

City-County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission

November 12, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

The Cascade County-City of Great Falls Historic Preservation Advisory Commission enthusiastically endorses the proposed Big Sky Country National Heritage Area, to be located in Cascade County and a portion of Chouteau County, which is home to Fort Benton, "the birthplace of Montana."

As members of this commission, we are well aware of the remarkable history and culture of central Montana. We would like this amazing past to be recognized, and for the Big Sky group to succeed in having its proposal approved by the Congress of the United States in the coming months.

We are involved, as a preservation commission on the local level, in attempting to assist individuals, groups and businesses as they preserve and renovate historic sites and structures. Our group has a preservation officer position, but its reach is limited to Cascade County proper, including Great Falls.

Members of this group have seen many instances over the years of people, groups or businesses trying to preserve or renovate historic sites and structures, but support for their efforts could be enhanced. The Big Sky Country National Heritage Area would offer such an enhancement. It would provide technical assistance to those within its boundaries, notably to a portion of Chouteau County where no historic preservation officer is available. It would raise the profile of central Montana by providing it with a national honorary designation, to try to attract folks traveling between Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, and to lure tourists from other areas to examine central Montana's dramatic history.

The heritage area group would work closely with other groups, such as tourism agencies, nonprofit historic preservation organizations, economic development agencies and others to boost area tourism. For example, this area needs more signs to let visitors know about the area's national landmarks and history. A heritage area can assist small groups operating on a shoestring who want to apply for grants, need advice on holding fundraising events, and who would like to learn about appropriate ways to shore up and renovate historic structures, or about efforts to preserve cultural assets.

A heritage area may be eligible to receive from the federal government a small annual appropriation of perhaps \$200,000 to \$300,000 per year to help the group fashion a business plan, hire a small staff, and get to work making this area a more attractive and compelling place to visit. This heritage area group must raise matching funds each year. The heritage area could provide small grants to projects as well. It's encouraging to see that for every \$1 allocated to a national heritage area, an additional \$5 is generated, providing strong benefits to communities.

We believe the Big Sky Country National Heritage Area will greatly benefit the community, contribute to efforts to diversify the economy in central Montana, and assist projects that will give tourists more to see. We need to tell the fascinating stories from this area.

By the way, the Big Sky Country National Heritage Area has already passed a resolution that it will not get involved in local zoning matters, and that it has no intention of getting into the business of buying property, other than the possibility it might buy or lease a location for its office.

A heritage area will not endanger any person's private property rights. Involvement with the heritage area will be strictly voluntary. If local folks want some help with a project, though, the heritage area will be glad to help. There is no need to fear heritage areas, of which there are 55 in the United States. They have a truly inspiring track record of historic preservation and economic development.

We, the City-County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission, firmly support this excellent proposal. (See official HPAC meeting minutes dated November 12, 2020.)

Sincerely,

chairman