

Comments on Grants Creek Expo Rezone

I am not a resident of Grant Creek but as someone who has significant experience heading up community development and affordable efforts in our community, I have some concerns about this particular project especially its significance to other processes and ultimately public input into the decision-making process.

Issues with Adequate and Meaningful Public and Neighborhood Participation in decision-making

The history of our public participation over the last 30 years has evolved just as our understanding of it. But the basic pillars of public participation has not changed. Over 20 years ago now, I was part of a dedicated group of people at the City-County that was responsible for bringing a better understanding of what that meant for local government decision making and making it part of our reality. Previously I worked as a Community Development Specialist for the state where part of my responsibilities involved traveling around the state teaching some of these concepts to small local communities as part of improving their overall community development efforts. The core values of Public Participation according to the International Association of Public Participation include:

Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

In Missoula, almost every person and official involved with the public went through this training to understand why and how to engage in meaningful public participation and engagement. Unfortunately, now years later, some of that knowledge appears to be lost or forgotten or maybe was never understood in the first place. Either the local staff are no longer fully informed about or educated on these processes or they've been warned that if they do not support a development request, then they and their colleagues will be sued. As a result, at every opportunity for public input, resident concerns are not adequately addressed. In fact, residents are asked to provide comments but that is the end of it. No discussion with staff or council and no attempt to discuss or address to work through their concerns. This puts residents in a situation where public and often neighborhood concerns are bypassed or are seen as secondary to a developer. Neighbors are legitimate stakeholders as they live, work, and have made significant investments in their neighborhoods and their own property. They must be recognized as such. Regarding this proposal, it appears that many of the neighborhood concerns have not been adequately addressed despite their very real legitimacy while staff wholeheartedly backed this rezone request over such concerns.

Adequate public participation in all matters involving community development means that both the public and the neighborhood is sincerely involved in providing input into decisions not just for the purpose of checking off a box on a checklist for a hearing on the project, zoning or subdivision. Having one public meeting or sending public notices of a project is not adequate public input. Public officials and developers must find other ways to meaningfully engage the public in two way or more dialogues because it affects THEIR community, THEIR neighborhoods, and THEIR properties. Again, our community officials must recognize that neighbors and neighborhoods are legitimate and helpful stakeholders. Giving someone just 3 minutes for public comment with zero dialogue, is demeaning for the public and results in loss of public trust and, ultimately, deters meaningful and important input. Both staff and Council must do better at finding different ways to listen to and address neighborhood concerns. Proper planning and community development recognizes that all neighborhoods have unique characteristics, assets, and limitations and these must be considered. Really listening to neighbors and address their concerns ultimately builds public trust and results in better and more adequately designed projects that are responsive to neighborhood needs as well as overall community needs. Those in the community commenting on this project who are not living in a neighborhood most impacted by a project, including some local representatives, have called these neighbors NIMBY for taking part in a public process and expressing their legitimate concerns about this project. That behavior just continues to beat down both free speech and public trust. Everyone's voice matters.

For this particular project, the concerns of neighborhood residents regardless of what they have been, have been diminished and ignored in favor of just the developer's requests. The residents have already clearly demonstrated that they are not against all development of this project (The existing zoning of the gravel pit allows 495 dwelling units in a mix of apartments and single-80% PERCENT). Grant Creek residents have come out in support of this existing zoning. But, again, the neighbors have pointed out legitimate concerns that should result in

limiting the number of units in this rezone request or denying the request for more and less diverse units.

Housing Development at all costs. This project become an example of “housing development at all costs.” It appears that most of the community, our public officials, and staff have embraced this concept. Yet most planners and community development specialists know that community Development is a comprehensive process that evaluates all community needs and addresses them as part of a larger process. Our community cannot support housing if we don’t, at the same time, adequately identify and address other equally important needs that support and make affordable housing even possible including infrastructure and economic development. Comprehensive Plans, Growth policies, community Needs Assessments, Transportation plans, neighborhood plans all were developed to provide necessary insight into those needs. In this particular request, the future adequacy of the transportation and other infrastructure and its associated costs (expansion of wastewater capacity, transportation, water, etc) is diminished as ‘less’ important or secondary. Ignoring or putting off these critical issues result in the entire community eventually paying for that lack of foresight. When I see comments from the public such as “the city can provide the infrastructure to the project,” it ignores capacity issues, the ability to expand basic infrastructure and how and if these improvements or necessary future expansions will receive adequate funding. These Infrastructure needs are not adequately discussed or addressed in this proposal and because of state law, the developer cannot be officially asked for anything in return like suitable transportation build out connections. Yet as a community we need to know and understand these impacts on all projects and how they affect our ability- both financially and practically - to address these other important related needs.

Second, while the public would like to believe that expansion of housing- all housing – will provide much needed housing, there is zero guarantee or likelihood that this or any for profit development will result in actual affordable housing or housing that meets our actual community needs. While increasing housing stock like this does just that, developing units that are priced well above any national affordability standards, does little to meet those needs. My experience in over 11 years at the City and County and at the state working on affordable housing has taught me that only nonprofit affordable housing developers have the organizational and institutional capacity to ensure that residents can remain in their homes and that affordable housing units remain truly affordable. Perhaps that is why most federal grant programs for affordable housing require that nonprofit housing developers are involved in developing and in managing such projects and that they have systems in place to ensure affordability and habitability.

Population Increase and Emergency Response Planning in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). This project, like others in the WUI, directly impact the ability of emergency responders to respond to wildfire risks and other emergencies in the Grant Creek corridor. Other areas including the rattlesnake and Miller Creek areas face similar concerns. Other commentators for this project including the Friends of Grant Creek and qualified forest professionals have provided evidence and concern over that reality. It continues to be an ongoing problem for all

areas in the WUI and this project is a wake up call that we can no longer ignore these concerns, especially because of the dire climate crisis realities. While the County has undertaken some planning for mitigating the risks to people and structures in the Wildland Urban Interface or WUI, there appears to be a lack of planning efforts that demonstrate coordinated City-County efforts to actually prepare and involve the public in specific wildfire response scenarios. Nor have we seen any efforts or discussion of limiting housing development in the WUI because of extreme wildfire risks.

The Emergency response document provided by Fire logistics is also wholly inadequate in addressing neighborhood wildfire response concerns. It provides no evidence of how the neighborhood or community would respond to evacuations, little evidence of public input, and it lacks the necessary details to show that this is little more than a PR effort. As just one example, this document provides inadequate solutions such as a one way out of Grant Creek which ignores the necessity of responders need to travel up the corridor. While we cannot predict the behavior of all fire activity, we can certainly provide better plans for responding to different scenarios that involves local residents in planning, scenarios and drills.

Adequate comprehensive City-County emergency response planning efforts must include all of the following elements: public and neighborhood education and involvement in evacuations, adequate property defensible space efforts, identification of all roles, addressing community/public concerns, review of population trends and response capacity in the WUI, running scenarios/drills, and adequately preparing the community for all possible emergencies including wildfire emergencies and toxic spills.

While the community keeps kicking this can down the road and especially now when the demand for housing is at an all-time level, we need to understand that there are population capacity issues that we must identify and address in these WUI areas. As such, it's not responsible for our community to think every neighborhood or place should have the same densities or capacity for growth. The constraints of the Grant Creek neighborhood and other areas in the WUI and corridor must be adequately assessed to determine those thresholds. Concerning adequate emergency response, according to the 2021 report, **Land Use Planning Approaches in the Wildland-Urban Interface *An analysis of four western states: California, Colorado, Montana, and Washington,***

“spatially defining the WUI is also an essential process that allows planners, land managers, and researchers to analyze and plan for these geographic areas. For example, planners can use a WUI map to identify the type of development patterns occurring near, or within, wildfire hazard areas. Researchers can also identify trends in WUI growth to see where development has occurred and where future planning resources may need to be prioritized. WUI maps can also be coupled with other maps, such as sensitive lands or environmental constraints to inform a suitability analysis. Finally, WUI maps are routinely used to draft land use regulations. . .“

I've submitted comments in the hope that the City will consider the expansion of this project in light of several concerns and a troubling trend to ignore neighborhood concerns over developer "rights." It is also my hope that the City will once again revisit the basics of a true public participation process and begin to reeducate staff and council. If not, as a community, we will continue to erode the public's trust in all our efforts.

Sincerely,
Beth Berlin

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