

RECEIVED

JAN 12 2015

Ravalli County Planning Dept.

[Home](#) / [Ravalli Republic](#) | [News](#) / [Opinion](#) / [Editorial](#)

Editorial: Don't ignore the unanimous voice of the people

17 hours ago • By RAVALLI REPUBLIC

[\(0\) Comments](#)

Over the past few weeks, the Ravalli County commissioners spent hours discussing plans to update floodplain regulations to match new maps provided by FEMA. As part of a program that provides subsidies for flood insurance, the county is required to update its regulations to match new maps.

The commissioners, along with planning director Terry Nelson, seized the moment to change a longstanding prohibition against building in the floodplain fringe along the Bitterroot River. The prohibition was implemented 18 years ago, and is a reflection of the ever-changing nature of the Bitterroot River.

Anyone who has spent much time in the valley can attest the river moves from year to year, sometimes significantly. A diversion dam near Corvallis used to be on a side branch of the river. Now it is within the main stem and has become a dangerous hazard for those floating the river. In Hamilton, a trip to River Park shows a change from this year. The river used to flow along the walking path through the park. Now it flows a hundred yards or so to the west, leaving a small side channel running through the park.

Each year, the river's path migrates as snowmelt moves banks and changes the way the water flows. Allowing construction in the floodplain fringe is a risky endeavor at best. Land that is currently in the floodplain fringe could easily be within the floodplain next year. Two years from now, it could be in the river itself. All it takes is a heavy runoff one the spring.

At a daylong meeting last week, the commissioners were encouraged by every resident in attendance to abandon the plan to allow construction in the floodplain, or floodplain fringe. A compromise was offered to prohibit the construction and establish a process for obtaining a variance to the regulation. No one, other than the commissioners apparently, was in favor of passing the new regulations as currently worded. No one favored construction in this zone.

Offering comments to the commission were wildlife biologists, fishing guides, attorneys, and many concerned residents. The meeting lasted six and a half hours.

One thing is sure, this is a complex issue that needs more study before adopting and implementing new regulations that change nearly two decades of policy. It is possible to pass updated regulations that take the new FEMA maps into account without also eliminating the prohibition on building within the floodplain fringe.

Before rushing into this decision, the commission needs to step back and give it the time and study it deserves. Damage done to the river puts our economy at risk. Construction in the floodplain fringe could lead to rip-rapping of the banks, which has shown to cause damage both above and below the installation. A home or building caught in a flood could pollute the river or cause hazards for those floating the river. The Bitterroot River is a big economic driver for our county's economy. Let's make sure we're looking at the long-term health of the river and not creating unnecessary risk.

Our river is unique. It moves and changes course more than most others. What seems a safe distance from the water's edge one year may be in danger the next. If we're going to make such a major policy change, the commission needs to take the time to do it right. Study the river, and how it changes. Study infrastructure that could act as a protective barrier. Study all the possible impacts a regulation change could have. Work with the community to find the best solution. Don't ignore the unanimous voice of local citizens, begging you not to arbitrarily change a sound and sensible policy.

Copyright 2015 Ravalli Republic. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Recommendations

Sponsored Links