

# Land trust considers options for preserving farmland

By [William L. Spence](#), 07/08/2003, The Daily Inter Lake

What's driving the conversion of agricultural land and timberland to residential and commercial land, and what can be done about it?

That's the subject of a Kalispell Chamber of Commerce tour this week.

The chamber's Natural Resources Committee will present a half-day field trip on Wednesday to discuss the economic factors contributing to development, as well as the regulatory tools used to define land uses, and options for preserving **open** space.

Speakers include Mark Lalum with Cenex Harvest States, Jerry Sorenson with Plum Creek Timber Co., Flathead County Planning Director Forrest Sanderson and Tri-City Planning Director Tom Jentz.

Given the rapid pace of development in Flathead County, the topic is certainly timely: A record 2,982 acres of land went into residential and commercial subdivisions here last year, and almost 1,000 acres have gone through preliminary plat approval so far this year.

The tour also coincides with efforts by the Flathead Land Trust to promote an agricultural preservation bond.

The bond, which would have to be approved by voters, would be funded by a countywide property tax levy.

The money would be used to purchase development rights on the valley's best farmland; the property could still be used for agricultural purposes, but couldn't be subdivided into home lots.

"We've been thinking about this for a couple of years," said Bob O'Neil, a member of the land trust's advisory board. "When we started looking at the problem, we had two principles in mind: We wanted to use incentives to preserve farmland, rather than restrictions, and we wanted to enhance property rights. We think the way to do that is to buy the development rights. It would give farmers more options."

Right now, O'Neil said, the only real option farmers have if they get into financial trouble or they want to retire is to sell some or all of their land to developers.

"No farmer wants to do that," he said. "They believe in the value of farming and what it does for a community. The last thing they want is to see productive land lost."

With an agricultural preservation bond, farmers could sell the development rights to the county, while the land itself stayed in agricultural production.

A critical aspect of the bond is that it would provide matching dollars for a variety of state, federal and private programs.

Through these matching programs, O'Neil said, a \$20 million bond could be turned into \$50 million or more for farmland preservation.

The development rights would be purchased by the county, which would typically hold onto them, he said. However, if it were in the public's best interest to sell the easement at some point in the future, the county could do so, as long as it replaced them with development rights from a comparable property.

An appointed board of directors would manage the program, deciding which properties qualify and which easements to acquire.

"There would be a number of criteria," O'Neil said, "but I assume they'd look closely at the valley's prime farmland."

That land is capable of growing more than 100 bushels of wheat per acre, he said, compared to a statewide average of about 32 bushels.

At this point, though, the land trust hasn't decided whether to try and get the bond placed on next year's ballot. It also hasn't decided how much money to try and raise, or what the term of the bond should be.

"Everything is contingent upon a telephone survey we hope to do this fall," O'Neil said. "If voters aren't interested, or if we can't raise enough money to have an impact, that's it, we're done. This isn't something we're going to shove down people's throats."

However, when people talk about the factors that contribute to the Flathead's quality of life, the list typically includes things like **open** space, clean water, hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities.

"The good thing about farmland is that it hits everything on that list," O'Neil said. "It maintains **open** space, it's crucial for water quality, it provides habitat for hunting and fishing — and it's important to the economy."

"But if we don't do something soon, we're going to lose farming as part of our economy," he said. "There needs to be enough farmers here to support the implement dealers and other firms that make up the basic economy. Once they're gone, you won't be able to farm here in a significant way. If an agricultural preservation bond were used judiciously on the valley's best farmland, I think there's a good chance we could keep that critical mass."

Representatives from the Flathead Land Trust will be on Wednesday's chamber tour to discuss some of the options for preserving agricultural and timber lands in the valley.

For more information about the tour, call 758-2800. For information about the agricultural preservation bond, contact the Flathead Land Trust at 752-8293.

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