



## Listening Sessions Summary

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### **Ears to the Ground: Public Input on the Zoning Ordinance Update Fall 2007**

Over the course of two, three-day periods, the first in late September 2007 and again in mid October 2007, a series of more than 40 listening sessions were hosted around Missoula by the zoning consulting team with logistical support from OPG. The purpose of the sessions was to convene individuals and representatives of the many groups who have a direct interest zoning and subdivision regulations in Missoula. The input gathered at these sessions will inform the zoning consultant's forthcoming report, due in early 2008, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the existing regulations and setting forth recommendations for what the revised ordinances should contain.

Interspersed throughout the listening sessions, the consultants also met with numerous resource groups, that is, representatives of local government departments and agencies outside OPG, whose missions are directly affected by the ordinance update.

In the calendars that follow here, each listening session and its number in the total series is noted as "LS: 1," "LS: 2," etc. Each resource group is also noted, with its number in the total series, as "RG: 1," "RG: 2," etc. Please note, we did not count the first meeting of the project advisory committee (which was held on September 26, 2007) as either a listening session or a resource group meeting.

#### **What We Asked People**

At all the meetings in September and October, the facilitators posed roughly the same questions to the groups as had been put before the general public at the Town Hall meeting held in June 2007. Those questions were:

- What issue and opportunities must the new ordinance address in order for you to regard the update as a success and for the new ordinance to be effective?
- What positive attributes or fundamental shortcomings do you see in the existing ordinances?
- Are there planning and development concerns or problems in Missoula that you believe should be addressed in the new zoning and subdivision regulations?
- What types of changes would you make to the development review and approval process?
- What techniques or forums for public involvement and input should be used in addition to the events and methods already in use (e.g., town hall meetings, listening sessions, an advisory group to the project, a project website where documents will be available for review).

## **What We Heard**

By the end of the two rounds of meetings, the consultants had compiled hundreds of individual comments, suggestions, and criticisms about what works and what doesn't with the current regulations and what the new regulations will have to address to meet growth and development challenges facing Missoula.

Although the comments reveal several different directions and conflicting concerns, this is not unusual. Such diverse positions are a routine part of any community and every code revision process. We believe that every comment adds value to the process. Some comments help create consensus positions, while others provide a valuable starting point for continued discussion and decision making processes. Here is a sampling of the major themes that emerged from the meetings, and again, is by no means exhaustive. The assessment report in early 2008 will address these issues in great detail.

*Neighborhood preservation:* Missoulians want to protect the existing scale and general appearance of the established neighborhoods.

*Infill development:* Any new development on in-town parcels, whether they are in residential, commercial, or other zones, need to be compatible with and sensitive to their surroundings. The last several attempts by the city to amend the zoning regulations to accommodate infill development have resulted in unpopular projects that soured many residents on the notion of infill altogether.

*Development review and approval:* Because the existing regulations are more than 35 years old, they are far too open to multiple interpretations at the zoning counter. Both applicants and those who oppose certain developments can get multiple, conflicting answers to the same question. OPG staff too wants clearer rules to work with.

*Natural resources and critical areas:* The city should lead by example by requiring energy efficient designs of municipal facilities. Standards to protect natural features and environmental systems, including hillsides, watersheds, and groundwater all need review, clarification, and improvement to ensure they are meeting their stated intent.

*Housing:* There is general agreement, and documentation, that housing affordability is and will continue to be a problem for many Missoula households. The city is still seeking a good balance of zoning and financial tools that will result in such housing getting built.

*Transportation options:* As Missoula grows, the transit, bicycle, and pedestrian networks must expand as well, and most important, development patterns and densities need to be planned concurrently with transportation planning. This should include creating and strengthening neighborhood level commercial districts where goods and services are in close proximity to where people live, connecting common origins and destinations in the bike and pedestrian trail system, creating transit supportive development nodes, where car ownership and use could be reduced, and generally, the city should pursue these and any other policies that can reduce reliance on automobile use in the valley.

*Public involvement:* There are a lot of strong feelings, both positive and negative about the rights of neighbors to protest development projects. Most people acknowledge that, if the rules for what can and can't be built were clearer, the issue of protest may not be as big of a frustration for all involved.