

BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES
ON THE
FLATHEAD ECONOMY, CONSERVATION,
AND GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

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Analysis of Flathead County business community opinion

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for the National Parks Conservation Association*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The business community in Flathead County has a complex relationship with Glacier National Park and other nearby wild lands. Because of these natural amenities, the region has experienced rapid population increases and steady expansion of the service, tourist, real estate, and construction sectors in the last decade. At the same time, resource policy and structural economic changes have caused the natural resources sector to decline in prominence, although these traditional industries remain important to the regional economy. Some businesses perceive themselves as winners in this changing business environment. Others perceive themselves as losers. As the regional economy's relationship to natural resources evolves, the interests of the business community will continue to influence public policy.

This study examines the attitudes of business leaders in Flathead County toward Glacier National Park, change in the region, and environmental conservation. The study seeks to inform the National Parks Conservation Association's advocacy agenda—with the goal of making this agenda both responsive to the business community's needs and more effectively communicated.

II. METHODS

During the summer of 2002, the Glacier Field Office of the National Parks Conservation Association requested and funded this study, conducted by an independent qualitative researcher, Jason Lathrop (Missoula, MT; 406-327-1501).

Business leaders were chosen at random from area Chamber of Commerce member lists and a direct marketing database produced by InfoUSA. A total of 80 business leaders from seven broadly defined sector groups participated in the study. Respondents were recruited with an introductory letter and follow-up phone call.

Interviews averaged 40 minutes, none shorter than 20 minutes and several lasting over one hour. In all, 68 interviews were conducted at the respondents' places of business, the remaining 12 by phone.

No compensation was paid for participation.

A caution on conclusions: Qualitative research of this kind cannot be generalized to the population as a whole. It provides an in-depth examination of the beliefs and thought processes of *these* 80 respondents.

III. KEY FINDINGS

A. Summary of observations

- ❖ With near unanimity, these business leaders say they live in the Flathead because they value the outdoor recreation opportunities and the community of people around them. Every one of them cherishes the region as a uniquely wonderful place to live.
- ❖ They also cherish Glacier National Park. A majority report visiting it at least several times a year, many as often as weekly. They consider it a regional treasure and largely praise park management.
- ❖ On the whole, they believe they have “given something up” economically for the amenities and community they so highly value.
- ❖ Despite this, business is good for most of them. Growth has brought increased prosperity for many business owners. At worst, they describe their incomes as “stable.”
- ❖ Most believe city and county planners have not adequately responded to the increased development in the valley. While they do not agree on *what* action, they do believe more action is needed.
- ❖ About half believe sprawl and haphazard growth could in the long run begin to act as a drag on the economy. Many expressed concern about loss of open space and farmland. Many cannot identify any current leaders they believe represent their interests regarding how growth should be managed in the valley.
- ❖ About a quarter of these business leaders expressed support for the environmental movement, while others called for “balance.” About half of these business leaders expressed strong frustration with elements of the environmental movement, expressing particular concern about reduced timber harvest, road closures and to a lesser extent wolf recovery efforts.
- ❖ Most respondents, including, many who dismiss virtually all claims of environmentalists, articulated a clear sense that ongoing development in the county could threaten water quality.
- ❖ Employers from sectors offering higher pay or more rewarding work seem more likely to describe the Flathead area workforce as excellent, attributing this to the lure of the region’s amenities.

III. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

A. Respondents' backgrounds

1. *Who are the respondents?*

The participants in this study include 80 business leaders from Flathead County. Most are business owners. One-third are general managers or in a few cases department managers. Their average age is 50, ranging from 28 to 72.

The large majority of respondents conduct business in Kalispell or its outskirts. About a quarter of the respondents conduct business near or in Whitefish, Columbia Falls, Somers, or Bigfork.

Respondents are broadly representative of overall industry¹ in the Flathead Valley. For the purposes of this study, respondents were grouped and recruited by sectors including:

- ❖ **Manufacturing (11 respondents):** All goods-producing firms, including the wood products industry.
- ❖ **Local Retail (14):** Retail firms primarily catering to non-tourists.
- ❖ **Construction/Real Estate (12):** Including architecture, engineering, and related services firms.
- ❖ **Visitor Services (11):** All non-goods producing and retail firms primarily catering to tourists.
- ❖ **Health Care (11):** Including massage therapists, dental professionals, and health care firm support services.
- ❖ **Business Services (11):** All non-goods producing firms primarily catering to other firms.
- ❖ **Services (10):** All non-goods producing firms primarily catering to non-tourist households.

It is crucial to note that these sectors are approximations. Many firms cater to both other firms and households, for example. In these cases, for the purpose of categorizing, they were included in whichever grouping best describes the largest share of their business (self described).

¹ These sectors were based on SIC codes with some recombination to reflect functional relationship to growth, conservation, tourism, and Glacier National Park. For example, construction and real estate share many of the benefits of population growth, though they are in separate SIC categories. This was done to generate a number of sector categories appropriate to the scope of this study, yet still encompassing all employers in the valley.

Recruiting participants from extractive industry was problematic for this study. Only two wood products industry firms were interviewed and neither was particularly representative of the mainstream timber industry. This should be kept in mind while interpreting the findings here.

In many situations, the sector a respondent works in says something about how he or she perceives the issues addressed in this study. Throughout this document these sector names will be used in discussing this.

These group sizes are not intended to reflect the overall size of the sectors relative to one another in the actual economy. With qualitative research of this kind, it is appropriate to speak with enough representatives, about 10-15, to get an overall sense of how each sector speaks about a certain issue.

Three quarters (60) of these respondents are members of one of the area Chambers of Commerce. The remaining 20 are not. Chamber members exhibited somewhat greater willingness to participate, a selection bias likely related to civic mindedness and the overall quality of the Chamber member mailing data. In comparing the Chamber members and non-Chamber members, there are no notable differences in response. While there are certainly some categorical differences between Chamber and non-Chamber members, neither group appears to perceive differently the issues addressed by this study.

2. A large majority of participants are migrants to the Flathead

These participants told a wide variety of stories in explaining how they came to live in the Flathead Valley. The bulk of them (67 of 80) relocated to the Flathead at some point, either from elsewhere in the country or elsewhere in Montana. Twenty-two respondents are originally from some other part of Montana (Return Montanans and Native Montanans). Only thirteen were born and raised in Flathead County.

Broadly they can be divided into five groups:

- ❖ **“Amenity Migrants:”** These respondents, 23 total, came to live in the Flathead Valley seeking the natural amenities and lifestyle of the region, typically having no previous ties to Montana.
- ❖ **“Return Montanans:”** These nine participants grew up in Montana, spent a long duration of time away, then returned, typically for the lifestyle and to be nearer family.
- ❖ **“Native Flatheaders:”** Thirteen of the 80 respondents were born and raised in the Flathead and have remained.
- ❖ **“Native Montanans:”** Another thirteen of these participants are native to some other region of Montana, but relocated to the

Flathead. In this regard they tend to share some characteristics with both in-migrants and Native Flatheaders.

- ❖ **"Other Migrants:"** In all, 22 participants moved to the region from somewhere outside of Montana for reasons other than amenities, such as a job opportunity for themselves or a spouse.

Many of the attitudes expressed by the participants are closely matched to their relationships to the Flathead Valley. These terms will be used to describe the participants when their beliefs seem related to how they came to live in the valley.

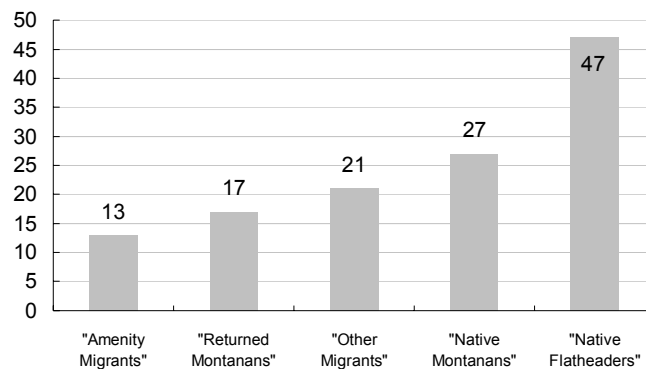
It is also useful to note that these categories underestimate somewhat the lure of the Flathead's amenities. While 23 can be described as Amenity Migrants, a large number of Return Montanans and Native Montanans were also, at least in part, drawn to the region by its amenities.

3. Those who came for the amenities have been in the valley the shortest time

Amenity Migrants are, on the whole, the newest to the region. This group has lived in the valley for an average of 13 years. Other migrants have lived in the valley an average of 21 years.

Native Flatheaders have lived in the region for on average 47 years, far longer than the next group, Native Montanans (27 years).

Average years lived in Flathead



B. Attitudes toward Glacier National Park

1. Overwhelmingly, they value and treasure Glacier National Park

These participants consider the park very important to them personally, often expressing a clear fondness or feeling of ownership. Even those few who say they never go to the park personally usually characterized its mere existence as at least somewhat important to them.

In their use of the park they vary widely, from dedicated, several-times-weekly users to rare exceptions who consciously avoid going to the park.

- ❖ 27 participants are frequent users of Glacier—typically recreating there at least weekly, sometimes year round
- ❖ 37 are users of the park, hiking, camping, or picnicking in Glacier 3-10 times a year
- ❖ 13 avoid the park, either preferring to recreate on less-restrictive public lands or simply not recreating outdoors at all. One of the most common reasons to avoid Glacier Park was the Park Service ban on firearms, which makes many uncomfortable in bear country.

While nearly all participants are likely to highly value Glacier Park, relative newcomers to the valley are more likely to use it often. Nearly half of Amenity Migrants and Other Migrants say they use the park very often and most of the rest use it occasionally. In contrast, the large majority of Native Flatheaders and Native Montanans only use the park occasionally or avoid it altogether (21 out of 26).

"I don't know that anyone can adequately explain what led them to Montana. There is a magic here. I know the first time I set eyes on Glacier Park, I was absolutely awestruck. I had never seen anything so magnificent in all my life. I vowed right then and there to come back and sure enough. It took a few years... I told my wife very simply. You're my wife. Glacier Park is my mistress. I think she understood."

—Owner, food manufacturer
"Amenity Migrant"

Reasons for this vary. Some Native Flatheaders own recreational property on Flathead Lake or along the North Fork Road and prefer to recreate there. Others stressed the restrictions in the park.

Those participants from all groups who say they only use the park occasionally tend not to pursue highly active outdoor pastimes, such as hiking or climbing, at all. They more often car camp or drive through to enjoy the scenery, typically when out-of-area relatives or friends come to visit.

Overwhelmingly, the people say they like the park for its scenic beauty. Others named the wildlife and historical values, but scenic value dominated as the most important aspect across all participants.

2. They tend to consider the park “safe”

Glacier National Park is a very non-controversial issue for these participants. As noted, they value the park highly. They also tend to consider the

“It’s part of the magic of the park. It’s a place where change occurs so slowly. My parents honeymooned in a cabin there and I can still walk by it. It’s a place where people can go to deny the passage of time.”

—Realtor, Columbia Falls,
“Native Flathead”

park as “safe.” Participants often used words like “unchanging” and “preserved” to describe the park.

Most believe development outside the park would not have much affect on the park itself. Those few who do perceive a threat tended only to name the erosion of the

aesthetic character in the canyon area. Just a few participants noted affects such as the compromise of travel corridors or grazing land used by resident wildlife.

This may imply a certain complacency, which could have some implications for advocacy organizations attempting to influence park policy.

3. Going to the Sun Highway dominates current concerns

When asked what they believe the major issues facing Glacier are, a clear majority first named the Going to the Sun Highway’s current state of disrepair.

With near unanimity, those who expressed an opinion believe the Park Service should not close the road completely to traffic during any part of the season, but should spend whatever it takes to repair the road.

“The road, Going to the Sun Road is a real treasure and I think we should do whatever we need to do to fix that road. I hope that that road will continue to be used by people.”

—Manager, staffing service, Kalispell,
“Amenity Migrant”

Following this, the participants most often cited the lodges, backcountry chalets, and general infrastructure as in need of maintenance attention. Very often they described the crowding as an increasing problem, but most do not see it as something that needs to be addressed by increased infrastructure.

4. Overall, sector and “reason for living in the Flathead” do not influence park beliefs

No clear patterns emerged when comparing these participants’ attitudes toward Glacier National Park to their business sector or reason for coming to the Flathead. This seems largely because of the broad consensus that the park is a well-managed regional treasure merely in need of repair. As a result, any other attitudes toward Glacier and park management do not come up sufficiently often to draw conclusions about what type of respondents feel this way.

5. Most believe park funding is currently insufficient

To the extent that these participants know anything about park funding, they tend to believe it is insufficient to maintain the current infrastructure. Many describe this as a condition persisting throughout the National Park system.

“The biggest issue with Glacier? The federal government giving them enough money to maintain the park. For everything... road maintenance, hiring enough biologists and botanists to keep non-native plants out, restoring the lodges, everything.”

– Administrator, medical practice, Kalispell, “Amenity Migrant”

Only a small minority believes the Park Service currently funds Glacier sufficiently. Even fewer believe the park does not efficiently spend the money currently given to it.

6. Glacier Park plays a large role in the success of their businesses

It is difficult for nearly all of these respondents to imagine life in the Flathead Valley without the presence of Glacier National Park. When asked

“The way I look at it, [Glacier] is the anchor for everything around here. So much of everything that’s going on around here wouldn’t be the way it is if it wasn’t next to the park. It’s that one entity that’s there that’s completely different from everything else, even the Bob.”

– Owner, retail firm, Whitefish, “Amenity Migrant.”

about the importance of Glacier to their businesses, many simply had trouble responding.

On the whole, only those businesses that experience a spike in sales volume during the summer months could quantify the effect of Glacier. While this group included all of the obviously affected Tourist

Services, a surprising range of other businesses experiences a direct benefit from tourist traffic.

For example, an optical retailer described a 20% increase in business during the summer merely from tourists losing their glasses, usually dropping them in a lake. Employers across the sectors—including a dairy distributor, grocery wholesaler, auto parts distributor, and others—described similar large increases in sales directly attributed to the influx of people during the summer.

7. Construction/Real Estate most strongly report Glacier’s benefits to business

While they do not experience a summer volume increase directly attributable to tourist traffic, respondents in Construction/Real Estate articulated very clearly the importance of Glacier.

Broadly speaking, these participants described a Flathead economy *largely driven* by in-migration and the associated strength in the building and real estate industries. They believe Glacier to be a key amenity in attracting this migration.

Big Mountain, Flathead Lake, and the other public lands were also described as playing a significant role.

Most respondents in Construction/Real Estate further reported that the presence of Glacier and the surrounding wild country improves their ability to find and hire quality workers.

8. A small minority believe the park should be managed more for “people”

A handful of participants believe the park should be managed with less emphasis on wilderness values and more on accommodating people.

These respondents tended to advocate substantial expansions of the park’s infrastructure, including adding new blacktop road and paving of existing dirt roads.

9. A small minority desires a public transit system

A small minority of these participants expressed strong enthusiasm for the development of a public transportation system in Glacier. While only a handful voiced this desire, the commitment with which they expressed it bears some mention.

As one dentist practicing in Kalispell explained, “It would be nice if they had some kind of central transportation, at some point basically negate the use of cars in the park. I’m not talking about locking up the park. I’m talking about you can go through the West Gate and you can get on a monorail or a bus, whatever you want, you can go hiking, get off wherever you want, go hiking and get back on. ”

Even one general contractor, who was generally opposed to conservation, believes there is merit in the idea, noting “I rode the buses in the Grand Canyon and it probably made my experience better than it did driving my car on that part of it.”

10. Other thoughts on the park

A few miscellaneous attitudes toward the park were expressed only a few times. These include:

- ❖ Leadership is unresponsive to the needs of the valley
- ❖ Park employees are lazy and inefficient
- ❖ Park spends too much money
- ❖ Condition grizzly to fear people with a limited hunt
- ❖ Park should not be expanded
- ❖ Park should work harder to open the road in the spring
- ❖ The superintendent should stop changing so often
- ❖ Park should increase marketing efforts

C. Life and business in the Flathead

1. *Participants like living in the Flathead*

Without exception, these business leaders characterized the Flathead as a region uniquely worth living in. The majority had moved to the area in their lifetimes for the amenities it offers and were not disappointed. Not a single respondent talked of plans to leave the area. Most characterized it as “home.” No doubt such sentiments would be typical of a group of mostly successful, well-established business leaders anywhere. However, these responses are notable in their unanimity.

2. *Recreation opportunities and community are the reasons they live in the valley*

Overwhelmingly, these business leaders consider the *recreation opportunities* and the *people* in the community as the most important reasons to live in the Flathead region. This is among the clearest findings in this study.

A total of 47 respondents volunteered outdoor recreation when explaining what they like about the region and 44 said either the people, rural culture, or in some cases family relations. A great many said both. Nearly all reported one or the other.

Only 10 named job opportunities as a reason to live in the region. Only seven named natural beauty specifically, though this characteristic was very often implied in descriptions of the natural recreation.

3. *Disadvantages of life in the Flathead region vary*

In contrast to the broad consensus about what is *good* about life in the Flathead, there was a wide diversity of opinion on what is *not* good about life in the Flathead.

The most often named disadvantage of living in the Flathead is the difficulty in earning income, cited by 17 respondents. (This particular finding becomes clearer later during discussion of the business environment.) However, 17 respondents said there are *no* disadvantages to living in the Flathead. Other disadvantages cited include:

- ❖ The lack of cultural opportunities (theater, music, dining, etc.).
- ❖ The long, gray winters.
- ❖ Rapid population growth.
- ❖ Lack of transportation (air service, Interstate access).
- ❖ Lack of shopping

- ❖ An excessive number of “greenies”
- ❖ “Local ignorance”

4. Business is good

Not a single respondent reported declining business volume. At worst, they described business as “stable.” The majority of respondents who addressed this said their businesses are growing.

- ❖ The Business Services, Construction/Real Estate, and Manufacturing sectors were notably more likely than the other sectors to report growing business.

This finding tends to match other data available on the state of the Flathead economy. However, reporting bias may play a larger role here than in other sections, as some respondents would be reluctant to acknowledge difficult times.

5. Few conduct business in the Flathead for the income

These participants do business in the Flathead region foremost because they want to *live* there, not because of the region’s financial opportunities or the business climate.

This finding is reinforced in other areas of the study, notably, the

“The quote to use is ‘poverty with a view.’ I took a 50% pay cut to come here.”

–Owner, computer services firm, Whitefish
“Amenity Migrant”

discussion of downsides to living in the area, among the most common of which was “lower income.” Whether it is true or not, these respondents

overwhelmingly believe they have “given something up” in order to live in the Flathead Valley. Many believe they could make more money in a larger city, even relative to the increased cost of living in these areas.

Interestingly, this is often true of those who reported that they came to the area specifically for a job opportunity. This suggests that even in these cases the job opportunity was only a part of the reason they came.

6. There is mixed opinion about the quality of the Flathead workforce

Respondents from various sectors described very different situations with respect to the quality of the workforce in the Flathead Valley.

- ❖ About a quarter of the respondents consider the quality of employees in the Flathead to be very high. Overwhelmingly,

they attribute this to the lure of the Flathead’s outdoor recreation and lifestyle amenities

- ❖ Another quarter complained of “lazy employees” and a “declining work ethic.”

"I think you can draw quality people to this region compared to the rest of Montana. I think it's a destination for new graduates, really qualified people. I think Western Montana, and especially the Flathead valley, has a better lure for quality employees."

–*Architect, Kalispell*
 “*Native Montanan*”

This apparent disconnect may be related to the types of jobs the employers are trying to fill.

For example, respondents from the Local Retail and Business Services sectors were among those most likely to

complain about the workforce quality. Those in Construction/Real Estate and Visitor Services tend to be very pleased with the quality of their employees. Participants from the Manufacturing sector were evenly split in their response.

This may imply that there is a high-quality pool of workers in the Flathead seeking jobs that pay well or are highly rewarding. They may simply be reluctant to take jobs in retail or business services. This study did not attempt to measure worker preferences.

Several participants reported that the labor market became noticeably tighter as soon as Stream Corporation began operations in Kalispell.

7. The region’s amenities contribute to higher quality health care

Repeatedly, physicians and non-physician leaders in the Health Care sector said the high-value recreational amenities in the Flathead play a key role in attracting top MDs to the region. While physicians in the Flathead regularly complained of the

"For a community this size we have always been at the forefront of medical technology. And that's one of the things that brought me here—to be able to practice in a small town that has specialty coverage and a hospital that's as advanced as they are."

–*Physician, Kalispell*
 “*Amenity Migrant*”

reduced income they receive to practice in the region, they generally praised the quality of life as fair compensation.

This benefit does not strongly influence recruiting of non-physician health care professionals, however. Nurses, clerical staff, and technicians are characterized as largely “local.”

In general, all Health Care respondents characterized the Flathead’s medical resources—personnel and facilities—as exceedingly good for an area of its size.

8. Local Retail feels strong competitive pressures

Business leaders in the Local Retail sector were most likely to cite competition, particularly competition from companies outside the region, as a drawback to doing business in the Flathead.

D. Change in the Flathead

1. Growth in the valley has expanded their businesses

As the valley has grown, business has increased for about half of these respondents. This is the clearest finding from the discussion of growth. Even many participants who bemoan changes in the region often admitted it has enriched them at least somewhat.

- ❖ About half of these respondents said the growth has increased their business volume.
- ❖ Participants from the Construction/Real Estate sector are notably more likely to say growth has increased their business volume.

2. Growth has compromised the character of the Flathead Valley

Other than increased prosperity for themselves, these participants see few benefits in the changes that growth has brought to the Flathead. Overall, they believe the valley has lost and is continuing to lose some of its unique characteristics. Among the changes they most lament:

- ❖ Loss of open space, farm land
- ❖ Increase of sprawl
- ❖ Loss of rural character
- ❖ Increased traffic density, “road rage”
- ❖ Increase in urban attitudes, anger
- ❖ Increase in customer service demands
- ❖ Decline of traditional job base
- ❖ Increase in wealth disparity
- ❖ Decline of central Kalispell retail area

Some of these changes are of greater concern to some groups compared to others. Some are fairly universal concerns.

After increased traffic, the most frequent lament is the loss of rural character, cited by respondents across all groups. Native Montanans and Native Flatheaders were more likely to

describe this loss of rural character in terms of the attitudes of newcomers,

“For me there's a great deal of sadness, because my friends were the loggers who don't have any work anymore. . . I understand why all that happens but it certainly changes the community. It's a different ballgame.”

—General manager, tourism operator
“Native Montanan”

demise of the logging industry, and increasingly demanding customers. Migrants to the area tend to see the commercial sprawl and influx of national chain stores as the signs of “declining rural character.” Loss of farmland tends to be lamented by all groups.

Change in the valley has not been all for the worse, however. Native Montanans, in particular, sometimes positively associated the decline in rural character with increased shopping and improved air travel to the region.

Improvements most often cited include:

- ❖ Increased shopping, restaurant availability
- ❖ Greater cultural diversity
- ❖ Increased economic opportunity
- ❖ Improved passenger air service
- ❖ Arrival of, profit from high-end clientele

3. Most agree government has not handled the growth well

Among these business leaders there is a widespread sense that the city and county governments have not responded adequately to growth. Most agree the county and city need better zoning, though what kind they would support varies.

Four broad groups emerged with respect to attitudes toward planning: Anti-Sprawl, Pro-Infrastructure, Pro-Property rights, and Moderates.

Anti-sprawl

Most often, these respondents express frustration that planning leaders have not sufficiently contained the commercial sprawl. The valley, as a result, appears “haphazard” or “junky.” Over half of these respondents believe city and county planners have not done enough to contain sprawl. Their chief complaints include:

- ❖ Loss of open space and farmland
- ❖ Loss of the Flathead’s traditional, rural character
- ❖ Erosion of the local retail base

“I haven’t actually seen any growth management, its just more sprawl. I see us eventually looking like Missoula. And eventually probably even like Spokane. I don’t think it’s inevitable . . . If there were some good growth management policies in place it wouldn’t be inevitable.”

—B&B owner, Somers, “Return Montanan”

Very often, participants who express frustration with the sprawl have lived somewhere other than Montana in their lifetimes; most of them are Amenity Migrants or Return Montanans. In general, they

voiced support for Citizens for a Better Flathead's vision for the valley's planning.

Pro-Infrastructure

About a quarter of these business leaders believe the planning

"Also, the visitor, when the visitor comes to Montana that knows they can go to a McDonald's and get a Big Mac that's the same as what it was in their home state. There's a certain amount of comfort there. So I encourage national chains to come in."

– Engineer, Kalispell, "Native Flatheader"

leaders have failed the valley by not developing sufficient infrastructure, such as roads, sewer, and utilities. These participants tended, though with many exceptions, to come from the Native Flathead and

Native Montanan groups. They favor the current growth, but believe the city and county should respond in a more organized way to facilitate traffic patterns and development. They typically believe that:

- ❖ The increased retail has helped the area—many complain of inadequate shopping
- ❖ The growth has benefited businesses and the welfare of valley residents
- ❖ The infrastructure is adequate now, but will not be in the near future
- ❖ There is currently an excess of regulation confronting developers, that zoning is too restrictive

Pro-Property rights

Eight participants expressed very strong opposition to zoning of any kind as a violation of the rights of private property owners. They tended to express opposition to the city-county Master Plan, often citing support for County Commissioner Dale Williams.

Moderates

A handful of participants expressed the belief that the public process is excessively dominated by extremes on both sides. They tend to believe the valley's growth planning has been adequate or, in rare cases, good, but criticized the rancor that characterizes public process.

3. Many believe sprawl, unchecked, could harm the economy in the long run

Nearly half of these participants reported believing that the unplanned growth in the area could one day begin to act as a drag on the region's economy, particularly for those sectors dependent on tourism and in-migration.

- ❖ Amenity Migrants and Return Montanans were the most likely to express the belief that unplanned growth could harm the economy.
- ❖ Other Migrants and Native Flatheaders were divided on the issue.
- ❖ Native Montanans tended *not* to think unplanned growth poses an economic threat.

Participants who have lived in locations other than the Flathead seemed to rate this threat from unplanned growth more strongly. A few specifically

"If you don't have the wildlife and resources and clean water, not only will the people who are visiting here stop coming, the people who live here will leave."

—Manager, western wear store, Kalispell,
"Other Migrant"

identified their fears of the Flathead becoming like the place they moved from.

Not all who had lived elsewhere believe sprawl poses a threat, however. A handful drew the opposite conclusion. Typically,

they acknowledged the Flathead is growing too fast, but added, "Compared to what?" These participants believe the tourists, lifestyle refugees, and wealthy in-migrants fueling the region's growth do not have any other place to turn.

For the most part, those who believe growth could harm the region's economy cited more planning as the appropriate solution. A sizeable minority however expressed resignation to the inevitability of the growth's affect.

4. Hostility to "California attitudes," while lamenting loss of rural character

One very typical complaint of long-time residents concerned the influx of out-of-state residents who "bring their big city attitudes with them." Often this attitude was attributed to progressive groups, usually Citizens for a Better Flathead. This complaint invariably went hand-in-hand with a lament at the loss of the region's rural character.

"It seems like every time they have zoning, the rich people flourish and the people who don't have a lot of money struggle, because we don't have the time or the money to fight it. Or get the thing done."

—Owner, crane and sign company,
Kalispell, "Native Flathead"

5. Double standard in zoning is frustrating to some

A number of respondents cited frustration with what they describe as a double standard in zoning. While small, local businesses cannot afford to comply with even the simplest zoning rules, they believe, wealthy out of state developers can afford the lengthy appeals required to get essentially any variance they want.

6. Many native Montanans place little value in the opinions of migrants to Montana

Very often in this survey, Native Montanans and Native Flatheaders discounted the opinions of individuals not born and raised in Montana.

“I see people come in here now, a lot of the environmentalists, that can't see the loggers' point of view ever. They've always been here, but now they want to say "go away, go away" let's preserve the forests... They've got to get over their extremeness.”

—Owner, tax preparation service,
Kalispell, “Native Flathead”

7. There is a leadership vacuum in the Flathead

More than half of these participants, across all groups, reported that *no* leaders in the region reflected their outlook on how growth should be managed. They very often expressed pessimism about the quality of individuals willing to run for public office. They also believe that most who are willing tend to have an extreme position on some topic.

Still, nearly half were able to cite some leaders they believe represent their views somewhat, though even this was typically qualified agreement. The most cited leaders include:

- ❖ Citizens for a Better Flathead (CBF)
- ❖ Montanans for Multiple Use
- ❖ Chris Kukulski, Kalispell City Manager
- ❖ Whitefish and Kalispell Chambers of Commerce

CBF and Dale Williams were the two most frequently named as groups respondents specifically *disagree* with. At the time of this study, both were lightning rods for opinion in the valley.

Other clear findings regarding community leader include:

- ❖ Amenity Migrants were somewhat more likely to favor Citizens for a Better Flathead.
- ❖ Not a single Native Montanan or Return Montanan was able or willing to name leaders with whom they agree on planning issues.

E. Attitudes toward the conservation movement

1. Generally speaking, this group does not agree with environmentalists

On balance, more members of this group do not sympathize with the environmental movement than do. Nearly half consider themselves opposed. Only about one quarter do support the environmental movement. The remainder tended to say there should be a balance between the two opposing forces.

Which business sector respondents represent did not turn out to be particularly predictive of how they feel about the environmental movement. Clear majorities

of participants from the Business Services and Services sector expressed opposition to the environmental movement.

However, all other sectors were fairly mixed.² Even

Visitors Services, which

might reasonably be supposed to support conservation efforts, was evenly divided.

In this study, it turned out that how respondents came to live in Montana was more predictive of how an individual feels about the environmental movement than what industry they represent. On the whole, Native Montanans, Native Flatheaders, and Return Montanans tended to more likely to oppose environmentalism. This was reinforced by many comments made by these natives themselves, accusing new arrivals of being “green.”

“I think [environmentalists] need to be done away with. I think most of them are not the people who have been around here for a long time. The majority of them, from my experience, are newcomers, that want to see it, this place left just like they found it.”

—Office manager, surgical practice, Kalispell, “Native Montanan”

2. The valley tends to be highly polarized on the specific issues

Unlike responses to planning, change, and Glacier National Park, very few areas of agreement emerged with respect to environmental conservation. On the whole, participants either support all current environmental efforts (wolf and grizzly recovery, forest management, etc.) or *none* of them.

² A judgment *could* be made about what types of business leaders support or do not support environmentalism. For example, in the category of Visitor Services, fishing outfitters might tend to support conservation but hotel operators might tend not to. More interviews focused on this question would be required to validate this.

A majority of respondents tend to consider the conservation debate in the Flathead dominated by extremes on both sides. A small handful of respondents who can only be described as actually *belonging* to these extremes do not believe there is polarization—instead they describe the other side as unreasonable.

On conservation issues there is a notable lack of agreement on the most basic facts. There exists a clear fog of uncertainty in the valley, (though it is beyond the scope of this report to assert from where). Consensus will remain elusive so long as many residents variously believe that, for example, roads harm/do not harm wildlife, that some logging does/does not improve forest health, or that conservation easements are/are not a U.N. plot to seize American land.

“I think it's two extremes. It's one that wants to lock everything up and make the whole valley a National Park and the other end that wants to clear-cut Glacier National Park. I don't see a lot of in-between ground and I think it's the in-between ground we need to hit.”

—General contractor, Kalispell,
“Native Flatheader”

3. Roads, timber, and wolves inspire frustration

Road closures, timber harvest levels, and to a lesser extent wolf recovery efforts have angered many respondents to a level that is difficult to overstate. Those opposed to conservation expressed emotions ranging from mild frustration to raised-voice outrage at the current handling of these three issues.

The vein of frustration associated with these issues seemed strongest when they described their belief that forces from outside the valley, usually federal agencies, are imposing these policies upon them. They feel the policies are arbitrary, not supported by data or common sense.

Road closures

Road closure frustration took two distinct forms: Those frustrated at the idea and those frustrated at the actuality. Many who expressed outrage over road closures were not able to identify actual areas where they once had access and no longer do. Others could identify specifically places they had once recreated that now are closed.

These participants generally do *not* believe road closures do anything to protect wildlife. Again they characterize them as arbitrary and indefensible.

Timber harvest

Decline of the timber economy, increased fire danger, and forest health dominated arguments in favor of increased timber harvest.

Respondents strongly voiced frustration at the cultural changes in the valley that have accompanied the decline of the timber industry. Very few of these respondents attributed this to any factor other than out-of-state environmentalists shutting down the forest.

Wolves

Those most frustrated with wolf reintroduction were in most cases hunters. They see the presence of wolves as directly contributing to a decline in large game populations. Many see the wolf through an historical perspective. As one owner of a property management firm noted, "Our founding fathers discovered 200 years ago that wolves and civilization are not compatible. It's that simple. That's why they put a bounty on the damn things."

4. Perspectives on use tend to follow environmental attitudes closely

Apart from how they came to Montana, the most evident common difference between those who support the environmental movement and

"Human activities are just as important as wolves and grizzly bears."

—Bank president, Kalispell, "Native Flathead"

those who do not is their perception on the purpose of natural resources. Those who believe nature fundamentally exists for the use of those near it, oppose the movement. Those

who believe nature should as much as possible remain in its natural state support it.

5. Many are concerned about threats to water quality

Those respondents who oppose environmental protection tended to share a very common set of beliefs about the movement—notably, opposition to road

closures, support for increased logging, and disdain for "extremism."

However, a notable number of these participants did identify pollution of the Flathead Valley's aquifer as a real threat.

"Water quality is the one part of the conservation movement I think needs to be addressed. Without good drinking water, without good quality water, Flathead Lake is not Flathead Lake. It's an algae pond. That's going to have quite an affect on tourists."

—Owner, garden supply and nursery, Kalispell, "Amenity Migrant"

"I see the environmental movement as being a 'shutdown of anything' and not doing anything with natural resources. To me the environmental movement is negatively impacting our area," explained a

manager at a fuel systems engineering firm in Kalispell. “But the plus side of EPA regulation has to do with water quality. The one issue they're facing with the mall for instance is how is that going to negatively impact our water quality.”

6. Even pro-environmentalists support some sustained timber yield

Support for logging runs deep in the Flathead region. Many who sympathize very strongly with the environmental movement believe there could be more timber harvest without exceeding sustainable level.

7. They do not agree about the influence of environmentalists

Those participants with the most extreme opinions on environmental issues demonstrated little agreement on the actual level of influence the conservation movement has in the valley.

Those who most strongly support environmental organizations tended to characterize the Flathead’s conservation community as small, marginal, and sometimes in fear of

“Conservation is fine but it's gone too far – the timber industry has been brought to their knees”
–Owner, property management firm, Kalispell, “Native Montanan”

“There isn't much environmentalism. Whatever there is gets opposed.”
–Dentist, Somers, “Other Migrant”

physical harm. As the owner of a masonry supply firm in Kalispell explained, “In this valley, it's just stupid. There's so much division. There isn't a conservation movement. The word environmentalist has been such a catchall word, nobody can talk about it with any sense.”

Those who strongly oppose the environmental movement tended to characterize it as extraordinarily powerful and destructive of traditional ways of life.

8. While polarized, most see groups who are too extreme on both sides

Interestingly, the groups these participants say they “trust or tend to agree with” do not always seem reflective of the polarization described above. Many business leaders tended to identify groups they believe are too extreme on *both* sides.

For example, many participants who express a strong pro-conservation bias singled out groups like the Sierra Club or EarthFirst! as not reflective of their views. They also fairly often qualified their support for local groups suggesting they sometimes “go too far.” Similarly, some participants opposed to the conservation movement cited the John Stokes

and militia-type sentiment in the valley as too extreme, in some cases “crazy.”

In addition, many ended their discussion of environmental groups with a plea for “balance” or “compromise.”

F. Reactions to statements

The participants were read a series of five statements and asked to respond to each.

1. “There is good reason to be optimistic about the future of the Flathead”

Despite their frustrations with how the valley is changing, this group remains overwhelmingly optimistic. Virtually all agree with this statement, though they explain their optimism in various ways. The most common reasons for optimism included:

- ❖ Growth will bring more prosperity.
- ❖ I believe we will solve our problems.
- ❖ I believe city planning will improve.
- ❖ We still have all the outdoor opportunities.
- ❖ This will always be a great place to live.
- ❖ I am just an optimistic person by nature.
- ❖ We will open our forests again to multiple uses.
- ❖ There are more sophisticated people coming all the time.

These respondents’ reasons for optimism in the majority of cases closely matched their perspectives on growth, planning, and the environment. Those optimists who believe the area should have stronger, more progressive urban planning tended to think the county will overcome its differences and find solutions. Those frustrated by the current forest management policies believe timber harvests will increase at least somewhat.

“It seems like some of this [forest fires] will get things turned around and soon we will be harvesting timber again.”

—Owner, local retail store,
Kalispell, “Other Migrant”

“It’s a nice place and will continue to be a nice place and it won’t fill up with 800,000 people. It doesn’t work that way.”

General manager, manufacturing firm,
Columbia Falls, “Other Migrant”

The nearly unanimous optimism might be attributable to the population being studied here, successful entrepreneurs. While this cannot be asserted conclusively, it is likely such a group tends to think positively.

A small minority disagreed, reporting pessimism about the future of the Flathead. Almost invariably, this pessimism stemmed from the population growth and development in the region—and severe doubts the valley will ever be able to manage it.

2. *“Natural amenities like wildlife, clean water, and Glacier National Park are very important to the economic health of this region”*

All but one believe the natural amenities of the Flathead Valley are the main reason for the economic success and population growth.

This highlights a key challenge for progressive advocacy organizations: Everyone agrees that the natural amenities are essential. They do not at all agree on what kinds of policy decisions will best protect these amenities.

For example, those opposed to environmentalism tend to believe the reduced timber harvest on public lands has created a situation in which catastrophic fire is more likely and disease has crept in. They frequently assert that this, as well as reduced ORV access to forest areas, threatens the tourist economy created by the public lands.

3. *“The Flathead’s economic health is being harmed by environmental policies”*

There is substantial agreement that environmental policies have harmed the timber industry, but, on the whole, most respondents do not

“Environmental polices harm portions of the economy, but the overall economy, and the long term economic outlook for the area would be enhanced through proper environmental controls.”
—Physician, Kalispell, “Amenity Migrant”

believe the Flathead’s *overall* economic health has been harmed by environmental policies.

Even those participants who express strong frustration or anger about the collapse of timber often expressed the belief that this

does not mean the policies have had a net negative affect on development in the region. On the other hand, many participants who support conservation frequently acknowledged harm to the timber sector.

Frequently, participants struggled to answer, though for different reasons. Some, frustrated by the decline in the timber industry, paused before acknowledging it has not affected the economy overall. Others in favor of conservation also sometimes paused, reluctant to acknowledge the losses experienced by timber workers.

However, there were exceptions on both sides of the spectrum. Some believe environmental policies have created a substantial and persistent drag on development and commercial activity of all kinds. Others attribute the decline in logging to factors other than environmental policy.

4. *“The tone of public debate in the valley is harsh. This harshness is bad for the business climate”*

More than half of these participants believe the tone of public debate in the Flathead Valley is harsh. However, only about a quarter of these respondents believe this harshness has any affect on business.

Characterizations of this harsh tone vary. Most attribute it to entrenched parties with “extreme” viewpoints on both sides of seemingly every debate. Others—usually those with strong opinions themselves—point to one side or the other as responsible for the tenor of the valley’s debate.

- ❖ The strongest supporters of the environmental movement tend to blame the radio host John Stokes of KGEZ for inciting the extreme right-wing sentiment.
- ❖ Those most strongly opposed to environmental protection blame what they characterize as the inflexibly “extreme environmentalists.”

In general, however, they do not believe the debate has all that substantial of an effect on business. Many describe the business community as too busy to concern itself with the polarization. Tellingly, many of these participants supported this by explaining it certainly has no affect on their business.

“The political values up here are just strange. There's people up here so far left side and so far right side. My first county commissioner meeting up here there was almost a fight between the mayor and the city attorney. It's just a lot of left wing and a lot of right wing and it's counterproductive in the community because you really don't know who to believe and who to trust.”
—Engineer, Kalispell, “Other Migrant”

However, a sizeable minority does believe the harshness has a negative affect on the business community. They divide into two groups:

- ❖ Those who believe the “weird” or “redneck” attitudes in the valley create bad publicity that scares off potential developers. They sometimes point to the Montana Freemen or Project Seven as examples of this kind of publicity.
- ❖ Those who blame progressive environmental groups for unfairly interfering with development of all kinds. They very often cited the proposed Glacier Mall as an example of this.

5. “The business community, conservationists, and public land managers such as Glacier National Park should develop closer partnerships to maintain natural, economic, and community values.”

This statement did not elicit particularly notable results. About half of the participants surveyed believe these three communities—conservationists, public land managers, and the business community—should in fact work more closely together.

However, many of these responses were fairly non-committal. Many seem to believe increased partnerships are never really a *bad* thing. As a result, this section probably conveys a distorted sense of these respondents’ attitudes toward the current state of partnership in the valley.

Still, some notable findings did emerge:

- ❖ A sizeable minority disputed the premise of the statement, saying these three communities work as well together as they reasonably could.
- ❖ Many respondents in the Local Retail and Visitors Services sectors noted that the park has worked much more effectively with the local business community recently, notably during the Going to the Sun Highway decision-making process.
- ❖ A few argued that there is no reason for the National Park Service to consider the needs of the local community, that they should manage Glacier with the best interests of the park in mind.