

**Date:** May 24, 2022

**To:** Focus Group Participants, Members of the Public, Stakeholders

**From:** Joel Nelson, Land Solutions, LLC

**RE:** Existing Conditions Report and May 10/11 Focus Group Meetings for the City of Libby Growth Policy Update

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This memo is intended to accompany the May 2022 *Existing Conditions Report* associated with the Growth Policy Update project. This memo outlines key findings for the project to date, and questions and other areas of discussion for the focus group meetings.

Two focus group meetings will be held at the City Hall Ponderosa Room, 952 E. Spruce in Libby:

- Tuesday, June 14<sup>th</sup> from 4 – 7pm
- Wednesday, June 15<sup>th</sup> from 2 – 5pm

To facilitate public participation, the city will host focus group meetings with open houses and work sessions for community discussions. Each meeting will consist of a one-hour open house format (come and go as you please), then a 1 ½ hour work session, followed by a 30 minute wrap-up.

The intent of the Existing Conditions Report is explained on Page 1 of the report. During the meetings, we will welcome input from the participants. Your feedback will help the City Planning Board refine the goals and actions of the growth policy and help shape growth policy update.

Please consider the following key findings and questions:

**Key Findings:**

- Libby's total population number is holding steady and even growing slightly, particularly since 2018. The recent uptick may simply be a snapshot, or a sign of a trend. Noteworthy ages of population increase are young children and senior citizens.
- Job numbers have increased since 2013. Jobs in health care, retail, construction, and transportation and warehousing employ the greatest numbers of Libby residents.
- The median household income has increased relatively substantially since 2010, but is still lower than median incomes in Lincoln County and the State of Montana.
- Finding and keeping employees have been a challenge for local employers while there has also been a shortage of good paying jobs.

- Housing prices have increased since 2010, and are accelerating since the onset of the Covid pandemic. While wages have increased, closing the gap between wages and housing costs has proven to be elusive.
- Libby's housing stock is dominated by single-family dwellings as opposed to multifamily dwellings. The possible need for more multi-family dwellings should be an area of discussion and focus.
- The Kootenai Business Park is a unique opportunity for potential location of relatively large employers.
- The zoning recently was updated to include the Highway Commercial District and modifications to the Downtown Business District. Other areas of the zoning regulations may be due for updating.
- Water and sewer improvements are always of high priority, but the list of improvements in the CIP is long and costly.
- There is an identified need for additional trained EMS volunteers.
- Parks facilities within the Libby area are relatively extensive.
- Climate change and emergency preparedness has been identified by the Planning Board as a topic of importance to be addressed with the update.

**Questions and other areas of discussion for focus groups:**

- What types of housing are needed? The Planning Board has identified the need for all types of affordable housing, including multi-family housing and mixed-use development.
- Are there other real estate and economic development needs, like office space? Specific locations?
- Is there sufficient area within the planning area for new housing? The Planning Board has indicated there is likely sufficient area for new housing, based on the 10 year planning horizon intended for the growth policy update, and the potential need for creative development and building 'up' (taller buildings, multi-family housing).
- Are vacation rentals having an impact on housing availability and affordability?
- The City of Libby is surrounded by forest, with the city in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Wildland fire has been and continues to be a threat. What are the most appropriate means to address WUI development in Libby?
- Libby's history includes the well-known groundwater contamination and asbestos-related disease, and the associated EPA cleanups. Does this unique history call for any special focus of the Growth Policy update that the current policy does not adequately address?
- Are there areas of blight? Parts of the city that could use more attention than others?

- Are there any urban renewal districts? If not, might there be interest in exploring establishing a URD and exploring the use of tax increment financing to invest in improvements to spur private sector investment? [Please see [Title 7, Chapter 15, Part 42, MCA](#) for Montana Urban Renewal Law]
- Are there or have there been emergent land use conflicts? If so, what kinds, and how may the Growth Policy update best address the conflicts?
- Regarding zoning, are there areas of trending or known nonconformities that need to be addressed due to current uses that conflict with the current zoning designations or standards?
- The CIP identifies goals for significant water system improvements needed, while the cost of city water services is said to be high. Beyond identifying needs in the Growth Policy update, are there any unique funding mechanisms to address needed water (and sewer) system improvements while not causing strain on city residents?
- How is the sidewalk ordinance working? Is the city enforcing it? Are landowners repairing and replacing sidewalks? Should the city's policy to assist landowners be updated to increase available amounts? If so, how could it be funded?
- Is there demand or desire to expand public transportation?
- Is there need or desire to improve the airport facilities?
- What needs are there for law enforcement, fire protection, and EMS that we should cite in the Growth Policy update or specific ideas to address these needs? A need for more EMS volunteers has been identified.
- Are slow internet speeds a limiting factor for locating new businesses, home offices, or homes in specific areas?
- Have the public schools identified significant needs that the community should address through the Growth Policy update?
- Downtown planning: What should be done to the *2005 Downtown Revitalization Plan and Mineral Avenue Streetscape Plan*, and how can this update best incorporate an update to any working components of the plan?
- The Planning Board has identified energy as an overall topic to address with the growth policy update. How can the updated address ideas such as clean energy, electric cars, charging stations, alternate transportation, conservation measures, including demand for smaller, more efficient housing units, potential for a City solar farm or use of solar for City facilities, etc.?
- Veterinary (animal) care is another aspect of health care services that the Planning Board has identified as a community issue. The number of veterinary offices in the community is

currently limited, and access to animal health care is diminishing, which the Planning Board intends to address with the growth policy update. Capacity for rescue and shelter is inadequate. Are there ideas that could address the promotion of bringing more veterinarian services to the community? And more rescue and shelter options? One idea that has emerged to address the low availability of vet services is the potential to reach out to college programs such as the veterinarian program at Washington State University.

- A related concern is an abundance in urban wildlife within the City of Libby, which has the potential to increase the transmission of animal illnesses and further straining the already limited access to veterinary services. Are there ideas to address this concern?

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I look forward to meeting with the focus group participants. If you have any questions or would like to discuss the project, please feel free to contact me at 406.261.3021 or [joel@landsolutionsmt.com](mailto:joel@landsolutionsmt.com)