

# WESTERN MONTANA

Growing into the 21st Century

# WESTERN MONTANA'S FUTURE IT'S OUR LEGACY

## Growth in Western Montana

The impacts of new growth in the 31 Western Montana counties—both positive and negative—affect us all. The Sonoran Institute, a non-profit organization with offices in Montana, Colorado and Arizona, has compiled this profile based on

the rate and character of growth in Western Montana to help citizens better understand these trends and their potential impacts. Detailed information has been compiled for all of the counties in Western Montana. For more information on the Sonoran Institute log on to: [www.sonoran.org](http://www.sonoran.org)

Information included in this Western Montana Profile was developed as a part of the Sonoran Institute and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy joint venture on growth and development in the West. For more information on the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, log on to: [www.lincolninst.edu](http://www.lincolninst.edu)



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INSTITUTE



## The Choice is Ours

Because Western Montana is such a special place, it's clear that we will continue to see lots of growth. Growth can be a good thing – it can provide us, our children, and our children's children, with the opportunity to live and work in a prosperous and vibrant environment. But sprawling, poorly-planned growth can spoil what we cherish about our communities and rural landscapes. These are the facts about growth in Western Montana: 1) we're growing fast; 2) we're building homes farther out into the countryside; and, 3) the average home lot is consuming more land than ever before. If we keep growing at this pace and with this pattern of growth, let's face it— our legacy to future generations will be a cluttered landscape of sprawling development.

But here's the good news: we can take reasonable steps – steps that respect our inherent property rights and values – to shape the future, rather than letting the future shape us. We can grow without losing what we hold most dear about this place: clean water, friendly neighborhoods, working ranches, magnificent views, excellent hunting and fishing, and essential community and county services. The challenge is to avoid rural sprawl that erodes those things. Instead, we can grow in a way that accommodates our development needs and adds great new neighborhoods to our existing communities. It's not about stopping new growth, it's about shaping a pattern of growth that respects and enhances our community character, our rural landscapes, and our fiscal well-being.

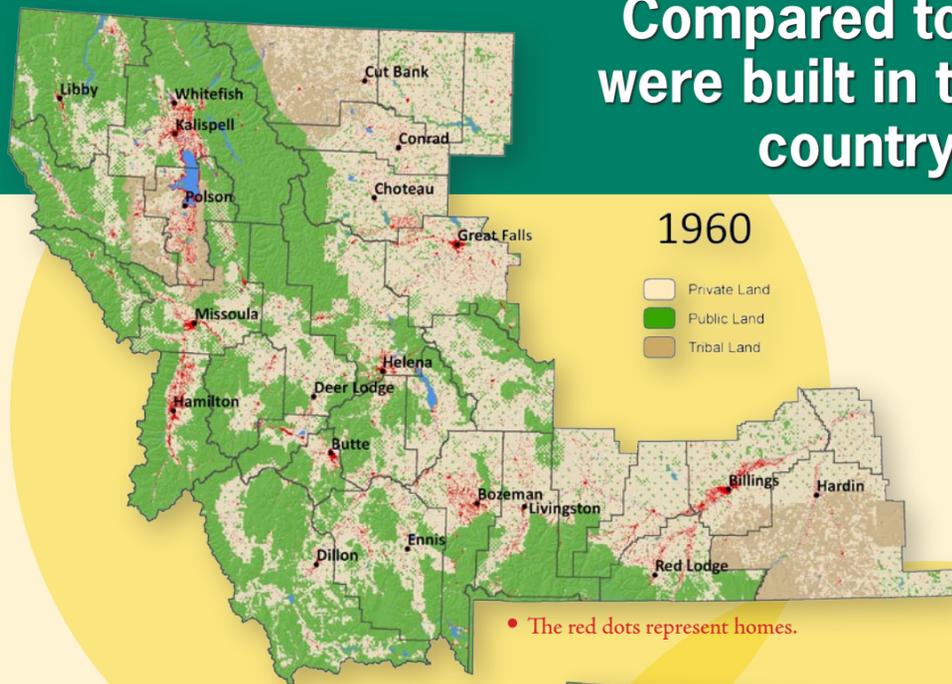
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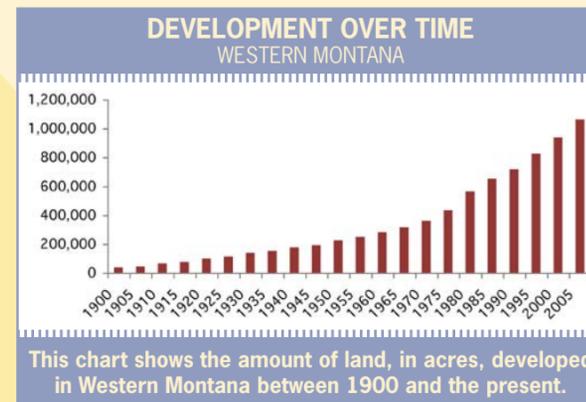
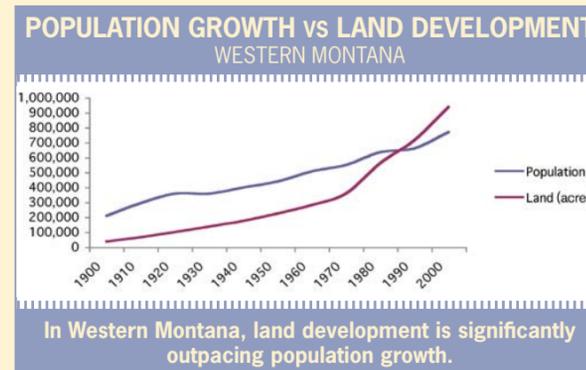
# Compared to traditional patterns of growth in which new homes were built in towns, recent growth has occurred farther out in the countryside, as illustrated in these maps and graphs.

WESTERN MONTANA: A GROWING CHALLENGE

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Not only are we seeing more growth in our rural landscapes of Western Montana, these subdivisions are taking up more and more space. While the population of Western Montana has grown by 49% since 1970, the amount of land developed has grown by almost 200%.



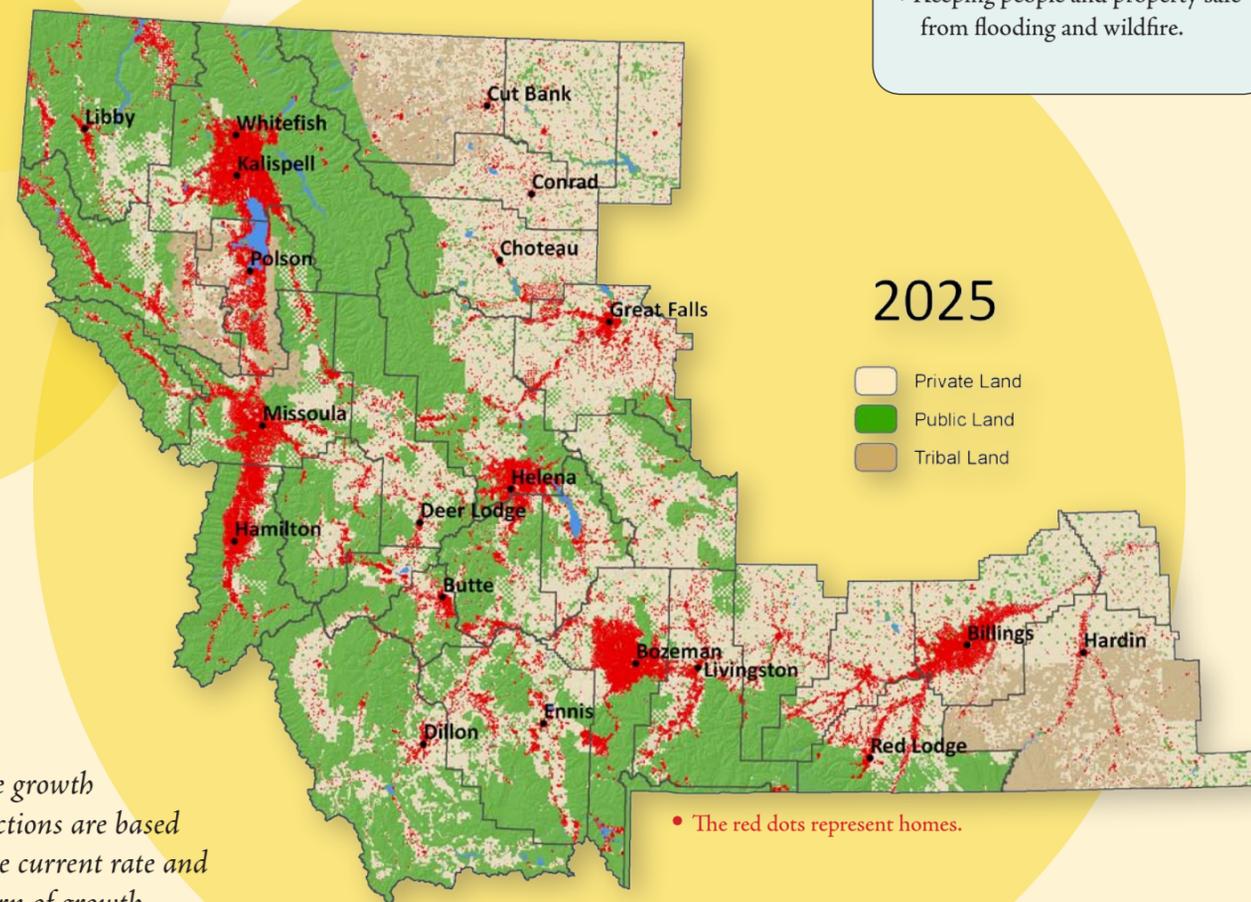
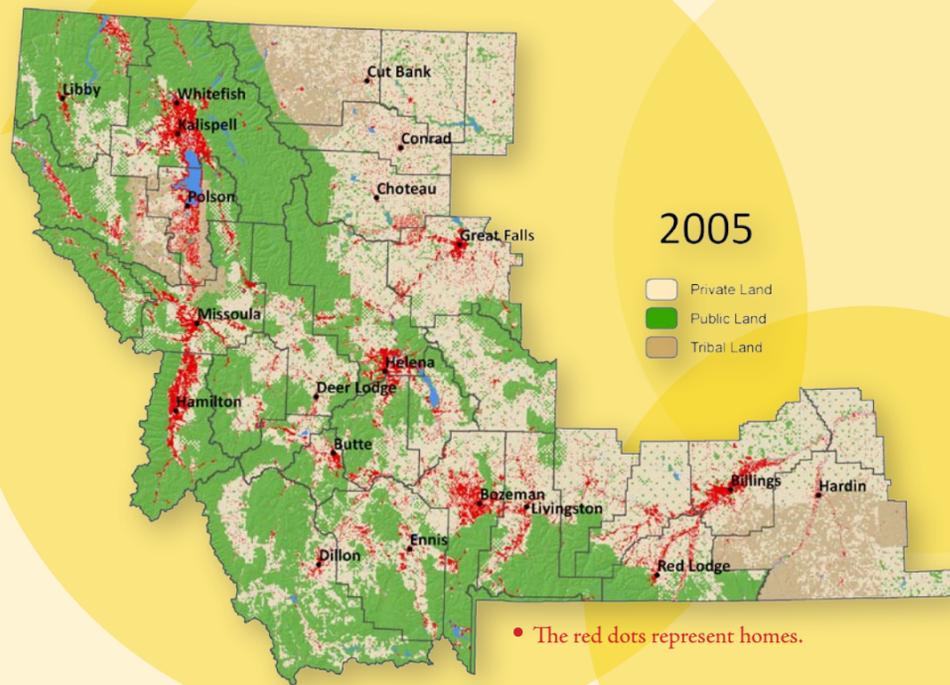
In contrast to rural sprawl, growth can take the form of pleasant, well-designed neighborhoods in our existing communities – with these benefits:

- Saving taxpayer dollars by avoiding the higher costs of far-flung infrastructure and services.
- Sustaining Western Montana's ranching heritage instead of paving over its agricultural lands.
- Conserving rivers and water quality, wildlife habitat, and scenic views by not cluttering and splintering the county with buildings, septic tanks and roads.
- Keeping people and property safe from flooding and wildfire.

## Western Montana Growth Facts

since 1970	Acres of residential development increased over 196%
since 1980	over 100,000 new homes
by 2025	additional 100,000 new residences
by 2025	additional 275,000 new residents

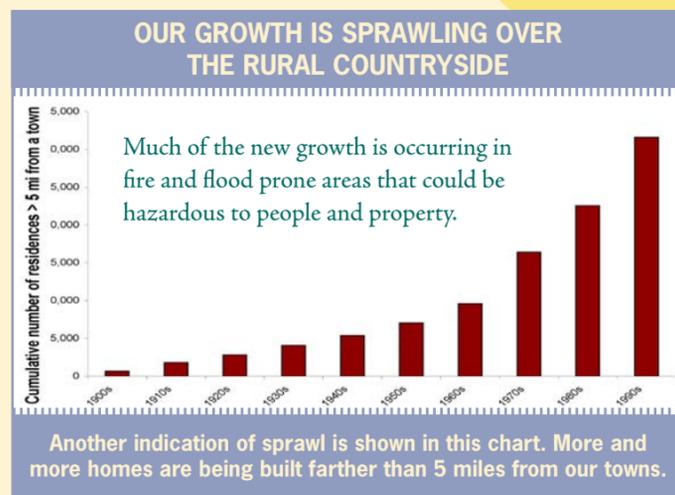
Sources: Sonoran Institute growth projections



These growth projections are based on the current rate and pattern of growth.



photo: Tim Cranford



## What Can You Do?

The leaders of both our cities and counties deal with growth issues on a daily basis. Because land use policies are decided by your local government-not the state or federal government- your voice is especially important. Your City or County Commissioners need to know where you stand on these issues. If you think that we should accommodate new growth in a manner that benefits our communities, conserves our natural resources and protects our quality of life and the fiscal well-being of your county, call or write them today.

Here's how to help shape the future of Western Montana

You can learn more about city and county planning efforts by contacting:

**Your local county or city planning office – check their website**

**Montana Smart Growth Coalition – 406 449-6086 or [www.mtsmartgrowth.org](http://www.mtsmartgrowth.org)**

**Sonoran Institute Northern Rockies Office – 406 587-7331 or [www.sonoran.org](http://www.sonoran.org)**

## Growing the Next Montana

*William Kittredge, Editor, The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*

As a boy, I remember my father returning to our home in Oregon from a trip to the Rockies and telling us that Montana was “The finest horse and cow country I ever saw.” In 1968, on my first drive into western Montana, I shared my father’s experience. I was floored by the big rivers, timbered distances and open meadowlands with ranch houses nestled back against the pines. What a place to live!

Then in the 1980s, on a flight out of Missoula, I sat next to an old rancher. “They’re turning that Bitterroot into hobby farms,” he said. He was moving to the sand hill country of Nebraska. “They won’t get there during my life.” I knew which “they” he was talking about. It was people like me, the newcomers.

Despite misgivings, Montana will keep evolving. People will keep coming. Their various priorities will often seem strange and alien to one another. How will we all get along together, as we must?

Let’s hope these newcomers come dedicated to preserving and even restoring what they came seeking in Montana – calm communities existing

in connection to a natural world that is reasonably functional.

It’s important to recall that good societies are usually centered on neighborliness that includes talking things out and grieving and celebrating together. We could begin by getting beyond the idea that relentless greed – whites against natives, cowmen against settlers, miners against the mine-owners – is right-minded.

Economic, ethnic and class hostilities, while very real in a West that likes to imagine itself as egalitarian, are going to become increasingly less tolerable as people move in.

And move in they will. It’s been my experience that many understand the need to fund education, health care and services for the disadvantaged, and that they are eager to care for rivers, forests and agricultural lands. It’s been my experience that they value a chance to live in neighborhoods devoted to both diversity and fairness which leads me to believe that together we can reason our way to a future based on the ideals of cherishing one another and this magnificent part of the world, Montana.

20 ACRE  
RANCHETTES  
1500 FT