

Seeley-Swan County: Feasibility Report

Introduction:

Seeley-Swan County is uniquely defined by its vibrant community, distinct rural character, and stunning natural landscape. To support the evolving needs of its residents and ensure long-term resilience, this report explores the feasibility of Seeley-Swan County. The purpose of this assessment is to determine if the proposed project is not only financially and logistically viable but also aligned with the community’s core values and growth goals. By examining environmental impacts, public benefit, and resource allocation, this report provides a comprehensive framework for informed decision-making. For the purposes of this report, the new county is referred to as “Seeley-Swan County”. Montana law would leave the right to name a new county to its voters.

Executive Summary: County Dataset Profile

Data Integrity & Completeness

- **Total Sample Size:** 6,435 records
- **Completeness:** 100% (6,435 filled / 0 missing values)
- **Uniqueness:** 5,452 unique values (~84.7% uniqueness rate)

Core Summary Statistics

<u>Metric</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
Sum	2,289,620,000	Cumulative total across all records (2.28962×109)
Mean (Average)	355,808.00	Central mathematical average
Median (Midpoint)	224,407.00	True middle value of the population
Standard Deviation (Sample)	433,958.00	High dispersion relative to the mean
Standard Deviation (Population)	433,924.00	Population-wide dispersion measure

Distribution & Range Breakout

- **Minimum:** 0
- **25th Percentile (Q1):** 112,122
- **50th Percentile (Median):** 224,407
- **75th Percentile (Q3):** 501,095

- **Maximum:** 10,300,800 (1.03008×10⁷)
- **Interquartile Range (IQR):** 388,974
- **Overall Range:** 10,300,800

Financial Viability: How a Lean Rural Model Runs at a Surplus

- **Baseline Operational Predictability:** With 50% of the county's base falling neatly between \$112K (Q1) and \$501K (Q3), and a typical midpoint of \$224K, municipal services can be budgeted strictly around these modest, predictable median numbers.
- **Low Overhead Scaling:** In a lean rural administration, fixed operational costs (infrastructure, staffing, emergency services) are calibrated to serve the baseline median load rather than bloated enterprise capacity.
- **Outlier Revenue Windfalls:** The massive right-skew, driven by high-end outliers up to \$10.3M, pulls the average up to \$355K and total revenue to over \$2.28B. When local government operations are budgeted conservatively against median baseline costs, these high-value outliers generate substantial top-line revenue that directly feeds a budget surplus.

Primary Real Estate & Geographic Data

- **Missoula County GIS & Spatial Parcel Repositories:** Private parcel counts, spatial boundary delineations, and contiguous land-use mapping were derived using QGIS spatial analysis applied to official Missoula County Geographic Information System (GIS) parcel layers. The dataset isolates **6,435 private tax parcels** across the Clearwater, Blackfoot, and Swan valleys.
- **Montana Department of Revenue (DOR) Property Assessment Records:** Individual property valuations, land-class distinctions, and aggregate market values were extracted directly from state DOR records. This dataset encompasses an aggregate property market valuation of **\$2.289 Billion**, establishing the baseline assessed taxable value of **\$31.13 Million**.

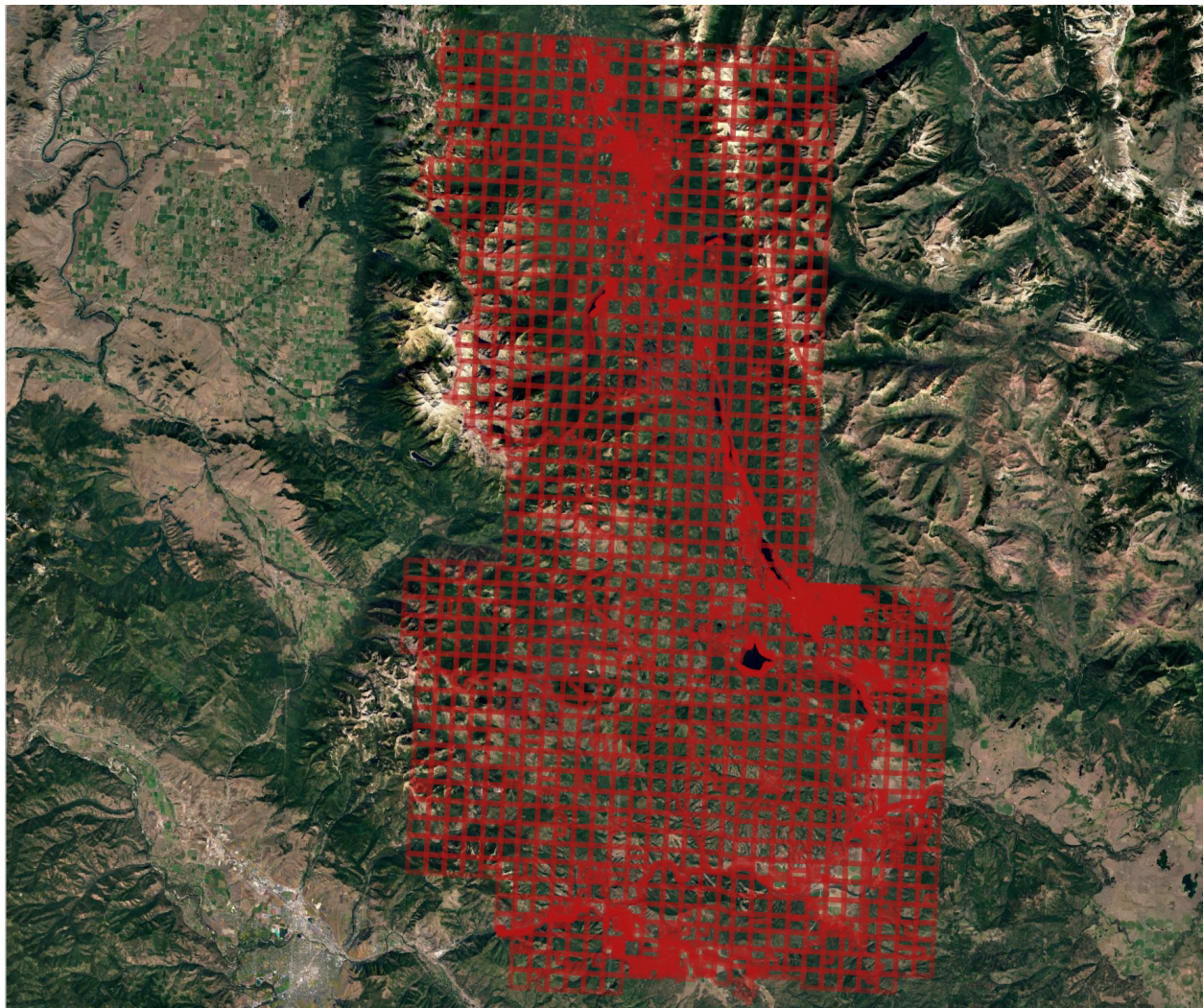
Boundary: Encompassing 6,435 private parcels starting approximately 3 miles west of Johnsrud Road along Highway 200 and stretching through the Potomac Valley, Greenough, Seeley Lake, and Condon along the Highway 83 and Highway 200 corridors, the proposed boundary establishes a manageable civic baseline with an estimated year-round population of 4,000 to 4,500 residents.

Southwestern Anchor Point: Township 13N, Range 17W, Section 18/19 (along the Highway 200 / Blackfoot River corridor, ~3 miles west of Johnsrud Park access).

Southern / Blackfoot Corridor Grid: Townships **13N & 14N**, Ranges **14W through 17W** (capturing McNamara, Potomac, Greenough, and the Garnet Mountain foothills).
Northern / Clearwater & Swan Grid: Townships **15N through 21N**, Ranges **14W through 17W** (capturing Seeley Lake through Condon to the Lake County line).

QGIS Information: Missoula County existing lines

The proposed county establishes a highly sustainable, self-sufficient baseline that aligns perfectly with Montana's existing rural landscape. With a year-round population of 4000-4500 and a total parcel count of 6,435, the region mirrors established jurisdictions like Teton, Blaine, Powell and Mineral counties, providing a stable civic foundation that easily outpaces over twenty of the state's current counties. Economically, the data reflects a strong, resilient community; while the median valuation of \$224,407 ensures a highly livable and accessible baseline for everyday residents, the overall tax base is heavily reinforced by high-value anchor properties reaching up to \$10.3 million. This classic Montana economic profile, where a robust median is supported by significant high-end outliers, drastically inflates the average valuation to \$355,918, ensuring a prosperous, self-reliant tax ecosystem capable of fully funding local infrastructure and public services without placing an undue burden on the average citizen. This excludes PILT, SRS and other available funding mechanisms to Montana Counties.



Existing County Infrastructure (Transferred to new county):

The proposed new county benefits from a robust foundation of existing municipal and public service infrastructure, ensuring operational readiness from day one without requiring heavy initial capital investment. Educational needs are well-supported by an established school district comprising four elementary (separate private school districts)/middle schools and a centralized high school. Fire and emergency protection are fully active through the Seeley Fire Department alongside a dedicated fire district that encompasses the expanding county boundaries, this includes additional fire halls in Condon and Potomac. Furthermore, public resources are anchored by established local libraries in Seeley and Condon. The seamless transition of existing county-owned assets, including multiple fire stations and several community halls, offers immediate administrative value, as these halls can readily be adapted to house key government operations and community services. The Condon/Seeley Corridor is also ripe with road material and heavy equipment operators eager to serve a new county.

County Administrative Role & School Choice Options

Under Montana law, public school districts operate as independent taxing jurisdictions whose budgets and mill levies are established directly by elected local school board trustees and approved by district voters. Following county creation, **Seeley-Swan High School** (currently operating under Missoula County Public Schools, District 1) will transition to become its own standalone, local High School District, joining the four existing independent Elementary/Middle School Districts (**Seeley Lake District 34, Sunset District 30, Potomac District 11, and Swan Valley Elementary District 33**) in full local operational autonomy. Home Schooling is also very prevalent in these rural communities.

Furthermore, Montana's robust **School Choice** statutes (including out-of-district attendance agreements under MCA § 20-5-320) remain fully intact across county lines. Families residing near the western border or the Bonner corridor retain complete flexibility to enroll their children in Bonner Elementary/Middle School, Missoula schools, or any neighboring district through standard tuition/attendance agreements.

The new county government exercises no discretionary authority over school district operations, boundaries, or expenditures, nor do school levies impact the county's operating budget. Instead, the county functions strictly as a statutory billing, collection, and pass-through agent. Property taxes levied for local school districts are collected by the County Treasurer and remitted directly to the respective school funds. This pass-through mechanism protects school choice, ensures complete educational

independence, and keeps county administrative overhead strictly limited to routine Treasury processing.

Law Enforcement & Public Safety Facilities

Local Patrol Coverage/Law Enforcement Infrastructure: Primary public safety presence is anchored by established substations and dedicated rural patrol routes currently operating along the Highway 83 and Highway 200 corridors. Seeley Lake already houses a small satellite Sheriff's office with an attached space for kennels. The plot of land has enough space to add on offices as well. Counties are not mandated to have animal control departments in Montana.

Emergency Response Infrastructure: Existing emergency communications infrastructure, including localized radio towers and direct dispatch links, provides full regional coverage across the Clearwater, Blackfoot, and Swan valleys without requiring immediate radio system overhauls. Each area operates its own EMS/Fire as volunteers currently, admirably serving their communities with amazing success.

PUBLIC WORKS & ROAD MAINTENANCE FRAMEWORK: ROAD NETWORK OWNERSHIP

A critical metric of financial liability for any newly formed county is its total public road mileage. In traditional rural governance, road maintenance, specifically snow plowing, grading, and asphalt preservation, represents the single largest operational cost center next to law enforcement. However, Seeley-Swan County benefits from a unique spatial reality: the vast majority of the region's transit infrastructure is owned and maintained by state and federal entities, or private homeowner associations (HOAs), leaving the new county with an exceptionally light local infrastructure burden.

Comparative Road Mileage Breakdown

By analyzing spatial GIS parcel tracking across the 6,435 private parcels, the 442,000 federal acres, and the core highway arteries of the Clearwater, Blackfoot, and Swan valleys, the regional road network is divided into four distinct tiers of maintenance responsibility:

Jurisdiction Tier	Primary Networks	Maintenance & Cost Liability	Estimated Share (%)
State of Montana (MDT)	Montana Highway 83 & Highway 200 corridors	0% County Cost. 100% funded and maintained by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). Includes major resurfacing, winter plowing, and right-of-way management.	~35% of total high-volume lane miles
Federal Government (USFS / BLM)	Lolo and Flathead National Forest access routes, logging roads, and recreational trailheads	0% County Cost. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Partially funds the county via federal PILT/SRS distributions.	~40% of physical road footprint
Private / HOA Networks	Subdivision interior roads, private gated drives, and resort access easements	0% County Cost. Maintained strictly by local Homeowner Associations, private road agreements, or individual property owners.	~15% of localized residential roads
Proposed Seeley-Swan County	Platted village connector streets (Seeley Lake core), and established rural county right-of-ways	100% County Responsibility. Minor local grid management, community hall access, and designated secondary rural connectors.	~10% of total regional miles

Tax Outlook:

By separating from Missoula County's urban tax structure and operating under a targeted "Lean Governance Model," Seeley-Swan County can dramatically lower the county-level property tax burden for local residents while maintaining full, above efficient

service levels. While rural property owners outside Missoula city limits currently pay approximately 270+ mills to support extensive urban bureaucracy, transit, shared departments with the city of Missoula, and multi-tier regional services, Seeley-Swan County can operate at a modest 110-mill levy. This represents an estimated 50% to 60% reduction in county property taxes. Because baseline rural services (such as law enforcement, public health, road equipment/material, etc) are budgeted around median community needs rather than bloated enterprise capacity, the local government can cap annual operating expenditures at \$2.00 Million with 18 to 20 full-time employees. Furthermore, high-value regional anchor properties and federal intergovernmental revenue buffers like PILT and SRS road funding generate an estimated \$1.4M to \$2.5M annual operating surplus, ensuring robust reserve funds for infrastructure maintenance without compromising core rural public services or overburdening local taxpayers.

Less Lean Local Government Option (170 Mills):

In traditional rural governance, balancing essential public services with property tax restraint is a constant challenge. The proposed Seeley-Swan County solves this friction through its superior taxable value. Operating at 170 mills, the county can comfortably absorb expanded operational expenses for critical sectors like law enforcement, public infrastructure, library staffing, and local DMV services. As detailed in the table below, this framework achieves the ultimate goal of local governance: maximizing community services and maintaining a protective budget surplus without overburdening the taxpayer. This route estimates a 30-40% tax decrease from current Missoula County.

Metric / Feature	Mineral County	Powell County	Proposed Seeley-Swan County
County Seat / Core Area	Superior	Deer Lodge	Seeley Lake
Estimated Population	5,000	7,000	4,000 - 4,500
Total Taxable Value	\$13.50 Million	\$26.20 Million	\$31.13 Million
Taxable Value per 1 Mill	\$13,500	\$26,202	\$31,130
Mill Levy Applied	259 Mills	133 Mills	170 Mills
Total Property Tax Revenue	\$3.50 Million	\$3.50 Million	\$5.29 Million
Total County Operating Budget	\$4.5M - 5.5M	\$5.5M - 6.5M	\$4.50 Million (Enhanced)
Detention & Facility Overhead	Full County Jail	Full County Jail / Courts	Small Holding Cell / No full Jail (Contract Bed Model)

Infrastructure / Road Network	High county road mileage	High county road mileage	Primary road network; State Hwy 83 & 200 (MDT main)
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Additional County Revenue Sources:

- Motor Vehicle fees
- County Road Funds
- PILT
- SRS (Secure Rural Schools)
- State Entitlement Funds
- Gas Tax (State)
- Recording fees
- Clerk & Recording fees
- Justice Court Fines
- Building Permits
- Septic/sanitation permits
- Grants
- HHS services/reimbursement
- Sheriffs Office Civil Service
- Investment & Interest Earnings

Low Crime Statistics:

Public safety data indicates that the proposed Seeley-Swan county corridor enjoys an exceptionally low crime rate (2-4% of crime in current Missoula County), consisting almost entirely of low-level, rural misdemeanors. By separating from the high-liability criminal justice needs of a major urban center, the new county successfully avoids the crushing financial burden of constructing or maintaining a massive correctional facility. Instead, public safety can be managed with maximum fiscal efficiency through dedicated deputy patrols, a localized temporary holding cell, and a standard Justice

Court, allowing the region to maintain top-tier community safety at a fraction of the traditional cost.

Local Job Creation & Rural Economic Revitalization

Under Missoula County's current structure, public sector jobs, county administrative spending, and economic development initiatives are heavily concentrated in urban Missoula. Because county officials must focus primary attention on urban infrastructure, transit, and city-adjacent projects, the rural corridor is largely left without targeted economic support. Establishing Seeley-Swan County immediately shifts 18 to 20 full-time public administration, public works, law enforcement, and county service positions directly into the rural valley, keeping tax dollars and stable career opportunities local.

Crucially, an independent county government can dedicate 100% of its administrative focus, planning efforts, and economic resources toward bringing jobs directly to the Clearwater, Blackfoot, and Swan valleys rather than urban Missoula. Following major local economic shocks, most notably the closure of Pyramid Mountain Lumber in Seeley Lake, the region urgently requires a local government whose single priority is rural economic survival. Free from urban agendas, Seeley-Swan County can actively spearhead initiatives to revitalize active forest management, timber health projects, heavy equipment contracting, and local trade infrastructure. By directing public works contracts to area operators and actively courting natural resource and trade-based employers, Seeley-Swan County will rebuild a resilient, self-sustaining rural economy tailored specifically to the working families who live here.

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE & RURAL SERVICES DEPLOYMENT MODEL

To balance regulatory efficiency with operational self-reliance, Seeley-Swan County utilizes a robust yet tightly managed **Rural Services Model** consisting of exactly **20.0 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employees**. By leveraging the consolidation mechanisms explicitly granted under Montana law, the county satisfies 100% of its statutory obligations. Simultaneously, it maximizes front-facing customer service capability in critical administration and road maintenance, ensuring the jurisdiction is fully equipped to manage its own public services from day one.

Legal Mechanism for Office Consolidation: MCA § 7-4-2301

Under **Montana Code Annotated (MCA) § 7-4-2301 (Consolidation of County Offices)**, a board of county commissioners is given the explicit statutory authority to consolidate constitutional and mandated county offices named in MCA § 7-4-2203. Seeley-Swan County formally consolidates overlapping administrative portfolios into multi-jurisdictional roles. This legally satisfies state mandates while eliminating redundant management layers, allowing the county to redirect personnel savings directly into active field operations and frontline customer support.

Mandatory Montana County Departments & FTE Allocation

The 20.0 FTE personnel model maps directly onto the state-mandated roles, essential functional systems, and front-facing service departments required to legally run a Montana county, distributed as follows:

Mandated Office / Department	Local Governance & Expansion Strategy	Target Staff Allocation (FTE)
Board of County Commissioners	Three elected part-time commissioners serving as the executive body. Focused entirely on legislative policy, jobs, budgeting, and intergovernmental strategy.	1.5 FTE (3 x 0.5 FTE)
Clerk & Recorder / Clerk of District Court / Treasurer	Consolidated Portfolio: Centralized administrative engine managing property deeds, vital records, court filings, and property tax collections.	4.0 FTE (1 Director, 3 cross-trained clerks)
Licensing & Motor Vehicle Registration	Dedicated Frontline Admin: Dedicated support role managing vehicle titles, renewals, license plates, and local business/permit processing to absorb high daily transaction volumes.	1.0 FTE (1 Licensing Clerk)
County Attorney / Public Administrator	Contracted / Shared Service: Legal counsel for the county commission and prosecution of local offenses. Operates via a part-time contract or shared regional counsel.	1.0 FTE
County Sheriff / Coroner	Law Enforcement & Public Safety: Dedicated rural patrol coverage along the Highway 83 and 200 corridors utilizing a 6-person team and a contract bed model for detentions.	6.0 FTE (1 Sheriff, 5 Deputies/Staff)

Justice of the Peace (Justice Court)	Mandated Independent Judiciary: Cannot be consolidated with administrative offices under MCA § 7-4-2301(2). Handles local citations, small claims, and misdemeanors.	1.5 FTE (<i>1 Magistrate, 1 part-time clerk</i>)
Superintendent of Schools / Assessor	Cooperative Portfolio: School oversight optimized through regional educational service agreements. Property valuations structurally executed directly by the <i>Montana Department of Revenue (DOR)</i> .	1.0 FTE
Public Works & Road Maintenance	Hands-On Physical Fleet: Direct infrastructure team managing the county's localized road share and transfer station access. Features an active working director and two dedicated crew members.	3.0 FTE (<i>1 Superintendent/Operator, 2 Equipment Operators</i>)
Noxious Weed Control District	Statutorily Mandated (MCA § 7-22-2109): Every county must establish a weed management district. Handled by a dedicated coordinator focusing on community enforcement, state grants, and private contract spraying.	0.5 FTE (<i>Part-time/Seasonal</i>)
Board of Health / Health & Human Services (HHS)	Statutorily Mandated (MCA § 50-2-104): Every county must have a board of health and a designated health officer. Administered via a part-time coordinator utilizing interlocal agreements for shared regional medical officers.	0.5 FTE (<i>Part-time/Seasonal</i>)
Total Personnel Infrastructure	Fully compliant with all mandatory Montana statutory frameworks.	20.0 Total FTE (<i>Optimized Capacity Baseline</i>)

5.3 Core Personnel and Strategic Efficiencies

- **A Working Public Works Engine:** Rather than relying purely on administrative management, the Public Works department functions as an active field crew. The Superintendent operates heavy machinery alongside two full-time Equipment Operators. This 3.0 FTE team provides the physical workforce needed to aggressively execute snow removal, gravel grading, and culvert maintenance across the county's local road footprint. The county can also contract out certain aspects of this department if it creates a tax saving opportunity.
- **Streamlined Frontline Licensing Operations:** By dedicating 1.0 FTE specifically to an Administrative Licensing & Registration position, the county eliminates typical small-county backlog bottlenecks. This position acts as the core interface for the public,

ensuring vehicle renewals, plates, titles, and vital licensing are turned around instantly, optimizing public compliance and capturing local fee revenues on day one.

- **Lean Asset Lifecycle via Contracted Fleet Maintenance:** Rather than staffing a dedicated mechanic position and funding a brick-and-mortar county maintenance shop, the county strategically contracts out all heavy equipment repairs, vehicle upfitting, and fleet maintenance to local commercial shops along the corridor. This eliminates heavy fixed overhead, keeps capital tooling costs off the county books, and actively reinvests public money back into local private businesses.
- **Streamlined Public Safety Framework:** Keeping the Sheriff's Office at 6.0 FTE aligns perfectly with the corridor's historically low crime data (representing just 2–4% of the parent county's total offense profile). Leaning on a contract bed model for detention prevents the county from being crushed by the round-the-clock staffing mandates of a jail facility, ensuring all available law enforcement assets remain mobile on the roads.
- **The Multi-Jurisdictional Admin Hub:** The combined Clerk, Recorder, and Treasurer office creates massive customer service efficiencies. Centralizing counter operations under cross-trained clerks ensures that vehicle registrations, property deed transfers, and court filings are handled seamlessly under one roof.
- **Fiscal Resiliency and Budget Integration:** Capping the total personnel infrastructure at exactly 20.0 FTEs ensures that county operations remain highly resilient against shifting economic climates. This structured framework robustly safeguards the projected **+\$2.5 Million structural surplus**, ensuring that taxpayer dollars are converted directly into local road quality, public infrastructure, and capital asset reserves rather than administrative overhead.

Forest Acreage:

BLM Land: 9,587

BLM (Garnet Area): 3,646

US Forest Service: 6,348

United States of America: 424,394

Tribal:

United States of America in Trust for Salish & Kootenai Tribes: 315

USA in trust for Salish & Kootenai Tribes: 321

PILT Equation:

430,000 (USFS) + 12,000 (BLM)= 442,000 Federal Acres in Seeley-Swan County.

4,300 Residents (Medium) x 238.87= \$1,027,141 (Max Cap)

These funds could completely cover roads in the area as well as most of the administration required for a small rural county.

County Seat- Seeley Lake:

The qualifications for a community to serve as a county seat are strictly governed by **Montana Code Annotated (MCA) § 7-2-2103**:

"7-2-2103. Qualifications for municipality or village to be county seat. > No city, town, or village shall become the temporary or permanent county seat of any county organized under the provisions of part 22 or created by an act of the legislature unless such city or town shall have been incorporated in the manner provided by law or unless such village shall have been regularly platted and a plat thereof filed..."

What is a "Platted Village"?

In Montana's legal and historical framework, a "platted village" is an unincorporated settlement that has been officially surveyed, divided into blocks, lots, and public streets, and had those official maps (plats) formally filed and recorded with the County Clerk and Recorder.

Unlike an incorporated city, a platted village does not require a mayor, city council, municipal tax system, or municipal charter to exist legally. Its physical layout is formally recognized by the state and county land records as a designated townsite.

With Seeley Lake being a regularly platted unincorporated community, Seeley-Swan County could potentially move forward straight to petition once Alteration & Creation of new county law is addressed by legislature.

Potential Site for Platted Village

The original ***Garlisch Seeley Lake Community Tracts*** plat (situated in Section 34, right in the center of town near the Community Foundation building) spans roughly **35 to 45 individual parcels**.

- **Residential Profiles:**
Roughly **25 to 35** of these parcels feature primary residential structures (single-family homes, rear apartments, or multi-family properties).
- **Commercial Profiles:** The remaining parcels are mostly strictly commercial storefronts or vacant town lots along the immediate highway edge.

Incorporation vs Platted Village

Metric / Concern	Municipal Incorporation	Platted Village (Seeley Lake)
Local Tax Impact	High/Medium (Adds a new city tax mill levy)	None (Only standard county taxes apply)
Required Voter Approval	Yes (Requires a separate city election)	No (Directly qualified by existing state statute)
Bureaucracy	High (Requires mayor, city council, city code)	Minimal (Administered directly by County Commissioners)
Implementation	Years (Slow)	Immediate (Legally ready to host the courthouse today)

Incorporation Option:

Under Montana law (**MCA § 7-2-4101**), incorporating as a city or town requires a proposed area to meet specific voter and density thresholds, most notably that each proposed ward must contain at least 50 registered electors and maintain a concentration of at least 200 inhabitants per square mile. As a census-designated place, Seeley Lake's core townsite readily meets these statutory requirements; while its overarching Census boundary covers roughly 12 square miles with an average density of ~120 to 137 residents per square mile, the concentrated commercial and residential hub surrounding Highway 83 easily achieves well over 200 residents per square mile. Furthermore, with hundreds of registered voters clustered within the village core, Seeley Lake possesses more than enough localized population density and electorate strength to satisfy the legal statutory baseline required to draft wards and petition for municipal incorporation if local leadership chose to pursue that route.

The Statutory Hurdle: County-Wide Veto Power

Under current Montana law (**MCA § 7-2-2215(3)** and **§ 7-2-2222**), the primary obstacle to creating a new county is the statutory voting mechanism. Currently, when a region petitions to carve itself out from a parent jurisdiction, the election on the question cannot be decided solely by the residents within the proposed boundary lines, **all registered electors of the existing county** are entitled to cast a ballot. Furthermore, if a majority of votes cast county-wide are negative, the proposal fails. This gives the more densely populated, distant population centers (such as the Missoula Valley) effective veto power over rural secession efforts, as parent counties rarely vote to surrender thousands of residents and billions in taxable valuation. Overcoming this hurdle requires targeted statutory amendments from state legislators to shift the voting franchise exclusively to the electors who actually reside within the proposed new county boundaries.

While a majority of the communities and precincts of Condon, Seeley Lake, Greenough and Potomac want to be able to petition to create a new county, or potentially join another, they are immediately blocked by the urban city of Missoula, that already has their own city government, on top of full voting representation in the county.

Historical Precedent: The Maturation and Division of Missoula County

The proposed formation of Seeley-Swan County is not an anomaly, but rather the continuation of a well-established legislative pattern in Montana governance. Historically known as the "Mother of Counties," Missoula County was originally organized by the Washington Territorial Legislature in 1860 and re-established during Montana's territorial organization in 1864–1865. At its peak, Missoula County spanned thousands of square miles across northwestern Montana, stretching from the Idaho border to the Continental Divide. As regional populations grew, timber and agricultural economies developed, and travel to the county seat in Missoula proved increasingly impractical for outlying residents, the Montana Legislature systematically carved out new jurisdictions to restore localized governance. The secession of the Clearwater, Blackfoot, and Swan valleys represents the logical next step in this 160-year administrative evolution, aligning with a rich history of decentralizing regional authority to better serve distinct rural communities.

- **Deer Lodge County (1864–1865):** Designated during initial territorial formation, taking the eastern expanse of early Missoula County (which subsequently birthed Powell, Granite, and Silver Bow counties).
- **Flathead County (1893):** The entire northern half of Missoula County was carved off to establish a local government closer to timber and railway hubs (later giving rise to Lincoln County).
- **Ravalli County (1893):** Residents of the Bitterroot Valley successfully partitioned from Missoula County to form an independent agricultural and civic center.

- **Sanders County (1905):** The northwestern Clark Fork River corridor (including Thompson Falls and Plains) was separated to address vast geographic isolation from the county seat.
- **Mineral County (1914):** The western narrow corridor along the Clark Fork River (Superior, Alberton, St. Regis) split away, driven by mining and timber transportation interests.
- **Lake County (1923):** Formed from portions of both Missoula and Flathead counties to serve the population surrounding Flathead Lake, marking the most recent major boundary adjustment of Missoula County.

Feasibility Summary and Future Legislation:

The feasibility analysis for establishing Seeley-Swan County confirms a highly self-sustaining, structurally sound, and financially exceptional rural jurisdiction. Encompassing 6,435 private parcels spanning from just below Johnsrud Road through Condon along the Highway 83 corridor, the proposed boundary establishes a manageable civic baseline with an estimated year-round population of 4,000 to 4,500 residents. This demographic footprint places the new county on par with established Montana rural peer jurisdictions such as Mineral (~5,000) and Powell (~7,000) counties. With an aggregate property market valuation of \$2.306 Billion, the proposed county produces an assessed taxable value of \$31.13 Million, exceeding Montana's statutory creation threshold of \$10.0 Million (MCA § 7-2-2202) by 211%. Generating \$31,130 per mill, Seeley-Swan yields a significantly stronger local tax revenue capacity than both Powell (\$26,202) and Mineral (\$13,500) counties.

Crucially, the proposed jurisdiction achieves total financial solvency based on local property tax collections alone, prior to incorporating any intergovernmental federal funding streams. Under a conservative, low-overhead "Lean Governance Model" utilizing 18 to 20 full-time employees, total annual operating expenses are capped at \$2.00 Million. Against this, local property tax collections at a modest 110-mill levy yield \$3,424,300 annually, generating an immediate, independent net operating surplus of over \$1.42 Million per year strictly from local tax revenues. When combining local tax receipts with federal Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) of ~\$500,000-\$1M+, federal Secure Rural Schools (SRS) road funding of ~\$200,000-\$400,000, and state entitlement distributions of ~\$300,000, gross annual revenues reach over \$4,500,000. This expands the county's total net structural operating surplus to +\$2,500,000 per year. Surplus can be used for dire infrastructure needs, building capital reserves, and even further reduction of levies.

In addition to its fiscal strength, the proposal is legally secure and administratively ready. Designating Seeley Lake as the permanent county seat satisfies state statutory requirements under MCA § 7-2-2103, as Seeley Lake legally qualifies as an unincorporated "Platted Village" with official plats filed in county records. The village core easily satisfies statutory density standards (exceeding 200 residents per square mile), avoiding a double-tax burden on residents, and allowing the county government to begin operations immediately. Even if Seeley Lake were to incorporate, they can levy modest city taxes, as the county is fully sufficient without an incorporated town.

Legislative passage of the proposed boundaries, along with a targeted amendment to MCA § 7-2-2115 restricting election franchise exclusively to electors within the proposed boundary lines, will eliminate the parent county veto, restore localized representation, and establish one of the most solvent rural counties in modern Montana history. In a modern government, laws must modernize to match local autonomy.

Suggested Revisions to 100+ Year Laws:

BILL DRAFT: LC _____

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: “AN ACT REVISING COUNTY BOUNDARY LAWS; AMENDING LAWS GOVERNING ELECTIONS FOR THE CREATION OF NEW COUNTIES; RESTRICTING VOTING ELIGIBILITY EXCLUSIVELY TO REGISTERED ELECTORS RESIDING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PROPOSED NEW COUNTY; ELIMINATING COUNTY-WIDE VOTER REQUIREMENT IN PARENT COUNTIES; AMENDING SECTIONS 7-2-2215 AND 7-2-2222, MONTANA CODE ANNOTATED; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE.”

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:

Section 1. Section 7-2-2215, MCA, is amended to read:

“7-2-2215. Order for election on question of creating new county -- NOTICE -- ELECTORS ELIGIBLE TO VOTE. > (1) If the board of county commissioners determines that the petition contains the required number of signatures and meets all statutory requirements under this part, the board shall within 14 days enter an order calling an election on the question of the creation of the proposed new county.

(2) The election must be held in conjunction with a regular or primary election or at a special election ordered by the board.

(3) ~~All registered electors of the county or counties from which territory is proposed to be taken to form the new county are entitled to vote at the election.~~ **Only registered electors residing within the proposed boundary lines of the new county, as described in the petition and order, are eligible to vote on the question of creating the new county.”**

Section 2. Section 7-2-2222, MCA, is amended to read:

“7-2-2222. Canvass of returns -- declaration of result -- votes required for approval. > (1) The board of county commissioners shall meet on the second Monday following the election to canvass the returns.

(2) If upon the canvass it appears that ~~a majority of all votes cast in the existing county or counties from which territory is taken~~ **a majority of all legal votes cast by electors residing within the boundaries of the**

proposed new county are in favor of the creation of the new county, the board shall by resolution declare the new county created and established.

(3) ~~If a majority of all votes cast in the existing county or counties are against the creation of the new county, the proposal fails, and no further proceedings may be taken.~~ **If a majority of votes cast by electors residing within the proposed boundaries are against the creation of the new county, the proposal fails.”**

Section 3. Effective Date.

[Section 3] This act is effective on passage and approval.

Section 4. Applicability.

[Section 4] This act applies to any petition for the creation of a new county submitted or pending on or after [the effective date of this act].

Legislative Brief:

Restores Local Self-Determination: Under current law, an urban majority in a county seat can permanently deny rural citizens localized representation, even if 100% of the rural residents vote in favor of creating a new county. This amendment restores local self-determination by aligning voting eligibility directly with geographic residency.

1. **Aligns with Municipal Incorporation Standards:** Under Montana municipal law (MCA § 7-2-4101 et seq.), when an unincorporated community votes to incorporate as a city, only the residents *inside* the proposed city limits vote. Surrounding county residents outside the boundaries do not get a vote. This bill applies that same principle to county formation.
2. **Protects Rural Taxpayers:** It ensures that residents who live in outlying valleys, who generate significant taxable value but receive diminished services, have the sole democratic authority to choose their local government structure.