

## Benjamin Brewer

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**From:** Kirstin Miller <kirstin@ecocitybuilders.org>  
**Sent:** Monday, January 26, 2026 10:49 AM  
**To:** Eric Melson; Betsy Craske; Mirtha Becerra; Justin Ponton; Gwen Jones; Jennifer Savage (she/her); Amber Sherrill; Mike Nugent; Stacie Anderson; Bob Campbell; Kristen Jordan; Sean McCoy  
**Cc:** Benjamin Brewer; Eran Pehan; Emily Gluckin (she/her); Aaron Wilson; Ben Weiss; Cassie Tripard; Laval Means (she/her); Mary McCrea; Aam Hertz; Chris Chitty; Alan McCormick; Heather; Brittany Palmer; Thomas; Paul Filicetti; Bob Giordano; Brian Vonlossberg; Jmetcalf; Kat Cowley; Ryan Salisbury; Megan Robson; Aimee; Tung Pham  
**Subject:** Supporting Community Walkability While Making Room for Strategic Flexibility

1/26/26

Dear Missoula City Council Members,

As you finalize the Unified Development Code (UDC) and advance the “Our Missoula 2045 Land Use Plan,” **we urge the Council to retain walkability standards as a foundation for future growth**—while embracing practical, well-defined flexibility for unique circumstances.

While good urbanism requires thoughtful planning and effort, its rewards—safer streets, healthier residents, and a stronger local economy—far outweigh the challenges. The UDC’s pedestrian design standards directly shape these outcomes by ensuring Missoula encourages walking and active transportation for people of all ages, incomes and abilities.

**We recognize the legitimate challenges in adopting walkability-focused standards** in areas currently characterized by car-dependency (sprawl). These sites may not be immediately ready for full implementation as envisioned in the Our Missoula Plan. Factors such as existing infrastructure, block patterns, and absence of alleys or alternative service access sometimes limit the immediate feasibility of “build-to” lines and pedestrian-oriented layouts.

However, the long-term vision as expressed by the Missoula community in Our Missoula is for **car-dominated areas to gradually evolve into more vibrant, mixed-use, connected places**. This evolution naturally takes time, following improvements to streetscapes, addition of transit options, and incremental redevelopment. Infrastructure upgrades, targeted city investment, and ongoing community engagement will be key drivers of this positive change, ensuring the transition is organic and tailored to Missoula’s context.

**UDC pedestrian standards can be applied with flexibility.** Variance processes and context-sensitive solutions allow unique site conditions, current economic needs, and diverse building uses—from retail to housing—to be handled thoughtfully. This approach avoids undue hardship while maintaining a strong commitment to making all parts of the city, over time, more accessible, equitable, and walkable—just as the Our Missoula Plan aspires to achieve.

**Cities across the country have successfully combined walkability standards with built-in flexibility**—ensuring the core benefits of pedestrian-oriented urbanism while accommodating special cases: **Houston, TX:** Allows in-lieu fees for sidewalk requirements in cases of technical or economic infeasibility, directing investments toward neighborhood pedestrian infrastructure. **Knoxville, TN:** Provides for administrative modifications to setbacks or design details, particularly for middle housing, after thorough review for compatibility with neighborhood character and needs. **New Orleans,**

**LA:** Grants exceptions for projects offering exceptional community benefits, such as affordable housing or adaptive reuse.

By retaining robust walkability elements in the UDC while creating accessible pathways for reasonable exceptions, Missoula can protect its long-term community vision and address pressing needs in real time.

We recommend the following — **Transparent, Predictable Variance Criteria:** Applicants clearly document physical or economic barriers. Projects show alignment with core city priorities—affordability, sustainability, proximity to transit. Any variance must not substantially undermine pedestrian safety or connectivity. **Efficient Public Process:** Streamlined digital applications and clear timelines. Community notification and comment opportunities for accountability and trust. Public reporting of all variance outcomes and rationales. **In-Lieu Option:** Projects unable to deliver walkability features on site pay into a dedicated fund for local pedestrian improvements, ensuring continued investment in Missoula’s walkable future. **Fast-Track for High-Priority Housing:** Expedite variance review for projects addressing urgent housing or equity needs, while preserving essential walkability features wherever feasible.

Walkability is at the heart of Missoula’s vision for safety, health, environmental stewardship, and economic vitality. In short, **good urbanism should not only apply to wealthier areas and neighborhoods.** Building more housing in car dependent areas without any accompanying standards for walkability is sending the message that good urbanism doesn’t apply to everyone who lives here.

We are ready to support thoughtful refinements like a variance process, and stand committed to working with you to make walkability practical, equitable, and enduring in Missoula’s future.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

**Kirstin Miller**, AICP, Executive Director, Ecocity Builders

**Bob Giordano**, Director, Free Cycles Missoula and Missoula Institute for Sustainable Transportation;  
Member, Our Missoula Community Advisory Committee