



Sept. 5, 2024

Mayor Davis, City Councilors and City Staff:

I'd like to speak to the question of urgency.

Over the eleven years I've been working with Parks & Rec. and The Converge Foundation on bringing a publicly owned community hub -- the Currents Center for Recreation and Creativity -- to fruition for our community, I've learned more about city government than I ever planned to. I'm sure there is still much that I am not privy to and don't understand, much that is good, happening out of the public eye. I am grateful to you all for offering your service.

From my vantage point, what has struck me is that big decisions, especially those presented to voters, seem driven by emergency, by crisis, specifically highly visible crisis. As a result, government is generally reactive rather than proactive.

Perhaps this is due to the structure of government. We elect our officials who may lose their seat or have terms that expire. I support that system, but wonder, too, if it mitigates against long-range, proactive thinking. The revolving door makes an understanding of the longer history of a community's needs harder to grasp. Instead, government officials, I imagine, are tempted, or pushed, to deal with whatever happens to be right in front of them at the time.

The 2004 Aquatics bond was put forward because the outdoor pool in McCormick Park had started leaking tens of thousands of gallons of heated, chlorinated water into the Clark Fork. It was an emergency.

The 2018 Open Space bond was a response to seeing houses crawling up our hillsides. It felt like an opportunity was about to be lost. It felt urgent.

Confronting affordable housing and houselessness is a no-brainer. Taking care of each other is the right thing to do. Houselessness in Missoula is not new, however, but it has grown, making it more visible, so the wider population is now also upset. It finally feels urgent.

Shelter is a basic human right. But health is also a basic human right.

Lack of health -- physical, mental, especially emotional -- is perhaps less visible than a tent across from your house or down by the river. Loneliness is experienced, and deaths of despair happen, in private. It's easier to ignore the urgency. Montana has led the nation in deaths by suicide for more than 40 years. Montana has seen a continual increase in death by suicide from individuals of all ages and demographics. To date, suicide is currently the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-44.\* But let's not talk only of suicide. Let's talk about the quiet "epidemic of loneliness" identified by U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, which now afflicts not only aging adults but our teens and, it turns out, even parents. Let's talk about the fact that one third of aging Missoulians\*\* feel lonely or isolated, that 40% experience depression. Additionally, Murthy noted that 65% of parents feel lonely; 75% if single.\*\*\* To me this feels urgent.

What the pandemic made abundantly clear is that lack of in-person connection adversely affects our mental and emotional, and then physical, health. Likewise the rise of social media and concomitant lack of in-person connection is having devastating effects on the mental health of youth. The crisis of our era is not housing or inflation (these are things that we have long experienced, that wax and wane). The crisis of our era is disconnection; and then the subsequent alienation and division and finally violence. I'm sure every town that has experienced a mass shooting thought it would never happen to them.

Now more than ever, we all need engaging, in-person ways to connect.

I've always found it hard to meet others who are unlike me, who are not part of my work routine, my kids' routines, and as a result part of my educational milieu, my economic class. We all know, that in a time when we have easy access to a plethora of narrow channels that reinforce what we already believe, divisiveness is on the rise. Missoula is not immune to this and is rapidly growing and diversifying. This could be enriching, if we think ahead. It could be increasingly dividing if we don't.

Now is the time to be proactive about providing neutral ways to meet others, face to face; to offer opportunities for newcomers to become engaged in and connected to this community. It is the strong sense of community that has long made Missoulians proud and continues to attract people to live here. Let's take action before we lose that; not desperately scramble, after it has split apart at the seams.

We're beginning to recognize and deal with the inequities that Missoula has always had. I supported the Open Space bond. It offers everyone beautiful views and it is serving me. But the equity ends there. The people I see on the trails (Mt. Jumbo, Sentinel, the North Hills, Pattee Canyon) look just like me. Their primary clothing store is not the Goodwill. They're not in a wheelchair. They don't yet need a cane or a walker. I don't see kids unless they're with their parents. I don't see teens. And then the trails are only accessible part of the year.

An affordable, accessible, year-round hub like the Currents Center addresses:

- inequity of financial opportunity,
- inequity of physical access,
- the epidemic of loneliness,
- increasing divisiveness,
- the need to hold this community together before we lose it, and
- the obligation to provide the basic human right to health.

I'm not sure what other project the city has that could operate on so many cylinders.

To return to government, one of the roles is to listen. This community has been trying to tell our city representatives for a quarter century, through the surveys you've conducted, that we need indoor, year-round space that is accessible to everyone.

We, at the Converge Foundation, have been doing the work of listening. But to realize big, proactive visions, the kind that have generational impact, like the Currents Center, someone in the city needs to openly champion the cause and say to the community, "we're hearing you."

The Converge Foundation cannot do this alone. We are here and will be here to be your partner, but we can't do the level of voter education that is needed all by ourselves.

Sincerely, Amy Ragsdale, Treasurer The Converge Foundation

\* UM's Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development

\*\* 2022 Community Assessment Survey of Older Adults by Missoula Aging Services

\*\*\* PBS Newshour interview, Aug. 28, 2024