

# MISSOULA COUNTY OPEN LANDS CITIZEN'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

March 12, 2026  
6:00 p.m.

Approved Minutes  
*Meeting recordings available upon  
request.*



|                                                                                                          |                                     | Staff  | Others                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Present                                                                                                  |                                     | Absent |                                                                                                   |
| Sarah Holden<br>Tim Hall<br>Noel Treat<br>Helene Michael<br>Brad Hall<br>Sharon Sweeney<br>Caroline Byrd | Bonnie Buckingham<br>Ginny Sullivan |        | Jenny Zaso<br>Randy Arnold<br>Josh Slotnick<br><br>Paraic Neibergs<br>Kyle Barber<br>Dereck Goble |

**A. Call to Order and Roll Call**

Sarah facilitated and called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

**B. Land Acknowledgement**

*Missoula County acknowledges that this event takes place in the aboriginal territories of the Salish and Kalispel people.*

**C. Approval of Agenda**

Tim moved; the agenda was approved as presented.

**D. Approval of OLC Meeting Minutes –January 8, 2025**

Sharon moved and Helene seconded approval of the minutes as amended. All members voted in favor and the motion passed.

**E. Public Comment and Announcements on items not on the agenda**

There were no public comments or announcements.

**F. New Business**

**a) New OLC Member Welcome and Intros**

Introductions of new and existing members were made. The new members are Noel Treat, Brad Hall and Caroline Byrd.

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**b) Guest Speakers – Paraic Neibergs and Kyle Barber – Conservation Lands Appraisals & Valuation**

Paraic Neibergs explained how conservation easements are valued using a before-and-after market approach, focusing on what property rights remain (like building, agriculture, or recreation), not just what is lost. Valuation depends on factors such as highest and best use, access, water, amenities, and comparable sales, with significant variation across Missoula County's diverse land markets.

The group discussed limits of the system: public benefits like wildlife habitat and scenic value are important but hard to quantify, so they are not included in standard market-based appraisals. This creates tension between true conservation value and financial valuation. The group also discussed differences between appraisals used for funding versus tax purposes, and how these can lead to varying valuations.

Paraic Neibergs explained that Missoula County has many distinct land markets (e.g., Seeley-Swan, Blackfoot, Bitterroot, Nine Mile), making appraisals more complex compared to more uniform areas like the Bitterroot Valley.

He outlined the conservation easement appraisal process, which compares a property's value before and after restrictions are applied. The key factor is not just what rights are lost, but what rights remain, such as building potential, agriculture, or recreation—since these drive buyer interest and value.

The discussion continued explaining how conservation easement values are determined, emphasizing that valuation is based on market evidence and what rights remain after restrictions, not simply on development potential or what landowners give up. Appraisals rely heavily on comparable sales and qualitative judgments rather than fixed formulas.

The Open Lands Committee's role is clarified as prioritizing how to allocate limited public funds across projects, rather than determining appraised value itself. Easements today often involve multiple funding sources, tax benefits, and financial strategies (like donations and 1031 exchanges), and landowner motivations range from stewardship to financial considerations.

Overall, conservation easements are presented as a key but complex tool—balancing economics, policy, and conservation goals—while facing challenges like limited appraisal capacity and difficulty measuring non-market values.

**G. Subcommittee Reports/Communications/Questions**

**1. Staff Communications**

**i. Board training**

Board members are invited to attend an upcoming county board training session on March 31st from 2:30–5:00 PM at the Missoula Public Library. The training is highly recommended and provides a helpful refresher on board roles, responsibilities, and best practices, including how to handle questions and logistics.

The session is interactive, involves participants from various boards, and is considered much more engaging and useful than past lecture-style formats.

**ii. OLC New Bylaws Confirmed**

The Open Lands Committee (OLC) has newly confirmed bylaws, and the board webpage is being updated to include more resources and an orientation packet, especially helpful for new members. Members are encouraged to stay tuned for these materials, which will improve access to important information and documents.

**iii. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Open Space Bond Planning Update**

The committee discussed plans to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 2006 and 2018 Open Space Bond Fund projects, highlighting the city-county partnership and its successes. This event will take place September 22–26, culminating on National Public Lands Day. Ideas for the celebration include hikes, historical talks, book events, arts activities, and other ways to engage the community and showcase open space projects. The committee will receive updates and may be asked to help with tasks as planning progresses. The broader context also notes approaching the 50-year milestone of successive bond projects.

**2. Subcommittee Communications**

**i. Communications**

- **Good Neighbor Handbook Updates**

The committee discussed updates on the Good Neighbor Handbook, which provides guidance for new acreage residents living in Missoula County, especially in rural areas. A final draft is nearly ready after reviews by a subcommittee and content experts. The handbook covers topics like agriculture, wildlife, fire safety, weeds, and general good land stewardship. Plans include making it available online and printing 5,000 hard copies targeted at residents who have lived in the area for five years or less. The last edition was published in 2010.

**ii. Board Chair/Vice-Chair Communications**

- **Chair/Vice Chair Elections – April meeting**

The committee introduced the current chair (Sarah) and vice chair (Sharon), noting that due to member transitions and delayed bylaws, officer elections were postponed. Both officers are willing to serve again, and elections will be held next month, giving members a chance to ask questions or consider running.

- **Guest Speaker Brainstorm**

The committee discussed planning future meetings and speakers to help members better understand their roles and natural resource issues. They encouraged suggestions for topics, especially those highlighting challenges in rural and ranching communities, and noted the value of field visits and hands-on projects when possible. Members were invited to share ideas via email to shape upcoming agendas.

- **Land Stewardship Award**

The committee discussed the annual Land Stewardship Award, which honors a landowner or community volunteer in Missoula County. Members review nominations from the public and land trusts, using established criteria, and recommend a recipient to the county commissioners. The award includes a public recognition and community celebration.

- **Subcommittees**

They also reviewed subcommittees, including the Communications Committee (linked to the Good Neighbor Handbook, 20th anniversary, and outreach) and noted potential reactivation of the Bond Fund Subcommittee. A special subcommittee may be formed to help plan the 20th anniversary events.

### **3. General Communications and Questions**

#### **i. Round Robin Updates:**

- The school in Lolo has been completely been demolished. They used a company like Home Resource to salvage the materials.
- The Conservation District has some upcoming events. The next one is March 14th and is called Coffee and Smoke.
- There will be a no till drill workshop for people who are in DAG or regenerative agricultural. It will be at Teller Wildlife Refuge.
- On March 30th, there will be a talk sponsored by the Clark Fork Coalition regarding the restoration work being done on Grant Creek.
- The Seeley Lake Community Council will be developing three subcommittees. One will be what the economic development will be for basically family businesses, police officers' homes, schoolteachers' homes. Another will be Forest Service relations. The third will be clean water.
- The Nine Mile Community Center will have an Easter egg hunt, a wildfire preparedness program, a pollinator workshop, an FWP electric fence presentation and information about funding, and a wildlife photography workshop. Check out <https://www.ninemilecommunitycenter.com/> for more information.

#### **H. Future Agenda Items**

There were no suggestions

#### **I. Adjourn:** The meeting was adjourned at 8:08 pm.