



**Opinion** | *Like I Was Saying*

## What to Watch for in 2018

### Flathead County unemployment rate hit rock bottom at the end of the summer

BY KELLYN BROWN // DEC 28, 2017

At some point over the summer, Flathead County surpassed 100,000 people. The actual number means about as much as it did when Montana surpassed 1 million people. Not much. But it is further evidence of steady growth that is outpacing every county in the state except Gallatin, which is bursting at the seams.

For comparison's sake, Gallatin County grew by a whopping 3.7 percent between 2015 and 2016, while [Flathead ranked second with a growth rate of 2 percent](#). Still, we're seeing an increase of well over 1,000 residents a year.

So as more people move in, and more tourists decide to spend their vacations here, considering where we fit them in this relatively rural area is an interesting exercise.

Here's what I'll be watching in 2018:

#### The

**Bypass:** Already, and predictably, a massive apartment complex has been proposed near the U.S. 93 Alternative Route off Two Mile Drive in Kalispell. If approved, the 15-acre development would eventually include more than a dozen buildings and 324 dwelling units. A 37-unit subdivision materialized near the south end of the bypass earlier this year and an apartment complex was proposed in the same area. The [area around the bypass is primed](#) for more residential and commercial growth.

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**Kalispell Core Area Redevelopment:** While the most noticeable aspects of Kalispell's core area development plan are still more than a year away, it's worth keeping an eye on the area surrounding the future two-mile trail that will replace the railroad tracks slicing through the heart of the city. Construction of the new Rail Park is already underway, where CHS and Northwest Drywall will relocate after its expected completion at the end of summer of 2018. But development [has already commenced around the future park](#), most notably with the expansion of Herberger's and the addition of SunRift Brewery, which is expected to open early next year. Could more projects be in the works?

**Real Estate and Interest Rates:** Much of how we grow will be determined by the real estate market. This year, Flathead County will shatter both its record number of homes sold and its annual median home price. Affordable housing is being discussed in nearly every community in the region, especially in Whitefish. Mortgage rates will likely inch up in coming months, with a 30-year fixed rate forecasted to [come in at about 4.7 percent](#) at the end of next year, compared to about 4 percent today. While a modest increase, it could determine how and where residents buy and build. Next summer, real estate sales numbers compared to 2017 will be telling.

**Jobs Picture:** The Flathead County unemployment rate hit rock bottom at the end of the summer 2017 when it fell to 3.9 percent, the lowest in recent memory. [Many businesses were scrambling for help](#), especially those in the service industry. Where higher-paying jobs sprout up, a population shift often follows. Columbia Falls is experiencing somewhat of a renaissance, with money pouring into the downtown area and local manufacturer SmartLam moving into a 140,000-square-foot former lumber mill. The company expects to add more than 50 good-paying jobs over the next two years. If that happens, expect the renaissance to continue.

**The Park:** Glacier National Park shattered its annual visitation record in 2017, and it could have attracted even more people with fewer fires and less smoke. According to the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana, [the 2017 fire season cost the state](#) up to 800,000 visitors and \$240.5 million in visitor spending. Does that mean Glacier will shatter its visitation record again in 2018?

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