

Threat to North Shore Conservation: North Shore Ranch Subdivision Proposal

A potential roadblock for the conserving the North Shore of Flathead Lake is a large-scale subdivision proposal. If approved, the North Shore Ranch Subdivision would result in relatively high density residential development that would negatively affect the viability of a conservation plan for the north shore.

The North Shore Ranch subdivision was initially proposed in 2006. The subdivision would be located between the U.S. F&WS Waterfowl Production Area and Hwy 82, about 1 1/2 miles east of the Hwy 82 and Hwy 93 intersection. The Flathead County Planning Board unanimously recommended denial of the proposal for a number of reasons, including its density, impacts on MT Hwy 82, impacts to the Waterfowl Production Area, high groundwater and runoff issues, and impacts to Flathead Lake. The applicants withdrew their proposal for what the county calls a “midcourse correction.” They resubmitted a new proposal last August.

The new proposal is for 290 lots on 367 acres. The minimum lot size is .27 acres and the maximum lot size is 1.6 acres. The lots are proposed to be served by the Lakeside Sewer District. The area is currently farm land with about 34 acres of wetlands. The area is unzoned except for scenic corridor zoning which applies only to signs. The proposal also includes an equestrian center with stables and paddocks, a clubhouse and fitness center, sports fields and equestrian and pedestrian trails.

The new proposal reduces the number of lots from 310 to 290, pulls all the lots out of the 100-year floodplain and includes revisions to several reports and plans submitted with the original application. The proposal indicates the development would occur in 15 phases, with the final plat for the final phases to be approved within 15 years.

A public hearing before the Flathead Co. Planning Board was scheduled for Nov. 28. The applicant requested the hearing be postponed in a Nov. 27 letter. That letter claims that 1) The Staff Report is deficient because it makes unlawful demands of the applicant, and 2) The substance of the Staff Report violates the integrity of the application process. The hearing had been rescheduled for Mach 26.

The Flathead Lakers submitted a comment letter on the subdivision proposal on Nov. 21, opposing the North Shore Ranch subdivision as currently proposed. We believe the North Shore area is a poor location for large scale, high density residential development. The North Shore Ranch subdivision proposal, as currently designed, threatens the area’s special qualities including its waters and wildlife.

In our comment letter we contend that:

- The North Shore is too special and too vulnerable to rely on numerous mitigation measures, multiple permit conditions, special construction methods and difficult to enforce covenants in order to protect the Flathead’s waters, wildlife and quality of life. It is a one-of-a-kind place in the Flathead and deserves special treatment and a special plan.
- The new North Shore Ranch subdivision proposal has not been substantially changed from the original application. Its density remains too great for this special area. Questions remain about its impacts on shallow groundwater, water quality, sewer capacity, the adjacent U.S. Waterfowl Production Area, waterfowl and other wildlife.

- There is growing interest in a plan that will engage land owners and the public in protecting the special qualities of the North Shore. We are optimistic that solutions can be created that will meet the needs of North Shore landowners, that funding can be secured and that the public will embrace a vision of the North Shore that conserves its special characteristics.

Despite some positive elements in this subdivision proposal, we believe it is simply in the wrong place. We urged the planning board to recommend that the subdivision be denied as it is currently proposed.

The River to Lake Initiative partners have been exploring possible solutions to prevent this subdivision from derailing the North Shore conservation effort, including raising funds to buy the property.