Physical changes associated with land development have been an important focus of our resource protection efforts. Accordingly, we have taken steps to play an active role in the statutory subdivision review process. We review all proposals for subdivision in Missoula County and suggest changes that will reduce impacts on birds and their habitats. Five Valleys Audubon is recognized by the County as an organization with expertise on birds and other wildlife. Over time our role in the review process has evolved, and we are now among the parties invited to offer comment at the earliest stage of governmental review.

Our reviews begin by evaluating preliminary and subsequent drafts of proposals submitted to the County by developers and land owners. For some proposals a site visit is then conducted to evaluate first hand the impacts of development and to determine how the proposed development could be changed to reduce or eliminate impacts to habitat that could significantly harm bird populations especially for species of conservation concern. Next we submit our findings and suggestions to the County and occasionally interact directly with developers about our concerns and to suggest how to redesign proposals to meet the needs of birds. We testify at Missoula County Planning Board and County Commissioner hearings to explain our concerns about impacts on bird habitat and to emphasize needed measures of mitigation. We participate in Missoula City-County public listening sessions and standing committee hearings to explain wildlife needs in planning for future population growth and related development.

Our replies are focused on reminding developers and the County planners that we review all proposals and keep a scientific eye on how birds might be impacted. Our reviews have resulted in redesigned proposals that have fewer lots or smaller lots, larger non disturbance buffers, clustering of home sites and in some cases rejection of the proposed development.

For the 15 years from 2007 through 2022, we reviewed and commented on 130 subdivision proposals. Many proposals had non significant wildlife impacts. Some had substantial impacts that we described along with recommended actions on how to minimize or mitigate those impacts. For example, a difficult proposal to mitigate called for 5 home sites to be developed on McCauley Butte within the Clark Fork River--Grass Valley Important Bird Area. The developer contracted professional wildlife consultants to defend their proposal. We testified at three County Commissioner hearings and submitted considerable bird survey data and scientific findings to support our recommendation to exclude three home sites. The County disapproved the subdivision, but was sued for making an arbitrary and capricious decision. However the County decision prevailed so no home sites were approved on McCauley Butte.

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