

Managing growth in the Clearwater Valley – Our Unique Resources

The following article is the first in a series developed by the Clearwater Resource Council to provide information for discussion of managed growth and future land use planning in the region.

Missoula County officials say that the Seeley Lake region may become one of the fastest growing areas in the county, possibly even the state, in the near future. The Missoula County Board of Commissioners has seen an increasing rate of subdivision requests (over 200 lots have been proposed for residential subdivision in the last 6 months) and is working with the Seeley Lake Community Council to update the region's land use plan. The commissioners are also concerned about the likely sale or development of thousands of acres of Plum Creek lands in the near future. To put this in housing terms, we currently have approximately 1,500 homes or cabins on 10,000 acres of private land in the Missoula County portion of the Seeley Lake region, with about 10,000 acres of non-industrial private lands that don't have residences on them.

The development of these remaining private lands in the Clearwater Valley could result in an additional 1,500 homes. This level of development would represent a 100 percent increase in the number of homes and people living in the Valley. Recent subdivision proposals have requested lot sizes averaging less than 2 acres, potentially increasing these numbers. These numbers do not account for apartments, condominiums, or campgrounds, nor do they include future development of Plum Creek lands, which have begun with the recent sale of Section 5 near Clearwater Lake. If Plum Creek lands are developed as well, we could see a very substantial addition of homes and potentially thousands of people.

What would we as a community like the Valley to look like in the future? While growth brings many potential benefits, unmanaged growth could radically change Seeley Lake as we know it today. Here's some background about our natural resources, to help frame discussions on managed growth. Future articles will give information on what managed growth means to the community, how managed growth can be accomplished, what tools can be used to help manage growth, and how a land use plan is developed. At the same time, the Seeley Lake Community Council will be working on the draft land use plan at its regularly scheduled meetings (second Monday of every month) and will also be hosting special meetings to get citizen input. It is important to hear from the community to ensure that all interests and concerns are considered.

So, just what is so special about Seeley Lake that would warrant a discussion of managed growth and land use planning? Imagine a community that was established through hard work and perseverance based primarily on using the abundant natural resources that the region had to offer. Now, imagine that a community could do that in a way that would be a model for sustainable management of natural resources. You don't actually have to imagine it, it is Seeley Lake. We have logged, trapped, hunted, and ranched, yet we have lost little of what was here a hundred years ago when the first settlers came to this area. We still have an extraordinary abundance of clear, clean lakes, ponds, streams, and wetlands. We still have working forests that are unusually fertile and provide wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and forest products for our local economy. And, we still have one of the most unique assemblages of native wildlife outside of national parks and wilderness areas living in our forests and sometimes even in our backyards. The fact that we still have grizzly bears, lynx, common loons, and other species living in our Valley that are rare or gone from other areas is a testament to the ways that those who utilized our wild and working landscape, managed to maintain the Clearwater Valley.

Where many other communities utilized their resources as quickly as they could, Seeley Lake was content with making it last for future generations. Clearly, these early individuals did not think only of the value of these resources to a small few, but rather of the value to the community as a whole. What would those early settlers and later residents think of how our community views the unusually rich resources they managed responsibly and left for us today? Are we still thinking of sustainability and future generations? How many communities can talk about the GPS-collared grizzly bear that lumbered through yards and crossed roads, totally unknown to the many residents that lived nearby? How many places in the U.S. can you encounter lynx tracks while cross-country skiing? Even in Montana, there are few communities that can still make such claims. Do we want Seeley Lake to look like every other town in America in the future, or should we stay true to our history? Should we let go our ties to the land and our links to our natural resource base without a discussion of its value to our community, to our children, or to their children? Do we need all of the types of services and events available in Missoula to also be available in our town? Is the price of the wildness that we all find so thrilling to observe, experience, and discuss, worth the exchange?

Outside of Seeley Lake there are people who know that this is a very special place. They recognize that what we have here has been lost nearly everywhere else in the world. They recognize that lakes and streams as clean as ours are almost unheard of outside of national parks and national forests. They recognize that wild and working landscapes are becoming a thing of the past. They recognize that our region is a last stronghold for the lynx and the bull trout. They recognize the importance of our region to connecting grizzly bear populations in the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountain Wilderness areas. They recognize that our community has been so unusually tied to its natural resources that we have had talented men and women who would write books, poetry, and songs about its wonder and beauty. Do these outsiders see something that our community no longer values? We are on the cusp of significant change in this Valley; change that cannot be reversed once it occurs--if we decide to do nothing about planning for it now.

We are being warned by our elected officials that if we stay silent they will be forced to take change as it comes, not how we might guide it. If that happens, we may no longer have discussions about GPS-collared grizzly bears, lynx tracks in the snow, our clear, clean lakes and streams, the supply of wood from working forests that maintain our timber industry, and the wildness of our migrating elk population. The things we value most are at significant risk with a future of unmanaged growth, but can be maintained with planned growth. Which do you want? Interested citizens should stay tuned for future articles and to the discussions of the Community Council regarding the land use plan, or attend the special public meeting to provide community input on this important subject.