

NEWS

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Open the gates

Ravalli County makes it easier to build in Bitterroot floodplain

By Ted McDermott

Stevensville-based fly-fishing guide Eddie Olwell says he already sees it while floating the Bitterroot River: Someone builds a home outside the floodplain, the river moves, the home is suddenly under threat of flooding and the homeowners are forced to "arm their bank," adding rock or other riprap to ward off erosion.

"But what happens is, the water hits that riprap, it increases the velocity and you're just pushing the problem downriver, somewhere else," Olwell says. "And that will put more speed on the water, and it'll cause more erosion on the same side or even on the other side."

That erosion degrades the river, harms the fish that live in it and, Olwell says, starts "a domino effect of bad things." So when Olwell heard the Ravalli County Commission was considering removing an almost 20-year-old ban on building in the Bitterroot's flood fringe—the area where scientists expect there to be slow-moving water during a 100-year-flood event—he went before the commission to testify about how the changes could exacerbate what was already happening, further harming the river and hurting the economy of a county that relies heavily on tourism and recreation.

"I figured, what will politicians and people understand?" Olwell says. "I figured they'll understand jobs and money."

But while Olwell joined a parade of citizens and experts who spoke against lifting the ban over four days of hearings earlier this month, the commissioners weren't convinced. On Jan. 12, they voted unanimously to end the ban and open the flood fringe to residential development. Under the old system, in place since 1997, a variance was required to build on the fringe. Under the new system, homebuilders must meet 14 criteria in order to receive a building permit.

According to Commissioner Greg Chilcott of Stevensville, the change affords property owners more flexibility while adding important safeguards to ensure responsible development.

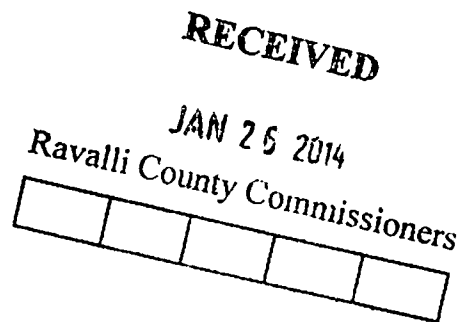
"Philosophically, I believe that government is here to help people, not to hinder them," Chilcott says. "If we can help people realize success in whatever their project is and it's within our ability and we're not pitting one against another, it's my philosophy that we should, that government should. ... At the end of the day, we added a large number of very specific criteria."

But Chris Clancy, a fisheries biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, calls the criteria "vague" and says the switch to a permit system adds a great deal of subjectivity and uncertainty to the process. "The poor guy out there doing the flood plain permit has to interpret a lot of general language," Clancy says.

Despite his criticism, Clancy actually helped craft some of the criteria. He did so, he says, in an effort to help shore up the shortcomings of what the commission seemed intent on doing, despite overwhelming evidence that it would jeopardize the health of the river and endanger the very homes the county was allowing to be built.

According to Clancy, the problem is the Bitterroot's tendency to move laterally far more than other rivers. He can point to some 30 places where the main channel of the river now flows through what's marked on FEMA floodplain maps as the fringe, and it's difficult to know where it will move next.

"There's a lot of science that would've been helpful if they would've taken the time to use it," Clancy says. With better data and improved modeling, Clancy believes scientists and planners



would be able to "delineate those areas where homes could be built and areas where homes should not be built." Instead it will be up to the discretion of administrators on a case-by-case basis.

Chilcott denies the commission ignored science at the expense of promoting development. Instead, he says, the change was about sending a simple message: "We're advocating for property owners to be able to enjoy their property without threatening others or hindering other peoples' property rights."

Not true, says former County Commissioner Carlotta Grandstaff. She believes the change will affect other property owners and the public interest, especially in the event of a major flood, when structures could be pushed downstream and cause major damage or endanger lives. For that reason, Grandstaff, who currently serves as the communications director for Bitterrooters for Planning, sees the change as the "revocation of a public health and safety measure" and an instance of the commissioners catering to their Tea Party base.

"The way I look at it," Grandstaff says, "it comes down to politics trumping science."