

Group asks for conservation bond ballot measure

By [William L. Spence](#), 02/19/2004 Thursday The Daily Inter Lake

Flathead County voters could have the opportunity later this year to decide if they're willing to pay to protect some of the valley's **open** spaces and farmland.

The Flathead Land Trust, a nonprofit organization that promotes the preservation of agricultural areas and critical wildlife habitat, is asking the county commissioners to put a \$10 million conservation bond on the November ballot.

If approved, the money would be combined with federal and state grants. The resulting pool of money would allow the county to purchase development rights on some of the most productive agricultural land in the state.

Under this scenario, the land could still be used for farming or ranching, but it couldn't be built on or subdivided into home lots.

Ken Siderius, president of the land trust board, said during a meeting with the commissioners on Wednesday that the cost of the bond would be about \$17 per year for someone who owns a \$125,000 home. Those payments would continue for 20 years.

"We feel like this is an investment in our future," Siderius said. "We're losing farmland to rapid population growth. This would help keep our farm heritage alive, keep our water clean and keep the valley beautiful."

Bob O'Neil, a member of the land trust's advisory board, said a conservation bond would give farmers an option they currently don't have for preserving their land.

"They can sell their development rights today, but it does them no good because there are no buyers — it's a property right they might as well not have," O'Neil said. "This bond would give them another option. They could sell the development rights and continue to farm the land as they always have. They would retain all other property rights, and they could put stipulations in the agreement that would allow them to add home lots for their kids. The control of the easement would be in the hands of the landowner."

Given the sharp demand for home lots in Flathead County, O'Neil estimated that development rights now account for half to two-thirds of land values here.

Longtime Realtor Paul Wachholz, who attended Wednesday's meeting in support of the bond proposal, said it could be even higher than that.

"I get calls from older farmers a couple of times a week," Wachholz said. "When one of them wants to retire, he has two choices: He can sell at farm prices or sell at development prices. The farm value of land here might be \$500 to \$750 per acre. Market price is about \$6,000 per acre."

Younger farmers looking to get into the business can't afford these higher prices, because they wouldn't make enough from agricultural production to pay off the debt.

Consequently, "we're in danger of losing our farm economy," O'Neil said.

Farming and ranching bring about \$29 million per year into the valley, he said. A conservation bond wouldn't salvage the industry all by itself, but it would help.

The land trust commissioned a telephone survey in December that found 60 percent of the 400 respondents supported the idea of the conservation bond.

The commissioners took no immediate action on Wednesday regarding the bond proposal. They also noted that even if they do put it on the November ballot, it wouldn't necessarily be an endorsement of the measure.

It would just give voters an opportunity to decide whether they're willing to tax themselves for this purpose.

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