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Ravalli Co. growth policy rejected

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Voters decided to throw out the county's growth guidelines



Reporting from KPAX in Missoula

The way to handle growth took center stage in the Bitterroot on Election day as residents decided to repeal Ravalli County Growth Policy.

The guidelines are a non-regulatory document that state law requires to be in place before zoning, and other land-use regulations can be adopted.

Members of The Citizens Coalition for Repeal of the Growth Policy said that they worked hard to get information out to the public about the issue and believe that worked in their favor.

The controversial plan prompted some high emotions as the numbers came down on Election Day.

"They felt helpless against a county commission of five commissioners and they wanted to take it back and they finally had their say and no one can take that away from them the commissioners are bound for two years" stated the coalition's Daniel Cox.

Ravalli County's Growth Policy was adopted by commissioners in 2004 and had been used to develop the current subdivision regulations, the county parks plan, and a voter funded open lands program. <mosID>KPAX.LEITCH.MOS</mosID><mosAbstract>\

(from November 5, 2008)

The move to repeal Ravalli County's growth policy is making a Phoenix-like turnaround after more ballots are counted late Tuesday night, and the debate over growth also plays a role in the outcome of two county commissioner races.

The debate to repeal the county's growth policy erupted this summer as the process on developing countywide zoning bogged down.

Although the growth policy is just a set of guidelines, developers and property owners rallied around the repeal as a means to stop zoning.

Initially it appeared the policy would stand after the first vote count, but when all of the votes were tallied, the growth policy had gone down in flames.

At first, the votes defending the policy were ahead by more than 10%, but in the late voting the votes to repeal the policy had jumped ahead by more than 1,100.

The result means that the county will have to restart its entire planning process, barring lawsuits or other challenges.

The growth debate had a pronounced impact on the two Ravalli County commissioner races.

In District 2, incumbent Greg Chilcott, who had backed the repeal, easily defeated challenger John Meakin, who

had defended the policy.

Meanwhile, in the District 3 Race, Rancher JR Iman is headed to the Ravalli County Commission after besting Roger Dehaan. Iman hadn't been quite as vocal about the growth policy repeal, but had talked of taking a step back to re-evaluate the growth fight.

Finally, voters in Hamilton narrowly rejected a levy that would have helped Hamilton Schools buy new computers and other technology equipment for classrooms.

(from November 4, 2008)

There are some important issues and races on the ballot in Ravalli County, and as election officials continue to count ballots, we do know that over 300 late registration voters showed up to the polls.

Meanwhile, candidates are taking their places at the courthouse awaiting results, including some of the candidates for the county commissioner seats.

Citizens will be paying close attention as results come in on the hot button issue of whether or not to repeal the growth policy.

One battle is between incumbent Greg Chilcott, a Republican, and Democrat John Meakin for the District 2 position.

Chilcott is in favor of voters repealing the county's growth policy, while his opponent Meakin feels that would be a step backward.

Candidates voiced their stance on growth in their recent public debate as Meakin said that he sees the Controversial Flat Iron project as a bad example of how "urban sprawl" could ruin the Bitterroot.

But, Chilcott is concerned about development in the Eight Mile area, where Ravalli County is providing roads to support development across the line in Missoula County.

Democrat Roger De Haan is facing Republican James Iman for the District 3 seat which is now filled by longtime commissioner Alan Thompson, who decided against running for reelection.

Dehaan is a retired civil engineer and supports the current planning and zoning efforts and believes that the County's growth can be a valuable thing for local jobs and economy.

Iman is a fourth generation rancher in the Bitterroot and believes the county reached an impasse over zoning and needs a "time out", but Dehaan doesn't want to "stop the train" on the work done so far.

(from November 2, 2008)

Come Election Day, Ravalli County voters will decide to maintain or appeal their growth policy, which voters approved a few years ago and provide the guidelines that form the basis for managing the county's development.

One group who wants to maintain the policy call themselves the bipartisan campaign for quality of life and say that they believe the policy encourages agriculture, which they say is an important part of the Bitterroot Valley.

"The growth policy is a really important document because it advocates maintaining an agricultural base which is critical to Ravalli County" said Lyle Pilon with the Quality of Life Campaign.

"I came to the Bitterroot Valley a few years ago because I was interested in doing agriculture. I had a lot of trouble finding a place where I could do an agricultural operation" added the campaign's Cheryl Tenold. "So, I came to an agricultural valley and I wanna continue doing that."

The Ravalli County commissioners debated the growth policy last week and Republican Greg Chilcott said voters should repeal the policy, but his challenger John Meakin feels that move would be a step backward.

(from October 31, 2008)

Ravalli County commissioner candidates are wrestling with words like "growth" "impact fees" and "zoning" as they enter the home stretch before next Tuesday's election.

But navigating the hottest issue in this fall's election in the Bitterroot is a complicated journey.

From the Flat Iron project, to the move to repeal the Ravalli County growth policy, this year's county commissioner races are even more complex than last year, as various factions jockey for positions that will support their vision of what the Bitterroot should look like in the future.

But it's not as simple as just stating a position and letting the ballots fall where they may.

Incumbent Republican Commissioner Greg Chilcott may be working from the "inside" on the county commission, but he has to be cautious as campaign questions fall around active proposals.

During a candidate forum in Hamilton, Chilcott and challenger John Meakin were asked their opinions about the proposed Flat Iron annexation, which has subsequently been rejected by the Hamilton city council. Meakin sees the project as a bad example of how urban sprawl could ruin the Bitterroot.

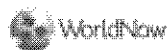
"You have a major subdivision located three miles away from the city of Hamilton," Meakin said. "All you're doing is extending a project that's going to increase the amount of sprawl in our county."

Chilcott told the audience he couldn't comment directly on Flat Iron because it could come before the commissioners for a decision.

He did point with concern at the other end of the county, in the eight-mile area, where Ravalli County is having to provide the roads and infrastructure to support development across the line in Missoula County.

"We can't charge an impact fee for a subdivision across the jurisdictional boundaries," Chilcott said. "Yet we provide those services necessary to accommodate those folks getting to and from their residences."

Chilcott argues voters should repeal the county's growth policy next week, but Meakin feels that would be a step backward - further proof of the differences showing up on the Bitterroot campaign trail this fall.



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