

December 22, 2025

Mayor Andrea Davis and City Council Members:  
435 Ryman Street  
Missoula, MT 59802



Dear Mayor Davis and City Council Representatives:

As you approach the final decisions regarding the adoption of a new zoning code, I again encourage you to proceed with careful reflection and discernment. Some of the proposed changes could forever alter the character of Missoula. I understand that life is filled with change and “character” is not rigidly defined. But some of the proposed changes – expanding the high density areas, allowing for taller buildings, eliminating parking requirements – could not only change character. They could also undermine the livability of areas and the safety and wellbeing of residents.

In a previous letter, I included a picture (see below) from a recent article published in the Washington Post. As summarized in the article, the zoning requirements that were in place allowed for the construction/remodel of that structure, even though it would undermine the property values of neighboring homes, decrease access to sunlight, inhibit use of solar panels, and create other problems. The picture offered a very clear example of what could occur in any number of neighborhoods in Missoula, given the proposed zoning changes. Existing houses could be scraped and very large new houses and multi-unit developments could be rapidly erected. Neighbors would have no recourse to any damages that ensued. In a response to a previous letter I submitted, Mayor Davis noted that the proposed zoning changes would reflect the “community’s adopted values” and “aim to create more predictability for residents and developers”. It feels very much like there is a great deal of “cherry-picking” among the values with the primary value being more housing regardless of the consequences – even if they are very steep. And any notions of “predictability” reflect chiefly the certainty of fast approvals for developers and realtors who seek new housing developments and absolutely no predictability for residents.

Comments on the zoning websites have noted other problems with the proposed code changes for the Lower Rattlesnake – the current transportation challenges and the difficulties of exiting via a congested street like Van Buren in the event of emergencies, the aging infrastructure (compromised sewer and water mains, the lack of sidewalks), the lack of protections/predictability for current residents, and other problems. How will the city respond to parking dilemmas given that multi-story units will not have parking requirements? Will the city enact a parking plan for current residents that mirrors the protections currently given to those who live in the University district? Or will it just become a parking free-for-all; get what you can when you can. The City and County have adopted a 100% Clean Electricity Resolution to reach 100% clean electricity for the Missoula urban area by 2030. How might such resolutions be undermined by reduced setbacks and tall/multi-story buildings that will disallow solar access by denying ability to generate solar energy on nearby existing residential lots?

The proposed changes planned for the Lower Rattlesnake feel particularly egregious given that the Upper Rattlesnake (an area where Ward 1 city council representatives live) has been awarded an “exemption” from the high density designation. Residents in that area of town (an area also endowed with a functioning school and both high quality playground space and athletic fields) will have a level of predictability that other neighborhoods will not. That decision alone does not feel fair or equitable.

It has not been easy to participate in this discussion of zoning changes. Raising concerns about high density has resulted in the use of labels like "anti-neighbor" or "anti-diversity". During one conversation, several of us were told that the zoning changes had to be speedily enacted as it "wouldn't be fair to set them back further after all the time invested by these parties" [developers]. That comment alone underscores some of the challenges that underlie this discussion. Protections are provided for developers. Period. There are no real plans for the seriously considering the wide range of factors that make housing a very difficult problem to resolve. Missoula has traditionally been a place where civil dialogue was possible. The propose zoning changes have created a level of discord and distrust that may last a long time.

It feels very much like the current zoning proposals reflect the deeply held *personal philosophies* of the individuals who compromise the planning staff. It is not clear whether the staff truly have the knowledge, experience, and wisdom to evaluate the consequences of their proposed decisions. During a planning meeting, one attendee asked if there were any examples of cities where such zoning changes had been enacted and where they had actually worked well. No examples were given.

I understand that the staff have been working on the issues associated with zoning changes for some time and there is a desire to achieve closure. But the stakes are high and there are many issues that have not been truly considered. The failure to "think through" some of these issues could leave all of us with problems that will be hard to remediate and that may actually undermine all that has made Missoula a desirable place to live.



Regards.

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