

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/27/2024 9:32:57 PM

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Comments: Julie Lacey, Director of Economic Development

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Carolyn Upton, Forest Supervisor

Lolo National Forest, Forest Service

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3/28/2024

Dear Ms.Upton,

As part of the public comment related to the Lolo National Forest's Forest Plan revision process, I am writing to request a change in the designation of Forest Service land parcels in Seeley Lake. It is my belief that they should be changed from their current designation to administrative use to support future flexibility in use and potentially workforce housing needs.

Please see the attached map prepared by Forest Service staff in Seeley Lake highlighting the specific parcels of land. Under the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, the Forest Service has the authority to enter long-term lease arrangements at qualifying administrative sites in exchange for cash or non-cash consideration. Given the identified property's location and current uses, local Forest Service agency staff suggested it as a possible site for housing or future redevelopment.

The development of affordable workforce housing on the White River National Forest in Dillon, CO, highlights an example of the above-mentioned authority that could be considered in Seeley Lake if these lands were designated administrative. MEP has spoken with Forest Service staff on the White River National Forest to learn more about the project and will continue to invest time and resources to support the viability of a similar project in Seeley Lake or at another possible site in Missoula County.

As I shared in a meeting with you and your staff on Thursday, September 14, 2023, Missoula Economic Partnership has convened a group of public, private, and agency stakeholders in Seeley Lake to discuss the critical needs around workforce housing and seek public-private solutions to address future housing needs. This group remains interested in working toward long-term solutions for the area.

In recent years, the availability of affordable housing has become a critical issue in Seeley Lake, impacting the ability of the Forest Service and other employers in the area to recruit and retain qualified employees. Without suitable housing options, employees are often forced to endure long commutes to surrounding communities as far as Missoula, which not only affects their quality of life but also contributes to environmental and safety concerns. The recent announcement of Pyramid Lumber's closing, specifically citing lack of workforce housing as a factor, highlights the urgency of the problem.

We understand the challenges associated with future development in Seeley Lake related to a lack of a wastewater system, however, by designating these land parcels for administrative use, the Forest Service has the flexibility to create future opportunities for the development of workforce housing projects that meet the needs of its employees and the broader community for decades to come.

In conclusion, I respectfully request that the Forest Service consider this proposal to change the designation of lands in Seeley Lake to administrative use to support future workforce housing or community needs. This initiative aligns with the agency's mission of managing and protecting our nation's forests and natural resources while also ensuring a vibrant community in Seeley Lake.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you regarding the progress of my request.

Sincerely,

Julie Lacey