

Mark Thane, Candidate in House District 99

Housing Development

What changes to Subdivision law do you support to encourage needed development of housing while balancing other community values?

The 2018 housing report released by the Missoula Organization of Realtors finds that 47% of Missoula renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing and are considered “cost burdened”. The vacancy rate for Missoula rental properties (pre-pandemic) is approximately three percent. The lack of affordable housing is a significant barrier to Missoula’s workforce. Support for development within opportunity zones and inclusionary zoning policies are necessary to increase housing stock. Creative public/private partnerships to address housing affordability are critical.

Quite honestly, I am not familiar enough with state subdivision laws to know how they may need to be changed. I often hear about the length of the subdivision review process and the “overburdensome” regulations associated with development, but I would need to learn more of the specifics about the problem and potential solutions. I would be open to the conversations.

Are there non-regulatory strategies that the legislature should pursue, so please enumerate? If strategies require funding, where should it come from?

I am not aware of non-regulatory strategies that might encourage/enhance the development of subdivisions or increase housing stock. However, the Villagio complex planned for Missoula’s North Side is an example of a partnership that includes tax-exempt bonds through the Montana Board of Housing, tax credits, tax increment funding, the federal HOME Loan program and the resources of the Missoula Housing Authority. Such partnerships are critical to increase the stock of affordable housing.

Tax Law

What changes to TIF statues would you recommend responding citizen complaints and improve the program?

While TIF can be a good tool for economic development, I believe that there needs to be consideration of changes, such as placing a limit on the percentage of a local tax base that may be included in TIF districts. I also have concerns about the length of the Urban Renewal Districts. If the life of a district is extended, the tax base should be adjusted to current value when the district is extended. The 2017 legislature fixed one of the significant issues, excluding voter approved bond revenues from the district (i.e. school bonds).

What are your thoughts on the current taxation structure for local government? What changes, if any, would you propose/support?

As state revenue declines, tax burden is shifted to local payers. Local government officials are accountable to the local voters. I am intrigued by the property tax rebates Whitefish provides to homeowners as a result of the collection of local option taxes. The State of Montana depends primarily on three revenue streams: state income tax, state property tax and resource extraction taxes. As the resource taxes decrease (less coal mined, etc.) less state revenue will flow to municipal governments and local school districts, shifting the burden to local taxpayers (property tax). Missoula voters have voted repeatedly to fund local projects (Fort Missoula Regional Park, Missoula County Public Schools, Missoula Public Library, Open Space bonds). These are all projects that enhance the quality of life in Missoula and make Missoula an attractive community for new businesses. These projects do, however, have a significant cumulative impact on residents' property taxes.

Economic Development

As a state legislator, how would you propose to help grow and attract good paying jobs in Montana and specifically Missoula County?

I previously served on the board of directors for the Missoula Economic Partnership. The Partnership found that when businesses were considering locating in Missoula they always had two questions related to Missoula's schools: will the schools produce career-ready employees, and if they chose to locate in Missoula would their children have a high-quality school experience. This is one example of how the "quality of life" investments the Missoula community has made relates to economic development.

The Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund Program is an example of a tool used to spur economic development. Awards are based on job creation, assisting existing businesses to expand and encouraging new business development. Further investment of this nature is necessary.

Missoula has used revenue guarantees to facilitate expansion of air service to the Missoula International Airport. Additional routes and seats have resulted in reduction in the cost of air travel to/from Missoula, which helps reduce or eliminate another barrier to business development in Missoula.

Fair Housing

As a state legislator would you support legislation to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and /or gender identity?

While I served as superintendent of Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS) the Board of Trustees adopted revisions to the nondiscrimination and sex equity policies for both students and staff to include protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender nonconformity. This is an important value and I would support state-level action in this regard.