

**Opinion** | *Reality Check*

## Giving Credit When it's Due

Thanks for fiscally conservative leadership in supporting completion of the rail park project all the while conserving tax dollars through innovative financing

BY TAMMI FISHER // MAY 25, 2018

There are only two seasons in Montana: winter and construction. Fortunately, we have had some projects in the Flathead that were able to move forward during winter this year, including the rail park project in the old Watson gravel pit off Whitefish Stage Road. The rail park project is part and parcel of the city of Kalispell's plan to rejuvenate its rail corridor downtown. In order for the city's downtown project to occur, businesses that use rail needed to move to the rail park, clearing the way for the train tracks to be removed for redevelopment. The Flathead County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA) and Montana West Economic Development have spearheaded the rail park project, and with the help of federal grants supporting the project, the end is in sight.

FCEDA is funded by taxpayer dollars. The county commissioners dedicate around \$500,000 a year to FCEDA to invest in economic development planning and management. When it became apparent that to complete the rail park an additional investment was necessary, FCEDA approached the county commissioners requesting a bond issuance for the roughly \$8 million. Our taxes are high enough; under the bond scenario, if lease payments

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from the rail park were insufficient to pay the annual bond payment, our taxes would increase to cover the shortage. We needed an alternative to another bond.

The interim expansion to the current county jail alleviated the need to build a new jail for the next 10 to 15 years. The commissioners have been saving for a new jail, and have built up the new jail fund substantially over the past five years. This is how capital improvement planning should be performed by government: saving and planning for the future instead of constant bonding when crisis hits. Instead of burdening the taxpayers, Commissioners Gary Krueger and Phil Mitchell agreed to loan FCEDA the necessary funds from the jail savings account with interest. The county will continue to save for the jail, and the loan funds plus the interest will be deposited to the jail fund. Under this scenario, the rail park will be completed, allowing for rail-dependent business development and redevelopment in the city of Kalispell, and the county will have ample funds for the new jail when it is needed 10 to 15 years from now. Most importantly, the taxpayers are not further burdened. If the lease payments are not sufficient to make the loan payments, the deficiency will be taken from the FCEDA annual budget allocation – not new tax dollars.

Perhaps

embarking on a path of redemption, Commissioner Mitchell voted appropriately. Notwithstanding my continued call for his resignation, he and Commissioner Krueger deserve our thanks for their fiscally conservative leadership in supporting completion of the rail park project all the while conserving tax dollars through innovative financing.

*Tammi Fisher is an attorney and former mayor of Kalispell.*

2 Comments

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**Scott Davis** ·

Water boy at Montana Trolley Co.

I'm so glad it has come to reality and is on the move, it's been a long time coming and is going to be the best thing for down town Kalispell. It's going to put Downtown back on the Map. Much better use of the funds. It's going to create more revenue and jobs and enhance our down town for retail and tourist enjoyment. It's a great idea from many civic leaders of our community, a lot of people have put their time in on the project. Congrats and Thank You to all.

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**Tom Clark** ·

Flathead Valley Community College

If full disclosure was required Tammi Fisher would have stated at the beginning of this article that she is also the Treasurer for Gary Krueger's campaign for Commissioner.. She also might have explored the reason that the county had to loan this money to FECDA, instead of it being a traditionally bonded project. Because of poor decisions made over the past 8 months by our current commissioners the only option left available to complete this project was to loan the \$8 million set aside for the new jail. I have felt that the money should have been used to purchase property for the new jail, but now that is not possible. For her to call this fiscally conservative is a joke, in reality it was just cleaning up a mess they created. Also in full disclosure I am also a candidate for commissioner and a strong supporter of the rail corridor project.

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**Sandy Welch**

For it to be a traditionally bonded project the public would have to vote on raising mills to guarantee the bond. But FECDA didn't want to do that work and didn't timely tell the commissioners they wanted a bond. FECDA arrogantly assumed that an appointed board could tax! Luckily for taxpayers that law changed a long time ago. It's only now that we have commissioners that insisted it be followed. That is NOT poor decision making and IS fiscally conservative.

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**Tom Clark** ·

Flathead Valley Community College

Sandy Welch The bonding process started in October, why was the decision not made until the very last minute. Cenex and North West Drvwall had committed to moving and site work

By then had committed to moving and site work was well under way, the project was on the verge of collapse, and if it had I cannot even

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