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Missouri River Open Lands Preservation: A Great Falls Case Study

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Missouri River Open Lands Preservation

A Great Falls Case Study

Leonard Ormseth

Faculty Mentor: John Lund

The University of Montana

South of Great Falls, Montana, adjacent to the city lies a 72-acre undeveloped parcel of state school trust land. For decades, this land has been used by the community for recreation including mountain biking, dog walking, fishing, and wildlife viewing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these recreational values were especially pertinent as city attractions such as bars, restaurants, and other entertainment were shuttered or suffered from greatly reduced capacity. The community, while aware of this treasure, became especially attached as it served as a refuge from the throes of the modern world. When the Fox Farm neighborhood learned of the State's plans to sell or lease the property, they bound together to fight the development of the ever-shrinking amount of undeveloped riverfront ecosystem which exists along the Missouri River.

Doug Ormseth, who has deep ties to Great Falls and Montana at large, began Missouri River Open Lands Committee to organize information, people, and money to fight the planned development. The Committee argued that it is not in the interest of the state nor the community to allow a developer the right to construct a subdivision, gas station, or other forms of development in this critical habitat. Permitting the lease and or sale would inundate one of the busiest intersections in Great Falls with increased traffic, would further stress Meadowlark Elementary which has been at or over capacity for a decade, and would sacrifice the long-term integrity of an ecosystem which largely remains undisturbed from Lewis and Clark's expedition. However, the Committee had difficulty organizing the information to bolster these arguments as well as disseminate them to Great Falls at large. I offered as my Senior Capstone project at the University of Montana to do the necessary research and broadcast this so that the funds and labor may be raised to purchase a perpetual easement on the land.

I was especially connected to this project as I grew up recreating here with my friends. We would ride bikes, go fishing, swimming, canoeing, build forts in the forest, have campfires,

and otherwise escape the monotonous concrete of the city. It was a place for freedom, where solitude abounded, and we could explore who we were and what our beliefs about life were. I divided my work into two parts: researching the necessary documents to support the anti-development agenda, and then presenting these in a convincing manner to the community.

First, I began with the issue of overcrowding at Meadowlark Elementary. I contacted the school, who let me know that elementary through third grades were at capacity, and that every other grade was nearing capacity. In fact, the school notified me that they already must reject applicants to Meadowlark, regardless of whether or not siblings attend. This is due to state policy regulating classroom size. I further contacted the district superintendent, who directed me towards a demographic study highlighting growth in this part of town. The study predicted that this part of town (in addition to those south of town which feed into Meadowlark) would see modest to high growth, resulting in increased enrollment at Meadowlark. However, being that Meadowlark is at capacity, the only chance for the Meadowlark School district to accept new students is to have less of them apply. By preventing the state land parcel from being developed, the Fox Farm and Associated Community would have much higher odds of sending their kids to this highly desired school. (See Appendix A)

Second, I contacted the senior planner for the Planning and Community Development Department of the City of Great Falls regarding traffic data. He confirmed our fears. The State is forecasting an increase in traffic volume along the stretch of road abutting the state land, as well as by Meadowlark Elementary, and into the already overtaxed Fox Farm and 10th Avenue South intersection, one of the busiest in Great Falls. To highlight this, we took pictures of what traffic appears like around Meadowlark Elementary during peak hours (drop-off and pick-up times).

Those that drive through the Fox Farm and 10th Avenue South intersection already know that it is increasingly becoming congested. (See Appendix B)

Lastly, we believed that above all else, the land should be preserved for its intrinsic value. It is becoming more and more rare to find open, undeveloped, waterfront land along the Missouri River. Being that land and water conservation is generally bipartisan in Montana, we stressed issues such as recreation and ecosystem services.

For the second part, I had to craft a mailer to send to all the affected parties. Unlike Missoula or Bozeman, Great Falls is a much older and more conservative town. There is no city-wide funding to preserve open space such as that in Missoula. The people are generally lethargic in opposition to development until they see it occurring (“you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone” mentality). So, I placed all these now researched issues into a mailer to send to the Fox Farm community, as well as those communities south of town who would similarly be affected. (See Appendix C)

Behind the scenes, we incorporated into a non-profit and were in regular contact with state, county, and city governments and agencies. We received letters of support, intent, and other legal necessities to have this land held in perpetual easement. Simply by word of mouth, we have now raised nearly \$15,000 which will be put towards matching funding by various grants. However, to prove that there is community support, we need to raise this number as high as we can and may thus receive more matching money from the grants. This is where the mailer comes in. Great Falls, being the older and more conservative town that it is, hardly knows of the State’s plans. Additionally, they either hardly know of Missouri River Open Lands Committee or will decide to not act until they see development happening. By mailing these issues to the most affected parties, we could gain web traffic to our website where people could see all the work we

have done pulling weeds, gathering signatures, raising money, and protecting the land. They could donate time, money, and other resources to protect this critical habitat and community treasure.

Currently, the mailer is being finalized and will then be sent out to the community. We have designed new signs which will be placed on the state land entrance so people may be alerted to the State's plans. We have applied for numerous grants and are waiting to hear back. The process is likely to take a couple more years, and in the meantime, we direct all interested parties to our website at missouririveropenlands.org where they may make a tax-deductible donation or donate other services.

This valuable community resource is threatened. However, we have faith that the great people of Montana can bind together to protect that which makes Montana so great: our clean rivers, healthy riparian ecosystems, and fragile, increasingly rare shortgrass prairie.

Appendix A

Meadowlark Enrollment Crisis

Leonard Ormseth

2/26/2021

Bottom line: if this parcel of land gets developed, GFPS will be forced to redistrict the Meadowlark community, potentially alienating certain neighborhoods or disallowing out-of-city students.

Meadowlark Elementary is the most sought-after elementary school in the Great Falls Public Schools district. It has achieved multiple blue-ribbon awards, is situated well in the Fox Farm neighborhood for biking and walking to school, and is very safe. Additionally, the Fox Farm neighborhood is an attractive place to live. Houses are larger, traffic is minimal compared to other parts of town, and it is very safe. Thus, there has been an explosion of growth and new homebuilding south of town along Fox Farm Road and Flood Road. These new developments feed in to Meadowlark, being that it is the closest elementary, and have resulted in a substantial increase of enrollment.

In 2017, a study was released by Cropper GIS and McKibben Demographics highlighting population trends in the Great Falls Public Schools district. The Meadowlark school district has the second highest household population—6,469 residents—in Great Falls. West Elementary district leads with 8,130 residents (GFPS Demographic Study). According to the same study, Meadowlark has the highest enrollment of any elementary school in Great Falls with 498 students, and West follows with 454. It comes as no surprise then that redistricting was proposed to alleviate this burden on Meadowlark. The district proposed adding the Belview Palisades neighborhood (the one behind Home Depot) to West's district. There was major pushback from

Belview in the form of letters to the editor, community organizing, as well as a petition: Stop the Redistricting of Great Falls Schools (<https://www.change.org/p/great-falls-school-board-stop-the-redistricting-of-great-falls-schools>). They were successful in their endeavor; however, it is known by the Meadowlark school district homeowners that this neighborhood is expanding.

Development south of Great Falls in this area has been picking up tremendously. More homes are being built off Dick and Flood Road and in Spring Tree, Big Bend, and Riverbend Estates. In fact, this has been mentioned by the assistant superintendent of K6 education, Ruth Uecker, in a 2019 article by the Great Falls Tribune. “There is one unique factor about Meadowlark Elementary. The school is now reaching capacity because of growth in this area” (<https://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/2019/09/23/gfps-classrooms-dealing-full-and-overloaded-classrooms-across-district/2357057001/>). Diane Crane, a neighborhood mom who has been in the GFPS system for 13 years spoke with the Tribune regarding class sizes. “When we started, I would say the classroom sizes were generally under 20. Twenty was big, like ‘Oh, we got to 20.’” And now that’s the norm. Then 24 got to be ‘Oh, that’s big.’” Now, in the last two years, both my kids here (at Meadowlark) have gone up in class size 4-6 people per class. Now they’re at 28 and 30.” Not only is this unfair to the teachers who cannot easily adapt to the specific learning needs of each student, but the students themselves who miss out on a higher quality education. The Montana School Accreditation Standards sets limits on how many students can be in each classroom. These are 20 students for K-2, 28 students for 3-4, and grades 5-6 are not permitted to exceed 30 students per classroom. Meadowlark has been at or exceeded these guidelines for years. The question then must be asked “What happens when this boils over”?

Cropper and McKibben's study notes that Meadowlark is predicted to stay past capacity through 2027 (as far out as their projections go, about a 5 percent increase in enrollment). This is more than 500 tiny souls elbowing for room in wee little Meadowlark. When you add faculty, it is going to create an unsafe environment non conducive to learning. Furthermore, this study was done before the proposed sale and development of the state land immediately south of Great Falls. How can we prevent Meadowlark from becoming unsafe and allow the wonderful teachers to form close, one-on-one connections with our children?

There are a couple of ways to solve this. The first is to redistrict neighborhoods such as Belview into other school districts such as West. However, given the swift and unambiguous response from this neighborhood, plans such as these are on hold. It is doubtful any other neighborhood would want theirs redistricted as well. Another solution is to cap Meadowlark's enrollment so that no new students, regardless of where they live may enroll. Given that this would separate students and create logistical nightmares, this too is out of the realm of possibility. The last, most powerful solution is to prevent more houses from being built in this part of town.

If this parcel of state land is sold to a developer and houses built, it would certainly be annexed into the city of Great Falls. Meadowlark would increase past the 5% predicted, possibly 10%. This means more than 550 students, surely far too many considering the currently exceeded enrollment. These new students would receive priority enrollment in Meadowlark being that they are in the closest neighborhood. Communities such as Woodland Estates, Big Bend, Riverbend Estates, Spring Tree, essentially any houses outside of the city limits would not be able to override this process. They would have to compete against each other for the limited spaces available, and the others would commute their children to other elementary schools. Being that

the Fox Farm and associated neighborhoods wish to continue sending their children to Meadowlark, it is easy to see that this land must be prevented from being developed.

Meadowlark has a serious enrollment crisis which is about to pop in the coming years. However, the families in this neighborhood are some of the most caring, intelligent, and responsible in Montana. The decision is easy and apparent. For Meadowlark to remain healthy and sustainable, the community must rally behind Missouri River Open Land's proposal.

Appendix B

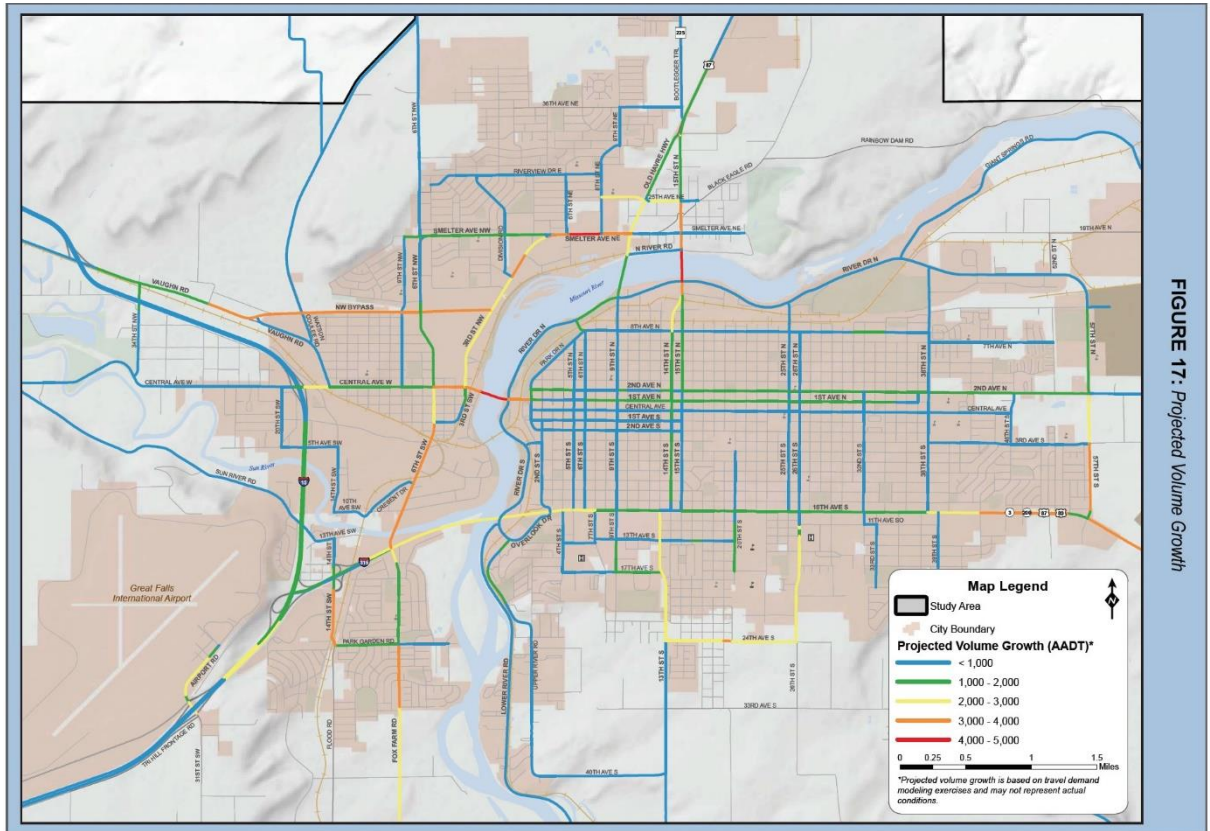


FIGURE 17: Projected Volume Growth

Missouri River Open Lands

www.missouririveropenlands.org

CALL TO ACTION

Missouri River Open Lands Committee

Attention Fox Farm and Associated Neighborhoods: The state is proposing to sell or lease the 72-acre parcel of land between Fox Farm Road and the Missouri River south of Grizzly Drive. If successful, a developer would more than likely build houses here and annex them into the Fox Farm neighborhood. This means:

- More traffic along Fox Farm Road, inundating the Fox Farm and 10th Avenue South intersection. Additional traffic at Meadowlark.
- More students enrolling in at-capacity Meadowlark Elementary School, forcing those who live out of city limits to send their children elsewhere.
- A loss of critical habitat along the Missouri River where we walk dogs, mountain bike, fish, take our children, and enjoy public land.

We do not wish to see this crucial parcel of land developed. At missouririveropenlands.org you may see the work we have done to prevent this: raising money, pulling weeds, and applying for grants. But we need YOUR help with matching funds to acquire a permanent easement. Please consider a visit to our website to get involved and a tax-deductible donation so that we may continue our work preserving this land.

Sincerely,

Missouri River Open Lands Committee: Leonard and Doug Ormseth, Al Rollo,
and Jean Clary