usable spaces."
- "The current layout looks very limited for use - only one large space (concerts?) and one large meeting room - which makes it difficult to believe it will actually be useful for workshops, classes, recreation, or other important concepts."
- "I hope a governance approach is developed and viable."
- "I hope a financial feasibility study is done to assess operating costs and revenues."
- "I would love to be involved and support in any way I can!"