

## Please, LUP, Grant Creek Residents Are Concerned Over Proposal to Overbuild on Expo Parkway

We returned to our native state after four decades away in 2019, settling in Missoula's Grant Creek. We'd lived with high traffic snarls for years and I was struck by the absence of congestion in our neck of the woods as we drove past Starbucks and into the city. That changed as new Expo Parkway units were occupied. Before that, maybe one in 30 trips down Grant Creek met unsafe entry by cars turning right off Expo Parkway onto Grant Creek, those failing to stop or stealing the right of way and merging forcibly. Today, ten in twenty of our trips past Expo encounter such unlawful driving. It can't help that the trees and shrubs on that street aren't trimmed back and cars must boldly inch forward to see. Even with so few units yet completed, that intersection already raises risks systemically, a trend most likely to grow unabated. Perhaps a light and a traffic camera may be prescribed for that intersection, which by present encounter could generate high revenues for Missoula from careless drivers ignoring laws.

But there's a greater risk. When we bought, I had concerns about fire danger. Homes in Grant Creek aren't just boxed in, we're surrounded by dry tinder by mid-summer - with one road in, one road out. Suppose a rezone of  $\approx 1,195$  new units is granted. Suppose there are 1.25 cars for each Expo resident, a count of 1,500 incremental cars using the intersection of Expo at Grant Creek Road. That's 1,500 more vehicles which don't use it now. Say that in a few years, early risers in Grant Creek wake one Saturday morning to smoke from a grass fire ignited just east of Burns Place. It grows steadily, lapping homes off Gleneagle, moving west to Grant Creek Road. Thankfully it's not a fast wildfire. It only doubles in size every three minutes (fast ones double every 30 seconds.) At first detection it has the footprint of a large garage - some 400 square feet. ...About 20 minutes later, it's like the size of a football field. Firetrucks arrive, grabbing attentions of sleepy residents ...who jump into preparedness mode. At 40 minutes past ignition, the fire is almost  $\frac{1}{4}$  square mile. Smoke invades. Even as a slow growing fire, it is now only a mile from the new development on Expo, as the crow flies. Evacuation is ordered, up and down Grant Creek, including Expo. There are clear proximate perils; but if the fire isn't contained those living deep north on Grant Creek lose easy access. So they must leave quickly too. Such a plot doesn't even require hyperbole. Given our climate trends, this very narrative falls in the realm of increasing likelihood.

Most of the neighborhood still sleeps. Residents hang on doors shouting that everyone must get out of Grant Creek NOW, including the 1200 new households (upon Expo's rezoning). Those families scurry too over the next 20 minutes and gather their pets and their children and priceless treasures and pile into their cars, hoping to exit before fire conditions grow alarmingly worse. Most of us have a vague sense of how very fast that can occur. But what few realize is that in those breathless 20 minutes, the slow growing fire has consumed a full square mile. The fire danger spikes. All of us need to get out.

Cars on the south side of that traffic bottleneck, nearest I-90 have the best chance of safely evacuating. If rezoning for 1200 new units on Expo Parkway is granted to the developer by Missoula's LUP, then, under conservative assumptions, an evacuation of Grant Creek would need that many hundreds of cars would have to evacuate before our cars filled with precious cargo from the more northern reaches of Grant Creek get our chance. It's similar to deboarding a plane. Those in the front exit before those in back have access. So here. Add a fire in the back of the plane, those last to exit are in high danger as those in the front force their way into the aisle. This risk is compounded by the bottleneck terrain just south of where Prospect Drive connects, where the road narrows, wedged in on one side by the hill, the other by the Creek. We living deeper north suffer a more confined access to exiting. It's unfortunate, since those under greatest risk from the fire are exactly families living in the far reaches of Grant Creek.

If Expo residents are as aggressive in entering Grant Creek Road as now, with no sense of urgency, why wouldn't they push harder in a wild fire? By virtue of their positioning, they could merely snatch the right of way as they do now, taking first priority and leaving the rest of us crammed in on the deeper end of Grant Creek road, subject to smoke and flames. Say the day of the fire, only 900 cars exit from Expo "ASAP" over that first hour of fire. Only 900. It's instant backup until about one car of those 900 can merge into heavy traffic on Grant Creek about every 6 seconds. That's ten cars a minute, 600 cars an hour, some 90 minutes to clear all the new anxious residents who've since moved to Expo Parkway. It's clearing that wasn't required three years ago, a delay not asked from the rest of us northward. Until

that clearing is achieved, those of us up Grant Creek are de facto "up the creek," either stalled in place ...or inching forward slowly. One road. One way to exit. I am versed in traffic jams. Each time you sit in place for what seems forever, engine idling, you marvel freshly, "How can this happen? Really, how can this traffic not move?" But it does play like that. ...Now add a growing inferno behind you.


We live in the Prospect community along with almost 200 other households. We must exit by making a right turn onto Grant Creek Road, a yield. That is a 2nd disastrous bottle neck for those of us in that subdivision; a family development built many decades ago, carefully planned, under different zoning laws which assured us of safety. Yet, rezoning Expo Parkway may violate that long-standing promise.


Suppose LUP grants 1100+ more new residents despite it's use of one exit, Grant Creek Road. Suppose that exiting is more orderly and the evacuation of our new neighbors on Expo only adds 45 minutes to the exit time for those of us farther north. Or even just 20 minutes more. What's twenty minutes to the cars stuck up Grant Creek waiting to flee as flames encroach? An eternity. Now add the fret that Grant Creek Road flows into Reserve Street, one of the most congested in the state. At some point, flow could become nigh paralyzed. Under such constraints, families still idling in their vehicles up Grant Creek panic and abandon cars - which only accelerates the crisis. They panic and drive into oncoming lanes too, which only makes it very likely that crews racing in to fight the uncontained fire can't gain quick access. Under those terms, a small fire, has the progressive capacity to ignite into a true catastrophe.

If LUP pins us down with excess development, our ruling body thusly fails that duty to our safety. I get that fire may be a rare event. Yet if it strikes once, if just one life is lost due to this new congestion, it's a travesty. If a tenth of us lose our homes, that's a heart break. Humans don't envision such worst case scenarios until they're in the middle of them. But it is the job of those granting exceptions to building zones to treat such exigencies with gravity, and when there is a request to grow congestion in an area by 190%! MORE it warrants every resistance. It's also 2.4 times MORE than first granted, all accessing Grant Creek Road for egress. Like many citizens of Missoula, Friends of Grant Creek (FGC) appreciates that Missoula has an affordable housing problem. FGC accepts the 495 unit addition initially granted and all the increased traffic risks which have and will continue to result. It holds a pro-cautious stance, not anti-development. That initial 495 residence rezoning alone grows the count of residences in Grant Creek by 80%, almost doubling it. If LUP grants the new petition for 1100+, the growth count of new homes is just shy of 200%. It not only almost triples the home count using Grant Creek Road, but about 2/3rds of those would be located off Expo Parkway. All those new residences would be added at that acute bottleneck ...leaving the rest of us residents in far more danger if such a fire crisis ever strikes.

Currently, models, such as the First Street Wildfire Model grades regions for fire risk, and will assign each home a fire risk rating such as done for flood risk. Missoula's risk is already elevated. Those of us living here know the concerns of a fire over July and August. That risk is expected to climb over the decades. Hence, Missoula zoning authorities must consider that our present conditions are statistically "best likelihood," and rule with regard to a trend for increased fire risk. If severe traffic congestion from extreme zoning then compounds that higher fire risk, homeowners in Grant Creek may also face a valuation hit. When we bought, I gauged the risk of a wildfire, and concluded it was yet manageable. But the new proposal before LUP changes that simply because it introduces acutely higher congestion.

We much appreciate you giving us time to speak our grievances and worries in this rezoning matter.

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