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March 13, 2024
Flathead County Planning Board
Attn: Erin Appert, Planner III
40 11th St. West, Ste. 220 Kalispell 59901

RE: Steamboat Landing Proposed Subdivision Somers

Email to:

planning.zoning@flathead.mt.gov

cc: eappert@flathead.mt.gov

cc: mfisher@flathead.mt.gov

Dear Members of the Flathead Planning Board,

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the proposed Steamboat Landing development in Somers adjacent to the new Somers State Park along the North Shore of Flathead Lake. Flathead Audubon's mission is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat, and ecosystem diversity through education and conservation programs, in North West Montana.

As such, we have concerns about the impacts of the proposed development on birds and wildlife habitat. The 60 plus acre area proposed for development is within an area of high habitat quality for birds and other wildlife due to proximity of Flathead Lake and its important shallow shoreline, associated wetlands along the North Shore as well as nearby ponds and Somers Slough. Bird populations have plummeted over the last 50 years; experts estimate we have lost about 3 billion birds in North America.

1. Important species using the Somers Slough and other wetlands and north shore include Mallard, Canada Goose, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, various species of teal, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, grebes, various species of shorebirds such as American Avocet, and Trumpeter Swans. Trumpeter Swan populations have only recovered recently in the Flathead as a result of extensive years of re-introduction by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and use both Flathead Lake in winter and the nearby Somers ponds, sloughs and often croplands for foraging and nesting. The sloughs and wetlands also are used by a variety of gulls, terns, Bald Eagles, Northern Harrier, Osprey, and a wide variety of songbirds such as Northern Oriole, 5 species of swallows, Black-headed Grosbeak, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds, and Yellow Warblers. We have documented over 164 different species in this area including the slough, trails, and State Park. This is an incredible area for birds.
2. The Sonny Boone Trail and the lands around Somers School and the new State Park are used by hundreds of birding and wildlife viewing folks every year due the slough's high habitat diversity and the natural abundance of many birds and bird species, good access and viewing. Additionally, Flathead Audubon has been leading bird trips along

the Somers Slough/Sonny Boone trail for many years as well as providing a bird education program for the Somers Middle School. Development could diminish much of the use of this area by many species and numbers of birds through displacement, disruption, increased predation by pets, collisions, etc.

3. In 2009 Montana Audubon designated the north shore of Flathead Lake as an Important Bird Area due to its incredibly high value to birds and the high diversity of species that use this area on a year-round basis. Important Bird Areas are sites that provide essential habitat for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds. In the last 2 decades, public agencies and private land trusts have raised millions of dollars to protect much of the North Shore because of its incredible habitat and bird values as well as protecting Flathead Lake, its water quality, wetlands, open space, and agriculture. High density development and expanded human uses of adjacent public and private lands along the North Shore would likely degrade these long-term investments over time.
4. We have concerns about high density development next to a new state park that took years to conserve, hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase, because of its intrinsic values for water quality, wetlands, Flathead Lake, bird and wildlife habitat and access/recreational values. After hundreds of hours of public review, input, and outreach by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, the agency adopted a plan that is not typical of most Montana State Parks that usually provide RV and camping, facilities, boat ramps, etc. The public wanted the new Somers State Park to be more quiet and open in nature with a few trails and minimal development. To propose a high-density development next to this incredible resource undermines the community's and state efforts to protect the area's unique resources.

We recommend you do not support the Steamboat Landing proposal and possibly suggest development more in line with community and local habitat values with substantial setbacks from water, larger lots, limited activities such as grazing or clearing vegetation near water, native plant buffers, no wildlife attractants, etc.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.

Sincerely,

Darcy Thomas, President
Flathead Audubon Society