

Comments on the Missoula Downtown Master Plan by Vicki Watson, July 2019

The Missoula Downtown Plan has good intentions and many good ideas. One of my favorites is 'Better utilize the river and enhance parks.'

Although I would prefer that it said – 'Better protect the river and aquifer while enhancing our parks.'

Missoula has an extraordinary opportunity to create a riverfront park on the south side of the river that reaches from the Kim Williams trail by UM to Reserve Street and on to the Tower Street Conservation area – about 3 miles of beautiful connected public space – and good for the health of the river.

The south river front park already reaches from the Kim Williams trail to California Street, varying in width from 100 feet to a few hundred feet at Silver Park. Then there is just a couple thousand feet to a gravel pit that will not be a gravel pit forever—and would make a great park some day, reaching to Reserve Street. Between California and Russell street is a little neighborhood of a few homes and one small business. The Master Plan refers to it as the Wyoming Street Neighborhood (pages 90-92 of the plan document).

On that neighborhood, the Downtown Master Plan proposes to put high density, multistory apartments and condos. I think that would be a grave mistake. If the current homes & business choose to relocate, the area should be purchased with open space funds to continue our river front park on to Russell Street. That riverfront (California to Russell) includes floodplain and should not be filled, paved and built on. The river and aquifer need the unpaved buffer, and public enjoyment of our river would not benefit from concrete canyons rising on both sides of the river.

To protect river and aquifer health, and to build our community's resiliency to face more extreme floods predicted by the Montana Climate Assessment – Missoula should not allow any more building & paving in floodplains. And it should protect and restore at least a 100-200 foot buffer on either side of the river whenever possible.

Creating more housing is laudable, but the city should focus on existing parking lots and brownfields well away from the river to build high density residential developments. An inspection of aerial photos of Missoula show that we have ample space for such developments without putting our river in a strait jacket of riverbank developments. That mistake has been made too often on the north side of the river. Let's keep the south side of the river more natural and open to public enjoyment.

In addition to the public enjoyment argument, there is a good scientific argument for this. An unpaved buffer near the river reduces the amount of polluted runoff reaching the river. The unpaved land allows the water to soak in, be filtered, and recharge the aquifer and the river with cleaner water. Extensive scientific studies recommend an unpaved buffer of at least 100 to 200 feet while stating that protecting the entire 100 year floodplain is your best bet for keeping the river healthy, and providing some habitat for birds and other wildlife. In addition, all filling of the floodplain sends bigger floods to the people downstream. It is time we stopped that practice.

Missoula is blessed to be on a beautiful river. Let us respect and love it, and work to improve the buffer needed for its health. Not strip it away.

Comments on the Downtown Master Plan are due August 1 and can be emailed to [info@missouladowntown.com](mailto:info@missouladowntown.com)<<mailto:info@missouladowntown.com>>