

August 31, 2023

Flathead County Commissioners
800 South Main St.
Kalispell, MT 59901

re: Northshore Woods Subdivision, Bigfork

Dear Commissioners: Pamela Holmquist, Randy Brodehl, and Brad Abell,

Flathead Audubon Society (FAS) represents about 400 members from northwest Montana. Our mission is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat and ecosystem diversity; promote awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education and advocacy; work with diverse groups and agencies to achieve sound decisions on natural resource issues; provide community services such as school programs, work projects, and field trips.

The proposed road that connects the Northshore Woods property to Bigfork Stage Road is very close to the newly-protected Harrell Forest which is a conservation easement. Other properties within 2 miles of the proposed development also are protected by conservation easements thus helping maintain a functional wildlife landscape from the Swan foothills to Bigfork. Placement of a large subdivision in the middle of conserved lands and open space can undermine some of the connectivity benefits of these prior conservation efforts.

The proposed subdivision area is comprised of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir trees, native grasses, shrubs, and forbs which provide habitat for a variety of birds and wildlife. This type of low elevation dry forest and grassland habitat has been almost completely extirpated in the Flathead Valley due to development and agriculture. The grasslands are particularly important to ground nesting birds such as savannah sparrows and western meadowlarks, a species in decline. The dry ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests provide year-round habitat for a variety of woodpeckers, including the pileated woodpecker and red-naped sapsucker. The forest also supports black-capped, mountain, and chestnut-backed chickadees, red-breasted, white-breasted, and pygmy nuthatches, dark-eyed juncos, as well as a variety of finches, hawks, eagles, owls, grouse, and wild turkeys year-round. Migrant birds from Central and South America that nest in these habitats include the western tanager, spotted towhee, yellow-rumped and orange-crowned warblers, Cassin's and warbling vireo, willow flycatcher and western wood peewees, black-headed grosbeaks, golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets, and calliope hummingbirds. This is home to white-tailed deer, red fox, skunk, raccoon, black bears and the occasional mountain lion or grizzly bear. The proposed development area serves as an important migration corridor for wildlife due to its topography and natural, unaltered character.

Monitored populations of vertebrates (mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish) **have seen a devastating 69% drop on average since 1970**, according to World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) *Living Planet Report 2022*. We have lost 3 billion birds due to habitat loss and direct mortality associated with human activities with the greatest losses affecting migratory songbirds and grassland species. Many of these declining migratory song birds benefit from an undeveloped buffer between their nesting areas and human disturbances. The importance of maintaining a biodiverse area cannot be over emphasized. Birds, wildlife, plants, and insects are all interconnected and loss or alteration of native habitat impacts wildlife and people. Native plants support native insects and many species of insect and bird pollinators which are needed to pollinate our orchards and other crops. Native birds depend on native insects that rely on native plants.

Homeowners and development tend to destroy the native plants and habitats. Invasive and non-native plants brought in around homes and development provide little habitat for our native insects and birds.

These species, who perform many ecosystem services such as eating undesirable insects, would be negatively affected by development. Owls and hawks are important in controlling rodent populations. Pets, especially cats and dogs, can have negative impacts as well. Cats prey on birds and dogs often chase wildlife. The additional traffic and activity generated by this development will also be detrimental to the habitat, wildlife and birds. The **limited access** of the proposed development would also **increase the risk of human caused wildfire**.

We urge you to deny the preliminary plat of the proposed Northwoods subdivision and all the associated zone change requests because of the unique nature of this area and the negative impacts of the proposal.

Sincerely,

Darcy Thomas, President

Flathead Audubon Society