

# WYE PLANNING ENVISIONS 15,000 HOMES, SMALL CITY IN 50 YEARS

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The Wye west of Missoula. (Martin Kidston/Missoula Current)

## **Martin Kidston**

(Missoula Current) While the population of Missoula County in 1975 was little more than 67,000 residents – the City of Missoula even less – it has since grown more than 80%, now housing more than 121,000 people.

Looking ahead another 50 years, Missoula County is anticipating similar growth, an ongoing need for housing, new job centers and the infrastructure to support it all. The cost of that infrastructure is estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars but, if tackled over time, the end goal is considered achievable.

The time to start is now, the county said.

On Monday, county officials took a deep dive into planning efforts around the Wye, an area that has seen little guided growth over the past 50 years. But as the City of Missoula fills in, the Wye is expected to **emerge as the next population center** and, it could one day become an incorporated city of its own.

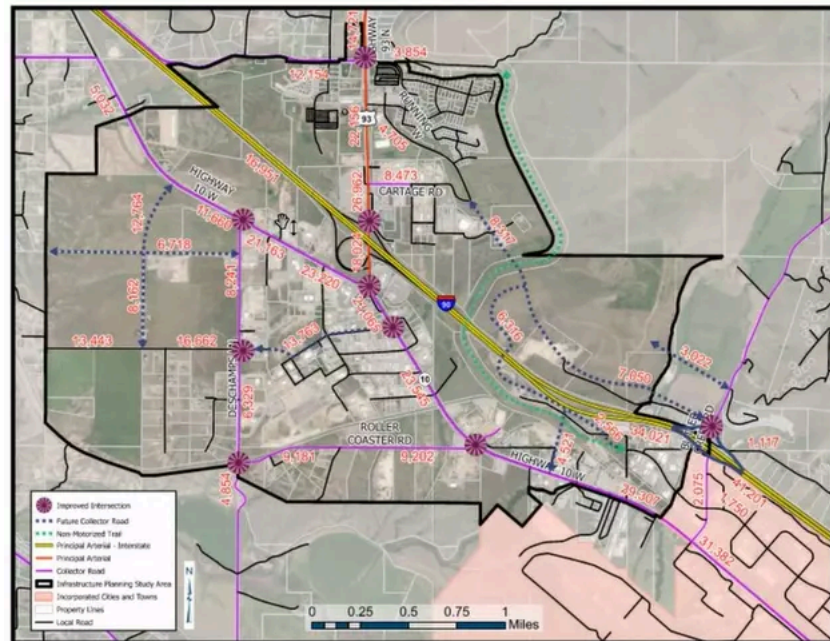
“The Wye itself has been an area designated for growth since the 1970s. But it hasn't really played out because we didn't really do anything to implement it,” said Andrew Hagemeyer, a senior planner with the county. “That's what we're doing differently now, saying this area is going to grow, so how do we make it happen rather than walking away and doing something else for 20 years.”

## **Planning for the future**

The county **has established** several Targeted Economic Development Districts at the Wye over the last five years, enabling to capture tax increment to fund future infrastructure. The Wye study area now covers around 3,500 acres, which is 2.5 times larger than that Swxtpqyen area

west of Reserve Street.

Several planned neighborhoods at the Wye include 1,300 acres of undeveloped land. At 8 units per acre, future development could accommodate 10,000 homes or, at 12 units per acre, around 15,000 homes.



A road system is proposed for the Wye as the area develops over the next few decades. The stars represent major intersections.

The Wye also includes 540 acres of undeveloped industrial land and 250 acres that are currently underdeveloped. When looking at future planning efforts to support both housing and industrial development, the county has turned its focus to sewer, water and transportation.

“When we look at complimentary cities, Post Falls and Coeur d’Alene are on a similar scale. The interstate between Post Falls and Coeur d’Alene carries about 60,000 vehicles a day,” said Jeff Smith, a principal engineer at WGM Group. “What we’re looking at when we lay this out is concept where we have the 15-minute city approach with services, schools and jobs within the study area.”

In the 50-year development plan, the interstate between Missoula and the Wye would carry around 45,000 vehicles a day. In 50 years, Highway 10 is expected to carry 30,000 daily vehicles, similar to the traffic on Reserve Street today.

But in time, the greater Wye area would include a new road grid, complete streets, improved intersections and better connectivity when compared to what exists today.

“We need to try to get some complete street networks into the industrial areas, just because of where the residential areas are,” said Hagemeyer. “There will be schools in this area in the future. Having complete streets in locations will be important.”

County planners believe the largest opportunities for housing development in the area includes 700 acres west of Deschamps Lane and several hundred acres north of Interstate 90 at Butler Creek. The creek bottom would be preserved for agriculture.

Butler Creek would eventually gain its own I-90 interchange.

“There’s a lot of capacity for homes there, between 3,000 and 5,000 units if we build at eight or 12 units per acre,” said Smith. “There would be some pretty significant improvements in this area. There would be an interchange at Butler Creek, but that’s a year-50 improvement.”

## Sewer and Water

With development looming on the horizon and the basic vision of a street system in place, the need for water and sewer are also being considered. The cost for the water system is currently estimated at between \$130 million and \$150 million, including storage, pumps, mains and trunk lines.

Smith said the water rights currently exist, including Grass Valley and from other private landowners. The Grass Valley alluvium has been a solid water producer, with several wells that produce 2,000 gallons per minute. The current Wye water system produces around 1,300 gallons per minute from supply wells. Other developers in the area have found wells that produce 500 gallons per minute.

Smith said the entire Wye planning area will need an estimated 10,000 gallons of water at full build-out.

"At the 50-year-build-out, we're probably supplementing supply from outside the study area," he said, describing the area's aquifer as somewhat unpredictable. "It's braided alluvium, deposited with lake-bed silt clay, so you have this intermix of clay, gravel and sand. Some of it's confined, so that means it's pressurized, recharging from up the hill."

The Wye planning area covers around 3,500 acres, making it 2.5 times larger than the Mullan planning area. Green represents undeveloped land, yellow developed land and blue underutilized land.

When eyeing water and sewer development, the county has split the Wye planning area in two, with one half lying north of Interstate 90 and the other half to the south. The largest needs lie in the planned neighborhood off Deschamps lane to the south and Butler Creek to the north.

But the capacity of the city's wastewater treatment plant may be an issue, though Smith said there's a number of options that could be explored. Among them, the county could partner with the city to expand the city's wastewater system. The county could also consider a standalone system for the Wye or various satellite systems that support smaller regions within the Wye planning area.

Currently, Smith said the satellite system may offer the most flexibility.

"It takes advantage for opportunities for developments as they arise. You consider it for an individual project basis or for a cluster of projects west of Deschamps and Butler Creek. We're building tax increment that helps build the regional infrastructure until we get that critical mass of folks where (wider) services start to make sense."

### **Annexation fears**

In recent years, the county has planned a number of areas for growth, only to see the city move in and annex them. That has included the county's development park by the airport and the greater Mullan area.

County officials expressed some frustration of the city's practice, saying it often prevents the county from getting the full return off its investment. But as it looks to plan and develop infrastructure at the Wye, it may look to protect its efforts.

Missoula County zoning plan for the Wye.

Hagemeier said an initial \$50 million investment in water could serve nearly a decade of "meaningful" development at the Wye. The two Targeted Economic Development Districts established by the county at the Wye capture tax increment, enabling the county to further invest in infrastructure.

That could permit the county to create a utility district, giving it some autonomy over future planning and development.

"There are mechanisms in statute in how we can create infrastructure. There are types of districts where the county has more control over the infrastructure decisions," said Hagemeier. "That's a next step, to look at all the tools that are available through statute that we have. We're going to look at the whole gamut of what our options are."

While the city works on its infill strategies and redevelops underutilized properties, it could alleviate some of the development pressure at the Wye, at least for now. But at full build-out, the Wye could accommodate 15,000 homes, vast employment centers, a commercial district, schools and other urban needs.

If each home accommodated two people, the Wye's population could see 30,000 residents or more. That would make it larger than many cities in Montana. It could also permit the area to incorporate, making it a city of its own, separated from Missoula.

"It would be a major town, if not a small city," said Commissioner Josh Slotnick. "That's part of the uncertainty of what the next 50 years brings, but the density requirements are absolutely there for incorporation."