

## 6. LOCAL SERVICES

### 6.1 Executive Summary – Key Findings

This chapter of the growth policy reviews public services provided or sponsored by local government and a few that are managed by local civic groups and volunteers. The following covers local government generally, law enforcement, fire protection, disaster and emergency services, health care, education, transportation, libraries, and social services.

Key findings include the following:

- Pondera County has a critical access hospital and rural health clinic – the Pondera Medical Center. Not all rural counties have this amenity.
- The county has a low crime rate compared to other counties in Montana.
- Pondera County has libraries, senior centers/community centers in both Conrad and Valier.
- Pondera County has several fire districts and rural fire departments. All are in need of equipment and these needs and other issues are described in the Pondera County Community Wildlife Protection Plan.

### 6.2 Key Issues/Perspectives/Preferences raised via public involvement relevant to this topic

Growth policy committee meetings were held throughout the county in 2009. Comments from those meeting that were relevant to local services include the following. (Note that comments as recorded were sometimes cryptic and it isn't always clear exactly what was intended. )

Comments from Valier included:

Medical care and time to get to a medical facility; Transportation; Schools and education; Long distance learning; Ambulance – EMS volunteers, Training requirements for EMS, Fire, and Bus Drivers; Recycling – receptacles for items; Community facilities: swimming pool, new fire hall, library; Day Care – Child Care; Construction of a separate facility for senior citizen activities; cleaning up town

Comments from Conrad included:

Library Bookmobile to rural areas- communities such as Dupuyer and Brady as drop off points

Comments from Brady included:

School Building and possible uses: Open gym, Technology center, Senior services for meals, Good access to I 15; Community Center completion in Conrad, During construction use Brady school facility; Senior activities, services; Possible bus stop service; Senior transportation issues; Use of local medical facilities; Current transportation from Brady to Dutton for activities for a fee

Comments from Dupuyer included:

Public Safety – EMS, Law Enforcement, Quick Response Unit; New Fire Hall- Available fire training; Recycling- containers at roll off sites; Medical care/Hospitals- Residents travel to Great Falls, Shelby, Choteau, Conrad- No long term relationships with doctors

## 6.3 Existing Conditions

### 6.3.1 Government

Government in Pondera County consists of municipal (Conrad and Valier), county, state, federal, and tribal (Blackfeet Indian Reservation).

#### 1. Local Government

County and municipal governments are local governments. It is the level of government that most people are familiar with. Local governments provide public water and sewer (typically in towns, but also via Rural Improvement Districts in the county), libraries, garbage disposal, conduct elections, provide police and fire protection, maintain and plow roads and streets, and collect property taxes (which include state-assessed taxes).

Since the adoption of the Montana Constitution in 1972, local governments have the option of several different forms of government. The 1972 Constitution also provided for local governments to be self-governing. Historically, counties and municipalities had only general government powers, or only those powers granted to them by the legislature and in state law. If a local government has gone through the process to be self-governing, it has all the powers not specifically denied by state statute, the Montana Constitution, or local charter. Most self-governing governments have a charter, which basically sets out how the government will operate, and defines the structure, powers, privileges, rights, and duties of the local government unit and the limitations on the government. Montana law allows for five optional forms of government in addition to the traditional form for counties and municipalities. The optional forms are: commission-executive, commission-manager, commission, commission-chairman, and town meeting. Town meeting form of government is an option only for those municipalities with less than 2,000 residents (Erickson, **date**).

Of Montana's 56 counties, three are self-governing charter governments. Of Montana's 127 municipalities, 41 are self-governing, and 32 operate with a charter (Local Government Center). Type of local government may be changed either by a petition of the voters, or by local government review. Every 10 years, each local government unit in Montana must hold an election on the question of conducting a local government review. If the question is approved,

then a second election is held to establish a study commission that will conduct the actual review (Erickson, **date**).

The town of Valier is a non-charter commission-executive form of government with general governing powers. There are five members on the Valier Town Council.

Conrad is a charter commission-executive form of government with self governing powers. There are five members on the Conrad City Council.

Pondera County is a commission form of government with general governing powers. There are three members on the Pondera County Board of Commissioners (Local Government Center).

## **2. State, Federal, and Tribal Government**

The State of Montana presence in Pondera County consists of offices for Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Department of Transportation maintenance shop (both of which are in Conrad), and the Montana Agricultural Experiment Station outside of Conrad. Federal government includes the U.S. post offices in Conrad, Valier, Brady, Dupuyer, Heart Butte, and Ledger; and the USDA offices in Conrad with Farm Services Agency and Natural Resource Conservation Services (formerly Soil Conservation Services). In addition, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs has a presence on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

The Blackfeet Indian Reservation is 1.5 million acres, a portion of which is within Pondera County. The Blackfeet operate under a tribal council form of government. The seat of government operations is in Browning, located in Glacier County. Privately deeded lands within the Reservation boundary are subject to land use regulations of the state and county (such as subdivision law).

### **6.3.2 Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement in Pondera County is primarily provided by the Pondera County Sheriff, Conrad Police Department, and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Valier contracts with the county for law enforcement, which is provided by the County Sheriff. In June 2010, County Commissioners approved a two-year agreement with Valier for the services for an amount of \$53,000 per year, paid by Valier. There are two resident deputy officers in Valier (Independent Observer, June 2010).

County Sheriff's offices are located in Conrad. The county has a resident deputy in Dupuyer.

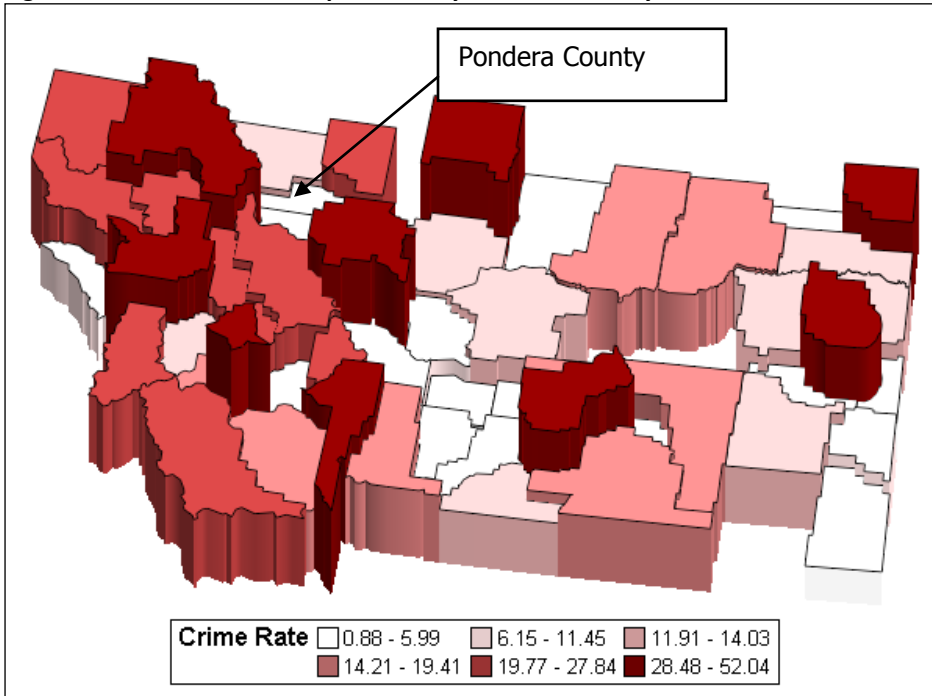
Pondera County and Conrad share a detention facility located in Conrad. The facility has capacity for 13 persons, including some single cells (Sawyer, 2010).

Law enforcement within the boundaries of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation is provided by BIA, County Sheriff, state highway patrol, and/or FBI, depending on the circumstance. Crimes involving non-Tribal members as both perpetrators and victims on deeded lands are within the County Sheriff's jurisdiction. Receipt of 911 calls depends on local determination. Most of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation 911 calls go directly to Browning. The area around Birch Creek has

its calls received by Pondera County Sheriff. The County Sheriff responds to domestic disputes in Heart Butte, but cannot actively enforce laws or make arrests there. The County Sheriff also responds to road accidents. There is a combination of Pondera County Roads, state highways, and BIA and tribal roads on the Indian Reservation in Pondera County. Determination of which laws apply and which jurisdictions have authority is sorted out on a case-by-case basis (Kuka, 2010).

Pondera County has a low crime rate compared to the rest of Montana, as shown in Figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1 Crime Index Rate per 1,000 by Montana County**



Source: Montana Board of Crime Control

High priority topics for the Pondera Sheriff’s office are addressing drug abuse through prevention education and issues related to medical marijuana (Kuka, 2010).

### 6.3.3 Fire Protection

There are a number of entities providing fire protection in Pondera County. These include the Pondera County Rural Fire District, City of Conrad Fire Department, and Heart Butte Volunteer Fire Department. Wildland fire fighting in the county is augmented by the Rocky Mountain Ranger District (U.S. Forest Service, Lewis and Clark National Forest), based in Augusta, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation – Central Land Office in Helena, and Bureau of Land Management.

The Pondera County Rural Fire District covers most of Pondera County and is comprised of rural departments stationed in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer, and Valier. Each of these departments is staffed with volunteers. The City of Conrad Fire Department covers fires within the city limits (Pondera County Community Wildfire Protection Plan Committee).

Issues identified in the Pondera County Community Wildfire Protection Plan include:

- Need for readily accessible, year-round water resources available for use by local fire departments (e.g. dry hydrants). Once developed, these water sources need to be mapped and use agreements need to be made between landowners, local fire departments other fire-fighting agencies.
- Recruitment and retention of volunteer fire fighters, training, funding, and equipment needs for local volunteer fire departments.
- Missile silos – approximately 50 sites and missiles with nuclear warheads in Pondera County. Issues include coordinating fire suppression near these sites in times of increased security.
- Oil and gas pipelines and major overhead transmission lines, including the Montana Alberta Tie Limited.
- Issues with access to residences east of the railroad in Conrad; there can be long delays when there is a train on the tracks.
- Fuel build-up in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields.

#### **6.3.4 Disaster and Emergency Services**

Pondera County has a Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) Office. The DES Coordinator is also the County Rural Fire Coordinator and Floodplain Administrator. The county has enhanced-wireless 911 call capabilities.

The Pondera Medical Center in Conrad manages two ambulances in Conrad and one in Valier. The ambulances serve the entire county (Erickson, **date**).

#### **6.3.5 Health Care**

The Pondera Medical Center in Conrad is the only hospital in Pondera County. It is a Critical Access Hospital and Rural Health Clinic with 20 acute care inpatient beds and a 59 bed extended care facility. The Center treated 1,942 patients in 2009 through its emergency center.

Services include extended care, home health, inpatient, lab, nutritional, occupational, physical, radiology, respiratory, sleep, surgical, OB, and visiting specialists- Pediatrician, urologist, podiatrist, ophthalmologist, and orthopedist (Pondera Medical Center).

Maris Healthcare-Valier Clinic is a part-time clinic (open Wed. 9 a.m.- 5 p.m.) in Valier (Valierian, 2010).

The closest major medical facility is in Great Falls.

#### **6.3.6 Transportation Services**

The Northern Transit Interlocal Bus runs from Shelby to Great Falls, with a stop in Conrad, on Mondays and Thursdays. Northern Transit is a partnership of the communities of Conrad, Cut Bank, and Shelby and the counties of Pondera, Glacier, and Toole. The service provides wheelchair access, and will also provide transport to scheduled medical providers, the Great Falls International Airport (Northern Transit Interlocal Bus).

### **6.3.7 Education**

There are five school districts in Pondera County: Conrad, Valier, Heart Butte, Dupuyer Elementary, and Miami Elementary.

In Conrad, there are two elementary schools. Meadowlark serves Pre-Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and had attendance of 159 students in October 2008. Prairie View Elementary serves 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders and had a population of 91 students. Utterback Middle school, grades 6-8, had a total of student population of 150 in October 2008. Conrad High School had 189 students (Montana Office of Public Instruction).

The Valier School District manages the public schools in Valier as well as the Kingsbury School Attendance Center. In October 2008, the Valier School (Pre-Kindergarten- 6<sup>th</sup> grade) had 98 students, the middle school (grades 7-8) had 39, and the high school had 58 students. The Valier School District provides the teacher for the Kingsbury center (grades Pre-Kindergarten through 8) and the Colony provides the land and building. There were eight students at the Kingsbury attendance center in October 2008 (Montana Office of Public Instruction).

Heart Butte Elementary (grades Pre-Kindergarten through 6) had 92 students in October 2008, the middle school (grades 7-8) had 22, and the high school had 51 students (Montana Office of Public Instruction).

The community of Brady is within Dutton-Brady School District, a consolidation of the Brady and Dutton School Districts which took place earlier in the decade. The school building in Brady belongs to the Dutton-Brady School District and it has been for sale for three years. The consolidation made sense at the time because there were few students at the Brady school, and Dutton was the closest school system. As it turned out, most students, do not attend school in Dutton but instead attend in Conrad, which accepts them as out-of-district without additional charge. The residents of Brady are working together to attach their land to the Conrad school district so that the Conrad School District receives the state funds and property taxes associated with the Brady students (Stone, 2010).

The Dutton-Brady School district also includes three schools on colonies in Pondera County. Bridge Creek and Pondera Colonies are between Valier and Dupuyer both have attendance centers (similar to Kingsbury in Valier District). The combined population of these two centers is approximately 50 children in grades Pre-Kindergarten through grade 8. There is an elementary school (Pre-Kindergarten through grade 8) at the Midway Colony, which is about 5 miles west of Brady. In 2009 there were approximately ten students at the school (Stone, 2010).

There is one private school in Pondera County – the Conrad Christian school west of Conrad (Pre-Kindergarten through 8), with approximately 16 students in 2009-2010. Approximately 15 students were home-schooled in the county in 2009-2010 (Stone, 2010).

The closest post-secondary education institutions are in Browning (the Blackfeet Community College), and in Great Falls (Montana State University – College of Technology and two private colleges) (Office of the Commissioner).

### **6.3.8 Library**

Both Valier and Conrad have libraries, both of which are funded jointly by the municipalities and Pondera County (Independent Observer June 16, 2010). Both libraries are open Monday through Friday.

### **6.3.9 Social Services**

The Conrad Center for Mental Health is part of the Center for Mental Health that serves 13 counties in North-central Montana. It is the only mental health center in the county (Center for Mental Health 2010).

The Pondera County Health Department provides a variety of services including immunizations, the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program, tobacco use prevention programs, and limited home visits for new mothers and lactation counseling (Bonser, 2010).

There are senior centers in Valier and Conrad.

### **6.3.10 Attractions and Recreation**

Conrad has a 9-hole golf course, swimming pool, baseball complex, bowling, health club, theater group, movie theater, active trap club, civic center (in process of renovation at time of this report), and the Transportation and History Museum.

Valier has the campground and boat access on Lake Frances, civic center (senior center), and two parks.

## **6.4 Conclusions and Projected Future Trends for Local Services**

Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier have generally quite good local services—medical, fire protection and medical. Local residents generally are proud of the quality of the local schools. The provision of inter-city bus service, senior centers, libraries in two communities open five days a week are services not seen in other rural Montana counties.

Issues for the future include the long distances between rural residents and law enforcement and medical services. Given the proximity to the Interstate Highway, there is more potential for illegal drugs to enter the county. Pondera County also has a higher proportion of deaths from accidents compared to the State of Montana overall. The rate of non-motor vehicle accident deaths in the county is 74 deaths per 100,000 persons, compared to 61 for the state. The rate of motor vehicle accident deaths is 64 per 100,000, compared to 26 for the state overall.

(Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services). The county has ambulance vehicles in two different locations, which is important for response, but distance to medical facilities can be great. Pondera County is fortunate to have the critical access hospital at the Pondera Medical Center in Conrad. It can be challenging to retain these facilities as population continues to decline and funding is harder to obtain.

Issues for Brady students and community have surfaced since the formation of the Dutton-Brady School District. The community is struggling with the vacancy of the school and looking for alternate uses. The longer the building stands vacant, the harder it will be to recover to a usable purpose.

Although population is declining, the county and municipalities are faced with growing senior populations that will also have specialized health care, transportation, and other needs. The communities have already made progress in a number of areas, including the operating senior centers in Conrad and Valier, the Interlocal Bus service.

As reported in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, there are many needs of the local volunteer fire departments. Pondera County has not experienced the boom of rural residential development that has occurred elsewhere in the state and which can significantly add to the problem of protecting structures from wildfire. Just keeping up with the historical and existing needs is difficult for many of the departments, which reported difficulties recruiting, retaining, and training fire-fighting volunteers.

Despite challenges of volunteer recruitment, which is not unique to Pondera County, there are indeed many active volunteer organizations, such as the fire departments, and other civic groups that are working to keep and improve public services such as community centers and libraries.

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