

Community & Infrastructure Solution Group

Contact Report

Contact: Montana League of Cities and Towns (MLCT), November 19, 2004, in Helena. Present were:

- Larry J. Bonderud, Mayor of Shelby, Montana and Immediate Past President of MLCT
- Alec N. Hansen, Executive Director, MLCT
- John Leeper, personal friend of Larry Bonderud
- Steve Johnson, Community Infrastructure Solution Group representative

This was an introductory meeting with MLCT, 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. Invite input from the MLCT regarding this process.
3. Advice and counsel on what the MLCT might be able to do to assist us, and their recommendations of other relevant resources.
4. Determine how we can best work with the MLCT in the future.

The key points from the discussion included the following:

- One of the primary functions of MLCT is to assist local governments in dealing with the state legislature, to get action on essential legislation.
- If Big Sky should decide to pursue a governance structure by incorporating, it will need legislative action to allow exceptions to current provisions in Montana Code (for example, population density), and MLCT can assist in that process.
- Two models of towns that successfully dealt with exceptions to enable their incorporation are Fort Peck and Colstrip. Both should be examined as models for Big Sky. MLCT can assist with contacts there.
- In pursuing incorporation, several recommendations were made:
 - Approach this in logical steps, focusing on what's do-able. For example, incorporating the meadow village was seen as much more approachable than dealing across county lines.
 - Provide logical reasons to the state legislature for them to grant the exceptions needed. Economics (Big Sky is economically important to the state), and self-determination (people here wish to control their own destiny) were identified as the strongest arguments to make.
 - It is also desirable to ask the state legislature for an exception that will apply in your case, and *only* your case. Granting exceptions

that create precedents for other cases is something the legislature prefers to avoid.

- Whatever is proposed to the state legislature must be simply framed and understood. State legislators meet only every two years, many are new, and they are often faced with thousands of issues in a session. As a result, they tend to deal with things they can readily understand, and dismiss those they don't have time or patience for.
- Develop specific details of what you propose to do (boundaries, population, registered voters, tax base, structure, etc.), the impact of doing that to the community (for example, costs and taxes), and what you need from the legislature to accomplish that.
- Build broad, and verifiable local consensus for your proposal through a combination of community involvement, communication with the community, and any other way possible.
- Build close working relationships with your state legislature representative and senator, so they will be ready and willing to represent your case when that time comes.

The MLCT representatives also made some important observations:

- The charter form of local government (reference MSU publication Governing Montana at the Grass Roots) is by far the superior choice of the available alternatives.
- The Local Government Center at MSU is a great resource to use in this process. Ken Weaver and Jane Jelinski were specifically named in this regard.
- A bed tax study was done some time ago by the state Department of Commerce. While now out of date, it may provide a useful framework for making an economic case for the importance of Big Sky to the state.
- There are a number of key issues regarding the cost impact to Big Sky residents and taxpayers:
 - Once a town incorporates, the county mill rate levy for that area decreases by 15 mils. As a result, if you can budget for town operations costs within that 15 mils levy, it would be cost neutral to affected taxpayers.
 - A key matter to resolve up front will be what happens to resort tax revenues in the affected area. Ideally, the new municipal government would gain control of those revenues, and that could also address cost concerns from taxpayers. Whitefish and West Yellowstone were identified as two models to review in this area.
 - Forget about redrawing county boundaries. It's far too big a deal, and will just become a distraction. Get your foot in the door with a reasonable first step, and then go from there.
 - Introducing any matter in the 2005 current legislative session is at this point practically impossible. Think in terms of a plan that builds solid preparation for the next legislative session in 2007.

At the close of the meeting, the MLCT representatives stated that they would be happy to assist us in any way they can in the future. There is no charge for their services, although at some point Big Sky may be expected to become a member of MLCT.