

Community & Infrastructure Solution Group

Contact Report

Contact: Montana State Local Government Center (LGC), December 13, 2004, in Bozeman.

Present were:

- Ken Weaver, Senior Research Associate, Montana State LGC
- Dick Fast, Community Infrastructure Solution Group representative
- Steve Johnson, Community Infrastructure Solution Group representative

This was an introductory meeting and the following points were discussed:

1. Background on Big Sky, the Chamber of Commerce planning process, and the mission of the Community Infrastructure Solution Group.
2. The process we are following, and some of the challenges for Big Sky that are surfacing as issues for our group to address.
3. Advice and counsel on what the LGC might be able to do to assist us.
4. Determine how we can best work with the LGC in the future.

The key points from the discussion included the following:

- The primary mission of the LGC is to train people elected to local government offices across the state of Montana.
- By policy, the LGC does not give legal advice in any form.
- With regard to incorporation, the density requirement in Montana Code (500 people residing in one square mile) is probably “the” important consideration:
 - The numeric requirement, while important, is not the main issue.
 - More significant is the aspect of the collective will of the people affected: do they in fact want to be governed as a group?
 - The logistics of governing a community that does not meet this density requirement can present real problems.
 - Although the State Legislature could be asked to waive or relieve this requirement, it may not be wise to do so.
- Another aspect of the Big Sky situation is the various population segments, or “communities” affected. Specifically we identified the following groups:
 - Permanent residents, including mainly
 - Young professionals and their families who live and work in Big Sky
 - Retirees
 - Seasonal workers
 - Absentee property owners who may vacation or live in Big Sky part time
 - Visitors and tourists
- The geographic dispersal of the Big Sky community is a challenge, both in terms of meeting the density requirement, but also in terms of delivering services. Major resident population centers of West Fork/Meadow and the Canyon are at least 5 miles apart.
- The Special Districts currently in place seem fine.
- The cost of a city government for a community the size of Big Sky would require a budget of approximately \$1 million for the general fund alone (not including fee-based services).
 - The 15 mils reduction in county taxes mentioned by the MLCT is only an allowance for road maintenance, which the county would no longer provide.
- This amount of funding will clearly hinge on control of the Resort Tax and also relates to the future role of BSOA and other homeowner’s associations, and their respective budgets.
- Cross-county incorporation to include the mountain area is unprecedented, and practically infeasible. Ken could not imagine how it could be done.

- Any approach to shift county boundaries or create a new county will be very tough to accomplish. As one example, to form a new county there must be a county seat, and at present there is none in Big Sky (i.e., no incorporated city).
- The concern that taxes on Big Sky properties go to Bozeman and Virginia City and never come back in the form of delivered services is legitimate, and should be raised as challenges to the Gallatin and Madison County Commissions.

In terms of making the case for change in Big Sky, the following points were discussed:

- Big Sky should be recognized as an important asset to the state's tourist economy segment. The Economic Impact Assessment will provide important data to support this point.
- The value of a community that will attract and retain competent professionals needed to manage and deliver services, for both residents and tourists, should be recognized as essential to the quality of the Big Sky experience for all.
- Communications will be key to gaining recognition and acceptance of these points.
- Nonetheless, money, costs and taxes will remain forefront issues for many in determining their support for local governance.

Ken will be available to meet with us in January 2005, with Monday dates including the 3rd, 10th, and 24th open in his calendar.