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ALERT EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL

## 'We're supporting it': Alberton to pursue Bear Smart program

Joshua Murdock

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Jamie Jonkel of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks presents to Alberton Town Council about bear conflict near the town.

**ALBERTON** — An initiative to reduce conflict between humans and bears around Alberton has gained momentum with the addition of half the Town Council onto the **newly formed Alberton Bear Smart Working Group.**

After a 20-minute presentation from the group at the Council's regular monthly meeting March 7, Council members Sharon Briggs and Kyle Cirincione volunteered to join the group. The working group already included Alberton local Monica Best, marketing, personalization, and analytics. By remaining on this website, you indicate your consent. [Privacy Policy](#)

Alberton landowner Bob Summerfield, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Bear Management Specialist Jamie Jonkel, FWP volunteer Laura Collins and Alberton School teacher Nick Ehlers.

The goal is to use a grassroots model led locally that's been proven to reduce bear conflicts across the U.S. and Canadian Rockies. The general premise is that securing the things that attract bears can gradually reduce their inclination to forage through human development, thus reducing conflicts between people and hungry bears.

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But first, the group wanted the Council's support and involvement. Summerfield said having a council member in the group would allow the Town Council to stay apprised of – and help shape – the group's work. In addition to the school and Town Council, the nascent Alberton Bear Smart Working Group hopes to also draw more members from the surrounding community

Cirincione said after the meeting that "It's a fascinating subject anyway, so (I'm) definitely interested in being on board." Briggs added that she heard about a bear that was killed last year near the school and "it really, really bothered me."

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"I just think it's really important to get it under control ... and just to get educated," she said. "It's not their fault. They're hungry and the berries weren't any good" – a reference to a **widespread food failure for bears last year** that drove many bears into communities searching for food.

Alberton Town Council member Sharon Briggs signs up to join the Alberton Bear Smart Working Group after a Town Council meeting March 7, as Bob Summerfield, an Alberton landowner and early member of the group, looks on. The group will examine how, where and why human-bear conflicts manifest in and around Alberton, and make recommendations for reducing such conflict.

JOSHUA MURDOCK, Missoulian

Mayor Anna LeDuc said that "I'm ecstatic that many people want to be part of the project, and we're supporting it. I agree with it."

Because the working group's target area extends slightly beyond Alberton's town limits and into unincorporated Mineral County, Summerfield said, the group will likely also approach the Mineral County Commission about the initiative.

Next, the working group will develop a hazard assessment of where and how bears come into conflict around the community. The assessment can answer questions around what things in the community attract bears, and when and where bears most often come into conflict with humans. After that, the working group can develop a report of recommendations for how to address the community's hazards. That could include educational efforts, deployment of bear-resistant garbage cans, or guidelines around food storage and bird feeders. Funding to implement recommendations **can come from FWP** or from nonprofits like People and Carnivores, which recently **launched a \$50,000 fund for communities vying to go Bear Smart.**

Jonkel explained at the meeting that such work is long overdue in Alberton, population 452, a former railroad community about a 30-minute drive west of Missoula. The area has a "really long history of black bear conflict," and "Grizzlies are starting to show up" nearby.

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"The Alberton area is just in the perfect position to funnel bears into town," he said, noting the convergence of multiple side-canyons into the Alberton Gorge. "A lot of bears have to naturally funnel through here."

He rattled off an abbreviated list of the myriad bear conflicts the area had seen in recent years.

"We had one individual that had a black bear come in multiple times and he sprayed it multiple times with pepper spray, bear pepper spray, and it just would not go away," he said. "And then there was the black bear that was shot not far from the school there."

There was also a black bear that broke into a child's bedroom via the window. And that was all just in 2022, a year Jonkel described as "one of the most insane years we've had with black bears anywhere."

Last year wasn't the only crazy year, though, Jonkel noted, explaining that "a lot of very interesting historical things have occurred" with bear conflict in Alberton. Not the least was a person directly across the Clark Fork River from Alberton who routinely fed about 30 black bears in her yard from about 2009–12. She often shooed the bears away with a broom to secure safe access for package delivery drivers.

"We had no idea, and the community had no idea," he said. "The individual passed away, and holy smokes, the year after and the year after were just insane. During that time period we had to trap and destroy eight to 10 bears here," and about 10 more were killed by vehicles on the interstate.

Another notable incident involved a man who sicced his dogs on a black bear that wandered up to a hunting kill he was processing at home. When the dogs flagged in the fight, Jonkel said, the man intervened with a knife and a gun, stabbing and shooting the bear until it was dead.

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Jonkel's presentation also included a short video highlighting the success of a Bear Smart program implemented in Virginia City a few years ago — the first adoption of the Bear Smart framework in Montana, although other less-structured efforts pre-date Virginia City's. Summerfield told the council at its Feb. 7 meeting that "They haven't had a bear conflict now for a few years," in Virginia City.

Joshua Murdock covers the outdoors and natural resources for the Missoulian.

**By Joshua Murdock**

**Outdoors reporter**

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