

PART TWO: CONRAD PROFILE

This section provides a summary of the existing characteristics and projected future trends of Conrad. More detailed information is included in the separate “Inventory of Existing Characteristics for Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier.”

OVERVIEW

Conrad is the county seat of Pondera County. Located on the rolling prairies of the Montana Northern Rockies Front, it is within easy access to Glacier National Park. The backbone of the economy is agriculture and Conrad has a number of businesses that supply and ship agricultural products. Conrad is located on a major interstate highway system and freight rail. It is also within 30 minutes of Amtrak (at Shelby) and within an hour of the international airport in Great Falls. It is a pretty city with tree-lined residential neighborhoods. The city is looking to expand and diversify its economy and build the population in the long-term.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The town of Conrad celebrated its 100 year anniversary in 2009. The area that now includes Conrad was part of territory claimed by the Blackfeet Confederacy from the 1700s. The following is a brief timeline of major events in Conrad and Pondera County and is not intended as a complete history.

1700s	Tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy – Piegan, Bloods, and Siksika (Blackfeet) – claim the area known today in Montana as the Hi-Line and including Pondera County
	Old North Trail – which runs roughly parallel to U.S. Highway 89 was a trail of conquest that Confederacy Indians used to travel as far north as Calgary, Alberta and as far south as New Mexico.
1806	Meriwether Lewis and his men travel up the Marias and Missouri Rivers on their way back from the coast.
1835	Government sends exploring parties to determine a practical railroad route.
1837	Small pox epidemic kills 6,000 Blackfeet, two-thirds of the population
1855	Treaty with the Blackfeet Nation signed. Boundaries of the reservation were eventually pushed back from the Musselshell to the Sun river and then to Birch Creek and Marias

1868	Brothers Charles E. and William E. Conrad begin building a business empire. Working as clerks for I. G. Baker, owner of trading companies, they eventually became partners with Baker and then in 1874 they bought the company. Were involved in overland trade, banking, ranching, mining, and real estate. Ended up owning much of the land that is known as Pondera County.
1886	Conrad brothers purchase 11 sections and begin building what will become the Conrad Investment Company holdings of more than 312 sections (200,000 acres) by 1898. The land is named the Seven Block Ranch and eventually runs 10,000 head of cattle. They start the irrigation projects that will become the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company.
1889	Old Pondera town was located a mile or so from present-day Conrad and had one store, one rooming house, two saloons, a section house, a school house, and a water tank.
1890	Great Falls and Canada Railroad makes first run from Great Falls to Lethbridge, Canada.
1901	Great Falls and Canada Railroad sold to Great Northern and new tracks run through present-day Conrad.
1902	620 acre town-site of Conrad is laid out, and buildings from Old Pondera are moved to Conrad. Conrad is named after William G. Conrad.
1904	First school built in Conrad
1908-09	Cargill family from Wisconsin purchases the Seven Block Ranch, including the initial irrigation system of the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company. W.S. Cargill and other investors developed the irrigation project that includes Lake Frances.
1908	Conrad is incorporated September 24, 1909.
1916	Conrad has grown to a population of 1500.
1919	Pondera County established
1929	Conrad Library completed
1948	Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company is completed and consists of two storage reservoirs and 360 miles of canal and lateral ditches.
1950	Conrad High School Completed

PHYSICAL SETTING

Conrad is located on the rolling prairie of the Northern Montana Rocky Mountain front. The city itself is on relatively flat land and wedged between Pondera Creek to the south and Dry Fork of the Marias to the north.

LAND USE

The city of Conrad encompasses 807 acres (1.3 square miles). In the city, the largest land use categories are rights-of-way (of streets, alleys, and highways) and residential lands. The third largest category, tax exempt lands, includes public properties such as schools, hospitals, public offices, parks, etc. Part of the tax exempt lands in Conrad is a 35-acre site that is a retirement community owned by town. The housing on the site was originally constructed by the US Air Force and was subsequently turned over to the city, who now leases it to a private property management firm. Commercial-retail is located primarily along Main Street, and industrial uses along the railroad tracks. The airport is located west of the city. The city has few vacant lots.

The city of Conrad Zoning Ordinance divides the city into three residential zones, one commercial zone, and two industrial zones. The city recently annexed land to the northeast, on the east side of Interstate 15. The city of Conrad also has subdivision and flood plain management regulations. The subdivision regulations are not current with the Montana Subdivision and Platting Act.

POPULATION

Total population in Conrad was estimated at 2,501 persons in 2008, down approximately nine percent from the 2000 census total of 2,753. The town's population has been declining since 1980, when the population totaled 3,074 persons.

The population of Conrad is also becoming preponderantly older. In 2000, the median age in Conrad was 40.3, compared to 37.5 for the state of Montana. Approximately one in five persons in Conrad was 65 years or older in 2000. The trend for increasing proportions of older persons is dramatic for Montana, by 2015 the state will be the fourth "grayest" in the nation.

In 2000, Conrad also had a slightly larger proportion of the population under age 18 (26.3%) compared to the state (25.5%) and nation (25.7%).

Population projections provided by the State of Montana for Pondera County indicate continued decline in population for the next two decades. Conrad's population will decline by 490 persons by 2030 for an approximate total of 2,263 persons, based on the county's population projection rate.

HOUSING TRENDS

The 2000 census counted 1,332 housing units in Conrad. Of these 915 were single family homes, 193 were mobile homes, and the balance included multi-family units and apartments. Data from the Montana Department of Revenue indicates that 10 new housing units were completed in the nine year period from 1999 to 2008 in Conrad.

In addition, some housing units may now be unoccupied because they are in bad shape. In 2005, 40% of all single family houses and mobiles were in fair or worse condition. Houses in fair condition have marked deterioration but are still quite usable. Much repair is needed and many items need refinishing or overhauling. Deferred maintenance is obvious.

In 2005, the Montana Housing Condition Study reported that 105 of 134 mobile homes in Conrad were built before 1976. The National Manufactured Home Construction and Safety Act of 1976 required significant improvement in the safety and quality of mobile homes. Homes that comply with the act are said to meet the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) code. Mobile homes constructed prior to 1976 are not considered to meet health and safety standards.

About 70% of all housing was owner-occupied in 2000 and about 30% was renter-occupied. These ratios are similar for the State of Montana.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines a housing cost burden when at least 30% of a household's monthly income is spent on housing costs and utilities. In Conrad in 2000 about one in every four homeowners and renters was spending 30% or more of their income on housing.

As the population ages, more elderly residents will become single person households and may need assistance with basic household upkeep such as painting, shoveling sidewalks, yard maintenance, etc. Those on fixed incomes may have less available to keep the houses in good functioning condition. Conrad is the only location in the county with licensed senior and special needs housing (Blue Sky Villa, Horizon Lodge, Conrad Beehive Homes, Pondera Medical Center long-term care).

Future housing challenges for Conrad include senior needs, addressing need for rental units, affordability of housing, and addressing non-compliant pre-1976 mobile homes.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The private sector economy in Conrad consists of some major agricultural facilities and elevators and a variety of service-based industries that serve local residents, the surrounding agricultural landowners, and visitors. Major private sector businesses in the Conrad area include Pondera Medical Center, Intercontinental Truck Body (manufacturing), implement dealerships, barley processing plant, and grocery store.

Major public sector employers include the public school system and local government. The Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center is important as a regional research facility.

Per capita personal income in Conrad in 2000 was \$15,742, approximately one-quarter below the national rate of \$21,587. Overall per capita personal income in Pondera County has lagged behind Montana's income growth for the last three decades.

Annual labor force and unemployment rates are not available for municipalities the size of Conrad. Data for Pondera County indicate a shrinking supply of labor. The county lost 13.7% of the labor force between 2000 and 2009. In part this is a factor of overall declining population and in part a result of an increasingly older population no longer in the workforce.

When adjusted for inflation, average earnings per job decreased between 1970 and 2008 in Pondera County. In 1970, average earnings per job were \$31,017 (in constant \$ 2005), above the U.S. average job earnings by 10% and greater than the statewide average by

23%. In 2008, average earnings per job were \$31,279 (in constant \$ 2005), 32% below the national average and 5% below the statewide average.

A strong economy supports population growth and quality of life. Conversely, it is difficult to maintain a strong economy with a declining workforce. To sustain and build the economy, Conrad will need to attract more persons of working age and create jobs that pay a living wage.

Property values in Conrad are low compared to other locations in Montana and the nation, which can be attractive to new residents, but which do not generate much income for town government to provide basic services. The municipality of Conrad is keeping up, but faces an ever-tightening fiscal belt and increasing costs of maintaining basic infrastructure.

LOCAL SERVICES

Local public services include law enforcement, fire and emergency services, medical, education-schools, transportation services, library, solid waste collection, and senior and other services.

Conrad is a charter commission-executive form of government with self governing powers. A local government with self-governing powers has all the powers not specifically denied by state statute, the Montana Constitution, or local charter. Conrad, therefore, has more authority than other municipalities that have not gone through the process to be self-governing and have only the powers authorized in state law. There are five members on the Conrad City Council.

Conrad has its own police department and shares a detention facility in Conrad with the county. The city also has its own Fire Department.

The Pondera Medical Center in Conrad is the only hospital in Pondera County. It is a Critical Access Hospital and Rural Health Clinic with 20 acute care inpatient beds and a 59 bed extended care facility. The Conrad Center for Mental Health and Pondera County Health Department are also located in Conrad.

Conrad has two elementary schools, a middle school and a separate high school. Total combined student population was approximately 590 in 2008. The Conrad Library is supported by both the city of Conrad and Pondera County.

Conrad has a 9-hole golf course, swimming pool, baseball complex, bowling, health club, theater group, movie theater, active trap club, civic center (in process of renovation at time of this report), and the Transportation and History Museum.

The Northern Transit Inter-local Bus runs from Shelby to Great Falls, with a stop in Conrad, on Mondays and Thursdays.

PUBLIC FACILITIES (PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE)

Public facilities include water, sewer, storm sewer, streets, sidewalks, municipal buildings, and street lighting. The city of Conrad has a Capital Improvements Plan dated February 2002 that addresses public facilities.

The majority of streets in Conrad were constructed in the late 1970s and funded through special improvement districts. Over ten miles of asphalt pavement, storm drains, curb and gutter, and sidewalks were installed. In 1998, these streets were extensively resurfaced. The streets are now chip sealed from time to time and will likely need more extensive resurfacing in the next decade. East of the railroad, streets are surfaced with oiled gravel. Cross streets between Main Street and Front Street were not included in the city's various special improvement districts and are consequently in poor condition.. The Montana Department of Transportation maintains Main Street (Highway 91), 4th Avenue SW (Hwy 534), and Sollid Road (Highway 218) in Conrad.

Construction of the redesigned Interstate 15 interchange on the north end of Conrad was completed in 2010. The project consists of reconfiguring the existing northbound ramps from the current partial cloverleaf style to a diamond configuration. This project includes a county road to connect the overpass with the east frontage road. The construction of the county road will alleviate the current safety concerns of emergency response access to the east side of the city of Conrad when there is a train at the railroad crossing. A MDOT rest area and city of Conrad's industrial park are planned for the areas that will be made accessible by the project.

Pondera County owns and operates the Conrad Airport which is located one mile west of the city. The airport has a 4,601 foot-long asphalt runway in good condition.

Conrad's water supply is from Lake Frances. Conrad has an ample water system for future growth in terms of water treatment capacity and quantity of water available.. The distribution system is comprised mainly of 30- to 35-year old asbestos-concrete pipe. In general, the water distribution system is in good shape and no major upgrade or replacement program is anticipated. The city provides limited water service outside the city limits and presently has 76 services outside the city.

Conrad's sewage treatment facility was undergoing a \$5.5 million upgrade at the time the growth policy was being prepared. The present population of Conrad is about 2,500 people. The upgraded plant is designed to accommodate the equivalent of 4,000 people. The city does not provide any sewer collection service to areas outside the city limits. In general, the collection system is in fair shape and no extensive upgrades are anticipated.

The city maintains storm water facilities consisting mainly of reinforced concrete pipe, most installed with original street-paving project of the 1970s. There are no storm drains on the east side of the city. When it rains, pools of water can form along the railroad tracks on the east side of town. The storm water collected in the pipe system is discharged to natural drainages at the north and south ends of the city.

In Conrad, the city collects solid waste for disposal at the main landfill.

The city of Conrad owns and maintains the following facilities (Anderson, 2010):

- Conrad Public Library
- Public Works Building and City Shop
- City Office
- [Conrad Fire & Ambulance Station](#)

- [Blue Sky Villa \(own and lease out\)](#)

City parks in Conrad include Lion's Club Park with swimming pool, Legion Park, Ball fields complex, Jaycee Park, and Keil Park.

NATURAL RESOURCES

The city of Conrad is well-developed within the city limits. There are areas of vacant lots (although few), but not much could be considered in a pristine natural state. Pondera Creek runs along the south side of Conrad, and has been identified on floodplain maps. These maps appear to be incorrect according to the County Floodplain Administrator.

SUMMARY

Conrad has a number of unique positive attributes, including a relatively strong agricultural economy and new potential for development with the north-end Interstate interchange. The population has taken a downturn since the 1980s and the community is planning ahead for revitalization.