

A win-win for DeSmet school, community

MATT DRIESSEN Feb 16, 2017



DeSmet School principal Matthew Driessen wants a broader discussion of zoning and housing development in the Missoula Development Park on the heels of a request to rezone land near the school as commercial. "This isn't fair," Driessen said. "Our (residential zoning) is so small and shoved into the corners so far that our numbers can't expand. It's like being choked a little bit."

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In today's political climate there seems to be contention almost everywhere. Friends are made and lost on Facebook daily. Protesters on opposing sides square off to advocate for their agenda. It would seem by watching the national news and commentary that politicians, municipalities and everyone else with an opinion are in a political brouhaha that leaves the average person shaking their heads and asking the question: Why can't they just get along and fix what needs fixing?

In Missoula, however, with respect to the greater DeSmet community, our experience has been positive and rewarding because local elected officials, municipalities and the DeSmet Public School Board are working together to fix what needs fixing.

In 1998 Missoula created a tax increment district (TIF district) out of most of the DeSmet School District for redevelopment. Oddly, over the last 20 years residential housing has been excluded from the heart of development in the DeSmet community. Several commercial interests sprung up, but for the most part, the TIF district is filled with vacant lots and land tracks. One of the contributing factors to this sluggish growth in the TIF district is the lack of affordable housing in Missoula. Businesses thrive when people can live, work and learn in the same community.

The problem, however, is locating a suitable area to seed this growth. Multi-zoning an area for growth requires three components: commercial, light industrial and residential zoned areas,

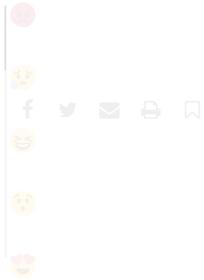
with infrastructure to support all three. To create a multi-zoned area from scratch would require an investment in infrastructure in the millions of dollars and to site a school for the residents would add an additional \$20 million to \$25 million to the price tag. With Missoula residents already paying the highest property taxes in Montana, this added tax burden to the residents would be prohibitive.

The solution came from the DeSmet School Board. The area around the DeSmet Public School has within one mile of DeSmet Public school: one ball park (three completed diamonds, two more under construction), six parks, 2-plus miles of paved trail system with picnic tables and benches, 16 empty lots encompassing roughly 40 percent of land, 34 businesses, nine empty business fronts and a paved boulevard (Expressway) with a central turn lane, which is everything a community would need. The only component missing is affordable residential housing.

In a proposal put forth to the county commissioners by DeSmet, it was discussed at length how the creation of residential zoning based on affordable housing around the DeSmet School would create a win-win scenario for many different groups with interests in the community. The TIF district would have affordable housing options for the employees at the airport and local businesses, which would attract businesses to the area. Missoula would have affordable housing options for its residents, reversing the barrier that stymies outside business ventures from settling in Missoula. DeSmet Public School would be able to absorb the new students without the county having the expense of creating a new school. The taxpayers of Missoula would not be on the hook for tens of millions of dollars in added debt. The added commercial and residential homes and businesses created would increase the overall property tax revenue to Missoula by \$500,000 to \$750,000 annually. The commercial area would create permanent jobs, strengthening the human resource base of Missoula. With two subdivisions, one north and one south of Airport Boulevard, commercial redevelopment will spring up to serve the needs of the residents.

As with all projects in the community, the growth in the greater DeSmet community is still a year away. But the groundwork to expand and strengthen the Missoula community is already underway. The synergy created by the county commissioners, the CAPS Offices and the DeSmet School Board by working effectively and collaboratively together is the hallmark of what good government should look and feel like. In Missoula they are fixing what needs to be fixed, government does work for the people, and Missoula is a great place because David Strohmaier, Jean Curtiss and Nicole Rowley are proactively addressing the long-term residential, educational and business needs of our community.

Matt Driessen is principal of DeSmet Public School.

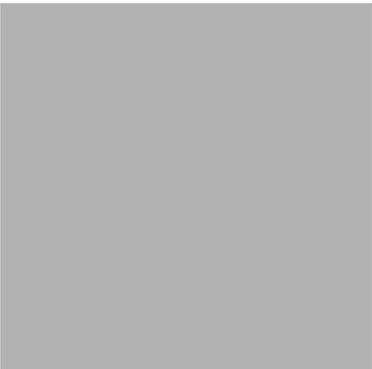


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