CITY OF BILLINGS

THOMAS W. HANEL, MAYOR

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To: US Environmental Protection Agency
From: City of Billings, Montana
Subject: EPA Smart Growth Implementation Assistance Program – Letter of Interest
Date: October, 2011

1. **Project Contacts: Candi** Beaudry, City of Billings with support from School District 2 (SD2) city/county liaison committee
(and including support from Big Sky EDA, Housing Authority of Billings, Riverstone Health, Montana Parent Teacher Association Billings, MT Safe Routes to School Network, Met Transit)
Name: Candi Beaudry
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2. **Description of Smart Growth Challenge**
School District 2 (SD2), Big Sky Economic Development Authority and the City of Billings request assistance to develop a collaborative school planning process/model to address the growth challenges the community faces. We strive to maximize sustainability through a planning model that includes weaves city, school and community plans. The City supports local diversification of jobs and tax base with mixed-use, compact development and varied housing, transportation and education options. The schools and school neighborhoods recognize the importance of working together to achieve both school and neighborhood vitality. As infill and workforce housing is developed and school-aged population shifts, the community faces the challenge of updating school boundaries and requesting taxpayer support to either repair existing or build new facilities. A collaborative planning model between city and schools with input from all stakeholders using a robust process that includes economic development, housing, public transportation, health, and land use conservation agencies and the community, will better inform decision makers on long term costs and benefits to community.

Although Billings' overall population increased from 67,000 to over 106,000 over the past 40 years, Billings' student population has remained relatively flat at under 16,000 students.
The City of Billings land area has increased at a greater rate than population resulting in fewer people per square mile compared to 1970. The only student population that has grown is the homeless population, (enrolled students who lack fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence) which has increased from 100 in 2002 to nearly 500 children in 2011. Demands for affordable housing also continue to grow and outpace supply.

SD2 has opened, closed, enlarged and consolidated schools to adjust to changing patterns of growth and demographics. Several schools have been closed in the center of the city where there are plans for infill and workforce family housing. Infill capacity within the current city limits of annexation is estimated at 20+ years. Student population density remains low (i.e. 40 0-5 aged population per square mile vs. 300+ 0-5 aged per square mile in the city center). When the city annexed large areas of land, population density decreased affecting both general population and school-aged population. Most recently annexed land does not have infrastructure for walking and bicycling, access to transit, or access to affordable housing options. SD2 has an estimated $120 million in deferred maintenance on its buildings, some of which are more than 100 years old. SD2 faces important decisions regarding the future of its facilities. The District is currently going through a strategic planning process with intentions to complete a student reboundary and develop recommendations regarding school configuration (K-6, K-5, K-8 etc) and size. The community and School District have had a long-term commitment to the elementary "neighborhood school" model but have gradually been moving away from the traditional model with consolidations, enlargements and closures. The community and School District would like to maintain the neighborhood school model to the extent possible. Several elementary schools remain "neighborhood" because they do not utilize bussing, and the surrounding neighborhoods include affordable, multifamily options for housing. Neighborhood schools also rely on a minimum housing unit density within 1- 1½-miles that can fill the school to capacity. Successful application of the neighborhood school model will help reverse the negative findings reported in the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Helping Johnny Walk to School" regarding the Billings Public Schools. The City of Billings has completed a district wide elementary school infrastructure study through a Safe Routes to School Program Grant with the intent of improving the safety of children who are walking and bicycling to and from school.

This community will be faced with difficult decisions in the future to build, close, re-open, refurbish/remodel existing schools to serve generations to come. It is important to develop a careful strategy through collaborative planning to identify the most sustainable course of action for both the School District and the City. The School District and City would like to use the most up-to-date tools for collaborative planning between schools, city, housing, and transportation.

School facility planning utilizing a collaborative planning process between the City and Schools may help avoid any unintended negative consequences for the community. School facility planning, incorporating principles of livability, could examine the current location of schools in relation to our student population trends and City growth management plans. Given the School District's budget shortfalls, a robust process of community input is needed for success. In order to refurbish, replace or build new, the School District needs to run successful bond levies.

3. Role of EPA-led Sustainable Communities Partnership Team

This project will develop a model for collaborative planning between City and SD2 that includes incorporating revitalization and infill plans, housing and transit plans to ensure a more viable, sustainable school-planning model for the future. It is our hope that the implementation team will analyze existing and updated demographic data regarding student enrollment, school and infrastructure location, and student population trends and work with the community to develop a sustainable community vision for schools that considers

the complexity of serving a relatively flat population of school children (with increasing numbers of students who are homeless), within an aging, geographically expanding community. SD2 is currently taking steps to develop a district wide capital improvement plan. Long-term effects of school size and location decisions on education, health, transportation, equity and the environment are rarely considered. Structural changes in schools are often related to capturing an immediate cost savings through closure or consolidation. This current model of short-term planning includes siting schools in newly developing locations where land is readily available or cost is least, with little consideration of housing unit density, affordability, transportation access/costs, or population demographics. Consequently, school land was acquired and developed on the fringes of the city and has contributed to low density, automobile-dependent, and high cost development. As an example of the disconnect between City and School District planning, SD2 has closed several schools in the city center, where the current plans for the East Billings Renewal District (EBURD) will bring workforce housing and infill projects to re-vitalize the area.

With the assistance of the SGIA team, we will develop a school-planning model that reflects the principles of smart growth and sustainability. Such a school-planning model includes a vision for schools as part of the local diversification of jobs and tax base with mixed-use compact development and varied housing types and services. The SGIA team will work to develop stakeholder and community consensus. We will identify barriers to infill development and any policies associated with school or city governance that may act as a barrier to integrated planning and sustainable growth. The model will address school development, school closure or school consolidation impacts on land use, transportation, environment and health. This project will help the community integrate planning for schools and community with a focus on equitable housing, schools, transportation and existing communities. It is our hope that the SGIA's technical assistance will help us better understand the challenges we face and involve the community in developing viable, sustainable, and actionable solutions for the future.

4. **Potential Impact of the Project**

Because of renewed national interest in walking and bicycling to school for its transportation, health, educational, and environmental benefits this model could be replicated in communities throughout the state as well as the nation. Billings is the largest city in Montana, however other cities and towns share similar concerns. The height of student enrollment in the state was in the mid 1990s with a plateau in enrollment for many districts, while others have experienced a steady decline. Cities, counties and school districts across the state are facing difficult financial and infrastructural decisions. Billings can be a leader in such future planning with successful interventions to be replicated to scale in some of our smaller communities. Professionals from all entities including urban planning, schools, transportation, health, housing, education and environment may have an interest in learning from this project.

5. **Political and Public Support**

The School District has invested in a city-county liaison with the deliberate intention of formalizing a model collaborative communication policy. City Council, the Mayor, School

Board, local public health, and citizen advocates for healthy community planning recognize the importance of collaborative planning and livability principles. The Billings community also supports the neighborhood planning and neighborhood elementary school concept. The Healthy Places community coalition, which includes membership from RiverStone Health, Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare, Billings Chamber of Commerce, Montana State University-Billings and others, is focusing efforts on creating safe and healthy neighborhoods to live, work and play. Results from a Yellowstone County Health Assessment that was completed in the fall of 2010 (funded by RiverStone Health, Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare) combined with the use of Health Impact Assessments (HIA), will continue to provide a framework for implementing smart growth principles. However, continued education, SGIA tools and implementation assistance as well as a robust community process are needed to convert stated support for livability principles into an applied model for collaborative planning.

Thomas W. Hanel, Mayor

Thomas W. Hanel, Mayor

Abby Hall
US Environmental Protection Agency

This letter is written in support of the SGIA proposal from the City of Billings with support from School District 2 and multiple community partners including the Big Sky Economic Development Association, Housing Authority of Billings, Billings Met Transit, Riverstone Health and Montana Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

We are in full support of the proposal requesting assistance of the EPA-led Sustainable Communities Partnership Team for the development of a collaborative school-city planning model. We support the concept of the SGIA team helping facilitate stakeholder and community consensus through education using public participatory processes including alternative analysis and build-out analysis, or tools and assistance tailored to the specific needs of the Billings community and schools.

Most communities in Montana have experienced a similar plateau or decline in student enrollment and sprawl development that has children and community spread over much less densely populated land areas. A model for collaborative planning and community participation will benefit not only Billings but also many communities across the state that face identical concerns. Collaboration between schools, city, housing, transit and health using smart growth principles will encourage growth that fosters economic development, protects valuable resources, and improves health, transportation and education options.

We are extremely grateful for this funding opportunity and strongly recommend the awarding of this assistance to the City of Billings.

Ron Wenger

Ron Wenger, Transit Manager, Met Transit

John Felton, President/CEO and Health Officer, Riverstone Health

Josh Middleton, Superintendent, Billings Public Schools/School District 2

Lucy Brown, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Billings

Kathleen Aragon

Kathleen Aragon, MT Parent Teacher Association, MT Safe Routes To School Network Director

John Brewer, President/CEO, Billings Chamber of Commerce

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Ms. Abby Hall
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Smart Growth Implementation Assistance Program
hall.abby@epa.gov

October 26, 2011

Dear Ms. Hall,

Big Sky Economic Development Authority is pleased to express its full support of the SGIA proposal from the City of Billings in collaboration with School District 2. The project aligns school planning and the East Billings Urban Renewal District (EBURD) Master Plan Guiding Principles as outlined below (see also www.eburd.com).

EBURD Master Plan Guiding Principles

- ***Economic Growth***: Foster economic growth in the District & surrounding region.
- ***Centers***: Foster distinct mixed use, industrial, and hospitality centers with a strong sense of place and character.
- ***Affordable Housing***: Create affordable housing opportunities and choices for the Billings workforce, seniors, families, and students.
- ***Industrial Uses***: Ensure existing industrial uses can continue to operate as desired.
- ***Trees & Open Space***: Improve the natural beauty of the District by reintroducing trees and environmental features.
- ***River Connections***: Extend nonmotorized connections from the Billings Core to MetraPark, the Yellowstone River, and the Heights.
- ***Edges***: Integrate the edges of the District with the North Park Neighborhood, the Downtown Core, the Medical Corridor, and the University.
- ***Transportation***: Provide a variety of transportation connections and choices throughout the District and surrounding areas.
- ***Infrastructure***: Complete the sewer and stormwater infrastructure and encourage methods for treating stormwater on site.
- ***Environmental Risks***: Understand and reduce historic environmental risks, while encouraging future high environmental quality in air, water, and soil.
- ***Environmental Consciousness***: Encourage environmental consciousness, green development, clean technology, and healthy living.
- ***Collaboration***: Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration.
- ***Predictable Choice***: Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.

The SGIA team will collaborate with the HUD-DOT-EPA Billings Sustainable Communities Partnership group to develop the model. The Partnership is comprised of more than 20 local transportation, housing, economic development, school, and other community stakeholders. The Partnership evolved from conversations among local transportation planners and HUD-DOT-EPA Region VIII representatives about the greater notion of sustainable development in the East Billings Urban Renewal District. The Partnership has been meeting consistently for more than a year and has been successful in collapsing silos among local planning organizations, compiling and sharing information, and vetting sustainable projects.

Big Sky Economic Development currently manages an EPA Brownfields Assessment Program grant and has assessed 23 parcels in the District. Recently, Big Sky Economic Development Authority applied for HUD-DOT-EPA Community Challenge Planning Grant funding on behalf of the Partnership. These funds, if awarded, will be used to create a Sustainable Communities Fund to seed sustainable development projects in the East Billings Urban Renewal District. This could be a viable source of funding with which to implement the collaborative planning model.

We are extremely grateful for this Smart Growth Implementation Assistance opportunity, and strongly recommend the awarding of this grant to the City of Billings.

Sincerely,

Steve Arveschoug, Executive Director

Patty Nordlund

Patty Nordlund, Community Development Manager

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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

October 27, 2011

Abby Hall
Office of Sustainable Communities
US Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Ms. Hall -

I am pleased to provide this letter of support for the City of Billings as they apply for the Environmental Protection Agencies' Smart Growth Implementation Assistance Program.

The City of Billings along with School District 2, Big Sky Economic Development, Billings Housing Authority, Riverstone Health and Billings Met Transit have formed a partnership to address the needs of a declined student enrollment and the growth challenges the community faces. This partnership strives to maximize sustainability through a planning model that includes local diversification of jobs and tax base with mixed-use, compact development and varied housing options that include access to schools by walking, biking or transit with consideration of all users regarding age or ability.

If selected, the EPA–led Sustainable Communities Partnership Team can analyze the existing and updated demographic data regarding student enrollment, school and infrastructure location and student population trends and work with the community to develop a sustainable community vision to fit the population needs. Collaboration between schools, city, housing, transit and health, is key to encourage economic growth. This model can be used and an example to other communities facing the same issues.

Again, this project carries with it my full support and I hope you will consider their application favorably. Please feel free to contact my office if I provide any additional information about my support of the City of Billings or its proposed project. I would also greatly appreciate if you kept my office informed about the status of this request.

Sincerely,

Max Baucus

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October 27, 2011

Abbey Hall
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington DC 20460-0001

Dear Ms. Hall,

It is with pleasure that I write in support of the Smart Growth Implementation Assistance (SGIA) proposal from the City of Billings. This application includes support from School District 2 and multiple community partners including the Big Sky Economic Development Association, Housing Authority of Billings, Billings Met Transit, RiverStone Health and the Montana Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

I support the concept of the SGIA team helping facilitate stakeholder and community consensus through education using public participatory processes, including alternative analysis and build-out analysis, or tools and assistance tailored to the specific needs of the Billings community and schools.

Most communities in Montana have experienced a similar plateau or decline in student enrollment and sprawl development that has children and community spread over much less densely populated land areas. A model for collaborative planning and community participation will benefit not only Billings but also many communities across the state that face identical concerns. Collaboration between schools, city, housing, transit and health using smart growth principles will encourage growth that fosters economic development, protects valuable resources, and improves health, transportation and education options by working together in future planning.

Thank you for your attention to this application. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide any additional information.

Sincerely,

Jon Tester

Jon Tester
United States Senator

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