

Blaine County 2025: Our Vision for the Future

What is your vision for how our community will look twenty years from now? If you're like many Blaine County residents, your answer will include open space, wildlife habitat, working farms and ranches and outdoor recreation opportunities. Unfortunately, all of these are threatened by the vision for our county espoused by Marty Flannes in his recent opinion titled "Blaine County 2025 Ordinances – Effective and Fair?"

Mr. Flannes suggests that the best way to protect wetlands and sensitive habitats, especially those near Silver Creek, is through cluster and planned unit developments. He argues that such development is preferable to the agricultural practices that now occur on these lands.

But conservationists know that much of the best wildlife habitat we have in the West is found in farmlands and ranchlands. Development of these areas does not improve them, but merely results in an awkward mix of residential and agricultural uses. This proposal would damage wetlands, cut off wildlife pathways used by mule deer and other big game and ruin the aesthetics that have made the Silver Creek Valley recognized as a world-class fishing destination.

Development as proposed in the op-ed is the root cause of many conservation problems and is a serious threat to our wildlife, our fish, our water quality and our open spaces.

Our vision for the valley is one where agriculture, abundant wildlife and a world-renowned spring creek flourish together. This vision respects our rural heritage and economy. It preserves the wildlife, fishing opportunities and open space that make our valley such a wonderful place to live. It is a vision born of decades of collaborative conservation with landowners and other community members.

This shared vision has permanently protected through voluntary conservation easements more than 9,500 acres in the Silver Creek watershed donated to both The Nature Conservancy and The Wood River Land Trust. Through partnerships and voluntary efforts we have worked with farmers and ranchers to restore wildlife habitat, plant thousands of willows and fence off sensitive riparian areas. It has been the landowners who have worked to protect the rural atmosphere, the wildlife habitat and the working farms and ranches that define the Silver Creek watershed and the southern end of Blaine County.

Jack Hemingway, who fished Silver Creek as a child in the 1930's, remarked in 2000 that the creek was better now than when he first saw it. There are not many places about which such a claim could be made. That's why Silver Creek has been recognized as a model for community-based conservation. It proves that wise, collaborative stewardship can provide our community with economic, recreational and quality of life benefits.

We strongly support the goals of the Blaine County 2025 proposed wetlands conservation ordinance, designed to protect our productive agricultural lands through a program that encourages landowners to voluntarily agree not to develop to their currently permitted A-20 density. Instead, under this new ordinance landowners would have the option to transfer this density closer to the cities, and leave the working farms and ranches undeveloped.

The magic of Silver Creek is why the community has invested so heavily in preserving its beauty and wildlife. It's why thousands of visitors come here each year—from across the country and around the world. It is a vision and a reality of a landscape where people working together can protect a special place for wildlife, for farmers and ranchers, for future generations.

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