



**MONTANA STATE PARKS AND RECREATION BOARD
AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

Meeting Date: October 29, 2020

Agenda Item: Somers Beach Acquisition

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 45 Minutes

Background: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes acquiring approximately 106-acres of land east of the town of Somers, MT on the north shore of Flathead Lake to create a new state park in the Montana State Park system for the use and enjoyment of the people of Montana and its visitors. The current owners of the property have allowed public access on the site for decades and FWP wants to ensure that access in perpetuity.

Public access sites on Flathead Lake are used heavily throughout the year and are consistently at or over capacity. This project is a rare chance to provide more public access to Flathead Lake, which currently has less than 20 public access points along its 185 miles of shoreline, all of which are heavily used by residents and tourists alike. Keeping this site open to the public would help ease congestion at other sites. Also, many of the features of this property, especially the wide, flat sandy beach that emerges at low pool level are unique to this area and not available at other state parks on Flathead Lake or elsewhere in the state.

Seeing this need for more recreational access, multiple entities have been working together to add this property to the Montana State Park System and thus ensure future public access. The price of the acquisition will not exceed \$2.985 million, based on a recent appraisal. Funding would be provided by a pending Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant and required matches from Parks Earned Revenue or General License Fund monies.

While future development of the park would be covered under a future environmental assessment and would not be fully determined until after extensive scoping and public comment, the site would be suitable for a variety of recreational offerings and amenities, such as trails, hand-launch boat access, picnic tables, restrooms, etc. It has not yet been decided whether the site would be open for camping or day-use only. The exact nature and location of amenities and hours of operation would be decided following further assessment of the site, available budget, and public input.

Other benefits of this project include protecting the site from commercial and residential development, which would help maintain the water quality of Flathead Lake. This in turn benefits aquatic life and riparian habitat and the wildlife that depend on it.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP released a draft EA for a 30-day public review period on August 12, 2020, with public comment closing September 11, 2020. The EA was advertised through media releases and legal notices local and state newspapers, FWP and Parks website and social media. Copies of the EA were available from the Kalispell FWP office, on the FWP and Parks web site, and at the Montana State Library and the Flathead County libraries. FWP received 135 comments on the proposed project; multiple people listed the same or similar comments. For comment details, please see the Decision Notice.

Alternatives and Analysis:

1. Alternative A: No Action

If no action is taken, FWP would not purchase the property for inclusion in the state park system. The property would remain in private ownership and the property would likely be sold to another buyer and potentially developed. It is unclear if public access would be allowed in the future, but it is unlikely if the property is sold to a private buyer.

2. Alternative B: Proposed Action

FWP would acquire approximately 106 acres of property along Flathead Lake for inclusion in the state park system. The property would remain undeveloped until further analysis of the site and additional discussions with the community occurred. Following that, a second EA would be released, and another public commenting process would begin.

Conditions: The Seller and FWP are also engaged in negotiations regarding title commitment, encroachments, final appraised value, property boundary delineation, and environmental liability language in the final Purchase Agreement. It is proposed that approval be conditioned on the Department's assent to the terms of the Purchase Agreement.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: Based on the analysis in the EA, FWP finds Alternative B, subject to the conditions described herein, to be the preferred alternative and support the acquisition of approximately 106-acres of land along the north shore of Flathead Lake for inclusion in the Montana State Park system. FWP has evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that the proposed action will not have significant negative impacts on the human environment.

The property would remain undeveloped until a second EA is released for further analysis of the site and brought back to the Board for approval to move forward with the project.

Proposed Motion: I move the Parks and Recreation Board conditionally approve FWP's acquisition of approximately 106-acres of land east of the town of Somers, MT on the north shore of Flathead Lake for inclusion in the state park system based upon the conditions outlined in the coversheet regarding Department satisfaction of the Purchase Agreement terms.