



Board of County Commissioners  
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BCC 2018-061  
February 8, 2018

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Senator Jon Tester  
130 W Front Street  
Missoula MT 59802

Dear Senator Tester:

Thank you for seeking input from Missoula County regarding infrastructure needs and priorities. We appreciate your willingness to seek feedback from Montanans and are grateful for the opportunity to provide you with information about important infrastructure needs from a local government perspective.

As we gathered information from various Missoula County department leaders and considered the needs we hear directly from constituents, three main themes were consistently repeated. First, it is critical for planning and execution of infrastructure projects that there be reliability and continuity in funding to ensure projects are completed and needs can be met in advance of infrastructure failure. Second, solutions from the federal government need to be equitable and flexible because each state, county, and city has different needs and must have the ability to craft appropriate solutions. Finally, it is critical that infrastructure not be treated as a one-time investment, but, rather, as requiring ongoing maintenance.

Reliability and continuity of funding is vital to any plan to improve infrastructure. Over the last several years, infrastructure funding has been focused on urban centers and not rural areas. Transportation funding and the Highway Trust Fund have focused more on the needs of urban populations and inconsistently authorized and funded. For Missoula County this means stretching fewer, inconsistently-received dollars across the same network of nearly 500 miles of maintained roads and not having the resources to maintain many roads at all. This balancing act leaves governments, like ours, in a position where maintenance is deferred or services are continually reduced.

Reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) is vital to each county. Counties in Montana have been forced to make significant reductions in personnel and operating costs to address the shortfall, yet the demand for services continues to increase. The current level of funding provided through SRS does little to address this demand for service. The need for this funding to continue is even more apparent after the devastating 2017 fire season. Missoula County uses SRS funds to help offset the costs of fuel mitigation efforts incurred by landowners in the wildland urban interface adjacent to federal lands. Being able to reduce fuels near homes and roads is critical to successful and safe firefighting efforts. We know you are acutely aware of this and encourage you to continue the push for a solution.

Infrastructure funding needs to allow for equitable and flexible solutions to complex problems and projects. While it is easy at the federal level to recognize the differences across the United States and create programs that fit both urban and rural areas, it is critical that those programs allow flexibility at a local level. Differences in geography between Missoula and Yellowstone counties can require substantially different solutions to meet the needs of the public.

Missoula County has begun integrating Next Generation 9-1-1 technology to ensure reliable access to 9-1-1 public safety answering points at any location. The resources and solutions to create a 9-1-1 network that is robust, redundant, and reliable will require different improvements and future infrastructure across our rugged forested terrain than in Montana's prairie counties. Having the flexibility to select and implement those differing solutions is critical to public safety.

Given the rapidly changing means of communication and commerce brought about by internet innovation, access to affordable and reliable broadband internet service is a critical infrastructure component that deserves equal footing with traditional infrastructure. Currently, service offerings in Montana, including Missoula County, are limited and that service is expensive both for governments and direct consumers. Flexible federal assistance would allow states to remove barriers so that service providers could more readily build out networks in areas with low population density. Affordable, reliable, and widespread broadband access is critical to Montana as we compete for high tech jobs, expand businesses, and work to retain young people in Montana communities of all sizes.

Infrastructure is not a one-time investment. While initial costs of any major project tend to get the most attention given the large sums required, maintenance of those investments is equally critical and must be funded. Roads and bridges require upkeep and maintenance to keep them safe and travel-worthy. Inadequate maintenance funding leaves communities like ours in a position where that maintenance may be deferred or we are forced to abandon some services completely. In turn this can slow development and growth because basic transportation needs cannot be met and the flow of goods and people is slowed. For example, scaled back federal funding impacts local government's ability to support expanded transportation systems such as air and rail which stymies business growth and retention.

Major infrastructure bills such as reauthorization of the Water Resource Development Act should include an expanded Section 595 Program which directly benefits rural areas. Most water infrastructure projects we have developed have included this program as a funding source. Water systems are a critical infrastructure component where maintenance is vital to reduce water waste, energy consumption, and provide safe clean water to communities. Maintenance of these systems is also critical to prevent the pollution of our rivers and streams with waste products. The Water Resource Development Act and United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development programs are vital to providing Missoula County residents safe, clean water.

As the infrastructure policy debate continues, we hope you will continue to collaborate with your colleagues to find solutions to provide Montana governments with reliable and flexible infrastructure funding to help meet the many needs in our community and across the state. Thank you again for your efforts to directly include Montanans at all levels of government in the conversation.

In closing, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude for your service to the citizens of Montana. We genuinely appreciate the help you have provided Montana communities.

Sincerely,  
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

  
David Strohmaier, Chair

  
Nicole Rowley, Commissioner

  
Jean Curtiss, Commissioner