



1. Purpose and Scope

1.1. Purpose

A Growth Policy is a community’s growth and development plan that evaluates existing community conditions and sets goals and future visions for housing, land use, economic development, local services, public safety, natural resources, transportation, and other unique characteristics and features of the community. A Growth Policy is not a regulation or ordinance, but it serves as the legal basis for enacting them.

The 2023 Pondera County Growth Policy is an update to the existing 2011 Growth Policy, providing vision for the County that indicates how it wants to develop and make public investments over the next 20 years. It provides the long-range focus to help decision-makers set priorities and evaluate whether development proposals are consistent with this vision. It is a tool to coordinate with other government agencies and to communicate to citizens and developers the vision of the community. The Plan provides the framework for regulatory updates, land use decisions, and public investments and will be an invaluable resource for the County.

1.2. Geographic Scope

The Pondera County Growth Policy is the responsibility of the Pondera County / City of Conrad Growth Policy Steering Committee and takes into consideration all areas of the County, including the incorporated City of Conrad and the Towns of Brady, Dupuyer, Heart Butte, and Valier and the lands within the boundary of the Blackfeet Reservation that are owned in fee.

1.3. Authority

In accordance with Mont. Code Ann. § 76-1-601 through § 76-1-606 (2021), the Pondera County Commissioners have authorized the Pondera County / City of Conrad Growth Policy Steering Committee to develop a County Growth Policy to address the most critical issues facing the County. The requirements outlined in these statutes constitute the contents of this Growth Policy.

1.4. Planning in Pondera County

The Pondera County Planning Board is responsible for land use planning in Pondera County. Bylaws instituted by the Board in 2002 state that the Board’s purpose is to:

1. Assist local units of government make adequate provisions for utilities, streets, roads, highways, conveniences, public health, safety, and general welfare.
2. Recognize the need of agriculture, agriculture related industry, and industry and business.
3. Conserve, stabilize, and protect the value of property.
4. Encourage the proper use of land.
5. Provide healthy surroundings for family life in rural and residential areas.



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6. Foster a plan in which the growth of the area will be commensurate with and promote the efficient and economical use of public funds.

The board serves in an advisory capacity to presently established boards and officials.

County Commissioners appoint one official member of the governing board of a conservation district or state cooperative grazing district if officers of either reside in Pondera County. They also appoint at least four citizen members who do not hold other offices in County Government. One member of the Commission MAY be an official member of the Board. Current members of the Planning Board are listed on the county's website at <https://www.ponderacountymontana.org/planning-board>.

Responsibilities of the Planning Board include development and administration of Pondera County's Subdivision Regulations, Hazard Mitigation Plan, enforcement of Floodplain Regulations, and overall land use management for the County in accordance with the Growth Policy. Responsibilities also include facilitating communication between the landowners/developers and a private consultant who provides review of certificates of survey prior to filing with the County Clerk and Recorder. This review is intended to identify any clerical errors and omissions and to ensure exempt divisions of land are compliant with the provisions outlined in the Montana Subdivision and Planning Act.

Subdivision regulations currently in place in Pondera County were adopted in 2016 and comply with the Montana Subdivision and Platting Act. Full copies of the regulations can be obtained from the Pondera Clerk & Recorder. The Regulations include general procedures for subdivision of property, review and approval procedures, exemptions from subdivision review, and design and improvement standards. Regulations also address spaces for recreational camping vehicles or mobile homes, planned unit developments, condominiums, and cluster development. Administrative provisions such as variances, amendments to regulations, enforcement, and violations and penalties are also described in the document. Future updates to the Pondera County Subdivision Regulations will be needed to address changes made by legislation since 2016. An update following the 2023 Montana legislative session is planned.

Communities within Pondera County, including Conrad and Valier, have established their own Growth Policies. The City of Conrad is undertaking an update of their policy in collaboration with the County's effort to update their Growth Policy. The Town of Valier recently completed a Growth Policy encompassing their town limits. This Growth Policy update will seek to coordinate with those individual policies.

Pondera County is an active member of the Sweetgrass Development Corporation (SDC). Their association with that organization provides planning benefits for the County that are otherwise difficult for smaller communities to develop on their own



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with limited budgets and staff. Participating in developing the Community Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the region, which is updated every five years, provides opportunity for Pondera County residents to provide input on monitoring and evaluating long term economic goals and strategies for the region. This type of region-wide planning highlights capital improvements necessary for the area to provide opportunity for the economic well-being of the communities within the planning area.

1.5. Public Involvement

The Growth Policy Steering Committee established a public involvement plan for development of the Growth Policy that included a variety of means for public education and input. Each member of the Committee was responsible for informing their local governments and residents in their representative areas about the development of the Growth Policy.

The plan included the creation of a project website with links from Pondera County and other community social media sites where Growth Policy work session dates and times, and updated Policy drafts were posted. The website provided contact information for making comments on the progress of the document and requested that all respondents provide their names and addresses.

A public meeting was held on April 13, 2023, to educate the public on the Growth Policy development process and allow comment during a visioning process that included opportunity for comment on each element of the planned Growth Policy document. A final public meeting was also held on ??? to take comments on the final draft of the document.

Press releases were used to inform the public about the progress of the document and announce public meeting opportunities.

Thank you to the following groups and organizations for participating in outreach regarding the content of the Growth Policy:

- Sweetgrass Development Corporation
- Pondera County U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- We will list these as groups are contacted or participate (i.e. Chambers of Commerce, Watershed Council, Stockgrowers, Pondera County Commissioners, City/Town Councils, etc.)

1.6. Document Organization

The Pondera County Growth Policy is organized in a manner that highlights the required elements of § 76-1-601 through 76-1-606, MCA. Each section provides current information about the element as it relates to the existing conditions of Pondera County, the incorporated City of Conrad, and the individual Towns of Brady, Dupuyer,



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Heart Butte, and Valier, followed by projections that may affect the future of the County and associated communities. Goals and Objectives developed through the Planning Board’s study of each issue, including public input, are also included in each section.

An implementation plan that considers each goal and objective developed is presented at the end of the document. The plan also sets a timeframe for accomplishment. For future tracking, additional columns are added for regulations used in implementation, funding sources, and dates completed.



2. County Background

Pondera County is located along the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains, stretching east to vast rolling prairies, creating a diverse terrain. The county contains a section of the Rocky Mountain Range of the Helena-Lewis & Clark National Forest, as well as portions of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

Fort Conrad was constructed in 1875 and became a crucial trading post and stopping point along the Whoop Up Trail, which provided a 230-mile trade route between southern Alberta, Canada and Fort Benton, Montana. Fort Conrad was also used by the Blackfeet Indians for trading items such as furs, food, clothing, and ammunition (Conrad Museum, 2012). The Whoop Up Trail was responsible for transporting a wide range of freight from the Missouri River in Fort Benton, Montana to Canada, including tobacco, flour, sugar, tea, hides and pelts, and alcohol (Keenan, 2017). In the early 1870s, the first settlers in Pondera County are believed to have been cattle ranchers near what is now the Town of Dupuyer (Pondera History Association, 1973)

Pondera County was formed in 1919 from portions of land that were a part of both Teton County and Chouteau County, Montana. Conrad was identified as the permanent county seat in 1920 and is located in the original location of Fort Conrad (Pondera History Association, 1973).

The County has a resilient agricultural heritage and is part of the Montana region known as the Golden Triangle because of the amount of wheat grown in the area (Central Montana, 2023). Other crops produced include barley, lentils, hay, and oilseed. To improve crop production, the Valier Land and Water Company, which began in 1898, introduced an irrigation canal system to provide water to approximately 6,000 acres of hay meadow. Subsequently, due to the introduction of the Carey Act of 1894, which allowed private companies to construct irrigation systems in the western United States and sell the water for profit, two additional irrigation companies were formed, which further improved crop production within the region (Pondera History Association, 1973).

Today, there are two incorporated cities/towns within the County – Conrad and Valier. Other small communities in the county include Dupuyer, Heart Butte, and Brady. These unincorporated communities originated as centers for agricultural operations and railroad shipping points.

Historical Background

The following is a brief timeline of major events that have taken place in Pondera County and is in no way intended to be a complete history of the County.



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Date	Event
1700s	Tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy – Piegan, Bloods, and Siksika (Blackfeet) – claimed the area known today in Montana as the Hi-Line, including Pondera County.
1700s	The Old North Trail, which ran roughly parallel to U.S. Highway 89, was a trail of conquest that Confederacy Indians used to travel as far north as Calgary, Alberta and as far south as New Mexico
1806	Meriwether Lewis and his men traveled up the Marias and Missouri Rivers on their way back from the coast.
1835	U.S. Government sent exploring parties to determine a practical railroad route.
1837	Smallpox epidemic killed 6,000 Blackfeet, which was approximately two-thirds of the population.
1855	Treaty with the Blackfeet Nation signed. Boundaries of the reservation were eventually pushed back from the Musselshell River to the Sun River, and then to Birch Creek and the Marias River.
1868	Brothers Charles E. and William G. Conrad began building a business empire. Working as clerks for I.G. Baker, owner of multiple trading companies, the brothers eventually became partners with Baker. In 1874, they bought the company. They were involved in overland trade, banking, ranching, mining, and real estate, and ended up owning much of the land that is known as Pondera County.
1874	Charlie Thomas and Joe Kipp took up a ranch near present-day Dupuyer and started raising cattle.
1875	Fort Conrad was established by Charles E. Conrad. The Fort was located along the Whoop Up Trail, carrying goods between Fort Benton and Fort Conrad until 1892.
1877	Town of Dupuyer was established.
1886	Brothers William G. and Charles E. Conrad purchased 11 sections of land and began building what would become the Conrad Investment Company holdings of more than 312 sections (200,000 acres) by 1898. The land was named the Seven Block Ranch and eventually ran 10,000 head of cattle. They started the irrigation projects that would become the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company.
1888	Townsite of Dupuyer was platted.
1889	Old Pondera town was located approximately one mile from present-day Conrad, and had one store, one rooming house, two saloons, a section house, a schoolhouse, and a water tank.
1890	Great Falls and Canada Railroad made its first trip from Great Falls to Lethbridge, Canada.
1901	Great Falls and Canada Railroad was sold to the Great Northern Railroad and new tracks were constructed through present-day Conrad.



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1902	The 620-acre town site of Conrad was laid out, and the buildings from Old Pondera were moved to Conrad. Conrad was named after William G. Conrad.
1904	The first school was built in Conrad.
1908-1909	The Cargill family from Wisconsin purchased the Seven Block Ranch, including the initial irrigation system of the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company. W.S. Cargill and other investors developed the irrigation project that included Lake Frances.
1909	Valier Townsite Company was established, and the Town of Valier was laid out to accommodate 3,000 people. Within 5 months, 600 individuals lived in Valier.
1909	Conrad was incorporated September 24, 1909.
1912	Valier Library was constructed.
1916	Conrad grew to a population of 1,500 individuals.
1919	Pondera County was established.
1925	Conrad Library was established.
1948	Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company was completed and consisted of two storage reservoirs and 360 miles of canal and lateral ditches.
1950	Conrad High School was completed.

Conrad

In the early 1900s, the newly created Great Northern Railroad installed tracks throughout the region, locating them nearly one mile west of the existing town of Pondera. Brothers W.G. and Charles E. Conrad, local cattlemen who arrived from Virginia after the Civil War, donated 602 acres of land near the newly built railroad for the purpose of creating a new town site (Borgen, 1995). The buildings that comprised the town of Pondera were moved to this new location, and Conrad was born (Pondera History Association, 1973). The town grew quickly due to the importance of the railroad and became incorporated in 1909.

Valier

The land on which Valier lies was originally located within the land of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which was comprised of the Piegan, Bloods, and Siksika (Blackfeet). In the late 1800s, the Conrad brothers began purchasing land to develop the Seven Block Ranch, which would eventually run thousands of head of cattle. When this property was sold to the Cargill family in 1908, the family and their investors created the irrigation system which resulted in the creation of Lake Frances (Valier Book Company, 1981). The Town of Valier was created in 1909 and was planned for a population of 3,000 residents. The Town was incorporated in 1910, nine years prior to the creation of Pondera County.



3. Population

3.1. Demographics

Pondera County’s total population, according to the Population and Housing Unit Estimates Program, U.S. Census Bureau, was estimated at 6,078 in 2022, showing a small decrease in population over a 10-year period beginning in 2012. In addition, between 2000 and 2022, the county’s population declined by 306 people, or approximately 4.8% (Montana Department of Commerce, 2022).

The long-term decline in population is likely related to a general decline in the birth rate as families are choosing to have fewer children, and farms and ranches are getting larger and turning to automation to reduce the cost or need of laborers. Outside of agriculture, local retail, and some large employers (i.e., Pondera Medical Center), there is very little opportunity for employment in other industries, like manufacturing, that might provide higher wage jobs. Agricultural operations are struggling to find and maintain employees due to wage competition in urban areas.

The decline in population may also be attributed to the difficulty in keeping and attracting young families to the area. This is evident in the age distribution of the existing population over time, where older individuals are not leaving the area, but childbearing individuals are moving away. As discussed further in this section, it does appear that there may be an upturn in the number of younger individuals returning to or moving to the area.

A more recent upturn in population numbers can be attributed to the diversification of the county’s economy. Job growth has been identified in retail trade, arts, entertainment, and recreation, and public administration. It may also be related to the attraction of a rural lifestyle during and following the COVID-19 pandemic that was at its peak in 2020 and 2021. Telecommuters, retirees, or previous residents of rural communities were known to find refuge in small communities to escape the more highly populated and restricted areas of the United States.

Table 3.1 Pondera County Population (Montana Department of Commerce, 2022)

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
6,152	6,218	6,140	6,024	5,954	5,936	5,858	5,879	6,018	6,078

Population totals for the City of Conrad and the Town of Valier are shown in Table 3.2, along with a calculation of population for rural and unincorporated communities.



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Table 3.2 Pondera County Consolidated Towns Population

(Montana Department of Commerce, 2022)

Community	2022 population	2010 population	% change
Conrad	2,387	2,583	-7.5%
Valier	545	510	+6.9%
Dupuyer (unincorporated)	93*	86	+8.1%
Heart Butte (unincorporated)	621*	582	+6.7%
Total Population of Towns	3,646	3,761	-3.1%
Total County Population	6,078	6,161	-1.3%
Rural and Unincorporated Communities	2,432	2,400	+1.3%

*Population numbers for Dupuyer and Heart Butte are based on the 2020 Census for 2021.

While the Town of Valier has experienced slight growth since 2010, the City of Conrad has seen a decline in population. The increase of population in rural areas of Pondera County, compared to the population decrease in towns, suggests that residents may be moving from the incorporated communities to more rural communities. The Headwaters Economics Demographic Profile of the County indicates the median age in Conrad declined between 2010 and 2020 but increased in Valier (see Table 3.3).

The largest increase in population over the last 10 years has occurred in the unincorporated communities in Pondera County. While some of this may be attributed to the recent return of individuals to their family farms or ranches, it is more likely that the lack of land use regulation in the County is more attractive to builders and developers. City/Town zoning and other land use regulations may be causing migration away from development within the incorporated towns.

Table 3.3 Median Age and Age Distribution by City/Town

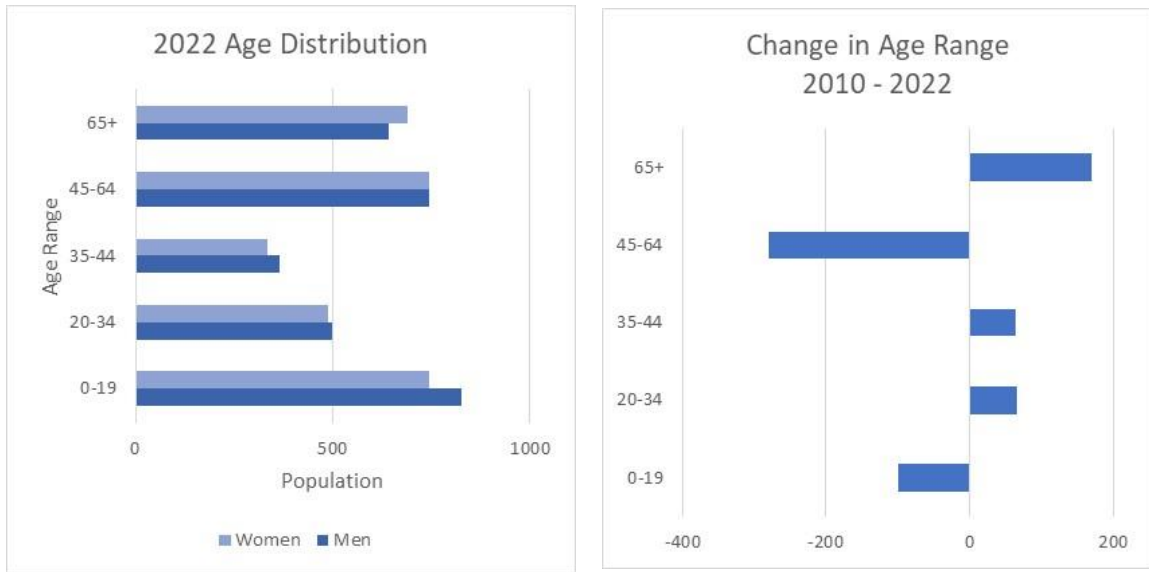
(Headwaters Economics, 2023)

Community	Median Age 2010/2020	Under 18	18-34	35-44	45-64	65+
Conrad	42.6/40.0	26.5%	15.5%	11.2%	23.7%	23.1%
Valier	43.3/50.9	24.1%	14.3%	12.3%	30.2%	19.1%

The county as a whole has experienced a slight decline in population from 2010 to 2021, particularly in the age range of under 18 and 45 to 64-year-olds. The overall population decrease was predicted in the 2011 Pondera County Growth Policy.



Figure 3.1 Profile of Median Age by Gender in Pondera County (Montana Department of Commerce, 2022)



3.2. Projections

The Montana Census and Economic Information Center (CEIC) projects that Pondera County’s population will steadily decline over the next 20 years (2020-2040) to approximately 5,308 (Montana Department of Commerce, 2020). Although the projection shows a small growth increase between 2040-2050, overall, the steady population trend is expected to continue through 2060.

Table 3.4 Pondera County Projected Population

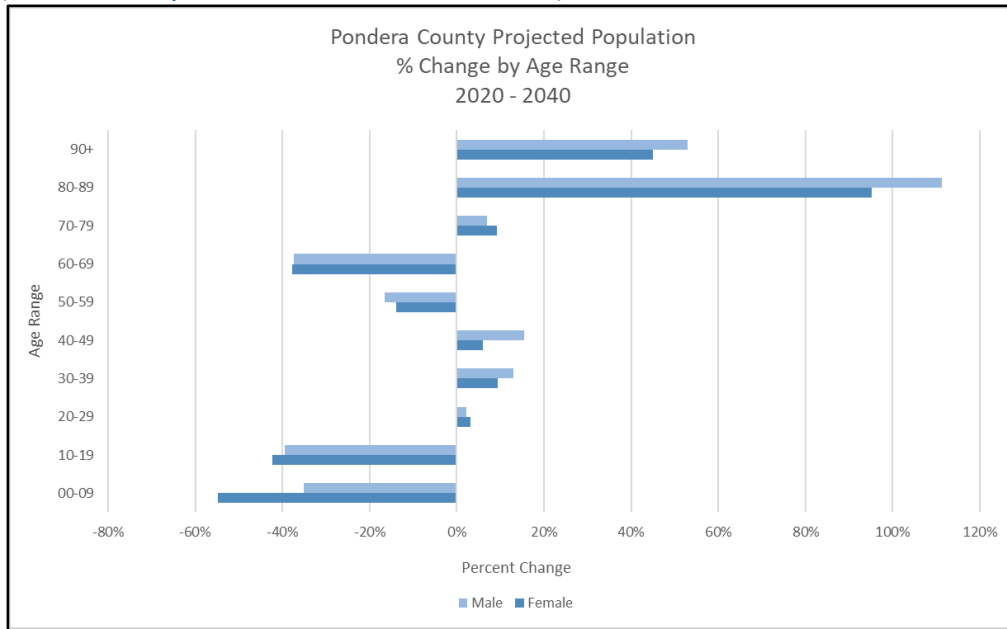
Year	2020	2030	2040	2050	2060
Population	5,786	5,310	5,308	5,363	5,258

Factors leading to a steadily declining population in the county can be attributed to larger communities that are luring individuals out of rural areas. Larger communities are able to offer benefits such as increased job opportunities, more healthcare options, or better access to broadband.

The 20-year trend from 2020 to 2040 shows the largest growth projection in the age group 80-89, and the largest decline in the age group 0-9. Implications for this trend are a need for additional senior programs, as well as increased medical services and assisted living facilities.



Figure 3.1 Population Change by Age and Gender in Pondera County
(Montana Department of Commerce, 2020)



3.3. Goals and Objectives

Goal 3.1	
Sustainable population growth that provides a base to support business and schools at a rate that local government can maintain.	
Objectives	Actions
Retain current levels of population and plan for 1% to 2% annual growth.	Planning board to coordinate with public infrastructure policies and procedures to support development growth.
	County leaders to support efforts by the Chambers of Commerce and other entities to market quality-of-life factors to attract new residents.
Goal 3.2	
Identify areas in Pondera County that are desirable for growth and target capital improvements for these areas.	
Objectives	Actions
Encourage high-density in-fill multi-family developments in and near town centers and cities to prevent urban sprawl and preserve open space and agricultural land.	Planning board ensures that the County Subdivision Regulations allow high-density in-fill and multi-family developments.
	Incorporated cities and towns utilize Subdivision and Zoning Regulations to encourage high-density in-fill and multi-family developments.
	Cities and towns seek to provide adequate infrastructure (water, sewer, storm) in areas suitable for growth. This may include acquisition of funding for projects.



Goal 3.3	
Provide the means to maintain the current population and attract new residents that represent the future of the community.	
Objectives	Actions
Maintain and improve infrastructure and services that support older adults or retirees and allow them to remain in the community.	Support housing development and upgrades that provide accessible and attractive housing options for seniors utilizing funding from sources that may include CDBG, HOME, Rural Development.
	Work with SEDC to encourage business and services for older adults (i.e., healthcare, and social centers). Utilize funding from sources that may include CDBG and Rural Development.
Improve services and infrastructure that encourage young adults and families to remain in or relocate to the area.	Local government, Chambers of Commerce and other community organizations to actively engage young adults in community leadership positions, ie. Leadership Conrad.
	Work with local agencies to identify the needs of young families and identify potential service gaps (social services, health care, etc.).
	Local government to work with local agencies (youth groups and schools) to promote activities and entertainment for youth.
Design facilities and services to accommodate people of all ages and abilities.	Local government to support ADA access to facilities and services, including seeking funding from programs that assist with accessibility (MDT TA, CDBG, Housing Rehab, CDBG Public Facilities).



4. Land Use

4.1. Land Description

Pondera County is in the northwest part of Central Montana, situated between the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountain Front and on the edge of the Northern Great Plains. The western portion of the county falls within the Helena - Lewis and Clark National Forest, home to majestic mountain peaks with elevations up to 9,000 feet. Predominant waterways within the county include Birch Creek, Two Medicine River, and the Marias River, all generally flowing east from the Rocky Mountain Front. Cropland and rangeland make up a greater part of the landscape through the central and eastern parts of the county, as agriculture is a key contributor to the local economy. See Chapter 6, Economic Development, for additional information on Pondera County economics.

4.2. Existing Land Use

Pondera County contains approximately 1,049,832 acres, or approximately 1,640 square miles, with 66% being privately owned and 16% being owned by a Federal, State, County, or Local Government agency, as seen in Table 4.1 (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023).

Table 4.1 Pondera County Land Ownership (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023)

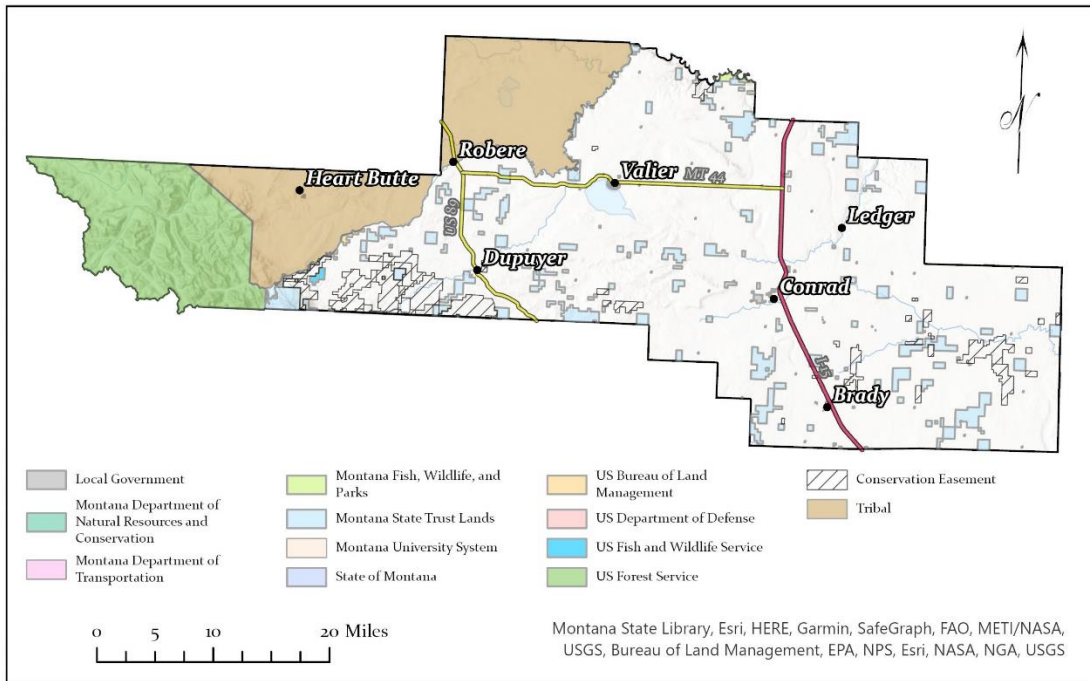
Location	Acres	Percentage of Total
Pondera County	1,049,832	
Private Lands	689,652	65.7%
Tribal Lands	162,961	15.5%
Federal Lands	109,334	10.4%
Forest Service	107,346	10.2%
U.S. Bureau of Land Management	1,145	0.1%
U.S. Fish and Wildlife	640	<0.1%
U.S. Department of Defense	203	< 0.1%
State Lands	57,993	5.5%
State Trust Lands	56,581	5.4%
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks	1,295	1.2%
State of Montana	38	< 0.1%
MT Department of Transportation	19	< 0.1%
Local Government	958	< 0.1%
Conservation Easements	28,672	2.7%



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Figure 4.1 Pondera County Land Ownership (Montana State Library, 2023)



Conservation easements make up 2.8% of the land within Pondera County. Conservation easements can be held by private or public entities, such as those listed in Table 4.2. Lands placed into conservation easements allow the current landowner to maintain ownership while the land is managed with an importance on conservation of agricultural and wildlife habitat. Conservation easements are a way to protect land from certain types of development and are perpetual with the land.

Table 4.2 Conservation Easements in Pondera County
(Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023)

Easement Holder	2022 Acres
The Nature Conservancy	12,889
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	9,514
Montana Department of Transportation	100
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation	484
Montana Land Reliance	5,685

As of 2017, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Census of Agriculture, a total of 804,578 acres, or 76.7% of land in Pondera County is used for agricultural purposes. This does not include Federal or State lands. Approximately 69% of agricultural land is used for cropland, such as wheat, barley, and hay, and 30% of agricultural land is pastureland for livestock. Both the total number of lands in



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agriculture and the number of farms/ranches declined from 2012 to 2017, as seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Pondera County Agricultural Profile (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023)

	2002	2007	2012	2017
Number of Farms	520	542	505	486*
Average Size (acres)	1,731	1,743	1,894	1,656*
Total Land in Farms (acres)	900,107	944,486	956,635	804,578*

**The 2022 Census of Agriculture will not be released until Spring/Summer 2024.*

The reduction in total land in farms may be attributed to land taken out of farm production or vacant land that was deemed agriculture but has since been developed. Since January of 2022, 20 Exempt Divisions of land have been requested and/or approved in Pondera County. An Exempt Division provides that certain divisions of land, which would otherwise constitute subdivisions, are exempt from local subdivision review. Examples of an Exempt Division are a gift or sale to a member of the immediate family or relocation of common boundary.

Since most of the land use in Pondera County is either agricultural or Forest Service land, urbanized areas consist of a small percentage within the county. Conrad is the only incorporated city in the county and is the county seat. Valier is the only incorporated town, and two unincorporated towns, Dupuyer and Heart Butte, are in Pondera County.

Property type is a classification used by Montana’s Department of Revenue to determine the type of property for tax purposes. This classification is used to display land use patterns within incorporated areas of Pondera County, which are shown in Figure 4.2. The most predominant property type found within the incorporated areas is shown to be Improved Property-Urban.



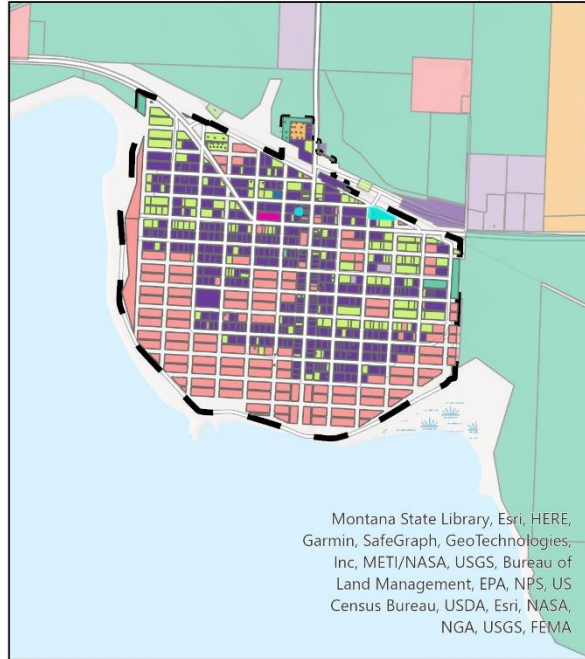
Figure 4.2 Land Use within Incorporated Areas of Pondera County

Legend

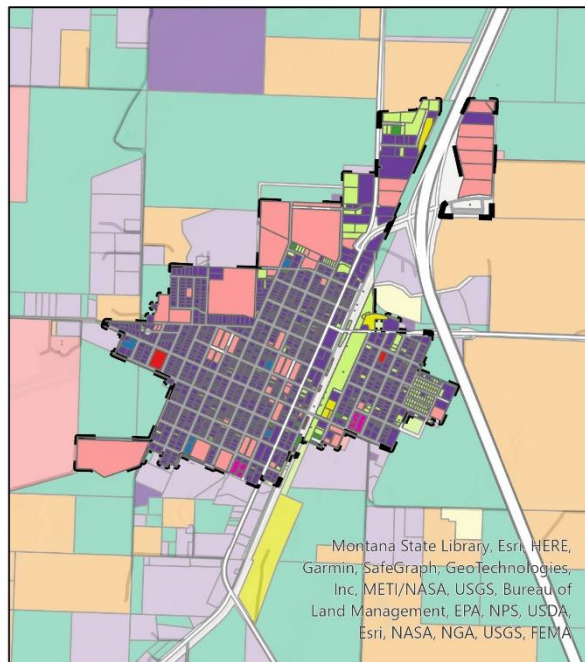
Property Type

- APT_U - Apartment Urban
- CA - Centrally Assessed
- CN - Centrally Assessed Non-Valued Property
- EP - Exempt Property
- EP_PART - Partial Exempt Property
- FARM_R - Farmstead - Rural
- GRAVEL - Gravel Pit
- IMP_R - Improved Property - Rural
- IMP_U - Improved Property - Urban
- IR - Industrial Rural
- IU - Industrial Urban
- LEASE_R - On Leased Land - Rural
- LEASE_U - On Leased Land - Urban
- OIL_IMP - Oilfield Improvements
- RV_MOB PARK - COML
- TP - Tribal Property
- VAC_R - Vacant Land - Rural
- VAC_U - Vacant Land - Urban

VALIER



CONRAD





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Geographically, Conrad is the largest community in Pondera County at approximately 807 acres. The city center, along the Interstate 15 business loop, hosts primarily industrial and commercial businesses with a small mix of older residential homes. Single-family homes are primarily located west of the city’s main transportation corridor. According to the Montana Cadastral Owner Parcels data, 12.3% of the land area in Conrad is classified as Vacant Land. Conrad is currently updating their Growth Policy and has existing subdivision and zoning ordinances used for consideration of land use growth for the community. Land limiting constraints in Conrad are primarily due to zoning and conservation easements.

Valier is located on the north shore of Lake Frances, along State Highway 44, in the central region of the county, and is comprised of approximately 525 acres. Approximately 26.4% of the land area within Valier is considered Vacant Land. Valier has a zoning ordinance in place that divides the town into commercial, industrial, and multiple residential categories.

4.3. Future Land Use Projections

Future property types in Pondera County are anticipated to remain Farmstead, Vacant Rural, and/or Improved Rural for agricultural purposes. With the decline of agricultural acreage and number of farms/ranches, along with the increase of population in rural areas of the County (See Table 3.2), the County will likely continue to see living land, or dispersed land use patterns. The use of Exempt Divisions allows land to remain in agricultural production while creating a parcel of land for housing. It is anticipated, as shown in Table 4.4, that future land use will include the steady use of Exempt Divisions with a consistently low average density of 3.7 people per square mile.

Table 4.4. Pondera County Subdivision Activity

Year	Minor	Major	Exemption	Total
2016			11	11
2017	1		16	17
2018			5	5
2019	1		13	14
2020	2		29	31
2021			23	23
2022	1		12	13
2023			8	8

It is no surprise the Exempt Division is the most common subdivision in Pondera County, as it is typically the most common division found in rural counties in Montana. Such Exempt Divisions include family member transfer, agricultural purpose, and common boundary relocation. The table also shows the few land developments which have occurred in the last seven years with a total of five minor subdivisions.



Minor subdivisions can create five or fewer parcels of land, whereas Major subdivisions can create six or more parcels of land. Exempt subdivisions are a division of land which is exempt from local government review. Please refer to the current Pondera County Subdivision Regulations for complete definitions and what qualifies as a subdivision.

Land use patterns for the development of residential and commercial property types will most likely continue to be clustered around existing communities and linear along major transportation routes. As seen in Table 3.2, Conrad has experienced a population decrease, while Valier is experiencing a population increase. Land use policy and regulations are especially important to help communities manage both growth and a declining population.

4.4. Policy, Regulatory, and Financial Items

The County's Growth Policy and Subdivision Regulations are primary tools employed to guide the use of lands and resources while protecting the rights of private landowners in Pondera County. Because nearly 16% of land in the county is Federal or State Lands, the Growth Policy is a major instrument for Pondera County to coordinate land management activities conducted by Federal or State agencies.

The subdivision review process is a policy to promote development and protect public health and safety, it does not regulate the location or type of land use development. There are a variety of additional tools that can be used by the County and incorporated city/towns to implement land use goals and objectives. Not all land use policies and regulatory tools are appropriate for rural Montana communities, and therefore, local governments must carefully consider the use of each of these in their deliberations regarding land use decisions.

- **Policies** that can be used to implement future land use goals and objectives are:
 - Land Use Policy
 - Long range planning
 - Targeted Economic Development Districts (TED)
 - Prime farmland / agricultural preservation
- **Regulatory tools** that can be used to implement and enforce future land use goals and objectives are:
 - Subdivision regulations, including design standards
 - Zoning regulation
 - Conservations Easements
 - Floodplain regulations
 - Buildings for Lease or Rent regulations
- **Financial items** that can be used to implement the future land use goals and objectives are:
 - Grants



- Taxation changes
- Land acquisition
- Capital Improvement Plans
- Targeted Economic Development Districts (TED)
- Tax Increment Finance (TIF) Districts
- Education towards and development of more valuable commodities that thereby make ranches / farms more profitable

4.5. Goals and Objectives

Goal 4.1	
Preserve agricultural land and promote an environment for successful agricultural operations.	
Objectives	Actions
Encourage development in areas that are not in agricultural production.	Local government to utilize right-to-farm protections in Montana Code.
	MCA 76-2-901. Agricultural activities -- legislative finding and purpose. (1) The legislature finds that agricultural lands and the ability and right of farmers and ranchers to produce a safe, abundant, and secure food and fiber supply have been the basis of economic growth and development of all sectors of Montana's economy. In order to sustain Montana's valuable farm economy and land bases associated with it, farmers and ranchers must be encouraged and have the right to stay in farming. (2) It is therefore the intent of the legislature to protect agricultural activities from governmental zoning and nuisance ordinances.
	WHO? Provide information regarding conservation easements and other incentives to preserve agricultural land. Commit to conducting additional studies and encourage activities that meet this goal.
	Local government to coordinate land use policies and infrastructure development to preserve water resources used by agricultural, recreational, municipal, and other beneficial users.
	Work with Pondera County/MSU Extension to take actions to educate and support the public in managing invasive species in croplands and pasturelands and regenerating degraded soils to prevent erosion and increase productivity.
Local government to update subdivision regulations to reflect changes in state requirements or land use patterns and develop review procedures for exempt divisions, including review of filed documents that create divisions without survey.	



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Goal 4.2	
Development that is compatible with existing land uses, protects small town character and minimizes negative impacts.	
Objectives	Actions
Establish or maintain policies and regulations that promote compatibility with existing land uses, protects small town character and that minimizes negative impacts.	Coordinate with incorporated municipalities on preferred land use patterns and future expansion areas as identified in their Growth Policies.
	Encourage new development to locate within existing communities or within areas identified for future growth.



5. Housing

5.1. Current Housing Characteristics and Conditions

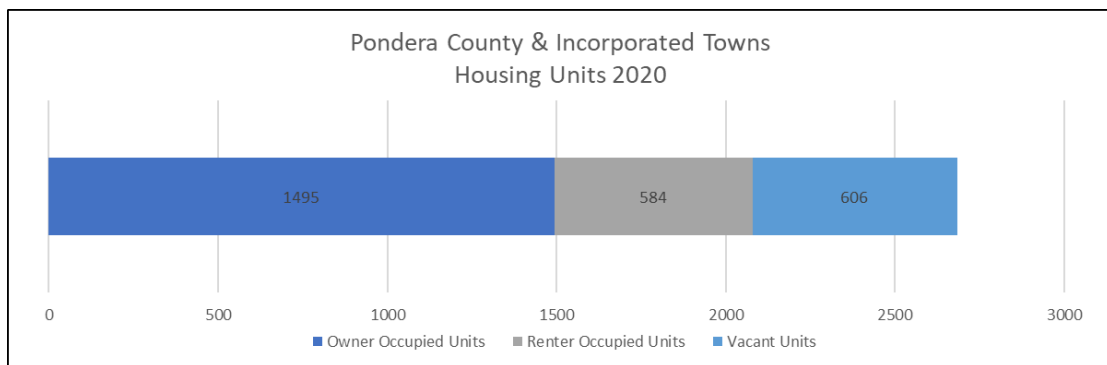
Housing is a primary concern of Pondera County as housing availability is low and much of the housing that is available is of poor quality. This issue, coupled with significantly increased prices, may be caused by a lack of economic incentive to build or maintain decent housing, difficulty building or maintaining homes due to the high cost of materials and labor, or elderly residents leaving homes unoccupied.

According to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) published by Sweetgrass Development in 2022, housing continues to be a concern in most central Montana counties. Housing is one weakness identified in the region, primarily due to both a diminished housing stock and an aging housing stock. To support these findings, according to information provided by Headwaters Economics, nearly 38% of the housing stock in Pondera County was built prior to 1969, which directly impacts the average home value in the County (Headwaters Economics, 2023).

Pondera County has a total of 2,685 housing units serving 2,079 households (Headwaters Economics, 2023). Information gathered during the 2020 Census indicates that Pondera County has a 67% homeownership rate, which is slightly below the average homeownership rate for the State of Montana at 69.5%. As the population of Pondera County has primarily been in decline since the 2010 Census, so has the rate of homeownership in the County, which was 69.9% at that time (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

The incorporated City of Conrad and Town of Valier both show an inventory of vacant housing, as illustrated by the data presented in Figure 5.2; however, with the high percentage of homes built prior to 1969, these vacant units may need significant repairs or be entirely uninhabitable.

Figure 5.1. Home Ownership in Pondera County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)

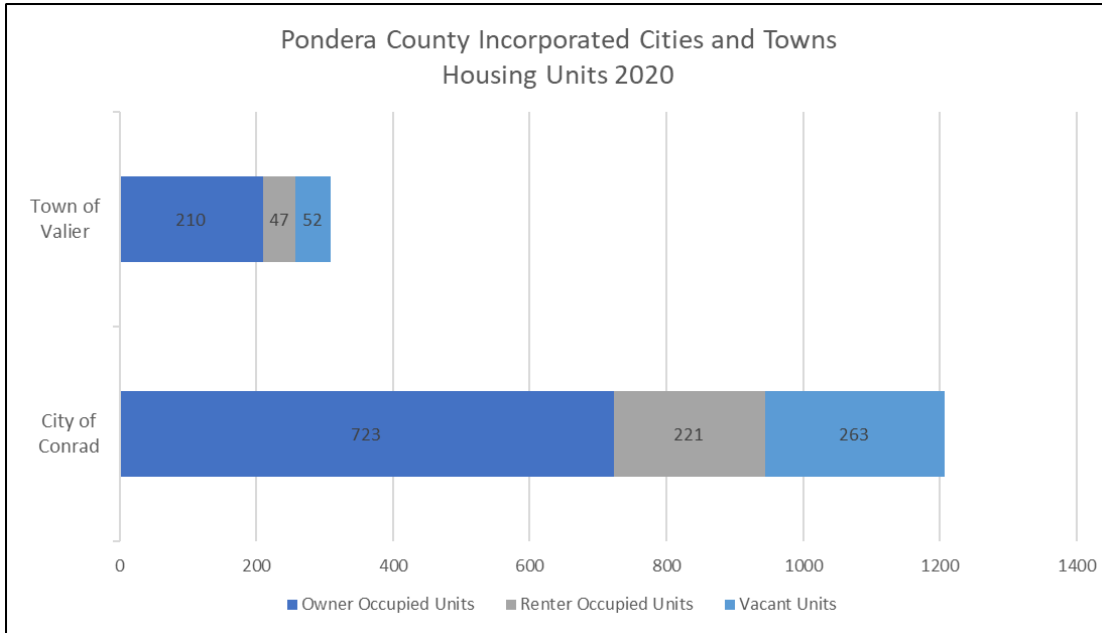




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Figure 5.2. Home Ownership in City of Conrad and Town of Valier
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)



Housing affordability is generally measured by the ratio of homeowner costs to total household income. Housing is considered to be affordable if homeowner costs, which include mortgage payments, real estate taxes, utilities, insurance, and various other fees, are less than 30% of the total household income. Affordable housing is often in the form of multi-family properties, and Pondera County has approximately 690 properties with 2 or more units (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Table 5.1 shows data obtained in 2020 and indicates that 25.6% of households in Pondera County are paying more than 30% of their total household income on homeowner costs, and 26.7% are paying more than 30% of their total household income on rent (Headwaters Economics, 2023). However, the amount spent on rent in both Conrad and Valier is significantly higher than in the County as a whole, which indicates a lack of affordable rental housing in those areas.

Table 5.1. Housing Affordability (Headwaters Economics, 2023)

Percent of Households with Housing Costs Greater than 30% of Total Household Income				
	Pondera County	City of Conrad	Town of Valier	Montana
Mortgage Costs	25.6%	22.6%	22.5%	28.8%
Rent	26.7%	45.7%	66.7%	40.4%

The percentage of Low to Moderate Income (LMI) residents in Pondera County and the incorporated cities and towns ranges from 15.8% in the City of Conrad to 24.4% in the Town of Valier, with Pondera County falling between the two at 18.2% (Headwaters



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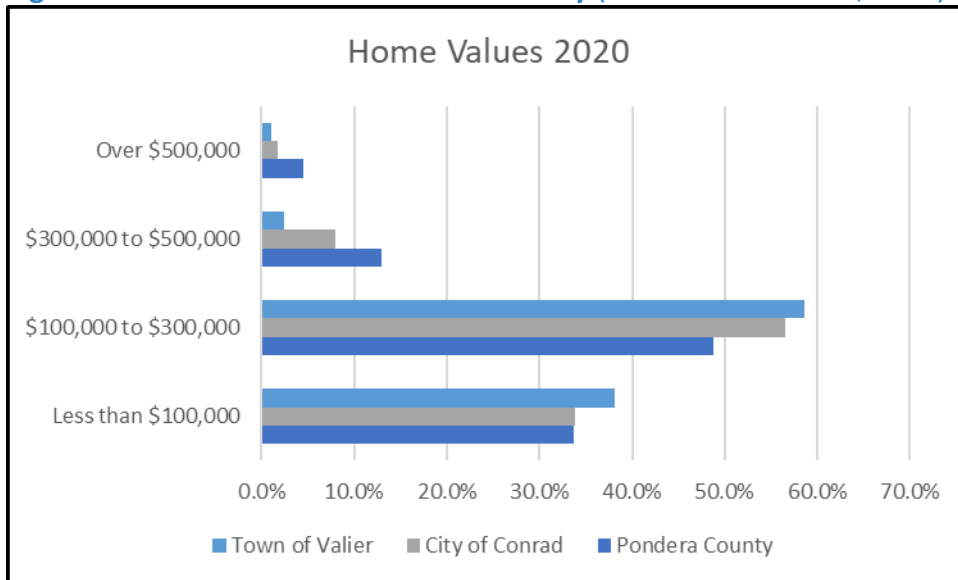
Economics, 2023). Housing Choice Vouchers, which are distributed through the Montana Department of Commerce Housing Division, allow low-income families to pay no more than 30% of their income in rent, and disperses the remaining rent directly to the landlord. Subsidized housing in Pondera County is listed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Subsidized Housing in Pondera County

Location	Name	Type/Description	Number of Units
Conrad	Missile Court Apartments	Multi-family rental housing	(3) One-bedroom (21) Two-bedroom

Home values in Pondera County have been steadily increasing since 2010, when the median value of a home was \$86,200. Based on 2020 Census data, the median home price in Pondera County was approximately \$138,900 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). According to the 2022 CEDS written by Sweetgrass Development, a primary goal for the region is generally to “increase available housing with special emphasis on increasing the supply of affordable and workforce housing”. Specifically, the CEDS identifies an overall goal to “Increase available housing with special emphasis on increasing the supply of affordable and workforce housing” (Sweetgrass Development, 2022).

Figure 5.3. Home Values in Pondera County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)



The majority of Pondera County is rural in nature, and in general, is comprised of older housing which does not provide the same investment value as housing in larger cities and towns. Approximately 48% of the homes in Pondera County were constructed prior to 1960 and are likely in need of repair or improvements based on their age. In addition, homes in rural communities often need rehabilitation or retrofitting for energy efficiency. Pondera County and the Town of Valier do not impose any building



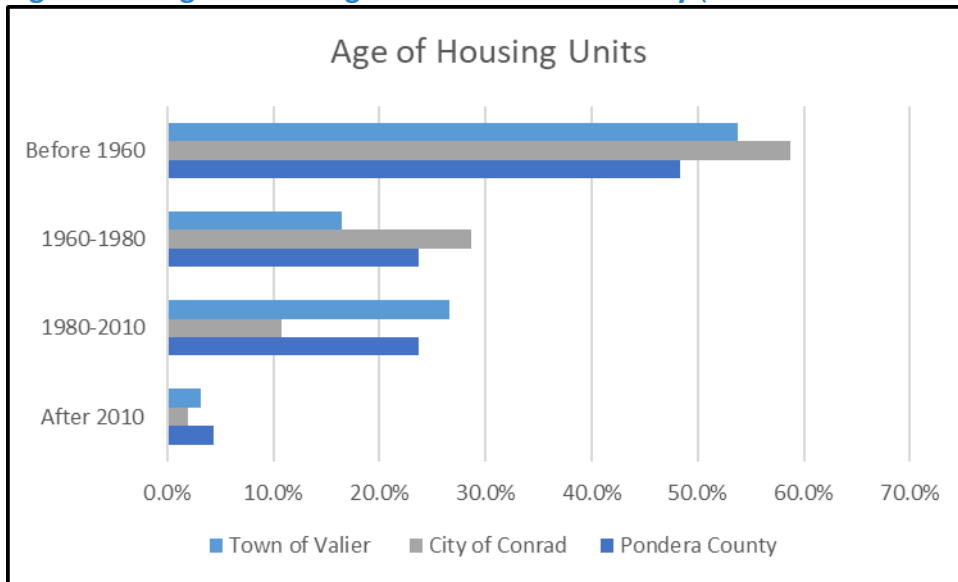
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permit requirements for buildings erected in the County other than those required by the State of Montana (verify). The City of Conrad requires building permits within the city limits only.

The County and its incorporated cities and towns do impose regulations according to Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 76.8.1 for the administration and enforcement of the creation of four or more buildings for lease or rent on a single tract (State of Montana, 2023).

Figure 5.4. Age of Housing Units in Pondera County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)



5.2. Anticipated Future Housing Issues

Pondera County is experiencing slight population growth in the last two years after a long, steady population decline since 2010. As more people seek a rural way of life, Pondera County has seen the largest increase in the age ranges of 18-34 and 65 and over (Headwaters Economics, 2023). Interest in living in Pondera County by telecommuters or retired individuals over the last several years may account for this change in population demographics. Therefore, affordable housing that supports the needs of seniors and young families will continue to be in demand. The age of housing in general, as well as the availability of affordable housing, may be a barrier to a greater increase in population, particularly in the more urban regions of the County.

To attract young individuals and families seeking to relocate or return to the area, there will be a need for quality, affordable housing; however, it must be noted that with an increase in improved housing that attracts population to the area, there needs to be corresponding improvements in services that support the health and wellbeing of that population group. This includes medical and emergency services, fire protection, and law enforcement. Many of these services are performed by local volunteers, which, in



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general, average over 45 years of age. It is critical that younger members of the population become engaged in volunteering or it may become more difficult to staff emergency and fire protection service agencies.

In addition to the housing stock, there is a shortage of land or affordable lots suitable to support development of new housing where infrastructure is readily available in Pondera County and surrounding cities and towns.

The City of Conrad has ample capacity in both their water system and wastewater system to accommodate future growth (See Section 8) but may require additional distribution lines to serve new areas. The Town of Valier also has excess capacity in their water and wastewater systems for population growth.

Housing resources that would be available to the residents of Pondera County include:

- Montana Department of Commerce (MDOC):
 - Federal Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) managed by MDOC
 - CDBG Large-Scale Multi-Family Housing Development and Rehabilitation Grants
 - CDBG Small-Scale Single-Family Housing Rehabilitation Grants
- HOME grants – provided by HUD and MDOC
 - Homebuyer Assistance
 - Affordable Housing Development and Rehabilitation Grants
- Housing Trust Fund – construction, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable rental housing for extremely low-income families
- USDA Rural Development
 - Housing Repair Loans & Grants
 - Community Facilities Direct Loans & Grants – multifamily and single-family housing programs
- NeighborWorks in Great Falls, MT
 - Homebuyer education
 - Rental assistance
 - Home improvement assistance
- Opportunities Inc. in Great Falls – Housing services for LMI individuals and families, emergency housing assistance, and housing choice voucher assistance.
- Area III Agency on Aging in Conrad



5.3. Goals and Objectives

Goal 5.1	
Meet housing needs for all ages, incomes, and special needs groups.	
Objectives	Actions
Expand housing stock to meet the need for Low to Moderate Income (LMI) families and first-time homebuyers.	Utilize housing organizations such as the Great Falls Housing Authority or Neighborworks to seek resources to improve housing quality, condition, and availability and support efforts to build affordable homes and rentals, including single family homes.
Encourage development/improvement of affordable homes and rentals to meet the needs of a growing workforce, including single family homes.	Local government/planning board to have efficient processes in place that encourage housing development.
	Local government to support housing developers with access to grant and loan funding for multi-family and single-family housing (CDBG, HOME, Housing Tax Credit).
Develop a variety of housing types to meet the needs of the changing population.	Promote and encourage the use of commercial and residential structures, including historic preservation of buildings, to develop rental units in currently unused spaces (i.e., above businesses, within unused government facilities).
	Local government exercises policies to promote development of multi-family rental units in incorporated areas where infrastructure and services are readily available.
Affordable housing for all populations.	Support grant and loan applications for the rehabilitation of existing housing designated for LMI and senior residents.
	Work with housing agencies and lenders to promote programs for home improvement and rehabilitation.
	Support policies and regulations that encourage affordable housing developments.



6. Economic Development

The remoteness of Pondera County and the incorporated City/Town within the County, limited employment opportunities, and limited goods and services all have an effect on the overall economy of the area. Of the total County population of 5,911 residents, 4,489 are over the age of 18 and 2,564 are currently working. Agriculture-related workers make up 19.5% of the employed labor force, 26.5% are employed by education and health care industries, and 11.9% are employed with retail trade.

6.1. Employment

Total average employment in Pondera County has remained relatively stable since 2010, with approximately 43% of the population over 16 years of age currently in the labor force (Headwaters Economics, 2023). As evidenced in the data in Table 6.1, Pondera County, the City of Conrad and the Town of Valier report the primary industries as education, healthcare and social assistance services. Other industries that employ a significant portion of the workforce include agriculture and retail trade, and in the Town of Valier, construction.

Table 6.1. County, City and Town Industries (Headwaters Economics, 2023)

	Pondera County	City of Conrad	Town of Valier
Number of Civilian Employees	2,564	1,153	209
Industry	% of Workforce		
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting and mining	19.5	8.9	13.4
Construction	4.3	5.3	15.3
Manufacturing	1.1	2.1	0.0
Wholesale trade	6.4	10.8	3.3
Retail trade	11.9	16.0	9.1
Transport, warehousing and utilities	6.2	2.9	3.3
Information	0.9	1.6	0.0
Finance, insurance and real estate	2.5	3.8	0.0
Professional, management, administration, waste management	4.3	6.5	7.2
Education, health care, social assistance	26.5	22.4	33.0
Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, food	5.7	7.5	5.3
Other services, except public administration	3.3	2.4	5.3



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Public Administration	7.3	9.9	4.8
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Agriculture plays an important role in the economy of western Montana and along the Rocky Mountain Front, with nearly 77% of the land in Pondera County being dedicated to the industry. According to data published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, agricultural land in Pondera County is comprised of 486 farms, with 804,578 acres in farmland. The market value of agricultural products sold totaled approximately \$111 million, and government subsidies to farm operators funded an additional \$10.5 million (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). Government appropriations include such items as crop insurance premiums, and disaster, conservation, and commodity subsidies.

Table 6.2. Agricultural Industries (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017)

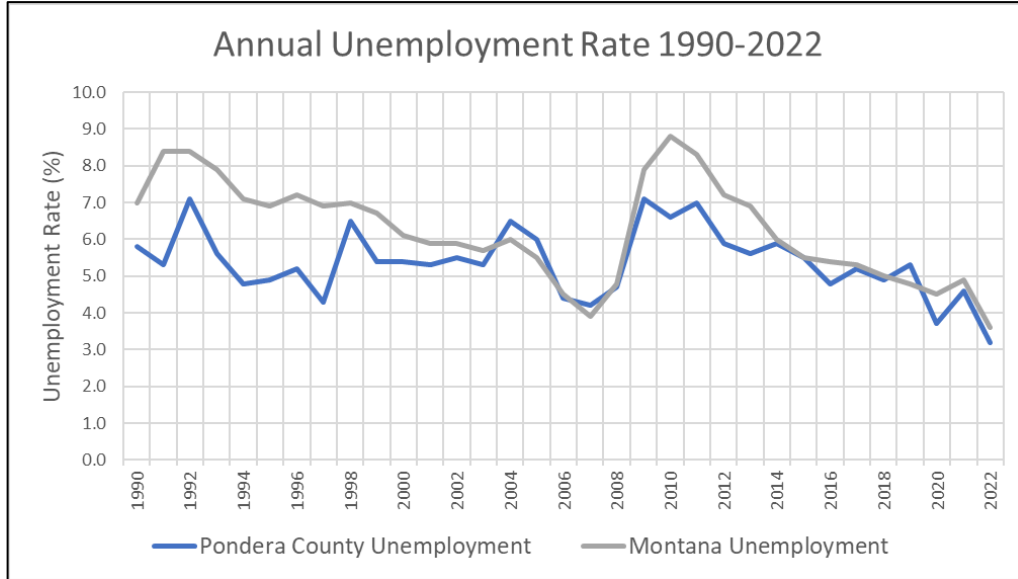
<i>Crops</i>	
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas	\$67,479,000
Other crops and hay	\$8,378,000
<i>Livestock, Poultry and Products</i>	
Poultry and eggs	\$2,084,000
Cattle and calves	\$20,673,000
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	\$629,000
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, donkeys	\$102,000
Other animals and animal products	\$2,255,000

Pondera County ranks 7th in the State of Montana for total agricultural product sold, 3rd in the State for crops sold and 24th in the State for livestock, poultry and associated products sold (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). These numbers provide evidence that the agricultural industry has a large impact on the overall economic health of the County and its residents. Information outlining the number of farms and total acres in farmland in Pondera County can be found in the Land Use Section, Chapter 4, of this document.

Unemployment in Pondera County was 2.3% as of December 2022, which is 4.4% lower than it was in April 2020, and is slightly below the State unemployment rate of 2.6%. In general, employment in Pondera County has remained relatively stable, with a few considerable fluctuations between 2004 and 2010. The lowest recorded unemployment rate recorded since 1990 was 2.0% in September 2022, and the highest rate was 7.2 in February 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2023).



Figure 6.1. Unemployment Rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2023)



6.2. Income

Based on information published by Headwaters Economics, in 2020, Pondera County has a per capita income of \$27,114 and a median household income of \$54,235 (Headwaters Economics, 2023). By definition, the per capita income is calculated by dividing the County’s total income by the population of the County. In contrast, the median household income is based on the total number of households and families in the County, including those with no income, and is based on individuals aged 15 and over reporting an income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

In the time frame from 2016 – 2020, the income range of \$50,000 - \$74,999 contained the most households, with 18.7% represented, while 17.8% of households earned less than \$25,000 annually.

Table 6.3. Household Income Statistics (Headwaters Economics, 2023)

<i>Income and Benefits (dollars)</i>	<i>Pondera County</i>	<i>City of Conrad</i>	<i>Town of Valier</i>
Mean earnings	\$69,049	\$59,022	\$75,385
Mean Social Security income	\$18,804	\$18,945	\$17,709
Mean retirement income	\$18,827	\$16,925	\$17,889
Mean Supplemental Security Income (<i>provided to adults and children with disability or blindness and people age 65+ who meet financial qualifications</i>)	\$11,181	\$11,030	\$8,420



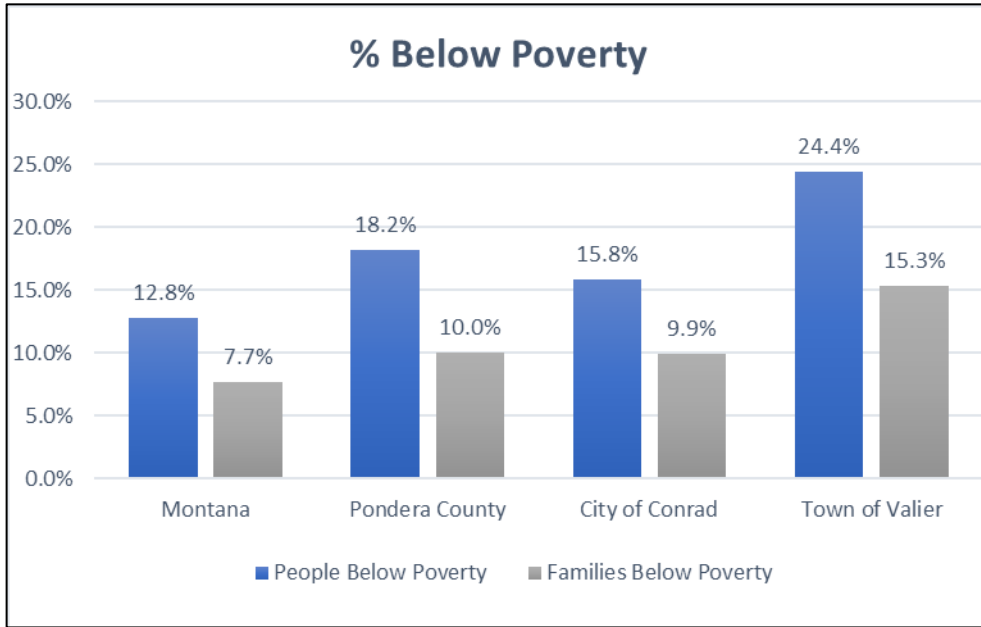
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Mean cash public assistance income	\$4,488	\$2,692	\$0
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Historically, poverty levels in Pondera County are greater than the State averages, as shown in Figure 6.2; however, the County ranks 12th of 56 counties for the highest poverty levels in Montana.

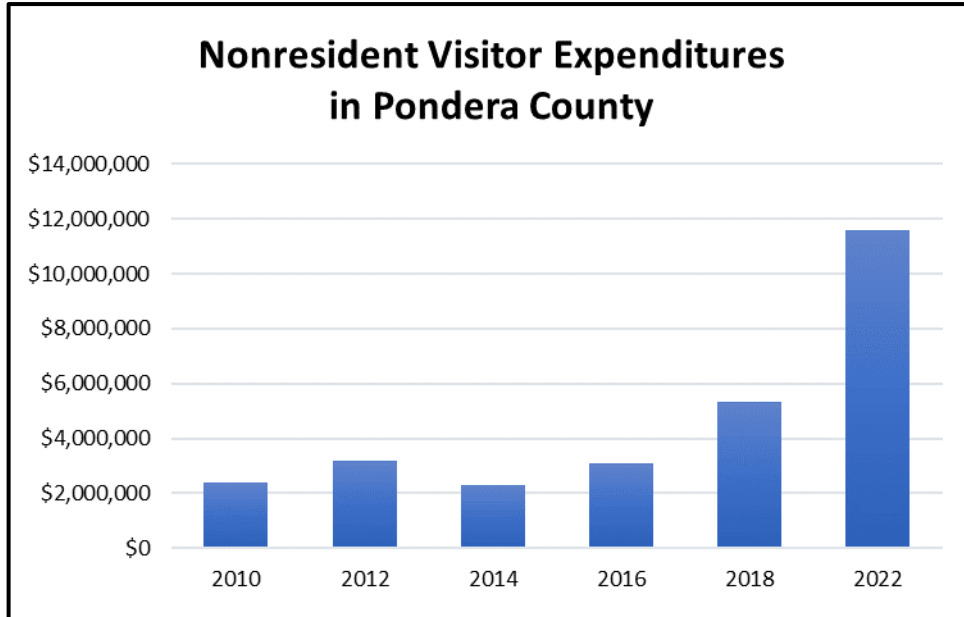
Figure 6.2. Poverty Levels (Headwaters Economics, 2023)



Tourism expenditures in Pondera County have been fairly steady since 2010, with a sharp increase in spending in 2021-2022. The expenditures captured in the data include campground expenses, gambling, fuel, grocery, lodging, license/fees, Made in Montana products, outfitter/guide expenses, vacation rentals, restaurant/bar, and retail purchases. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data was not collected in 2020; however, it is likely that the large increase in spending is due to the pandemic and the large increase in travel that occurred once travel regulations were lifted.



Figure 6.3. Nonresident Visitor Expenditures (University of Montana, 2023)



6.3. Future Projections for Economic Development

Pondera County, including both incorporated and unincorporated cities and towns, has seen a steady population decline since 2010, with a recent growth trend beginning in 2020. Likely attributed to both resident retention and in-migration, this trend may also be indicative of the widespread migration to more rural areas due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Growth in population reinforces the need for continued economic development, the attraction of new industry, and increased opportunities for tourism. Promoting the opportunity to enjoy a rural lifestyle, while still earning competitive wages, will continue to attract people to the area and bolster the economy.

One way to evaluate the economic sectors that deserve the most focus when working to improve the economy of Pondera County is to evaluate the number of jobs in each industry, as identified in Table 6.1, and compare that to the number of jobs in each industry within the State of Montana. Base industries are those that have a higher percentage of the workforce locally as compared to statewide percentages, and expansion of these industries will result in additional growth of the overall economy. Likewise, industries that have a lower percentage of the workforce locally as compared to statewide percentages represent areas that may offer new opportunities for economic development strategies. See Table 6.4 for an overview of those industries likely to provide the most economic development.



Table 6.4. Employment Data for Pondera County, Montana (Headwaters Economics, 2023)

NAICS Title	Pondera Employment 2020	Pondera Employment Shares 2020	Benchmark Region (Montana) Employment 2020	Benchmark Region (Montana) Employment Shares 2020	Location Quotient (LQ)
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting, Mining	499	0.1946	33072	0.0636	3.060
Construction	110	0.0429	42680	0.0821	0.523
Manufacturing	29	0.0113	25990	0.0500	0.226
Wholesale Trade	165	0.0644	11009	0.0212	3.040
Retail Trade	304	0.1186	63971	0.1230	0.964
Transportation and Warehousing, Utilities	160	0.0624	27257	0.0524	1.191
Information	23	0.0090	8224	0.0158	0.567
Finance and Insurance, Real Estate	64	0.0250	28210	0.0542	0.460
Professional, Scientific, and Management	111	0.0433	45656	0.0878	0.493
Educational Services & Health Care	680	0.2652	120662	0.2320	1.143
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, Accommodation & Food Services	147	0.0573	59115	0.1137	0.504
Other Services (except Public Administration)	85	0.0332	25014	0.0481	0.689
Public Administration	187	0.0729	29183	0.0561	1.300
Total	2564	1.0000	520043	1.0000	

	LQ less than 0.75: New opportunities for economic development strategies
	LQ greater than 1.25: Base industry whose expansion will result in increased growth

Although there are numerous active oil and gas wells in Pondera County, there is little activity related to natural resource extraction and the employment opportunities that industry might provide, with only 0.6% of the civilian employed population in the oil,



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gas and mining industry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Alternative energy resources, like wind, are not likely to be a large source of economic development. Wind energy projects are developed by companies that seek out the areas with the strongest wind resource but also review other critical factors like access to land, access to transmission lines, ability to sell the electricity, and public engagement. While there are no active wind energy projects in Pondera County, the Valier school district is part of the Wind for Schools Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Energy and aims to provide an accessible, working wind turbine to support educational efforts (Montana State University, 2023).

Due to the lack of population, industry, and employment opportunities, it is critical that the County, which has a large amount of state and federal land in its land base, continues to receive Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT). This form of payment from the Federal government, which takes the place of full tax payment, is subject to congressional approval. The failure of this program without a viable replacement would be devastating to the operation of Pondera County government.

6.4. Goals and Objectives

Goal 6.1	
Diversify and expand the current economy with industries that do not threaten the rural lifestyle and/or create a strain on public services.	
Objectives	Actions
Attract businesses that do not create a strain on public services and increase the number of jobs that pay a living wage.	Work with Chambers of Commerce and other programs to support entrepreneur training and programs.
	Utilize SEDC for business retention efforts, which includes identifying local business needs for resources and training and that encourages local job creation.
	Work with SEDC, Made in Montana, Grown in Montana and Chambers of Commerce to support local businesses and promote niche markets for local products.
	Work with SEDC to develop and implement a long-range economic plan that builds on the strengths of the County, such as agricultural production, natural resources, water, rail, access to Interstate 15, and energy transportation corridors.
	Participate in local CEDS planning and work with Sweetgrass Development and Pondera Port Authority to qualify for funding opportunities.



7. Local Services

7.1. Fire Protection

Headwaters Economics produces a Wildfire Risk Report, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Services, that “presents data about wildfire risk, socioeconomic vulnerability, and land use to help communities understand their relative wildfire risk profile” (Headwaters Economics, 2023). This report shows that populated areas in Pondera County have, on average, greater wildfire likelihood than 14% of counties in the State of Montana, and that 65% of homes in the County are exposed to wildfire from indirect sources, such as embers or home-to-home ignition.

Pondera County, in conjunction with numerous State and Federal agencies, completed a Community Wildfire Protection Plan which was adopted in May 2007. This plan aims to make Pondera County and its residents “less vulnerable to the negative effects of wildland fires through the effective administration of wildfire hazard mitigation grant programs, hazard risk assessments, wise and efficient fuels treatments, and a coordinated approach to mitigation policy through federal, state, regional, and local planning efforts” (Pondera County, 2007).

Fire protection in Pondera County is primarily provided by the Pondera County Rural Fire District, which is comprised of rural departments stationed in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer and Valier. In addition, the City of Conrad Fire Department has a cooperative agreement with the Pondera County Rural FD.

The DNRC provides wildland fire protection on State lands and private lands that have signed up for this service under the affidavit program. The Helena - Lewis and Clark National Forest and BLM, have fire protection responsibility for all USFS and BLM lands, respectively, in Pondera County. Mutual aid agreements are in place between Pondera County and all municipalities. The County has a cooperative fire control agreement with the Montana DNRC and mutual aid agreements with the DNRC, BLM, several surrounding counties, and individual fire companies in neighboring counties.

A Statewide Offset Agreement was recently updated and, as a result, the Rocky Mountain Ranger District is entering into an agreement with the Lewistown Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Office to take suppression responsibility for essentially all federal lands west of highway 89. There are 57,993 acres of State Lands in Pondera County, for which the DNCR provides wildland protection. The location of State Lands is identified in Section 4, Figure 4.1. The Lewistown BLM currently has suppression responsibility with no local resources; therefore, the RMRD will be responsible for state lands along the Rocky Mountain Front. This includes BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, and US Fish & Wildlife properties.

The State of Montana Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) is currently creating new Regional Hazard Mitigation Plans that will encompass the counties, municipalities and



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tribal nations within each region. Pondera County is part of the Central Montana Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan, which is one of 13 counties and 2 tribal nations represented within this plan. This Plan includes an individual section for each entity, as well as a regional overview, and contains a section on Wildland Fire. This plan references the 2007 Pondera County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which describes the resources available for fire protection in Pondera County, summarized in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. Pondera County Fire Districts (Pondera County, 2007)

Fire District	Description	Priorities / Issues
Pondera County Rural Fire District	Fire district covers most of Pondera County and is comprised of rural departments stationed in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer and Valier. District has mutual aid agreements with other counties and agencies.	Due to cost and lack of equipment, digital communication is not an option at this time. Additional training for volunteers would be beneficial, but it is expensive, and volunteers cannot always take time off work to attend.
City of Conrad Fire Department	The Fire Department covers any fires located within the city limits of Conrad. Open burning is not permitted inside the city limits. Pondera County Rural Fire District also responds to city fires.	Updating the current fire trucks would be beneficial to the department. The Department also needs a new pumper truck with 1,000 gallon capacity, a top mount panel for safety, and a double cab for firefighter safety while putting on SCBA.
Valier VFD		New firehall
Heart Butte VFD		In need of a Type 6 pumper truck and an additional slip tank.
Dupuyer VFD	The Fire Department operates with a yearly levy based on property tax revenues from fire district residents, averaging \$6,000 yearly.	New firehall
Brady Fire Department	The Brady Fire Department covers a rural farming district with both interstate and rail lines within, as well as several missile silos and two command centers.	Need to replace both one-ton trucks and a tender truck, upgrade radios, and install new siding on the fire hall.



7.2. Law Enforcement

Law enforcement services in Pondera County are primarily provided by the Pondera County Sheriff’s Department, with additional services provided by the City of Conrad Police Department and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The Pondera County Sheriff’s Office is located in Conrad, with a resident deputy in Dupuyer and two resident deputy officers in Valier.

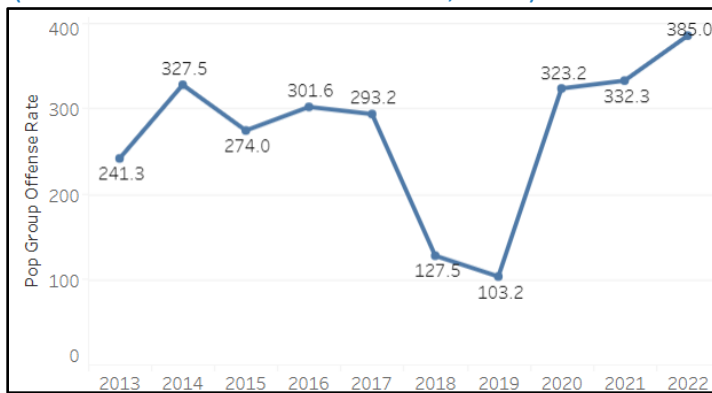
The sheriff’s office is responsible for duties associated with enforcing state and local laws, such as investigation of crimes, preserving the peace, patrolling county roads, animal control, serving warrants of arrest and overseeing the detention center. Duties not required by law are also provided, such as livestock/branding inspections, drug and violence education, and oversight of Search and Rescue (Pondera County, 2023).

The BIA Office of Justice Services (OJS) is responsible for law enforcement within the boundaries of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, with assistance provided by the County Sheriff, State Highway Patrol, and/or FBI. The OJS is tasked with community safety through law enforcement, tribal courts, and detention/corrections services.

The Pondera County Jail is a medium-security detention center located in the City of Conrad and is operated by the Sheriff’s Office. The facility has capacity for 13 inmates, including some single-person cells.

In 2022, Pondera County was among the counties in the State with the lowest offense rate per 10,000 people. With a population of 6,078 there were 234 offenses, which translates to 385 offenses/10,000 people (Montana Board of Crime Control, 2023). This rate has been highly variable since 2013, with a sharp rise in offenses occurring since 2019. See Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1. Offense Rates per Year in Pondera County
(Montana Board of Crime Control, 2023)



In Pondera County, between 2017-2022, violent crimes reported were primarily aggravated assault, with a total of 49 cases. During that same time period, there were



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also three forcible rape charges and one robbery charge (Montana Board of Crime Control, 2023).

7.3. Disaster and Emergency Services

Pondera County maintains disaster and emergency services (DES) staff that are responsible for maintaining an emergency services system, including mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The County DES Coordinator also acts as the Pondera County Rural Fire Coordinator and the Floodplain Administrator.

Pondera County DES assists with education and outreach relating to hazard mitigation, such as fire mitigation programs, national weather service StormReady, local citizen groups that communicate hazard risks, and other ongoing public education programs for fire safety, responsible water use, and household preparedness, just to name a few (Montana DNRC, 2023).

7.4. Public Health

The Pondera County Health Department, located in Conrad, provides resources, information and access to health care services. It is governed by the Pondera County Board of Health and Board of County Commissioners. Programs and services administered by the County Health Department include immunizations, cancer screening, emergency preparedness, Women, Infants and Children Nutritional Supplement (WIC), and mental health resources.

Logan Health Conrad (LHC), formerly the Pondera Medical Center, is a 20-bed critical access hospital located in Conrad. The facility provides 24/7 emergency room services, ambulance, laboratory and testing, imaging and radiology, a helipad for transport services, and telestroke services. In addition to the hospital, Logan Health operates the Hogan Health Rural Health Clinic and the Logan Health Care Center facilities. The Clinic, located in Conrad, provides accessible care for the surrounding area. The Care Center, also located in Conrad, is a 59-bed nursing home offering 24-hour care and nursing services. 14 of the rooms are located in the Special Care Unit, which is designated for residents with advanced memory loss and confusion.

In 2022, in conjunction with the Montana Office of Rural Health, Logan Health Conrad conducted a Community Health Needs Assessment. The assessment is an overview of the current health status in Pondera County, and community-based objectives and approaches for improving health and quality of life. Within the Needs Assessment, Goals and Objectives were identified to set priorities for public health system challenges or needs. These include (Montana Office of Rural Health, 2022):

- **Goal 1: Enhance Access to healthcare services in Pondera County.**
 - Improve access to primary care services at LHC.
 - Improve access to specialty care services at LHC.



- Explore new modalities to enhance LHC’s outreach and communication.
- **Goal 2: Enhance Logan Health Conrad’s chronic care management and prevention efforts to reduce chronic disease burden.**
 - Host or sponsor community events that promote prevention and wellness.
 - Enhance chronic care management services and resources at LHC.
 - Enhance health educational offerings available through LHC.
- **Goal 3: Enhance mental and behavioral health services in Pondera County.**
 - Continue to promote and provide behavioral health resources in Pondera County.

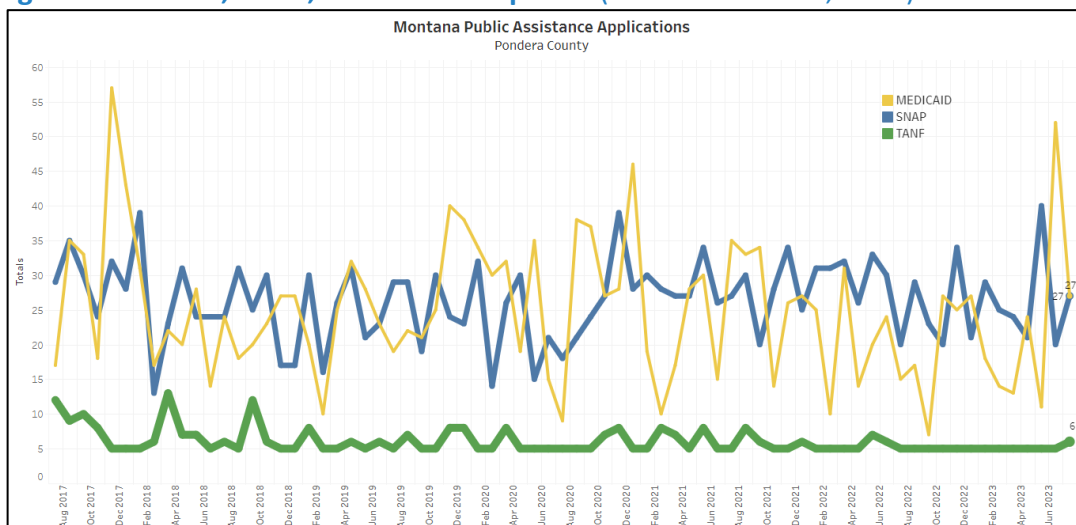
Marias Healthcare, based in Shelby, Montana, operates a medical/podiatry clinic in the Town of Valier that is open two days a week. In addition, they operate a medical, podiatry, and behavioral health clinic in the City of Conrad.

7.5. Social Services

Public Assistance

The Montana Office of Public Assistance administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which provides nutrition assistance for income-eligible households, as well as the Medicaid program and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Children (TANF) Program. Individuals can also apply for Medicaid, SNAP and TANF via phone (1-888-706-1535) or online at www.apply.mt.gov. Pondera County has had a recent decrease in Medicaid recipients, and a slight increase in individuals receiving SNAP and TANF assistance, as shown in Figure 7.2.

Figure 7.2. SNAP, TANF, Medicaid Recipients (Montana DPHHS, 2023)





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Child and Family Services

Pondera County is served by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) Child & Family Services Division through an office in Conrad. This service protects children who have been or are at risk of abuse, neglect or abandonment. The division assists with placing children in Foster Care and also provides support for adoption. Ideally, the goal is to maintain a child with its parents through reunification services that include counseling, parent education, and in-home services.

The Center for Mental Health serves 11 communities in four north-central Montana counties, including Pondera County. The Center is located in Conrad, and provides a number of services, including substance abuse counseling, domestic violence intervention, veteran’s services, and outpatient therapy, just to name a few (Montana DPHHS, 2023). The Pondera County Health Department also provides Social Services, such as mental health resources and tobacco use and prevention.

Senior Services

Pondera County has three Senior Citizen Centers, located in Conrad, Heart Butte, and Valier. The Montana Area Agencies on Aging are non-profit agencies that address the needs and concerns of older residents at the local level. Pondera County is located in Montana Area III Agency on Aging, which serves seven Montana counties.

7.6. Education

The Superintendent of Public Schools in Pondera County is responsible for “annual final school budgeting and levy processes; home school student registration; teaching and bus driver registration and monitoring; approval of transportation contracts and certificates; preserving all permanent school records in Pondera County of teachers, boards, elections, and transportation; serving as Superintendent of rural schools or schools without administration; advising school trustees” (Pondera County, 2023). The office of the Superintendent is in the County courthouse.

Pondera County has five public school districts: Conrad Public Schools, Dupuyer Elementary, Heart Butte K-12 Schools, Miami Elementary, and Valier Public Schools. Enrollment numbers for the public schools are shown in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2. Pondera County School Enrollment
(Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2023)

<i>School</i>	<i>Grades Served</i>	<i>2022-2023 Enrollment</i>	<i>2021-2022 Enrollment</i>	<i>2020-2021 Enrollment</i>	<i>2019-2020 Enrollment</i>
Conrad High School	7 th – 12 th	153	138	143	124
Meadowlark Elementary	K – 3 rd	157	157	153	165



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Utterback Middle School	4 th – 6 th	119	115	105	110
Utterback Middle School	7 th – 8 th	69	81	69	77
Dupuyer Elementary	K – 8 th	21	16	14	18
Heart Butte Elementary	K – 5 th	95	100	86	100
Heart Butte 6 th – 8 th	6 th – 8 th	39	43	27	32
Heart Butte High School	9 th – 12 th	74	82	66	63
Miami Elementary	K – 8 th	34	32	36	31
Valier Elementary	K – 6 th	78	68	71	64
Valier Elementary	7 th – 8 th	24	20	19	16
Valier High School	9 th – 12 th	46	42	45	46

The Valier School District also manages the Kingsbury School Attendance Center, which is located on the nearby Hutterite Colony. The Valier School District supplies the teacher for the Kingsbury Center, while the Colony furnishes the land and building.

The community of Brady, located in Pondera County, is within the consolidated Dutton-Brady School District. The residents of Brady are working together to attach their land to the Conrad School District, which will distribute state funds and property taxes associated with the Brady students to the Conrad School District. The Dutton-Brady School District also includes three schools located on Hutterite Colonies in Pondera County. Midway Colony, located approximately 5 miles west of Brady, and Pondera Colony, located between Valier and Dupuyer. These attendance centers are similar to the Kingsbury Center. The Midway Colony also had an elementary school serving grades Pre-K through 8. The Birch Creek Colony is an attendance center in the Dupuyer School District which is also similar to the Kingsbury attendance center.

There is one private school located in Pondera County, the Conrad Christian School, which serves 31 students in grades Pre-K – 8th. Families that opt for home schooling must register with the Pondera County Superintendent of Schools.

Post-secondary opportunities are limited to online courses offered via internet sources. Nearby institutions offering post-secondary education include:

- University of Providence, Great Falls
- Montana State University Northern, Havre
- Montana State University – College of Great Falls



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7.7. Noxious Weed Management

The Pondera County Long Range Plan, completed by the Conrad NRCS Field Office and Browning Tribal Service Center, was completed in 2020. The plan states “Noxious weeds continue to be an issue across the county as more noxious weeds are reported and larger infestations are found. Education, outreach, and coordination to feasibly address this issue continues to be a challenge” (Conrad NRCS, 2020). Biological control and chemical application, as well as livestock management, are identified in the Plan as the primary means of weed control.

Pondera County has a Weed Board, comprised of five citizens, a member from the Pondera County Extension and one member of the Pondera County Commission.

7.8. Land Conservation/Resource Management

The vision for the Pondera County USDA NRCS Long Range Plan is to “improve the natural resources on private and tribal lands through focused collaboration” (Conrad NRCS, 2020). The Long-Range Plan, developed by the NRCS Conrad Field Office, with help from the Pondera County Conservation District and numerous other contributors, highlights high priority resource concerns and sets a direction for Target Implementation Plans (TIP). Areas targeted for improvement within the Plan include:

- Honeybee pollinator and wildlife habitat improvement.
- Ditch to pipe (irrigation delivery systems).
- Soil acidity.
- Soil health improvements related to intensive grazing management.
- Improved soil health on cropland.

Based on information gathered from the local working group responsible for the Plan, identified the following priorities related to natural resource problems:

- Pollinator habitat and wildlife habitat.
- Soil health, including soil acidity and salinity.
- Herbicide resistance.
- Field gully erosion, water erosion and wind erosion.
- Noxious weeds.
- Irrigation efficiency.
- Range land health.
- Irrigation waste ways.
- Streambank erosion.
- Wildfire.



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7.9. Communications

Telephone

3 Rivers Communications telephone service is available in the majority of Pondera County, with limited services available in the Conrad area. CenturyLink also provides phone service within Conrad, but not in rural areas. Cellular Telephone Companies with licenses in all or parts of Pondera County include T-Mobile, AT&T wireless and Verizon. 3 Rivers has a database of existing cell tower infrastructure and is working to expand the capabilities of existing cell towers.

3 Rivers has recently prioritized the installation of fiber optic service to every household they serve and the base infrastructure for fiber optic internet, which is funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Broadband

“Montana’s broadband connectivity is a critical resource for purposes of education and employment, to access eGovernment services, and to participate broadly in our global world” (Montana State Library, 2023).

With the recent work completed by 3 Rivers Communication in 2020, almost every home and business 3 Rivers serves in Pondera County is now connected directly to the Internet through its fiber optic network. 3 Rivers has invested tens of millions of dollars in these areas over the past 15 years. Customers connected via the fiber optic network can receive Internet speeds of up to 1 Gbps or more. CenturyLink also offers broadband services in Conrad.

7.10. Electricity and Gas

Northwestern Energy

Northwestern Energy is the electric and natural gas utility that serves the incorporated towns of Pondera County. The Northwestern Energy service territory covers approximately 107,600 square miles or 73% of Montana. This area includes 288,000 electric customers and 151,000 natural gas customers in the western two-thirds of Montana. Northwestern Energy electric transmission system consists of over 7,000 miles of transmission lines and associated terminal facilities. The Northwestern Energy system has interconnections to five major transmission systems located in the Western Systems Coordinating Council (WSCC) area, as well as one interconnection to a system that connects with the Mid-Continent Area Power Pool (MAPP) region. Northwestern Energy also has programs for net metering, renewable energy and energy conservation.

Sun River Electric Cooperative

Sun River Electric Cooperative was first organized as Sun River Electrification in 1937. It opened its headquarters in Fairfield the following year and still operates at that location. The first electric service was installed in the Sun River Valley from Vaughn to Simms and north to Fairfield Bench. Today Sun River Electric serves consumers in



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Cascade, Teton, Pondera, Lewis & Clark, Choteau, Liberty, Toole, and Judith Basin counties. In Pondera County, the Sun River service territory includes Conrad, Valier, Ledger and Dupuyer. Northwestern Energy provides the majority of service within the City of Conrad.

7.11. Future Need for Additional or Improved Services

Population levels and the economic status of Pondera County is largely dependent on available and existing job opportunities that are available; therefore, working to improve broadband services and install additional fiber optic lines is one way that Pondera County can continue to be competitive in attracting and maintaining new and existing residents and businesses.

7.12. Goals and Objectives

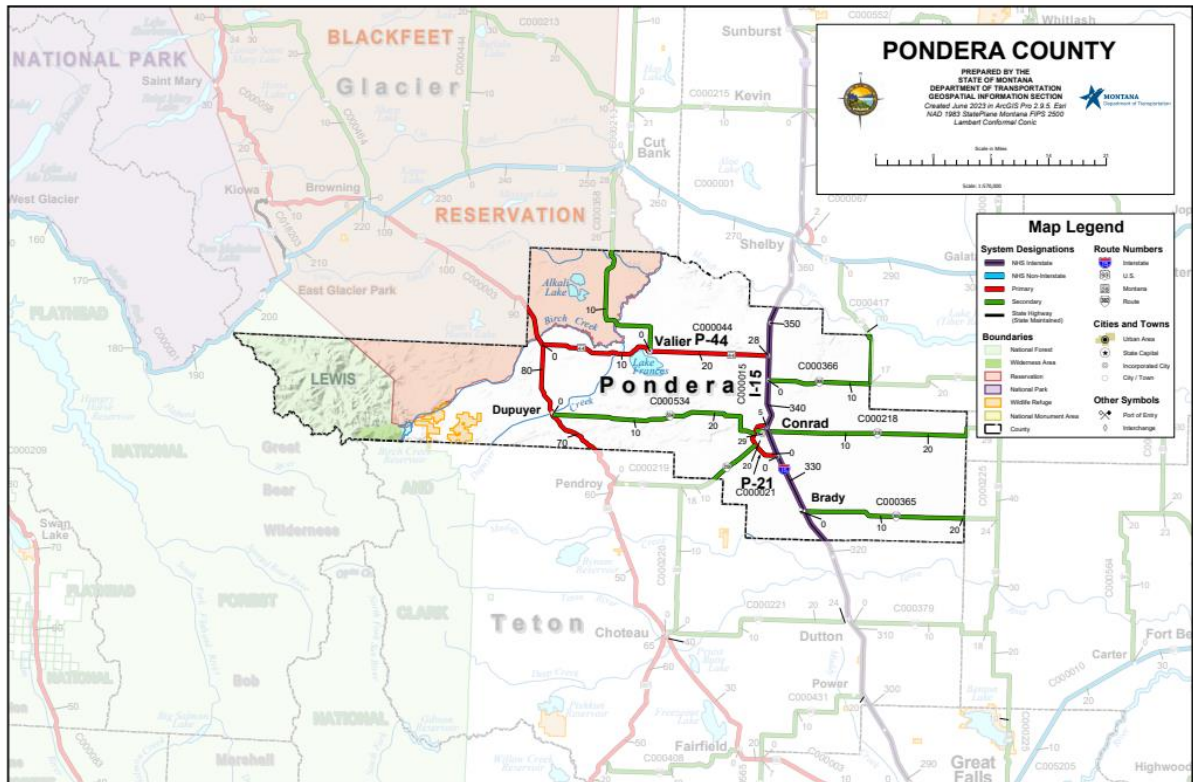
Goal 7.1	
Meet safety needs for all residents of Pondera County.	
Objectives	Actions
Provide emergency response, fire and medical care services for all residents in Pondera County.	Local government to implement and maintain the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan and Community Wildfire Protection Plan.
	Promote efforts by Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to study and mitigate flood prone areas and update flood maps. (?)
	Support fire departments and emergency medical response teams to maintain service and encourage volunteers.
Goal 7.2	
Provide competitive cell phone and internet service for all residents.	
Objectives	Actions
Encourage improved service by communication providers.	Support the efforts of local communication providers to install services that provide residents and businesses with competitive communication access.



8. Public Facilities

8.1. Transportation

Figure 8.1. Pondera County Highway Map (Montana Department of Transportation, 2023)



Pondera County has an extensive network of local roads that are under the jurisdiction of the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), the Pondera County Road Department, and the incorporation municipalities of Conrad and Valier.

The Pondera County Road and Bridge Department is responsible for an extensive network of roads and bridges throughout the unincorporated portion of the county that are not included in the state highway system, which is shown in Figure 8.1. The County is responsible for approximately 800 miles of roads and 64 bridges. The road and bridge department budget is generally used for road maintenance, equipment, and personnel, and is funded from the county general fund, gas tax, grants, and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) funds. PILT funds are received from the Federal government for public lands within the county. The incorporated municipalities maintain the local alleys and streets within their city/town limits. The major arterials within city/town limits are typically state or county highways, while residential streets are local city streets.



Table 8.1 County Road & Bridge Information

Pondera County Road & Bridge Information	
Miles of Paved Roads	40
Miles of Gravel Roads	760
# Bridges over 20-feet in length	51
# Bridges 20-feet or less in length	13

As identified in Table 8.2, bridges are broken into two categories:

- Major Structure: bridges greater than 20-feet in length, which are inspected biennially by the MDT. Based on current MDT records, there are 99 bridges in this category located in Pondera County. Although major structures are inspected by MDT, they may be the fiscal responsibility of Pondera County for repair or replacement. Of these 99 bridges, 51 bridges are the responsibility of Pondera County.
- Minor Structure: bridges less than 20-feet in length, which are not inspected regularly by MDT or Pondera County crews. There are currently 13 bridges in this category that are the responsibility of Pondera County.

Pondera County also contains roads on the Interstate System, the National Highway System (primary roads), and the State Highway System (secondary roads), as shown in Figure 8.1. Federal and State highways are eligible for Federal funds and are within the jurisdiction of the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). MDT prepares a Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) annually, which covers a period of four years. The 2022-2026 STIP identifies the following projects in Pondera County:

Table 8.2 Pondera County Projects in the MDT STIP (Montana Department of Transportation, 2023)

Fiscal Year	Project Name	Road	Project Scope
2026	Sollid Rd Bridge – 20 M E Conrad	S-218	Bridge Replacement
2023	Junction S-219 N&S	US-89	17.27 miles of chip seal
2025	Junction S-219 N&S	US-89	10.86 miles of chip seal
2026	SF189 Curve SW of Conrad	S-219	Safety Project
2023	Junction US 2-South	S417	16.52 miles of chip seal

8.2. Water Supply

Pondera County does not currently operate any public water systems; however, public water systems exist in the City of Conrad and the Town of Valier, as well as the Brady County Water/Sewer District and the Tiber County Water District. There are also a number of water systems located in Colonies that are regulated as public water supply systems due to the population served. See Table 8.3 for all public water systems in Pondera County.



Table 8.3 Public Drinking Water Sources in Pondera County (SDWIS, 2023)

Location	Water Source	Population Served	Service Connections
City of Conrad	(1) Intake	2,500	1,247
Town of Valier	(5) Wells	452	338
Brady-Pondera County W&S District	Consecutive Connection from North Central MT Regional Water	144	73
Tiber-Pondera County Water District	(2) Intake	750	300
Birch Creek Colony	(3) Well	120	12
Kingsbury Colony	(2) Wells	120	15
Midway Colony	(2) Wells	92	10
New Miami Colony	(1) Well	130	6
Pondera Colony	(3) Wells	112	9

City of Conrad

The City water system is currently supplied by Lake Frances and treated by conventional filtration methods and chlorination (Pondera County Growth Policy Committee, 2011). Water storage is provided at the treatment plant and piped to Conrad, where it is distributed by gravity to approximately 2,500 users. The distribution system is primarily comprised of asbestos-concrete pipe and is in relatively good condition with no major upgrades anticipated.

Town of Valier

Water for the Town of Valier is currently supplied by six groundwater wells located within the Town, and water is stored in a 250,000-gallon elevated storage tank, which was installed in 2011. Additional improvements completed in 2011 include the addition of water meters, rehabilitation of an existing well, and the addition of controls to the system. The distribution system is comprised of asbestos-cement, cast iron and PVC piping.

Brady County Water/Sewer District

The unincorporated town of Brady is supplied water by the North Central Montana Regional Water Authority (NCRMWA). There are new water lines in Brady to support the NCRMWA; however, Brady is not currently served by NCRMWA. At this time, water for Brady is being supplied by Conrad water.

Tiber County Water District

The North Central Montana Regional Water Authority system is currently completed to the district; however, the District is yet unserved by the NCRMWA.



8.3. Wastewater Collection and Treatment

Pondera County is not responsible for operating or maintaining any public wastewater system. Public wastewater treatment and collection systems are located in Conrad, Valier and Brady, while the remainder of the County utilizes individual septic systems that must be approved by the County Sanitarian. The Pondera County Sanitarian and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) must review any development with an area of less than 20 acres.

City of Conrad

The wastewater collection and treatment system in the City of Conrad is comprised of collection pipes, two lift stations, and the wastewater treatment plant. In 2002, a small amount of collection pipe was upgraded to PVC; however, the remainder of the system remains clay tile pipe or asbestos concrete pipe. The wastewater treatment plant was upgraded in the early 2010's to address issues with Montana DEQ discharge requirements and allow for future growth (Pondera County Growth Policy Committee, 2011). Upgrades to the lift station and the stormwater collection system are currently in process.

Town of Valier

The wastewater collection and treatment system in the Town of Valier received major upgrades in 2007, replacing sewer lines and manholes, and adding UV disinfection to the existing wastewater treatment plant (Pondera County Growth Policy Committee, 2011). The Town is currently in the design phase for upgrades to the system, including modifications to the lagoons and collection lines.

Brady-Pondera County Water & Sewer District

The Water & Sewer District serving the unincorporated town of Brad recently completed significant upgrades to the system, including the replacement of the collection system, placing new liners in the lagoons, and installing a solar-powered spray irrigation system. (Pondera County Growth Policy Committee, 2011).

8.4. Solid Waste

The Northern Montana Joint Refuse Disposal District serves three north central Montana counties, including Pondera County. The landfill is located approximately nine miles north of Conrad on Highway 44 and is an unlined, Class II facility with significant expansion potential (Pondera County Growth Policy Committee, 2011). Montana DEQ recently completed an Environmental Assessment for the expansion of the facility, which would add 160 acres and 139 years of capacity to the landfill (Montana DEQ, 2019).

The City of Conrad collects solid waste from residents and transports it to the landfill. In the Town of Valier, a private contractor collects solid waste for transport to the



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landfill. Outside of city and town limits, solid waste collection sites are available for residents and are located in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer and Valier.

Recycling facilities in Pondera County consist of multiple locations that collect cardboard, paper/newspaper, and aluminum cans. In addition, a yearly E-Waste event is held to collect electronic equipment.

8.5. Pondera County Courthouse

The Pondera County Courthouse was constructed in 1938 with funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program created by President Roosevelt (Borgen, 1995). The Courthouse is home to a number of County Departments, including the County Commissioners, Clerk & Recorder, Treasurer, Superintendent of Schools, and County Attorney, just to name a few.

8.6. Airport

Conrad Airport, located west of Conrad, is owned and operated by Pondera County. The airport does not provide commercial passenger services, but has fuel available to private aircraft, as well as hangars and tiedowns. The airport has two runways, one asphalt and one turf, both in poor condition (AirNav, 2023). Upgrades to the airport planned for 2024 include resurfacing the runway and aprons and installing new lights.

Pondera County also operates the Valier Airport, which is comprised of three turf runways, all in fair condition (AirNav, 2023). The airport does provide tiedowns, but no fuel services.

The nearest airport providing passenger service is in Great Falls, Montana, approximately 63 miles from Conrad. Private airstrips are located throughout the county, primarily serving the agricultural industry.

8.7. Town Hall/Fire Hall/EMS

Pondera County owns the Community Center located in the City of Conrad.

As indicated in Section 7.1, fire protection in Pondera County is primarily provided by the Pondera County Rural Fire District, which is comprised of rural departments stationed in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer and Valier. Pondera County owns the fire halls located in Brady, Dupuyer and Valier. The fire hall in Conrad is owned by the City of Conrad.

Pondera County owns the EMS facility and ambulances currently utilized by Logan Health. Logan Health leases the facility and ambulances from the county but is responsible for all staffing. In addition, the City of Conrad Volunteer Fire Department includes EMS services, which shares the ambulance barn with fire hall. The County is seeking grant funding for a new ambulance barn that will house EMS facilities.



8.8. Cemetery

Pondera County is served by two Cemetery Boards, one in Conrad and one in Valier, that govern and manage the various cemeteries within the County. The Cemetery Boards are comprised of three trustees and a secretary. The Boards are responsible for supervising all activities within the cemeteries, such as setting rules and regulations.

The Cemetery Boards oversees two cemeteries within Pondera County, including Conrad and Valier. There are additional cemeteries within the County; however, they are primarily Hutterite Colony cemeteries or private families' plots.

8.9. County/Town Shops

The primary site of the Pondera County Road and Bridge Department is in Conrad, with district shops located in Valier and Dupuyer. The City of Conrad and Town of Valier also maintain their own shops.

8.10. Library

Pondera County is home to two joint city/county libraries, located in Conrad and Valier. The Conrad Public Library offers a number of programs for residents, including reading challenge and book club for adults, toddler time, story hour, kindergarten camp, and after school clubs for children. The library also offers services like public computers, internet and wifi, meeting areas, test proctoring, and notary services.

The Valier Public Library offers a large selection of books, as well as e-readers and audio books. Computers are also available and include connection to the internet.

8.11. Community/Senior Centers

The Community / Senior Center located in the City of Conrad provides a number of services for local residents. Lunch is provided at the Center, or via Meals on Wheels, five days a week. They also manage the local transit service, which also runs five days a week, providing rides to medical appointments, shopping, or other destinations. The facility also acts as a community center, which can be rented to host private and public events.

The Valier Senior Center also provides meals, with delivery, five days a week to local residents.

8.12. Future Need for Additional or Improved Public Facilities

The City of Conrad has a need to develop a project to upgrade their aging wastewater treatment plant, which is essential for population growth and retention.

Replacement of the Front Street Bridge, located in the City of Conrad but the responsibility of Pondera County, is a priority for the County. This bridge is in poor



condition and undersized; therefore, replacement of the bridge would address public health and safety concerns, as well as help mitigate upstream flooding issues that regularly occur.

8.13. Goals and Objectives

Goal 8.1	
Maintain and upgrade public infrastructure as needed to serve County residents of all ages, incomes, and special needs groups.	
Objectives	Actions
Systematically plan and budget for capital improvements within the County, City, and Towns to efficiently maintain and upgrade public infrastructure as needed	Local government to develop a Comprehensive Capital Improvements Plan (CCIP) to identify needed infrastructure and facility projects.
	Planning board to determine the long-term benefit of installing new infrastructure to new development in unincorporated areas.
	Implement local guidelines that require studies that address impacts to county infrastructure that may occur as a result of new projects, such as wind farms, transmission lines, oil and gas projects, and major water transmission facilities.
	Update local subdivision regulations and other planning documents to ensure that proposed developments are adequately served by infrastructure and that developers are responsible for some or all of the infrastructure extension and improvement costs.
Goal 8.2	
Provide residents of Pondera County with adequate drinking water resources.	
Objectives	Actions
Implement policies and procedures that protect drinking water quality and quantity.	Work with the State of Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to update all County water discharge permits.
	Follow up on Conrad water shares



9. Natural Resources

Pondera County offers a diverse landscape from where the Rocky Mountain Front transitions into the Northern Great Plains. Abundant wildlife and natural landscapes are a common scenic view throughout the county. The climate is generally pleasant with sufficient growing seasons; however, trends of seasonal low precipitation and record droughts pose potential natural hazard risk to property and resources throughout the county. Pondera County, in coordination with local, State and Federal agencies, continues to develop and evolve management plans and policies that involve various aspects of the county’s natural resources.

9.1. Land Cover

Pondera County’s land cover is approximately 55% agricultural land use and grassland systems, as seen in Table 9.1. Agricultural land cover consists of approximately 53.4% cultivated crops and 0.6% of pasture/hay fields throughout the county (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023). A majority of the agricultural land cover is on the eastern side of US Highway 89 and a majority of grasslands are on the western side of US Highway 89, rolling up to the forest and woodlands of the Rocky Mountain Front.

Table 9.1 Pondera County Landcover Ecological Systems (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023)

Landcover Ecological System	Acres	Percent
Pondera County	1,049,832	
Human Land Use	581,398	55.4%
Agriculture	560,098	53.4%
<i>Cultivated Crops</i>	553,508	52.8%
<i>Pasture/Hay*</i>	6,590	0.6%
Developed	21,114	2.0%
Grasslands Systems	233,083	22%
Forest and Woodland Systems	49,917	4.8%
Recently Disturbed or Modified	91,339	8.7%
Wetland and Riparian Systems	44,348	4.2%
Shrubland, Steppe and Savanna Systems	30,875	2.9%
Alpine Systems	5,612	0.5%
Sparse and Barren Systems	13,243	1.3%

**Note from Montana Natural Heritage Program “Generally speaking, alfalfa grown with center-pivot irrigation will be classified as “Cultivated Crops” rather than “Pasture/Hay”.*

Spruce, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, limber pine, and subalpine fir are the common characteristics found in Pondera County’s forest and woodland systems, located in the western part of the county, and the undergrowth of these spruce and fir forests supports a diverse stand of forbs and shrubs. As seen in the Pondera County Landcover map (Figure 9.1) large patches of recently disturbed or modified systems can be found in the Rocky Mountains. This is due to major disturbances such as blowdowns from

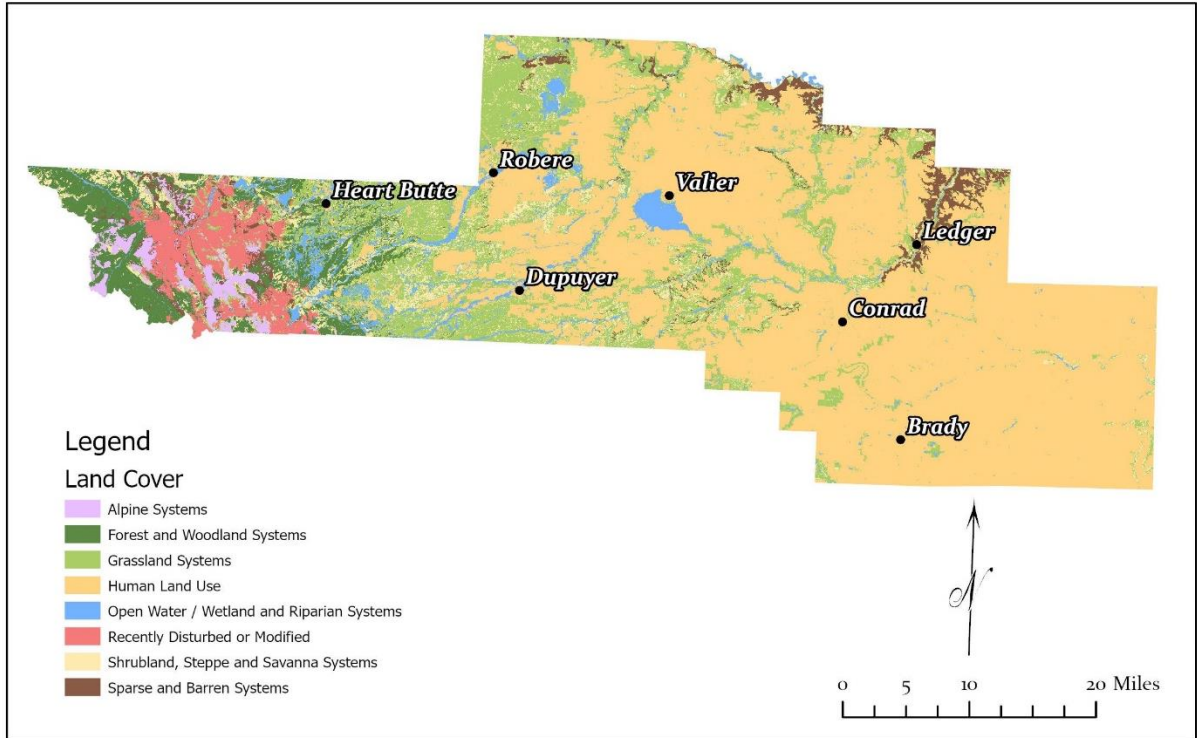


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weather storms, previous wildland fires, and insect outbreaks such as the spruce budworm, mountain pine beetle, Douglas fir beetle and grasshoppers.

Figure 9.1 Pondera County Landcover Map



As the Rocky Mountains transition into the western edge of the Great Plains as foothills and upland meadows, a variety of perennial bunch grasses, forbs, and shrubs cover the landscape. The western wheatgrass begins to emerge as the dominant species as the landscape transitions into lowland prairie. The growing season is 60 to 110 days with an annual precipitation of 13-21 inches, allowing for a large variety of mid and short grasses mixed with cultivated crops (USDA NRCS, 2023). Because of the productivity of the area’s climate and soil, it is common for non-native and noxious weeds to be widespread.

The spread of noxious weeds is a major concern for residents of Pondera County as they threaten rangelands, croplands, and recreation lands. Montana has 35 listed noxious weeds and five regulated plants, according to the Montana State Noxious Weed List (Montana Department of Agriculture, 2017) . Highway corridors and waterways such as the Marias and Teton Rivers, and irrigation ditches contribute to the spread of noxious weeds throughout the county. Pondera County is active in collaborations with various agencies and organizations for effective weed control management.



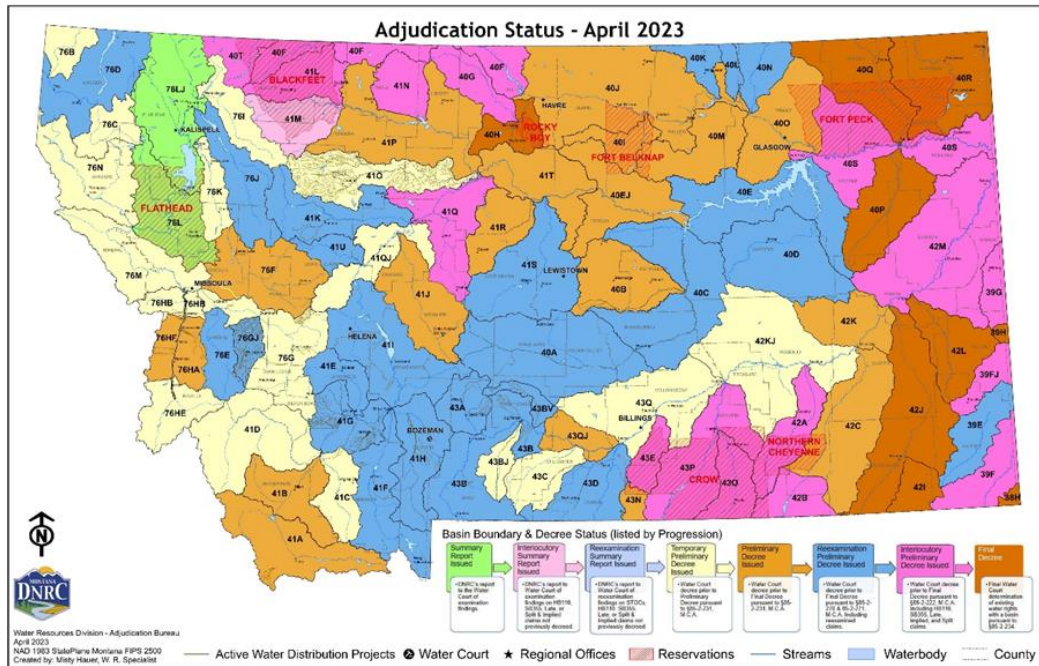
9.2. Rivers, Streams, Lakes, Wetlands, and Watersheds

Pondera County consists of five subbasin watersheds: Marias, Two Medicine, Milk River, and Birch Creek (USDA NRCS, 2023). The significant waterways such as Dupuyer Creek, Badger Creek, and Pondera Coulee eventually flow into the Marias River. There is approximately 6,150 acres of open water in Pondera County, with Lake Frances and Alkali Lake being the two largest bodies of water (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023). Swift Reservoir, Mitten Lake and Horn Lake are among other significant lakes/reservoirs in Pondera County, and numerous swamps and marshes provide recreational, ecological, and developmental importance. Because of the diverse importance of the waterbodies in the county and region, many efforts from organizations and agencies tackle to address water quality and quantity issues.

The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC) Stream Gage Program operates surface water, groundwater, and reservoir monitoring locations across the State of Montana in an effort to provide accurate real-time measurements of streamflow to assist with water management and distribution. According to the DNRC Stream Gage Program, Pondera County currently has no active DNRC or USGS Gages (Montana DNRC, 2023).

The Montana Water Adjudication Program assists local governments with water rights claims and examines all claims pursuant to Supreme Court rules, providing a summary report to the Montana Water Court on each of the water basins in the State (Montana DNRC, 2023). An updated map of the Adjudication Status of water basins in Montana is in Figure 9.2.

Figure 9.2 State of Montana Water Basin Adjudication Status (Montana DNRC, 2023)





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9.3. Fish and Wildlife

Pondera County landscape provides a diversity of habitat for fish and wildlife from the alpine peaks of the Rocky Mountain Front to the terrace and prairie of the Great Plains. The western portion of Pondera County is managed by the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and is recognized for exceptional wildlife habitats of big game such as bear, deer, elk, moose, and more. In addition to the National Forest, Pondera County contains a portion of the Marias River Wildlife Management Area.

There are 83 species of mammals, nearly 400 species of birds, 52 species of fish, 10 species of reptiles, and nine species of amphibians that inhabit areas throughout Pondera County (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2023). With an abundant diversity of species and ample habitat areas, some mammal and bird species are listed on the Federal endangered and threatened species list. Those species include the Pallid Sturgeon, the Grizzly Bear, a shorebird known as the Piping Plover, and the Canada Lynx (USFWS, 2023).

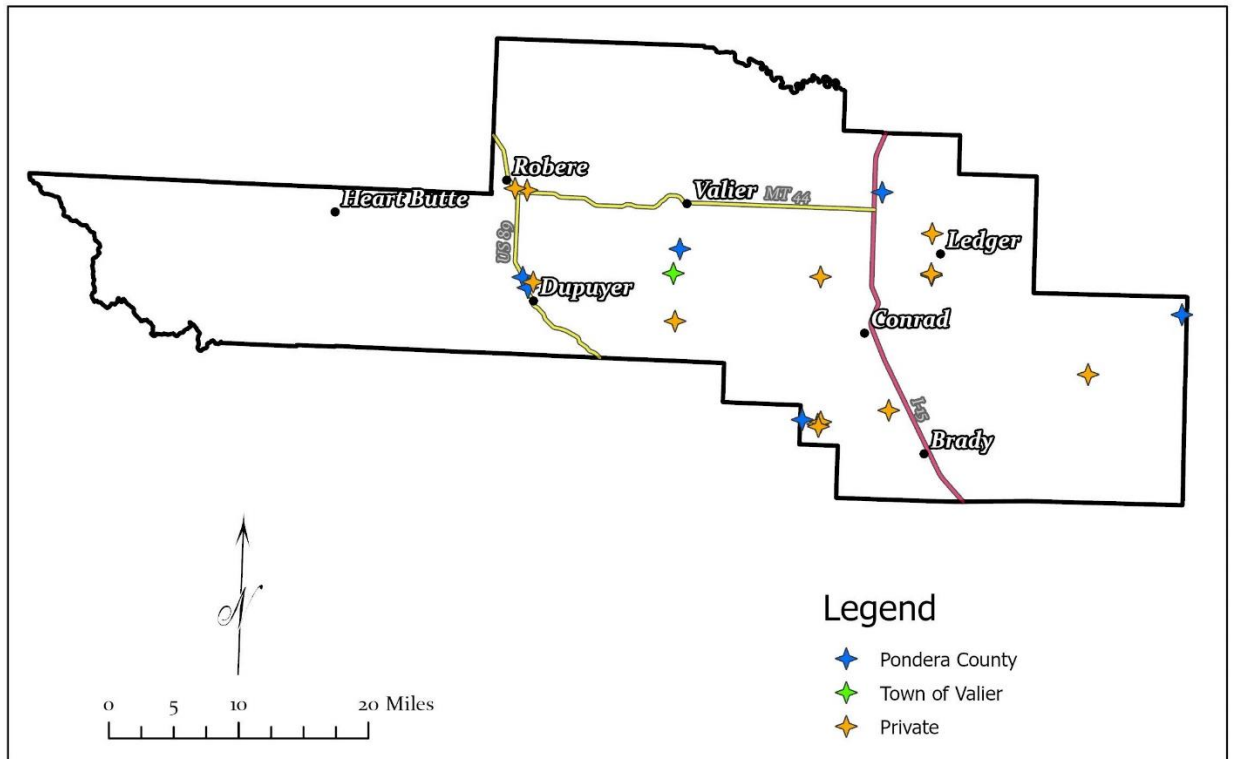
Pondera County is among other counties within Montana which have a unique relationship between wildlife and humans. One primary topic concerns the increasing conflicts between county residents and grizzly bears. With sparse and concentrated development within proximity to wildlife habitats, the importance of planning and management is critical for the safety of county residents, protecting their livelihoods, and ensuring wildlife remain an important feature of the County.

9.4. Sand and Gravel Resources

Opencut mining sites allow the extraction of bentonite, clay, scoria, soil materials, peat, sand, or gravel. Pondera County is abundant in the important natural resource of sand and gravel deposits, providing a foundation to infrastructure of buildings, roads, and bridges. Currently Montana DEQ has permitted 20 opencut mining sites in Pondera County, of which six sites are operated by the Pondera County Road Department and one is operated by the Town of Valier, as seen in Figure 9.3. Access and spatial distance of local gravel resources is important in reducing the cost of transporting and process fees for the overall cost of development. The potential for local extraction of sand and gravel resources influences the overall economic climate, supporting jobs and supplying local construction industries.



Figure 9.3 Pondera County Opencut Mining Sites



9.5. Wildland-Urban Interface

The Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) is defined by Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 76.13.102 as “the line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.”

The Montana Legislature established the State’s wildfire policy, which requires growth policies to include an evaluation of potential wildland fire. The County’s 2007 Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) notes that it should not be assumed that just because an area is not identified as being within the WUI, there is no wildland fire risk. The CWPP planning committee identified a number of action items to address WUI Safety and Policy. High priority items included (Pondera CWPP Committee, 2007):

- Develop County policy concerning building materials used in high-risk WUI areas on existing structures and new construction.
- Develop a policy to enforce burning permits and fire restriction throughout the county.
- Develop policy on adoption of International Fire Code.
- Begin making formal requests to Rocky Boy’s North Center Montana Regional Water System planning board to include hydrants at strategic points along the main water line.
- Adopt stringent regulations to insure fire-safe development of rural subdivisions.



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Pondera County and other agencies have been proactive in creating plans and polices for emergency preparedness as it relates to wildland fire. The Montana Regional Hazard Mitigation Program is currently completing Hazard Mitigation Plans for each of three regions identified for the State. Pondera County is located in the Central Region and is one of 13 Montana counties and two Tribal Nations included in the Plan, which is currently in draft form. Portions of the Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan and the Pondera County CWPPP can be found in Appendix X. Additional plans that are available to assist in wildfire emergencies include:

- 2011 Rocky Mountain Ranger District Emergency Plan for the National Forest Service, which includes a six-mile buffer along the Forest Service boundary into private lands.
- State of Montana Cooperative Fire Management Plan, which establishes a basic level of wildfire protection to all county property that is not covered by a wildland fire protection district or under the protection of a municipality or federal agency.
- Weed plan included with any gravel permitting in the county during reclamation and with new pits/permitting process.

Wildland fire season in Montana and Pondera County is generally July to September, with the potential in spring based on prescribed burns, and fire severity or behaviors is simplified by three components: fuels, topography, and weather. Since 2000, two fires in Pondera County have resulted in FEMA declared disasters, one in August 2000 and one in September 2017 (WSP, 2023). With recent trends of high drought levels, variability of ignitions and proximity to large amount of National Forest lands, the level of fire hazard in wildland-urban interfaces is moderate to high and poses a great risk to life and property. However, for parts of the county in the plains with sparse development, the threat to life and property is low to moderate. A wildfire risk analysis completed for the Central Montana Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan found that 85% of residents in Pondera County reside in areas identified with high, very high, or extreme wildfire risk (WSP, 2023). See Table 9.2 below:



Table 9.2 Pondera County Parcels at Risk to Wildfire (WSP, 2023)

At Risk Rating	Jurisdiction	Improved Parcels	Improved Value	Content Value	Total Value	Population
At Risk to Extreme Wildfire Hazards	Blackfeet Tribe	2	\$175,600	\$87,800	\$263,400	6
	City of Conrad	11	\$864,254	\$450,832	\$1,315,086	28
	Pondera County	12	\$752,982	\$376,491	\$1,129,473	33
	Total	25	\$1,792,836	\$915,123	\$2,707,959	66
At Risk to Very High Wildfire Hazards	Blackfeet Tribe	4	\$512,500	\$390,170	\$902,670	3
	City of Conrad	1,015	\$146,499,192	\$86,900,012	\$233,399,204	2,703
	City of Valier	345	\$34,243,461	\$18,055,583	\$52,299,044	916
	Pondera County	218	\$23,053,389	\$18,294,235	\$41,347,624	553
	Total	1,582	\$204,308,542	\$123,640,000	\$327,948,542	4,175
At Risk to High Wildfire Hazards	Blackfeet Tribe	8	\$1,592,180	\$1,592,180	\$3,184,360	0
	City of Conrad	18	\$4,579,345	\$3,177,363	\$7,756,708	47
	City of Valier	1	\$23,450	\$11,725	\$35,175	3
	Pondera County	359	\$63,932,855	\$49,837,383	\$113,770,238	523
	Total	386	\$70,127,830	\$54,618,650	\$124,746,480	572
Grand Total	1,993	\$276,229,208	\$179,173,773	\$455,402,981	4,813	

Source: MSDI 2022, MWRA

The Hazard Mitigation plan outlines a number of goals and mitigation measures the County can use to diminish the impacts of wildfire, including (WSP, 2023):

- Goal 1: Reduce impacts to people, property, the environment, and the economy from hazards.
- Goal 2: Protect community lifelines and critical infrastructure to ensure the continuity of essential services.
- Goal 3: Increase public awareness and participation in hazard mitigation.
- Goal 4: Sustain and enhance jurisdictional capabilities to enact mitigation activities.
- Goal 5: Integrate hazard mitigation into other plans, processes, and regulations.
- Goal 6: Promote regional cooperation and leverage partnerships in mitigation solutions where possible.

9.6. Mining

Records from the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG) indicate deposits known as areas of bituminous coal deposits; however, the deposits are small and not viable economically for extraction on a commercial scale (MBMG, 2023). Small amounts of titanium, iron, and zircon have been produced in the area.

9.7. Energy

Currently, there are 204 active, producing oil and gas wells in Pondera County, according to the Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation (MBOGC, 2023). Records



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of oil and gas production have been kept by the MBOGC since 1986, which was the year of peak oil and gas production, with oil production above 375,000 bbls (billion barrels) and gas production above 652,000 mcf (1 mcf = 1,000 cubic feet). After 1986, oil production steadily declined to 85,174 bbls and gas production declined to 62,209 mcf in 2022 (MBOGC, 2023).

Table 9.3 Pondera County Oil and Gas Production (MBOGC, 2023)

Year	Oil (bbls)	Natural Gas (mcf)
2010	131,349	279,590
2011	131,628	242,191
2012	141,246	207,850
2013	135,597	198,278
2014	130,577	176,981
2015	123,071	173,661
2016	110,590	128,625
2017	103,317	94,984
2018	98,074	52,601
2019	92,899	37,395
2020	78,524	64,047
2021	80,275	63,712
2022	85,174	96,135

According to the Montana Natural Resource Information System, wind speeds in Pondera County can range from less than 12 mph to over 19.5 mph, with the highest wind speeds generally located along the Rocky Mountain Front. The Montana DEQ website does not currently show any existing or proposed wind farms in Pondera County.

9.8. Climate and Soils

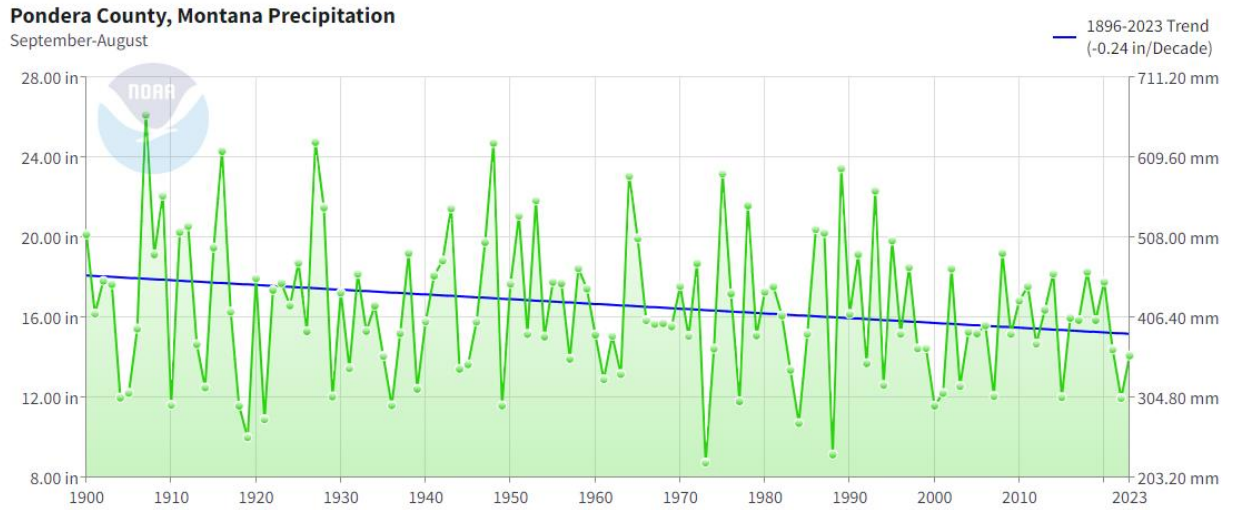
Pondera County generally experiences warm summers with average temperatures of 70 degrees Fahrenheit with limited extreme temperatures variance, generally not exceeding 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Winter months in the plains often experience Arctic cold air with lows reaching in the teens between December and February. Frequently these Arctic systems can be interrupted by Chinook winds producing warming temperatures with relatively clear and sunny winter weather.

Precipitation in Pondera County ranges from 10-20 inches annually, with the highest amounts generally occurring in May and June (NOAA, 2023). Figure 9.4 shows annual precipitation amounts in Pondera County, starting in 1900 and clearly showing a downward trend in annual precipitation rates.



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Figure 9.4 Pondera County Annual Precipitation Rates (NOAA, 2023)



The range of precipitation can be substantial from November to May. The Sun-Teton-Marias River Basin median snow water equivalent (SWE) is approximately 17 inches from 1979- to current, with a maximum up to 32 inches of SWE. SWE represents the depth of water in the snowpack if the snowpack were to melt. Snowpack is critical for spring run-off, generally starting mid-April, replenishing streams and reservoirs throughout the county (USDA NRCS, 2023). Pondera County is currently considered in a season of severe drought, with the extreme western edge of the county in extreme drought (NOAA, 2023).

According to the NRCS Long Range Plan for Pondera County, soil in the County was primarily formed from glacial till or glacial outwash material, with the remainder of the soil formed from weathered from limestone, mudstone, sandstone, shale, or siltstone (Conrad NRCS, 2023). The USDA NRCS prepared a soil survey for Pondera County and surrounding areas, which provides the acreage and extent of each of the soil types found in Pondera County, along with detailed maps showing the location of soil types. This survey can be found on the NRCS Web Soil Survey website ([Web Soil Survey \(usda.gov\)](https://websoilsurvey.usda.gov)).

9.9. Future Projections

Land cover is not anticipated to change in the future and Pondera County will continue to foster current production of its natural resources. The variability of climate and natural hazards will always pose a risk to natural resources and property. Nevertheless, with ongoing efforts of coordination with various agencies, the county has planned for protection of its natural resources and assessment of natural hazards. Pondera County will continue to cherish traditions and protect all its natural resources, local customs, and the private property rights of their residents.



9.10. Natural Resources Goals and Objectives

Goal 9.1	
Preserve the high quality of life and natural heritage of Pondera County.	
Objectives	Actions
Protect the high quality of life and natural heritage of Pondera County, such as wildlife, scenic vistas, clean air and cultural resources.	Local government to enforce the design, construction and permitting regulations adopted by local, state and federal agencies that protect air quality and other natural or cultural resources.
	Local government to utilize maps and information that identify areas of sensitive lands and lands with high natural resource value to inform their decisions.
	Local government to work with existing agencies to discourage development in areas with high natural resource value such as wildlife habitat and migration corridors, scenic areas, and archeological sites.



10. Recreational Access

10.1. Access Sites

Pondera County has many recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, and hiking, along with cultural and historical sites. Public Land access is scattered throughout the county, commonly as Montana State Lands or National Forest Service Lands. Most of the Montana State Lands provide public access and allow for hunting opportunities. The National Forest Service lands also offer extensive recreational opportunities.

The Helena-Lewis & Clark National Forest encompasses 10% of land in the county, providing access to the vastness of the Rocky Mountain Front and a portion of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The Forest Service manages approximately 107,346 acres in the county, offering one established campsite and one trailhead. Winter months in the Rocky Mountain Front deliver excellent snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing opportunities.

Other than the Forest Service, nearly 61,000 acres of public land, including BLM lands, provide diverse recreational activities within federal and state managed lands. Wildlife viewing and hunting sites are available throughout the county at the Marias River Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and one Fishing Access Site at Lake Frances. The Marias River WMA was established in 2009 and includes 14-miles of undeveloped land along the Marias River.

Pondera County offers exceptional historical and cultural sites throughout the unique geological landscape. The Conrad Transportation and Historical Museum collects and preserves artifacts and information illustrate how Pondera County and the region was settled.

10.2. Local Recreational Facilities

City of Conrad

Conrad has a variety of recreational facilities that support varied outdoor interests.

These include:

- 9-hole golf course
- Swimming pool
- Baseball complex
- Bowling alley
- Health club
- Theater group
- Movie theater
- Shooting range, with indoor targets, small bore, archery
- Civic Center
- City parks
- Walking path
- Pondera Rec Association

Valier

Valier recreational facilities include the campground and boat access on Lake Frances, Civic Center (senior center), and two town parks.



10.3. Future Projections

The use of land managed by state and federal agencies will continue to increase due to the popularity of outdoor recreation, changes in regulations, and wildlife management. These issues may create management challenges for agencies, given that any management changes often take an excessive amount of time due to required public processes and conflicts related to public land access.

10.4. Recreational Access Goals and Objectives

Goal 10.1	
Preserve the high quality of life and natural heritage of Pondera County.	
Objectives	Actions
Retain natural outdoor areas for recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, hunting and fishing, and tourism.	Local government to work with local, state and federal agencies to maintain access to public lands and support new access opportunities.
	Work with the County Weed Department to control the spread of noxious weeds and reduce areas of noxious weeds, particularly in the Swift Reservoir area.
Goal 10.2	
Enhance the recreational opportunities for residents and visitors to Pondera County.	
Objectives	Actions
Encourage the development of new recreational opportunities and the maintenance of existing recreational opportunities.	Continue to expand the existing walking path network located in and around the City of Conrad.
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11. Coordination with Local Jurisdictions and Agencies

11.1. County/City/Town Coordination

Section 76-1-601(3)(g) MCA requires that a growth policy include a statement concerning how local governments will cooperate with other jurisdictional entities in implementing its growth policy. The City of Conrad and the Town of Valier have their own Growth Policies; therefore, those documents are implemented as separate policy statements but have been considered with the development of this policy.

The Pondera County Planning Board is comprised of one member each from the City of Conrad, Town of Valier, Dupuyer, Brady and Rural Pondera County. Members of the planning board are appointed by the County Commission. The County Planning Board has duties and responsibilities described in by-laws that outline the relationship of the Board to the respective governing bodies, meetings, membership, powers, and duties including their relationship with Planning Staff. In addition, this board is responsible for developing a Growth Policy for their jurisdiction.

Per the Pondera County 2013 Subdivision Regulations, when a proposed subdivision lies within one mile of a third-class city or town, within two miles of a second-class city or within three miles of a first-class city, the county governing body must submit the preliminary plat to the city or town governing body or its designated agent for review and comment. City/Town classifications are determined by the population of the municipality. A first-class town has a population of over 5,000, second-class has population between 500 and 5,000 and, a third-class town has under 500 people. If a proposed subdivision lies partly within an incorporated city or town, the preliminary plat must be submitted to, and approved by, both the city or town and the county governing bodies. When a proposed subdivision is to be annexed into any incorporated city or town, the governing bodies shall coordinate the subdivision review process and annexation procedures whenever possible.

Table 11.1 Local Entities Coordinated with During Subdivision Review

Local Entity	Coordination Effort
School Districts	Coordination for new subdivisions, shared use facilities, and youth leadership programs.
Economic Development Agencies & Non-Profit Organizations	Regular updates, information sharing, and partnering on economic development efforts by agencies such as Sweetgrass Development, OpportunityLink, and Chambers of Commerce.
Irrigation Districts	Pondera Canal and Reservoir Company. Information sharing, notification of pending development reviews, invitation of input on land development regulations.
Fire Districts	Coordination through the County DES. Notification of pending development reviews and invitation of input on land development regulations.



Utilities	Information sharing, notification of pending development reviews, invitation of input on land development regulations with Northwestern Energy, Sun River Electric Coop, 3 Rivers Telephone, Water Districts, and Solid Waste providers.
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11.2.State and Federal Agencies

State and Federal agencies have the potential to impact resources and influence the use and development of land in Pondera County. Agencies including the BLM, USFS, DNRC, USFWS, and FWP occupy approximately 16% of the land in the county (see Land Use Section of this document).

The Pondera County Long Range Plan, authored by the USDA NRCS Conrad Field Office, identifies a mission to “work with partners organizations and agricultural operators to identify and focus efforts to address economically feasible resource concerns with the highest need”. In addition to the NRCS, partners in the document included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Pondera County Conservation District.

Additional intergovernmental coordination is described below.

Table 11.2 Government Entities Coordinated with During Subdivision Review

Government Entity	Coordination Effort
Helena - Lewis & Clark National Forest	Land Management Plan was updated in 2021. Cooperation between the NF and county entities is a goal throughout many areas of forestwide direction.
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	Wetlands, hazardous waste, information sharing, and distribution of educational materials.
Bureau of Land Management	BLM manages large sections of land in the county and provides recreational access within the county. Coordination of public land management, including hazard mitigation is critical to the agencies relationship with the County.
State of Montana Agencies	Information sharing, public participation, coordinated review processes with the following agencies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEQ: review water and sewer systems, permitting and compliance, hazardous waste and solid waste regulations, water and air quality. • FWP: management of wildlife preserves in Pondera County. • MDT: maintain state highways within Pondera County. • DNRC: water rights and groundwater issues, floodplain management.



12. Implementation Plan

Implementing a strategy for reaching the goals and objectives stated in the Growth Policy is critical to making the document a useful tool for planning the future of Pondera County. There are a variety of tools that can be used for implementation, which include regulatory and policy tools, available funding or fiscal tools, and training or educational tools that County government can use. This section lists implementation tools including a mandatory statement by State Law describing how the governing body will review subdivisions within the County. All other tools are contained herein for informational purposes only.

In this section a plan for future review and update of this Growth Policy is also stated.

Finally, an action plan is outlined based on the goals and objectives set for each of the required elements of 76-1-601 through 76-1-606, Montana Code Annotated (MCA) contained in this Growth Policy. The action plan assigns a timeframe to follow through on implementation.

12.1. Regulatory Tools

Local Review of Subdivisions

Subdivision regulations control the creation of new lots by imposing design and infrastructure standards and by establishing procedures for local government and public review. Regulating the division of land ensures that the development has appropriate services and does not adversely affect resources. Because of the possibility for adverse effects on resources, subdivisions will be reviewed for compliance with the Pondera County Growth Policy as well as compliance with subdivision regulations adopted by the County. As with all regulatory tools, subdivision regulations are most effective with consistent use.

As per §76-3-501 et. Seq. MCA, which requires local government to establish subdivision regulations and outlines the minimum requirements for those regulations, the County completed the process of updating regulations in 2013 and is planning another update following the 2023 Montana Legislative Session.

As per §76-3-608(3)(a), MCA, the governing body must review proposed subdivisions considering the effect on the following review criteria:

- Agriculture;
- Agricultural water user facilities;
- The natural environment;
- Wildlife;
- Wildlife habitat;
- Local services, and;
- Public health and safety.



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Pondera County Subdivision Regulations that describe each of these criteria, as well as the subdivision evaluation process and requirements for public review, were last adopted in 2016 and are available in their entirety at the Pondera County Clerk & Recorder's Office.

The City of Conrad has subdivision regulations that were adopted October 20, 2015 with an effective date of November 20, 2015. These regulations govern the subdivision of land within the City of Conrad and are available in their entirety at the City office and on the City website ([Departments — City of Conrad](#)). A plan for updating Subdivision Regulations is in place following changes made during the 2023 Legislative Session.

The Town of Valier does not currently have subdivision regulations.

Zoning

Pondera County does not currently have Zoning Regulations in place. However, zoning is a commonly used tool for implementing land use policy. Zoning describes the control by authority of the use of land and the buildings that may be placed there. Areas of land are divided by appropriate authorities into zones within which various uses are permitted.

The City of Conrad utilizes zoning, with the primary purpose of ensuring “the orderly development of land uses within the city and adjacent territory within one mile of the corporate limits, by providing a legal arrangement of streets in relation to other existing and planned streets, to comply and support the growth policy, to protect the public health, safety and welfare of city residents, and to provide for adequate and convenient open spaces for traffic, utilities, recreation and to avoid congestion of population” (City of Conrad, 2015). Zoning regulations for the City can be accessed through the City's website via their Municipal Code: [CHAPTER 1 ZONING CODE \(amlegal.com\)](#). Conrad Zoning Districts include the following:

- Single Family Residential
- Multi-Family Residential
- Mobile/Manufactured Home Residential
- General Commercial
- Neighborhood Commercial
- Light Manufacturing
- Manufacturing and Industrial
- Planned Unit Development

Zoning permits are required in Conrad for new homes and business construction, additions, fences, signs, etc. and approval must be received from the City Office before any work can begin.

The Town of Valier also employs a zoning ordinance, which divides the town into



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commercial, industrial, and residential categories. There is also a large portion of town that is not zoned but is primarily airport land.

In addition to the more traditional form of zoning, jurisdictions have explored other zoning approaches that can be used to regulate development of property. Some of these alternatives are described below.

Development Design Standards

Development design standards include site and building design standards adopted in zoning regulations. These standards are generally adopted with the intent of preserving and enhancing community character. State law supports the use of design standards if they are objective, reasonable, and applied uniformly throughout a community. Considerations for implementing design standards should include the level of administrative review required and the potential for increased development costs.

Agricultural Zoning

Agricultural zoning is commonly used to restrict land uses to resource extraction and production activities. Other agricultural protection zoning mechanisms include voluntary agricultural districts, agricultural area buffers, area-based zoning or density zoning, fixed area-based allowance zoning and sliding scale area-based allowance zoning.

Interim/Emergency Zoning

Interim zoning is specifically authorized in State law. It is a temporary land use control that expires unless replaced with permanent regulations. Interim zoning means a temporary emergency zoning that is conducted while the local government makes revisions to existing zoning ordinances or creates and adopts a final zoning plan or zoning ordinance or addresses some other local policy issue in the state. It helps to preserve the status quo or at least to limit the extent of change that can occur from zoning activities. It is also called stopgap zoning. Emergency zoning may be put in place by the County Commissioners.

Decay Ordinance

Decay ordinances are enacted to protect the general public from decaying structures that are deemed unsafe and uninhabitable by a building official. Chapter 5 of the City of Conrad Code of Ordinances regulates Nuisances for health and sanitation purposes. The regulation includes anti-litter regulations and requirements for disposal of noxious material, and abatement of nuisance weeds (City of Conrad, 2022).

Floodplain Regulations

Pondera County has adopted Floodplain Hazard Management Regulations in an effort to promote public health, safety and general welfare of County residents and minimize



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public and private losses due to flood conditions in Regulated Flood Hazard Areas. Floodplain regulations restrict development in areas within the 100-year floodplain of a watercourse in order to protect the watercourses and their flood storage areas, as well as the public health, safety, and welfare.

The City of Conrad and Town of Valier both separately maintain and enforce floodplain regulations.

Considerations for Regulatory Enforcement

Regulatory or code enforcement programs ensure that property owners comply with a jurisdiction's land use regulations. The County Planner or City/Town representatives will receive complaints and forward them to the planning board for consideration. The Planning Board will make recommendations to the County/City/Town Commissioners/Councilmembers.

The Montana DEQ's Brownfields Program works to address Brownfields sites across the state, providing both technical and financial knowledge on the assessment and cleanup process. There are numerous grants available through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to assist with environmental assessments, cleanup, and job training activities.

12.2. Fiscal Tools

Capital Improvements Program

A Comprehensive Capital Improvements Plan (CCIP) is used as a budgeting and financial tool by the County to establish long term goals for maintaining, improving, or building new public facilities. The document identifies specific projects, costs, priorities, timetables, and funding sources, and includes all public facilities owned or maintained by the local government. The importance of a CIP for land use planning is the critical connection between where and when infrastructure is provided and what the desired land use pattern is for a community or neighborhood. It is recommended that a full CCIP be prepared every 10 years at a minimum to include a full study of the capital needs of the county/city/town.

Impact Fees

Impact fees are charged to a developer by local government at the time of development or building permit review to pay for the impacts of new development on off-site capital facilities such as public sewer, roads, fire, or emergency services. Developing a fair and equitable impact fee program can be complex and often requires local governments to obtain outside assistance. Developers or applicants should expect a comprehensive review of long-term costs to the county/city/town.



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State And Federal Grants or Loans

Grant programs are a key means of implementing public policy regarding affordable and accessible housing, infrastructure extension, economic development, historic preservation, health and human services, crime victim assistance, environmental remediation, and provision of support to low- and moderate-income households and special needs populations. Acquisition and administration of grants for use by the County includes applying for and complying with the requirements of grant contracts; conducting needs assessments and program evaluations; coordinating community responses to identified needs; and seeking resources for the purpose of addressing a variety of community development issues.

Local entities may also play a role in the acquisition of state and federal grants for non-profit organizations. This may include sponsorship and/or assistance with grant writing and administration and providing technical assistance and direct service program administration. Involving local non-profit organizations in needs assessment and other county planning activities may provide a valuable partnership for addressing community development issues.

Grant and loan opportunities commonly used by local governments include:

- **Montana Coal Endowment Program (MCEP):** planning and construction grants for infrastructure including bridges, water systems, and wastewater systems, solid waste management, and storm water management.
- **Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program:** planning and construction grants for infrastructure, public facilities, housing, and economic development. CDBG eligibility for construction grants is tied to the benefit the projects will provide for low to moderate income individuals.
- **Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Renewable Resource Grant and Loan (RRGL) Program:** planning and construction grants for public facility projects including drinking water, wastewater and solid waste development and improvement projects. Other renewable resource projects that have been funded include irrigation rehabilitation, dam repair, soil and water conservation and forest enhancement.
- **MDT Transportation Alternatives (TA):** grants to improve access to alternative transportation routes along Montana’s highways. This can include sidewalks, trails, community gateway features, lighting, and historic rehabilitation.
- **USDA Rural Development (RD):** planning and construction loans and grants for communities with fewer than 10,000 people. Grant amounts are dependent on Median Household Income.
- **State Revolving Fund (SRF):** low interest loans used to maintain and improve drinking water systems and water pollution control projects.
- **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF):** grant program that provides funding for increased public access to and protection for federal public lands and waters.



Tax Increment Financing and Targeted Economic Development Districts

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is an important fiscal tool that allows jurisdictions to finance certain kinds of development costs within a Targeted Economic Development (TED) District.

12.3. Growth Policy Timeframe

Annual Review

The Pondera County Planning Board will review the Growth Policy on an annual basis and provide a Status Report to the County Commissioners. The Status Report will include:

- Status of goals, objective and actions suggested in the Growth Policy.
- Recommendation/assessment of goals to be addressed in the following year.
- Evaluation of need to revise the Growth Policy.

Condition for Revising the Growth Policy

This Growth Policy is based on existing conditions and anticipated future conditions. It is impossible to project every potential scenario and, therefore, the policy needs to be flexible to accommodate future issues. The Planning Board will review the Growth Policy and determine if changes are needed under the following conditions:

- Major proposed actions made outside of County authority with potential to significantly affect implementation of the stated goals, policies, and strategies in this growth policy.
- Any actions that might affect the health, safety, and welfare of citizens that were inadequately addressed in the growth policy.
- New development proposals not provided for in the plan.
- Priorities that need to be reassessed to take advantage of new opportunities such as grants, partnerships, and State and Federal programs.
- Additional public input suggesting the need for changes.
- Changes in state law regarding growth policies.
- Court cases and/or litigation that set legal precedent in Montana for growth policies.
- Individual neighborhood plans developed in accordance with state law (76-1-601) that are mandated as amendments to the current growth policy.
- Planning Board evaluation of implementation measures and progress, and determination that modifications would enhance the effectiveness of the growth policy.

Process for Revising the Growth Policy

County Commissioners will be notified in writing by the Planning Board prior to commencing work on the revision.

The Planning Board will follow the process outlined in State Law (MCA 76-1-602



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through 76-1-603) for adopting a Growth Policy to provide revisions. The Board will conduct a public meeting on the revisions prior to making their recommendation to the County Commission for adoption. The County Commission will follow the provisions of State Law (MCA 76-1-604) to adopt, revise, or reject the changes to the Growth Policy.

12.4. Action Plan

The Action Plan is a matrix intended as a snapshot of the Goals and Objectives outlined in the Growth Policy. It defines each goal and objective and sets a timeframe for accomplishment. For future tracking, additional columns are added for regulations used in implementation, funding sources, and date completed.

Timeframe is limited to:

- Ongoing or Ongoing as Opportunities Arise – indicates something the county or other entities are already involved in or are encouraged to become involved in as circumstances, funding, or other opportunities arise.
- Near term (1-5 years)
- Mid-term (5-10 years)
- Long term (<10 years)



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