

Missoula County Commissioners

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BCC 2026-091
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Dear Ms. Poten and Co-Signers,

Thank you for your letter and for taking the time to share your concerns regarding the Seeley Lake Trails project and Missoula County's decision to allocate trail bond funds to support it. We appreciate the deep commitment you each bring to protecting the extraordinary natural resources and wildlife populations that make Missoula County such a special place. Your engagement reflects the strong stewardship ethic that has long shaped this community.

As outdoor recreation interest continues to grow, Missoula County, like many other places, faces the ongoing challenge of balancing opportunities for people to enjoy public lands while ensuring the long-term health of the wild places, habitats and species that define our landscape. We recognize this balance can involve competing values, and we understand some of you did not feel adequately included in the federal process that shaped this project. We hear that concern and appreciate you raising it.

After reviewing the information available to us, we have not found a reason to change course on the decision to issue trail bond funds for this project. Missoula County has historically deferred to the jurisdiction and decision-making authority of federal land management agencies when projects occur on public lands they administer. In this case, we have no indication that the U.S. Forest Service's existing decision for the Highway 83 Project is not in good standing. At the same time, our deference should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the Forest Service's environmental review process or their analysis; it simply reflects the delineation of roles and authority among local, state and federal entities. That said, we do appreciate you sharing correspondence between you and the Forest Service regarding the specific concerns you've expressed over their environmental review process and analysis. We encourage your continued engagement with the Forest Service to address outstanding questions and concerns.

Regarding the use of County trail bond funds, we believe this project fits within the purposes approved by voters, and the allocation followed our standard review and due-diligence process. As with all bond-supported projects, the forthcoming grant agreement will clearly define requirements and expectations.

To address several of the themes raised in your letter, we intend to include the following commitments and expectations within that agreement. In some cases, these will entail more specific project implementation requirements than were expressed in the Forest Service environmental review and decision:

Trail Design and Use

Scenic Montana Trails submitted a detailed application for trail bond support, including proposed trail widths, non-motorized route designations and construction sequencing. The grant agreement will require the organization to build and maintain the project as proposed – emphasizing that best practices be incorporated during all project phases.

Wildlife Conflict Reduction Measures

We will encourage Scenic Montana Trails to consult with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the U.S. Forest Service to identify any additional conflict-reduction strategies that may be necessary to mitigate wildlife impacts now and in the future. The grant agreement will also require measures such as the use of bear-resistant trash containers, education for trail users on recreating responsibly in grizzly bear country, recommendations around carrying bear spray, and consideration of wildlife-conflict concerns when seeking group or event permits.

While these steps do not resolve all of the broader questions raised about land management in the Seeley Lake area, they can help focus attention on the values you highlighted – particularly wildlife protection and responsible recreation – which we all share.

Thank you again for your engagement, for your advocacy on behalf of the region’s ecosystems, and for your commitment to thoughtful stewardship of the places that matter so deeply to Missoula County residents. We remain open to continued conversation about how best to protect our natural resources while serving the diverse interests of our community.

Respectfully,

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Josh Slotnick, Chair

David Strohmaier, Commissioner

Juanita Vero, Commissioner

BCC/ac