

North Shore Deserves a Special Plan

by Dick Siderius

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Do you remember the last time you returned home from an extended road trip away from the Flathead Valley?

I do. I remember cresting the hill north of Somers and seeing the Flathead Valley rolling out in all its glory. The scene said: "Welcome home."

Indeed, the North Shore of the Flathead Lake is a particularly special corner of our very special valley. That stunning beauty, it turns out, is only a small part of what makes it special.

Unfortunately, the future is cloudy for this special place. Now is the time to work together to protect the natural beauty and clean water that makes life in the Flathead Valley so wonderful. Or this inspirational view could become our own "Heartbreak Hill."

The North Shore is that ground between Bigfork and Somers, south of Montana Highway 82. It includes the US Fish and Wildlife Service waterfowl refuge, plus surrounding farmland. It's known for its osprey nests, wetlands full of ducks and swans and sweeping views of the [Jewel Basin](#). It is "postcard Montana." These wetlands are good for more than just ducks. Scientists tell us wetlands and sloughs act as natural filters. They help keep the pollution we all create from reaching Flathead Lake. We all know it is far easier and cheaper to keep pollution out of our water than to try to clean it up after it's degraded.

The North Shore is also important for maintaining the Flathead Valley's outdoor way of life. It is the most popular place for hunting upland birds like pheasants and waterfowl like Canada geese. Plus, waterfowl that nest and rest there are hunted far and wide. In other seasons, the North Shore offers public access for folks who like to walk, picnic, bird watch or even ice-skate on the shore of the "big lake."

These things — our natural beauty, our clean water, and our right to hunt and fish — belong to everyone.

They are valuable for our economy and they are valuable in ways that cannot be measured in dollars and cents. Anyone who has lived in the Flathead Valley has seen the valley grow, develop and change. Growth can be good. We are far luckier than many communities in other parts of Montana, where communities are fighting a steady erosion of their towns, business districts, schools and church congregations.

We share a responsibility to grow wisely. It is our job to grow in ways that do not squander the very things that make the Flathead Valley special and make our economy hum.

Right now, the Flathead County Planning Board is weighing a major proposal for a subdivision along the North Shore. There are a host of concerns — ground water, flooding, soils, and impacts on public wildlife areas. But the bottom line is this is not the right place for 290 homes. The professional staff at the Flathead County Planning Department declined to give this subdivision its stamp of approval.

We all respect the rights of property owners to develop their land. But we must make sure that development does not degrade the waters, wildlife and quality of life that belong to all of us.

The [Flathead Lakers](#), the [Flathead Land Trust](#), local landowners and appropriate agencies are working for a win-win for the North Shore. We believe that, given a bit of time, we can find a plan that gives landowners what they need and protects public values.

Flathead County, we have only one chance to do this right. Our kids will judge us by how well we plan for the future. Once the North Shore is developed, that chance is gone forever. The North Shore is a special place. It deserves a special plan.

Dick Siderius serves on the board of the Flathead Lakers, a nonprofit organization working for clean water, healthy ecosystems and lasting quality of life in the Flathead Watershed. He lives near Somers on the farm that his family has owned for over 100 years.