

Missoula City Council
435 Ryman St
Missoula, MT 59802

December 2, 2024

RE: OSAC Review of the Hayden – Grass Valley Conservation Easement Open Space Project

Dear Members of the Missoula City Council:

On November 14, 2024, the Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC) voted to approve up to \$26,050 from the 2006 Open Space Bond fund to support a conservation easement for the Hayden – Grass Valley Open Space Project. The approval was based upon a 6 to 1 vote with three members absent.

The project has a number natural resource and community benefits that impressed many OSAC members, including:

- Protection of 65 acres of wetlands, key for wildlife and migratory birds.
- Preservation of artesian springs vital for year-round habitat.
- Location within the Audubon's Clark Fork River – Grass Valley Important Bird Area.
- Conservation of 215 acres of prime farmland for crops and grazing.
- Linkage of 287 additional acres to an adjacent existing conservation area.
- Helps provide clean water, wildlife habitat, and scenic views for the community.

Furthermore, most OSAC members feel that the project is an excellent opportunity given that the estimated \$700,000 easement value is being fully donated by the landowner, and the public cost from open space bonds has been well minimized to fund only transaction costs, legal fees, and easement stewardship.

Even with numerous positive aspects, the project also generated some critical feedback from a few OSAC members. In general, there was little question about whether the project qualifies under the 2019 Missoula Urban Area Open Space Plan. However, there was concern expressed about the lack of cost sharing with the County's portion of open space bond funding given that the project is located outside of the City boundary, but within the Missoula Urban Area Planning Region where City bond expenditures are authorized. Some members felt there should be a cost split between the City and County bond funds, but others felt that the project's benefits far outweigh the low cost and that a cost split was not worth the complication. There were also concerns expressed about lack of public access and more careful prioritization of bond expenditures in light of dwindling bond funds. OSAC performed a closer examination of previous bond projects with information provided by staff, which revealed that there is no decisive trend or policy regarding previous City-County bond expenditure cost splits.

In the end, most OSAC members put aside concerns and decided that using open space bond funds to support the project was in the best interest of Missoulians. However, the decision was not without some debate and a single member with a final vote in dissent. OSAC thanks you for your time and we hope that the City Council will consider supporting this funding request based on a majority recommendation by OSAC members.



Eric Anderson, Chair
Open Space Advisory Committee