

Billings Chamber of Commerce
Convention and Visitors Bureau

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2012-2013 Public Policy Manual

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INTRODUCTION



the region that employ over 44,000 people. We are the voice for and are committed to ensuring a favorable economic, legal, and regulatory climate for the business community. Each policy position we have taken has been crafted by our specific Task Forces and Committees, reviewed by our Government Affairs Committee, and carefully vetted by our board. Our mission is to publicly support policies that will facilitate economic growth in our community as well as throughout the state of Montana. We hope that you will take the time to become engaged in these issues.

This Public Policy Manual has been compiled to communicate to our members, elected officials, and decision makers where the Billings Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau stands on numerous issues important to the business community. Each policy area includes a short explanation of each issue along with our stated position and our recommendations to lawmakers.

At all levels of government, well-intentioned initiatives often have unintended consequences. Without input from the business community, these initiatives could adversely impact the ability of businesses to generate jobs and to create higher standards of living. However, when business leaders communicate with their elected officials, better public policies result.

This manual includes contact information for elected representatives as well as tips on how best to communicate with them.

We hope that you will find this public policy manual useful. To accomplish our many legislative objectives, it is essential that the local business community becomes engaged in the issues and active in communicating our positions to our elected officials.



John Brewer, CAE
President/CEO
Billings Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

PRIORITY ISSUES THAT WILL BENEFIT OUR COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL ECONOMY

The Billings Chamber has developed, in partnership with the City of Billings, Yellowstone County, Big Sky Economic Development, and the local education community as well as with leadership throughout eastern Montana, the following key issues.

Community Development

Community development, which encompasses infrastructure, quality of life, ultimately impacts our economic future. Revenue enhancement is important for many if not all communities, counties, districts and the state.

Reappraisal cycle:

Currently all real property is reappraised every six years and the new values are phased in. The Montana Department has proposed that this be done every two years at an additional cost of one to two million dollars. We advocate for a shorter timeline for reappraisal, however it were done every four years, with one fourth done each year, or every three years with one third done annually, it should be timelier without incurring higher costs at the state level.

Modification of the Resort Tax:

Currently the resort tax is applicable only to communities with a population of less than 6,000 that derive at least 10% of their revenues from tourism related activities. Money collected can only be used for infrastructure needs. Removing the population cap and the 10% requirement would open this community funding option to a much wider group, including eastern Montana communities impacted by the energy boom.

Coal Impact Funds:

A portion of the coal severance tax is set aside to mitigate impacts of coal. Current funding was increased from \$2.7 million dollars to \$5.9 million dollars annually. This tax is scheduled to revert to the 2.7 million unless specific action is taken to maintain it at its current level.

Education

There has been a significant increase in students in the region; however these increases come without any increase in funding until year two. Funding formulas need to deal with the varying demographics in our area.

Basic Entitlement for schools:

All school districts receive the same basic entitlements regardless of size. Districts with multiple schools should be compensated accordingly, and not at the expense of the small school districts. Also, basic entitlement funding for increases in student count does not become effective until year two

unless a minimum of 6% increase. This needs to be addressed as a companion to modification of the basic entitlement adjustments.

Higher Education Facilities:

Anticipated legislation to promote a facilities bonding bill for higher education is important for Billings as well as our community colleges in Miles City and Glendive. We support statewide infrastructure improvements for higher education with emphasis on eastern Montana.

Business Development

To be competitive with the states in our region, Montana needs to further improve its business climate. We are at a disadvantage in a number of areas including those we have specifically identified.

Workforce Training:

Workforce training dollars are a valuable tool for new and existing businesses and need to be funded at or above their current levels. We will vigorously oppose any plans to reduce these levels of funding

Worker's Compensation:

During the last session of the legislature, a good first step in reducing worker's compensation costs was passed, and Montana no longer has the highest worker compensation rates in the country. We still are significantly higher than surrounding states, so we will continue to work to improve the claims process, work with safety service providers such as WorkSafeMt to implement meaningful safety programs, and continue to explore legislative options to reduce rates for employers.

Business Equipment Tax:

Business Equipment Class 8 property was reduced from 3% to 2% on the first \$2 million in property valuation for individuals or businesses. Our surrounding states tax business equipment once, in the form of a sales tax. To be competitive, Montana needs to continue to lower the tax rate and raise the threshold

Energy Production

Eastern Montana is enjoying a robust economy due to the energy sector. Unemployment is low and jobs are plentiful, however the energy sector can and does change quickly depending on price for product and demand. We need to maximize the energy potential.

Production Tax holiday:

Currently there is an 18 month production tax holiday for oil and gas producing wells. Montana wells yield significantly less than in the North Dakota, and the tax holiday encourages companies to explore for gas and oil in Montana. We support the continuation of this tax holiday.

Federal Issues

Energy Tax incentives:

As referenced in the chart below, the playing field for energy power subsidies is not equal. We will continue to see coal fired generating plants closed until such time as the inequalities are dealt with. The Federal Subsidies for electric power by source, fiscal 2010 are:

	(Total in millions)	Dollars per megawatt
Oil and Gas	\$ 654	\$ 0.64
Hydropower	\$ 215	\$ 0.82
Coal	\$1,189	\$ 0.64
Nuclear	\$2,499	\$ 3.44
Solar	\$ 968	\$775.64
Wind	\$4,986	\$ 46.29

Keystone XL Pipeline:

This pipeline needs to be built sooner rather than later. In Montana, the impact is 5,531 person hours of employment in the construction phase, and will provide \$7.5 million dollars in state revenue annually. When completed, the only access point other than at the source will be at Baker and will offer the ability to move 65,000 gallons of crude oil per day from the oil fields to the refineries.

MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

Our MISSION is to develop a strong business climate and vibrant economy by serving the community in a leadership role thereby enhancing the quality of life.

Our VISION is to achieve excellence in community leadership and growth.

Preamble

As an advocate for business, the Chamber/CVB believes in free enterprise. We are pro-entrepreneurial and support the capitalist system.

Business, including agriculture, is the basis of economic growth and prosperity. We believe that government has a role in ensuring the health and welfare of us as citizens. Part of that role is to collect taxes and fees to pay for necessary services for society. Our duty as a business advocate is to ensure that the regulations on business and the taxes and fees collected for services are not excessive.

We believe in local control and authority, and citizen involvement. While we believe in individual freedom and private property rights, we also believe in personal responsibility. We recognize that there will be differences between industries in Montana.

What is good for business and agriculture is generally good for Montana. The role of government is to provide those services that business cannot. The Chamber/CVB supports using the most efficient and effective means of providing government services by streamlining governmental services and privatizing government services whenever effective, appropriate and economical.

The Chamber/CVB believes that government, no matter what level, should operate as efficiently and openly as possible. Any governmental entity should conduct business on a competitive basis. That entity should encourage local participation on contracts for goods and services to "client" businesses (local businesses for local government, state businesses for Montana government). We should not grant rule-making authority lightly, or completely, to governmental agencies. We have the obligation to involve ourselves in rule-making decisions. The Chamber/CVB opposes the shifting of mandated duties to lower levels of government or private entities without the funding to carry out those mandates. We will pursue coordination and consolidation of duties, regulations, and licensing whenever economically feasible. Cutting governmental bureaucracy and removing excessive regulations remain a high priority for us.

Administratively, the Chamber/CVB encourages its members, the business community, and local governing bodies to use the services and expertise of local professionals and consultants whenever possible.

The following public policy statements have been developed by the Chamber/CVB keeping in mind our vision, mission, and our pro-business philosophy.

TAXATION

Basic Philosophy

The Chamber believes in a comprehensive tax plan requiring statewide reform that is equitable and takes into account the need for a responsible and efficient government. The tax structure needs to provide sustainable and adequate funding for necessary services and should promote planned economic development and growth through the creation of positive economic policies. This type of mandate requires broad support throughout the state from legislators, the business community, cities and counties, and the general public. The Chamber will continue to support statewide tax reform, which may include a statewide general sales tax, as well as weighing the pros and cons of any such reform, and will work to move acceptable legislation forward.

As an alternative to passage and implementation of a general sales and use tax, the Chamber realizes that it may be necessary to devote its resources to passage of some type of alternative tax if a general sales tax meets substantial resistance. The most prominent of the alternatives would be expansion of the resort tax/local option taxing authority.

A crucial element of comprehensive sales tax reform must include, but not be limited to, significant reductions in property and/or income tax while remaining substantially revenue neutral for Montana taxpayers and must return a portion of the tax collected to local government. If the option to be pursued becomes an expansion of the resort tax or a local option tax, a significant portion of the tax collected must be returned to the taxpayer as property tax relief. Implementation must be approved by a majority vote of the electorate, must have a stated purpose(s) for the funds proposed to be collected, and must have a sunset provision.

Tax incentives should only be considered as an alternative option, and should be available to both new and expanding businesses. Tax policy should provide adequate funding for the public well being, without hindering the ability of business to create, compete and react in the free market.

Government has an obligation to use tax revenue prudently, providing the best services at a reasonable cost.

During previous sessions of the legislature, the Montana Department of Revenue proposed several pieces of legislation which would move authority for decision making from the local level to the state. The Chamber believes that consolidation of this authority is not in the best interests of the communities throughout Montana and will work to retain these powers at the local level.

Specific Issues

Tax Increment Finance and Business Improvement Districts

The Chamber supports the ability of Local Governments to establish tax increment finance and business districts that seek to promote economic development, infrastructure expansion and development, and taxable growth. The districts need to be established in cooperation with, and possibly benefit, other tax entities such as local school districts, cities, and counties. The Chamber opposes any changes in the Tax Increment Financing District rules and regulations as may be proposed by the Montana Department of Revenue or the legislature and supports being a part of any coalition that

may be formed to oppose these changes in the rules and regulations. The Chamber will oppose laws or rules which may be proposed by the Montana Department of Revenue that limit or hamper cities' or counties' abilities to adopt and use Tax Increment Finance Districts and Business Improvement Districts.

Expansion of the Resort Tax Authority/Local Option

The Chamber supports the removal of resort tax limitations. This would allow for all communities in Montana to determine whether or not they want to implement this tax, and for what purposes. In the event that expansion of the resort tax fails to receive legislative support, the Chamber supports local option taxing authority. Either expansion of the resort tax or local option taxing authority should have local voted authorization and purpose, a sunset provision, substantial property tax relief, and should be used primarily in the community in which it is generated. Accordingly, we need to have a draft piece of legislation that contains all of the elements listed above:

Statewide Sales Tax

The Chamber supports a statewide sales and use tax with the current constitutional cap of 4%, primarily as a replacement tax and as part of a broader tax reform plan.

Estate Tax

The Chamber supports finding an equitable compromise to the present federal estate tax legislation scheduled to revert back to 2001-02 levels on December 31, 2012.

Montana Income Tax Credit for Gifts to Charitable Endowments

This credit is set to sunset in 2013. It provides for a 40% credit up to \$10,000 (\$20,000 for married filing joint) of the federal income tax deduction allowed for a planned gift to the endowment of a Montana charity. It also provides for a 20% credit up to \$10,000 for an outright gift by a business to the endowment of a Montana charity. This is an important tool for charitable organizations in Montana and the Billings Chamber supports the extension or reauthorization of this tax credit by the Montana Legislature.

Alternative Minimum Tax

The Chamber supports eliminating the federal Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT).

Fees

The Chamber believes fees must be tied to services rendered, not created as a replacement for lost taxing authority. Therefore, they should reflect the cost of providing that service. The Chamber also believes that powers that rest with local authorities, such as tax abatement should remain within the local jurisdiction and should not be assumed by the Montana Department of Revenue.

Property Taxes

The Chamber supports basing property taxes on assessed value, not acquisition value. Additionally, the Chamber believes that a six year cycle for reappraisal is too long, and supports putting all property on a four year cycle for reappraisal, with approximately one fourth of all property reappraised each year. This would put reappraisal on a four year rolling cycle and should reduce costs for staff to complete the reappraisal each year.

Business Equipment Taxes

We support continuing reduction and elimination of the business equipment (personal property) tax as a part of a statewide tax reform package. The state now provides tax replacement to local governments that lose revenue from the equipment tax's elimination and the Chamber supports continuing the loss of revenue offset.

Oil Impact and Royalty Fee Distribution

The impacts of oil development in Eastern and Central Montana and the lack of an adequate funding source for remediation will continue to be a critical issue in affected areas. The Billings Chamber will

assist where possible to develop or enhance funding streams that will help communities impacted by oil development. Presently there is a two year delay before any royalty fees reach the counties; and cities and towns realize very little, if any, funding as a result of this development. The Billings Chamber supports a more equitable distribution of energy income received by the state of Montana.

Session Potential Issues

In the previous Legislative sessions, the Department of Revenue introduced a number of proposals, most of which the Chamber opposed. While the Chamber will once again evaluate each proposal on its merits, we will continue to hold the same position if the proposals discussed below are submitted in the same form by the Department.

Real Estate Investment Trusts

The Chamber feels that this type of legislation would be a significant disincentive to business development in Montana and opposes this measure.

Withholding for Non-Resident Sales of Property

In 2007, the Department of Revenue estimated that there was a 70% non-compliance reporting rate on real estate sales in Montana by non-residents. The economic impact shown in the Fiscal note assumed additional tax revenues in excess of \$10,000,000 annually. The Chamber supports this legislation for withholding under the assumption that it not be expanded to include Montana residents and is limited in scope only to non-residents.

Grantor Trusts

This is searching for potentially abusive tax shelters or income and has an unknown fiscal impact. The Chamber is opposed unless a case can be made for needing this type of legislation and an accurate Fiscal Note can be established.

Trust Tax Refunds

Examples of trust taxes include withholding taxes; the retail telecommunications excise tax and the lodging facility use tax. Refunds would go to the individual or entity that paid the tax, not to the company that collected the tax. If the individual or entity that paid the tax cannot be located, the refund becomes unclaimed property or state general fund money. The Chamber is opposed this type of legislation.

Lodging Facility Use Taxes

During the 2011 session of the legislature, there was a concerted effort to move 10% of the Lodging Facility Use Taxes that would be collected over a four year period to the General Fund as a method of balancing the budget. The Billings Chamber/CVB opposes any transfer of funds from their traditional purpose and using them for any other purpose.

Follow Federal Practice of Withholding on Retirement Fund Withdrawals

The state is concerned that without withholding, the distribution is spent and when any taxes are ultimately due, the funds to pay the taxes are not available. The fiscal impact is minimal and we oppose this type of legislation.

Clarify Confidentiality Laws

The Chamber is opposed to any legislation that would allow disclosure of any corporate or individual tax returns, as well as any exchange of this information among state agencies.

ENERGY

Basic Philosophy

The Chamber is an advocate of a nationwide free market in respect to energy. We recognize that the production, processing and distribution of energy create good-paying primary and secondary jobs and provide fiscal benefit to the State of Montana. We believe that in a free market, the needs of adequate power and fair power pricing will be established. We believe that increasing the supply of energy in Montana, including oil, coal, methane, wind, fuel cells, gas, solar and alternative methods will help find a solution to the current and future power needs facing our state and country. Energy production, processing and distribution methods, traditional and alternative, may prove to be economical and efficient ways to accomplish this goal. The Chamber also encourages conservation efforts allowing our current supply of energy to be sustained. Streamlining the permitting process and limiting the appeals process for both production and transportation systems related to energy development is critical.

Specific Issues

Responsible Energy Exploration and Development

Responsible energy exploration and development on public and private lands is crucial to resolving our nation's energy crisis and building Montana's economy.

Natural Gas Development

The Chamber believes that natural gas development should be explored and may be beneficial to stimulating the state's economy. We recognize that coal bed natural gas is an abundant resource that holds great potential for development. Other sources for natural gas include landfills, sewage treatment and animal waste. We will support legislative efforts that seek to encourage environmentally responsible natural gas development and deployment.

Publicly Owned Energy Facilities/Infrastructure

We generally oppose any public competition in the private business arena. Any attempts by the State of Montana, or local governmental entities, to own or operate existing or new power generation facilities/power distribution infrastructure, unless in a public-private partnership, must be subject to the most stringent cost benefit analysis to the stakeholders.

Other Alternative Sources

The Chamber supports alternative power generators such as wind, solar, fuel cells and others as long as they are effective and all costs are disclosed.

Oil Refineries

The Chamber supports the growth and greater production of existing area oil refineries, as well as the construction of new refineries utilizing the latest in refining technology.

Public Policy

Consistent public policy and prudent tax policy needs to occur for long-term planning, production, processing and distribution.

Carbon Sequestration

We support responsible Carbon Sequestration Legislation and Rule Making if technology is available and affordable, and is justified by a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis.

Coal Reserves

We support the development of coal reserves in Southeastern Montana. We recognize the importance of coal production in providing economic benefits and opportunity to local communities in this region and the spillover benefits that result for the Billings area and our members. We also recognize the significance of coal production to the state economy and the financial assistance it affords local communities throughout Montana. The responsible and timely development of new coal mines will provide a much needed economic boost to Montana. We therefore support efforts that will enable new coal production to occur, including the development of railroad infrastructure and securing access to federal and state-owned coal reserves.

Coal Bed Natural Gas Water Discharge

Recognizing that water is the lifeblood of Montana and recognizing that coal bed natural gas production brings up volumes of this precious resource in the daily operation of energy production, we support water management practices based on sound science that is based on DEQ and EPA standards. Further, we support practices that provide for beneficial use of this water resource whenever feasible. Because of the complexities of individual land use, landowner preferences, and water quality and quantity, we also support the implementation of a toolbox approach to water management. The toolbox approach allows the operator and landowner to use sound science and knowledge of the land to develop site specific management plans that will maximize beneficial uses, protect the environment and allow the economic benefit of energy production.

Energy Infrastructure

A key to energy development in Montana is the ability to move these natural resources from area of development to the ultimate market. The Billings Chamber supports the development of pipelines, such as the Keystone XL pipeline and the Baker to Billings pipeline that will move crude oil to the refineries in Billings and on the Gulf Coast. We will continue to support development of pipelines that are necessary to oil and gas development.

Also, it is important for our coal mines to be able to move their product from the mine mouth to the ultimate customer. The Billings Chamber will continue to support coal train traffic through the Billings area while exploring alternatives that would mitigate transportation issues related to increased use of existing rail services.

Oil Development in the Region

The Billings Chamber will continue to promote Billings as a regional hub for doing business in the oil patch as well as serve as a hub for oil development in other areas of the state as well, whether it is the Rocky Mountain Front, Petroleum County or southern Montana

HEALTH CARE

Basic Philosophy

The health care industry in Billings – providing a wide variety of high quality physical, mental, and preventative health services – is a major force in our local and state economy and in economic development. The health care industry is facing serious workforce shortage issues and through educational partnerships we can enhance our recruitment and retention efforts, as well as educate, train, and provide degree advancement opportunities. The health care industry in Billings can benefit people in rural areas by assisting with the unique challenges of access for consumers and recruitment and retention of health care professionals.

Government regulations significantly drive up costs causing great harm to efforts focused on making health care services and coverage more affordable. The increasing number of uninsured and under-insured Montanans is a major concern to the business community, especially regarding coverage for employees and their dependents, and we support cooperative efforts involving the health care industry and all other employers to seek workable and affordable solutions.

We encourage and support:

- Collaboration among health and human service providers with compatible philosophic and business principles, while encouraging competition that results in cost containment, improved quality, and improved access to care.
- Self-responsibility and appropriate access to health care services.
- Educating consumers about healthy lifestyle choices, insurance coverage options, and appropriate access to health care services.
- The care, safety, and treatment of our most vulnerable citizens: children, the elderly, and disabled.
- A viable private and public health care system that seeks to empower individuals in health promotion and disease prevention activities while recognizing the need for a strong health safety net for those members of our community in need.
- Tax exempt status of not-for-profit health care/human service providers.
- Ongoing scrutiny and consideration of medical liability reform measures.
- Holding down soaring health care costs due to explosive growth in medical liability awards and insurance costs by limiting awards for non-economic damages (all medical costs and lost earnings could still be recovered).
- Availability of options such as health savings accounts, association health plans, and provider price transparency – all in support of consumer choice and education.

- Medicare payment reforms that reward quality performance with appropriate levels of reimbursement for health care providers, as well as modernizing Medicare services through reforms and preserving the overall solvency of the program.
- Strengthening and continuation of the employer based health care system.
- Incentives for more Americans to purchase health insurance by enacting refundable tax credits.
- Allowing for greater consumer choice by regularly examining additional state mandates on health care plans and closely scrutinizing any proposed additional mandates.
- Increased dental access for low-income individuals and families, especially children.

Specific Issues

Reform:

Given the United States Supreme Court's ruling that the Affordable Care Act is constitutional, there is a shared responsibility for the public and private sector to continue implementation. Health care system reform is already underway and many challenges will need to be addressed in the coming years at the federal, state and local levels. Much will also depend on the outcome of the fall 2012 elections. Health care costs, insurance reforms, new technologies, an increased emphasis on preventing illness and other issues, will need to be addressed.

Reimbursements:

We believe in fair government reimbursements to health care and human service providers that at least cover the cost of providing services. Covering costs of providing service will protect against cost shifting to private sector payers, thereby reducing the cost of employee coverage for the business community. For instance, uncompensated care resulting from uninsured individuals inappropriately accessing hospital Emergency Departments as a regular source of primary health care is a very costly case of cost shifting. We support the health care industry's position on issues such as:

- Hospital Provider Fee, Nursing Home Bed Tax, Medicaid Direct Care Wage Increases, and Inter-Governmental Transfers for both hospitals and nursing homes
- Physician payments

Increased Health Insurance Coverage:

Given the United States Supreme Court's decision to allow states to determine if/how to expand Medicaid, we support a thoughtful analysis of options as a means to reduce the uninsured. We support allowing companies to band together and form Small Business Health Plans, which can negotiate lower prices and better choices than small businesses can find on their own. We also support legislation that encourages more Americans to save for medical expenses tax-free by expanding Health Saving Accounts and allowing those with Flexible Spending Accounts to roll over unused balances to pay for future medical expenses. We support enacting refundable tax credits to increase health insurance coverage for employees and support programs such as CHIP for children through private sector and government efforts. To cover more employees, we support exploration of options such as tax credits/incentives, health savings accounts and association health plans.

Affordable and Accessible Health Care:

The Chamber encourages the health care industry to work closely with the education and business communities to explore ways to reduce the costs of health care services while maintaining and improving the quality of care and access to care. The United States has the world's best health care system, but it is being priced out of reach for more and more American citizens. Five straight years of double-digit health insurance premium increases have pushed the number of Americans who lack coverage to over 45 million. Companies struggle to find health care plans that provide adequate coverage and are still affordable.

The Chamber recognizes that most health care insurance coverage is provided by employers, although statistics indicate that rising costs are making it increasingly difficult for employers to afford to maintain that coverage. Because of the dire societal effects caused by lack of health care insurance coverage, it is essential to make it easier for employers and their employees to afford the health care insurance coverage they need and the quality they deserve.

Consumer Education:

The health care consumers will benefit from educational efforts on health care options, healthy lifestyle choices, various insurance plans, and appropriate ways to access health care services. Our goal is for consumers to be able to make informed health decisions.

Regulations:

Governmental regulations of the health care industry, though well-intended, significantly drive up the costs of providing health care services and coverage while also complicating the delivery and processing of services and products. The public is best served by balancing the goals of regulation with the associated costs of compliance. For instance, HIPAA benefits consumers by protecting personal information, but compliance is costly and time-consuming.

Technology:

We support appropriate funding for acquisition and implementation of Health Information Technology (HIT). Increased use of HIT and Tele-Medicine will lower costs while increasing efficiency and access, especially in rural areas. In particular, the Chamber supports the ongoing efforts of HealthShare Montana to develop interconnectivity among Montana's health care providers.

Administration:

A major source of cost savings would be realized by streamlining the delivery of health care services and the processing of insurance applications and claims, including a reduction in the number of privacy notices and standardization and uniformity of insurance applications, forms, and claims processing.

Higher Education:

We need to strengthen the stature of higher education in Billings through collaboration with local health care and business communities. Collaboration involving Montana's higher education institutions will benefit consumers of health care services, our local economy, and employees. Strengthening the stature of higher education in Billings will assist the health care industry in recruiting and retaining physicians and other health care professionals. An important aspect of the strategy should be strengthened linkage between health care and the MSU-B College of Allied Health. Increased partnering with the WWAMI program should be promoted to offer incentives to attract physicians and other health care professionals to the Billings area.

Bioscience Research and Development:

We recognize great potential in local economic development focused on the highly technical field of bioscience research and development. Collaboration involving the health care industry and Rocky Mountain College and MSU-B are particularly essential to success in this area. Progress in encouraging technology transfer for the bioscience fields will be possible if consultation services and educational programs are developed to promote access to the federal grants and contracts programs of the Small Business Innovation Research initiatives. These are grant programs that many small businesses are not trained to compete for through the peer review process. Success in bringing in grants through these programs will stimulate the needed start-up for small businesses. To encourage tech transfer in the biosciences, we support State funding of match money for SBIR grants, as was approved during the 2009 legislative session.

Workforce Needs and Shortages:

As Montana's population ages and health care providers retire, solutions to our health care workforce shortages will continue to be a priority. By supporting Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), we

nurture and encourage young people to develop an interest in health careers thus expanding the pipeline of health professionals. Additionally, the Chamber supports increased state funding for the Graduate Medical Education (GME) program expansion occurring in the state. More than 70 percent of physicians graduating from the Montana Family Medicine Residency program are practicing in Montana today.

The current focus of workforce needs and shortages is in the field of nursing, and much teamwork lies ahead in tackling this important issue. Many other types of ancillary professionals in health care require attention as well. Higher education is critical in providing education, training, and opportunities for degree advancement. The Chamber supports development of a mechanism to access federal dollars for workforce training and equipment, including onetime needs and new programs. Training for incumbent and entry-level health care workers should be considered. Also, in rural areas there should be examination of potentially using alternate types of providers offering health care services, such as nurse practitioners.

Affordable Housing:

An important aspect of overall community health and well-being is affordable housing for low-income individuals and families, some of whom may be members of the local health care workforce. The Chamber supports state and federal subsidization to realize affordable housing.

Mental Health:

The Chamber supports improved government payment for mental health services, which would benefit both providers and patients.

Community Crisis Center:

We support the Community Crisis Center, a health care safety net partnership providing “no wrong door” for individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders. People who come to the CCC are evaluated and then directed to the appropriate treatment, if necessary. The CCC is a partnership of St. Vincent Healthcare, Billings Clinic, RiverStone Health and the South-central Montana Mental Health Center which saves money and provides better, more focused treatment for the patients. This partnership not only serves people in Yellowstone County but across eastern Montana. While the June 2010 passage of a public safety mill levy assisted in providing a source of on-going funding for the CCC, state funding is needed, as are grant opportunities provided through federal sources.

Public Health and Safety:

While the United States spends more on clinical health care costs than nearly every other country, we do not lead the way on health status. A strategy to make our health dollars buy more is through implementing population-based health improvement strategies - public health. Of the \$8,086 spent per person on medical care, only \$251 is spent on public health and by protecting the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act's Prevention and Public Health Fund, we will continue the investment in public health delivery.

The Chamber supports the continuation of building a strong public health infrastructure as well as a fiscally responsible approach in the creation of policies, programs and services which keep people healthier now, thus reducing the demand for medical care throughout their lives. These include evidence-based interventions such as:

- Chronic disease risk reduction measures via tobacco use prevention, physical activity promotion and sound nutrition policy;
- Promoting seatbelt use;
- Modernizing and strengthening remedies for substance-related and distracted driving abuses;
- Increasing immunization rates.

Medical Liability and Tort Reform:

The Chamber supports medical liability and related tort reform. This issue continues to be important due to: increased legal pressure on health care providers from the plaintiff bar and ongoing concerns about higher liability insurance premiums; the small number of medical liability insurance carriers in Montana; and the threat of restricted patient access to health care professionals due to liability concerns. For these reasons, reform ideas will likely be proposed during the 2013 legislative session. The Chamber will continue to monitor this important aspect of public policy and support reform legislation as needed.

TRANSPORTATION/ MANAGED GROWTH

Basic Philosophy

A fully integrated transportation network is essential to our economy. In addition to traveling to and from work, we count on transportation every time we make an on-line purchase on the Internet, every time we expect an urgent overnight delivery, and every time we shop for fresh foods and produce at the local market. Without extensive, well-maintained roads and highways, a well-managed public transit and rail system, and modern airports, our quality of life suffers.

The Chamber believes that a strong economy and quality of place are fostered through well-planned community development. Managed growth encourages infill development and re-development and stresses the efficient use of open space. We believe that a quality transportation system, both surface and air, that connects Billings locally and regionally is essential for a strong local economy and for the success of Billings' area businesses in the regional and national markets.

Knowing that goods and services can be provided only as fast and effectively as our transportation system allows, the Billings Chamber of Commerce supports:

- Legislation that protects the integrity and level of funding of both the Federal and State Highway Trust and Road Funds, including funding for trails and bike paths, ensures all current funds are utilized, and seizes the opportunity to rectify the impact of alternative fuels on these funds.
- Development and expansion of air transportation infrastructure, including runways and terminals, to facilitate the ongoing increase in passenger miles and the expected growth of air cargo.
- Public transportation systems that ease traffic congestion, conserve energy, increase mobility, create jobs, and generally stimulate the economy.

Specific Issues

Transportation Corridors

The Chamber supports improvements to transportation corridors locally and regionally that will enhance economic development and quality of life. Corridors should include non-motorized components as well as aesthetic enhancements whenever possible. Corridors presently identified are:

1. East End Entrance to Billings from Interstate 90, Exit 452 (known as the Trailhead Entryway)
2. Inner Belt Loop/Zimmerman Trail
3. Montana Highway 3 (Billings to Great Falls)
4. Interstate 90
5. King Avenue West
6. Main Street in the Heights

Subdivision and Zoning Regulations

The Chamber supports subdivision and zoning regulations that encourage efficient, orderly development, while allowing flexible and innovative development strategies. The Chamber supports the use of carefully considered incentives to encourage developers to invest in amenities such as parks, trails and open space.

City-County Planning

The Chamber supports the combined City-County planning department to best plan for the future growth of the greater Billings community. A cohesive City-County growth strategy is critical to provide for an efficient development process. The Chamber supports appropriate County zoning, subdivision and development standards for areas close to the City limits that are compatible with City standards and reflect the likelihood that these areas will eventually be annexed into the City. Proactive community planning, which articulates a community's vision for future development, requires the inclusion of private property. The Chamber supports the rights of private property owners and encourages substantial public notice to encourage the participation of property owners in community planning efforts. The Chamber does not believe that it is necessary or practical to require explicit permission from property owners when planning on a regional level.

City Annexation Policy

1. Pursue a long term policy that would include an annual tracking of growth within the city as well as in the 5 year limit area. The Chamber supports actively pursuing alternative sources of revenue for cities and towns through the legislative process.
2. The Chamber supports City annexation of new development areas as a means to manage growth. The City provides infrastructure that supports economic development and City zoning and development regulations provide the guidelines for orderly, efficient growth.
3. Encourage the City and County to support additional funding for the City-County Planning Department.
4. Continue to support the redevelopment of the East Billings Urban Renewal District as a strategic in-fill development for the community.

Public Utilities

The Chamber supports strategic, cost effective investment in public utilities as a way to manage the pattern of City growth and to discourage sprawl and encourage compact, space-efficient growth.

Quality of Place Amenities

The Chamber believes that proactive planning and investment in quality of place amenities, such as parks, trails, preserved open space, and recreational and cultural facilities is crucial to attracting economic investment and maintaining a vibrant work force.

Public and Alternative Forms of Transportation

In this era of traffic congestion, high gas prices, climate change, health concerns, and fiscal constraints, federal, state and local transportation funding has reached a crossroads. The Chamber supports investment in a more diverse transportation system that provides viable choices to walk and bike, use public transportation in addition to driving, and will lead to a far more efficient use of our transportation resources. The Chamber also feels that there is a need to develop a comprehensive trail system for the economic and healthy community benefits that result from active transportation (to work and school and for leisure), and communicate the quality of place and economic benefits to the business community and general public. We need to bring trail support groups and stakeholders together to find solutions to connect our trails and keep them clean, and safe and well maintained. We will seek federal support through transportation and appropriations bills.

Air Service

Air Service must be maintained and in Billings even with challenging marketplace conditions and stresses on the airline. We will work to increase needed direct flights. The Chamber also supports the continuation of Essential Air Service subsidies. The 1978 Airline Deregulation Act promoted the continuation of the EAS, stating, "The maintenance of a comprehensive and convenient system of continuous airline service for small communities and for isolated areas, with direct federal assistance, where appropriate, is necessary."

Eminent Domain

Condemnation is a tool that government can use to acquire private property when a parcel is necessary to complete a project that is deemed to be for the public good. The Chamber recognizes the inherent conflict between private property rights and government's power of eminent domain. While the Chamber staunchly supports the rights of private property owners, we support the use of condemnation when the following criteria have been met:

1. The condemned property is needed to complete a public infrastructure project that was identified through an open public process.
2. The proposed project is necessary to facilitate the orderly growth, safety, and economic development of Billings.

WORKFORCE/ BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Basic Philosophy

The Chamber believes that a successful business is a joint effort among ownership, management, and labor. To be successful, a working relationship must be developed and encouraged. Free market forces should play a strong role in establishing and maintaining a positive employer/employee relationship. Small businesses make a distinct and creative contribution to the Billings economy. For many seeking economic independence, small business ownership offers the greatest opportunity. Small businesses produce a major share of business innovation. Their numbers make them the largest source of private employment and the most tangible local representation of the private enterprise system in America today.

Specific Issues

Medical Marijuana

The Billings Chamber supports SB423 which was passed in the 2011 session of the legislature. In its current form, it rescinds the action taken through the passage of the medical marijuana Referendum in 2007. We believe that allowing the distribution and sale of an illegal substance sends a conflicting message. We support total repeal of the original referendum.

Workforce Training

Publicly funded worker training is essential in order for Montana to be competitive when it comes to industry retention/expansion and new industry recruitment. We support continued funding to help offset the cost of training individuals for newly created “base industry sector” jobs as enacted and funded by previous legislatures. We support and encourage continuing skills training through local educational organizations, the local building trades unions and other sources. Training through the various Joint Apprentice Training Committees (JATC) is funded through employee and employer contributions. Furthermore, we support expanding training funds and programs for incumbent worker training to assist existing businesses to expand and to utilize the talents of their incumbent workers to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace. Advancing incumbent workers to more technical and skilled positions within their companies will provide positive results for the worker, the business and Montana’s economy. We support the reduction of bureaucratic costs and improved efficiencies in the workforce system resulting in maximizing funding to train workers and assist businesses.

Wrongful Discharge

Montana’s Wrongful Discharge Act, being the only statute of its kind in the nation, has an adverse impact on recruiting new businesses to Montana. The Chamber vigorously opposes any action or legislation it deems will have an effect of eroding employer’s rights under the current statutes. We will support any improvements or modifications to this statute which would enhance Montana’s ability to attract and retain new or existing businesses.

Drug and Alcohol Free Workplace

We support clarification and expansion of the 1999 legislation to allow universal drug and alcohol testing of employees with proper procedures established to safeguard the innocent.

Workers Compensation

Workplace safety is the shared responsibility of employers and employees. We support the pursuit and prosecution of worker's compensation fraud whether perpetuated by an employee or an employer. We support a competitive insurance market for workers' compensation, not dominated by a single insurance carrier or the State Fund. We support the exclusive remedy doctrine for workplace injuries with the inherent trade off of legislated benefits for the injured worker without having to prove negligence. We support prompt delivery of reasonable and appropriate benefits to a worker who, in the scope and course of employment, has suffered an injury or illness as a result of a workplace environment. The Billings Chamber encourages employer/employee participation in programs that promote safety in the workplace such as SafeMT. During the 2011 session of the legislature, an important first step was implemented to reduce the cost of worker compensation. We support carefully crafted legislation which will further reduce the cost of workers compensation. To be effective in reducing costs, equal attention must be given to workplace safety.

Wages

The Chamber believes in the ability of market forces to set wages and benefit levels. We oppose the creation of livable wage legislation.

Unemployment

More and more Montana employers are expressing frustrations with Montana's Unemployment Insurance system. Often we hear that employees who quit or are fired for legitimate reasons end up receiving unemployment benefits, which only drives up the cost. The Billings Chamber supports the position ensuring that unemployment benefits will only go to those who are legally entitled to receive unemployment benefits..

H2B Visa

An H2B visa is a temporary work visa for foreign workers with a job offer for seasonal, non-agricultural work in the US. The H2B visa program is open to nationals of countries designated by the United States Secretary of Homeland Security and is capped at 66,000 visas per year from October 1 – September 30. Those with a temporary job offer in an agricultural industry may be eligible for a H2B visa which is exempt from this cap. In addition, the applicant must have a temporary or seasonal offer of employment that can be classified as a one-time occurrence, peak load, intermittent or seasonal need. Furthermore, the prospective employer must demonstrate that the position cannot be filled by a US worker. H2B visa applicants may also be required to meet certain health and character requirements. The Billings Chamber supports the continuation of this program and supports efforts in Congress to protect the program. This is vital to the well-being of the number of industries in Montana that are reliant on seasonal workers. It includes but is not limited to the agriculture and tourism industries. We support efforts in Congress to protect this program; however the Department of Labor is making it difficult for employers to use this program effectively. We need to ensure our Representatives in Washington understand how valuable this program is for our members.

Business

The Chamber opposes any legislation that would mandate financial and other requirements on businesses that close down their operations or lay off many employees. One barrier to business ownership is access to capital, especially long-term debt financing. The Billings Chamber of Commerce recognizes that ensuring the availability of financing to foster the growth and expansion of businesses is in the best interest of the economy. The Billings Chamber proposes exploring venture capital fund financial packages through the use of tax credits and tax dollars, to help small Montana businesses.

The Chamber supports passage of legislation that would eliminate the hurdle of "substantial justification" and allow businesses to be reimbursed for attorneys' fees when successful in challenging government's regulatory actions in court.

Additionally, the Chamber supports the following:

- Provide businesses with additional time to respond to an OSHA citation, increase the number of OSHA commissioners, allow small businesses the right to appeal an OSHA citation, and force OSHA to pay the legal fees of a business when a citation is overturned.
- Resolve administrative and compliance problems suffered by employers who are making a good faith effort to comply with the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and prohibit FMLA expansion to small business.
- Encourage passage of business tax provisions that would provide for the permanency of business expensing allowances (Section 179), the reauthorization of the death tax at a rate the same or lower than the 2009 rate, with the goal of the eventual elimination of the death tax, and the permanent reduction in the marginal income tax rates.
- Work for passage of the Small Business Liability Reform Act, which provides caps on punitive damage awards and proportional liability for small businesses.

Immigration

The Billings Chamber of Commerce recognizes that the U.S. immigration system is broken. To fix the system, a comprehensive approach is needed because it is easier to enforce laws that make sense. Enforcement alone is not the solution. The Chamber supports legislative action that:

- Is comprehensive: addressing both future economic needs for future workers and undocumented workers already in the United States.
- Strengthens national security by providing for the screening of foreign workers and creating a disincentive for illegal immigration.
- Strengthens the rule of law by establishing clear, sensible immigration laws that are effectively and vigorously enforced.
- Creates an immigration system that functions efficiently for employers, workers, and government agencies, which is based on a reliable employment eligibility confirmation system that is easy to use, and will aid businesses with deciphering federal immigration laws so that they can avoid having to hire expensive lawyers.
- Ensures that U.S. workers are not displaced by foreign workers.
- Ensures that all workers enjoy the same labor law protections.

TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Basic Philosophy

The Chamber/Convention and Visitors Bureau believes that tourism is a vital part of the Billings economy and directly generates \$600 million each year in non-resident expenditures, brings around one million visitors to our area and is a major employer. To create a vibrant tourism destination, the community must support its demand generators: those activities and facilities that bring guests to Billings. As a destination, there must also be adequate funding to recruit groups and individual leisure visitors through marketing and sales.

Specific Issues

Tourism Promotion

The Chamber/CVB realizes that state tourism promotion funding is inadequate. The Chamber/CVB supports the state lodging tax and the positive impacts that are made in statewide, regional and local tourism marketing. To be most effective on a local and regional level, the Chamber/CVB supports substantial reform to the rules and regulations administered through the state Tourism Advisory Council. The Chamber/CVB opposes additional use of the bed tax funds for infrastructure, or any reductions to local marketing agencies such as the Chamber/CVB. Any attempt to reallocate or increase the bed tax for any purpose other than the promotion of tourism will be vigorously opposed. The 3% general fund lodging tax should be allocated specifically to state tourism with a portion granted to regions and CVBs. The Chamber/CVB opposes any changes, additions or deletions to the current Tourism Business Improvement District laws that are now in place.

Incentives

The Chamber/CVB supports carefully considered incentives to lure conventions, groups and the film industry to the state.

MetraPark

MetraPark is a vital part of the tourism infrastructure and the Chamber/CVB believes this is a critical time for master planning of this facility.

- We support a complete assessment of facility and grounds' future use that will drive the most business to the community and the facility as well as investigating operating opportunities to improve revenues and aid in funding capital improvement projects.
- We support the facility's operation as a subsidized attraction in driving business to Billings and Yellowstone County.
- We support public investment to improve and maintain the facility and grounds.
- The Chamber encourages the County to maintain adequate reserves to pay for such capital repairs and replacements in the future.

Potential East End Hospitality Corridor and City Entrance

The Billings Chamber/CVB recommends that consideration be given to developing the East End entrance to Billings through way finding signage, beautification, aesthetic landscaping and ease of access.

Convention Center

The Billings Chamber/CVB supports the development of a Conference Center located in downtown Billings as recommended by the 2011 CH Johnson Consulting study and the 2002 Ernst and Associates Executive Conference Center Study.

Brand Builders

The Chamber/CVB supports demand generating infrastructure and programs to bring visitors, athletes, companies and conventions to Billings while increasing our quality of life as residents. These infrastructure amenities include natural, historic and cultural amenities.

EDUCATION

Basic Philosophy

The Education Committee supports a business and education partnership that will prepare today's students and adult learners for the workplace. The business community is the primary consumer and beneficiary of K-20 education, both public and private. A partnership between business and education is vital in order to align academic needs with the practical needs that translate into value for the business community.

We encourage an education system that is connected to the community.

We encourage business involvement in all aspects of public education, including businesses partnering with education entities as part of the learning process.

We support a School Board that understands the impact their decisions have on the business community.

We encourage the school board to look at adding a provision for drug testing for all participants participating in any extracurricular activity.

We support the current Graduation Matters program or any other program which will reduce the dropout rate.

We support continued funding for innovation and improvement efforts related to education that assist the Billings community in attracting new business and training the existing workforce to solve specific business needs.

We expect area graduates to show proficiency in reading, writing, and functional math, as well as critical thinking and foundational business skills.

We expect a workforce that is well-prepared to meet business needs, whether that is by college bound students meeting university demands or the non-college bound students achieving a proficient level of technical skill.

We support the need to educate and maintain a well-qualified pool of labor for current business operations, as well as new business development.

We support adult learning and training programs that assist with training the existing work force to expand their skill set.

We encourage and support economic development efforts of the University system, private or public, in coordination with private industry and other government entities.

Specific Issues

School District 2 Facilities

In order to support a growing 21st Century economy, it is crucial that Billings have a first-rate public school system. Therefore, the Chamber supports strategic, cost effective investment in the infrastructure that supports public education, including proactive maintenance and revitalization of existing facilities and continuous long-range planning. The business community needs to be involved in helping the school district define, prioritize and implement its priorities.

Education Primary/Secondary Funding

The Chamber supports quality primary and secondary education that is adequately funded and delivered efficiently. We welcome improvements in the budgeting process, fiscal accountability, and the quality and presentation of discretionary bond issues and mill levies. In addition, the Chamber encourages public-private partnership with the School District.

Consolidation of Districts/Superintendent of Schools Role

The Chamber supports investigating the consolidation of school districts on a statewide level and re-examining the role of the County Superintendent of Schools.

School Attendance Areas

The Chamber supports frequent review and adjustment of the school boundaries. The Chamber also recognizes that individual school boundaries have not been addressed for a number of years. Because of the fluidity of the student population in Billings, boundaries should be readjusted as needed to alleviate overcrowding and busing while balancing class sizes among individual schools. Emphasis must be placed on neighborhood schools rather than busing, assuming cost factors are relatively equal over the long term.

Magnet Schools

The Chamber supports the concept of magnet middle and high schools, which offer specialized Curriculum, highly trained teachers and innovative instruction, a great example of a magnet school is our own Career Center.

Dual Credits

The Chamber supports the dual credit program where students can attend college classes at MSU-Billings, City College at Montana State University Billings, or Rocky Mountain College and receive both high school and college credit. This program has the potential to alleviate over-crowding in the high schools and increase attendance at MSUBillings, City College at Montana State University Billings, and Rocky Mountain College.

Business to School Ambassadors/Partners in Education

The Chamber supports business to education ambassadors/partners in education program. Business ambassadors/partners would be assigned to each school principal and to all administrative personnel. This program helps the individual school staffs understand educational support by the business community and promotes interaction between business and education.

Financial Advice

The Chamber should be an integral partner regarding financial information and value judgments that become part of the school budget. We support the goals of all levels of education for numerous reasons and want to assist with delivering these services in a manner that is efficient and represents fiscal responsibility to the taxpayer. The Chamber will help to evaluate the financial information and promote understanding of the values underlying budgets of various educational institutions.

School Board Elections

The Billings Chamber supports well-qualified school board members. The current policy of electing from single-member districts presents challenges in finding well-qualified candidates for the school

board. Representing specific districts has been shown to have a divisive effect on the individual board members and district-wide issues do not receive adequate consideration. When the district elected board members at-large, there were many contested races, and candidates had to develop a platform on which they ran and take that message to the general electorate. We support returning to at-large elections.

School Board Committees

The Billings Chamber encourages the school district to reinstate the various committees, especially Budgeting for Results that were in existence prior to 2011. A committee structure, made up of the business community in particular, is an educational system for potential board member candidates, as well as a means for communication between the district and the business community.

Work Readiness Credential

The Billings Chamber believes that a skills profile and assessment that measures the proficiency of entry level workers should be a testing mechanism that is performed while the individual is still in school. The testing should measure the individual's basic and soft skills and testing should include:

1. Situational judgment
2. Oral language
3. Read with understanding
4. Use math to solve problems

When individuals successfully complete the assessment they receive a National Work Readiness Credential as a confirmation that they have the skills to add value on the frontline in entry level workplaces.

Non-Traditional Educational Opportunities

The Billings Chamber knows education does not begin or end with the traditional "school day". We support the efforts of community-based organizations engaged in public/private partnerships, which provide school-age children with a continuum of support designed keep students in school and bridge the gap between the classroom and the work force. In addition to the daily support designed to meet students basic physical, emotional and academic needs, these organizations provide intentional programs designed to expose students to the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), and activities which will create enthusiasm and assist students with developing goals and planning to secure employment in a STEM related career.

Post Secondary Education Faculty/Funding

The Chamber supports a quality system of higher education. To ensure academic excellence, the Chamber supports the development of any mechanism that will enable the universities to attract and retain outstanding faculty. The Chamber supports expanding incentives.

Post Secondary Education Interface with Healthcare

The Chamber supports the need to strengthen the stature of higher education in Billings through collaboration with our local healthcare industry and business community.

•**Bioscience Research and Development:** There is great potential in local economic development involving bioscience research and development. Collaboration between the healthcare industry with Rocky Mountain College, City College at Montana State University Billings and Montana State University Billings is particularly essential to success in this area.

•**Workforce Needs and Shortages:** There are many shortages right now in the field of nursing, and ancillary healthcare. Higher education is critical in providing education, training, and opportunities for degree advancement.

•**Higher-education collaboration:** Collaboration between Montana’s higher education institutions and businesses will benefit consumers of healthcare services, our local economy and employees. Strengthening the stature of higher in Billings will assist the healthcare industry in recruiting and retaining physicians and other healthcare professionals.

Post Secondary Education Interface with Business

The Chamber encourages the continuation and expansion of dialogue and cooperative ventures between higher education and private businesses that address workforce training needs and shortages and promote while promoting partnerships for business opportunities.

Post Secondary Education Transfer Credit Applicability

The Chamber recommends that the Montana University system assure sustainability of the Transferability Initiative that has been accomplished and is in effect.

Post Secondary Education Facilities

The Chamber supports continuation of a formal long-range capital building plan for the University system. Montana State University-Billings is an integral part of our community and investment in its infrastructure is critical to its continuation. We support the acquisition of additional land where needed to ensure orderly long term growth.

Six-mill Post Secondary Education Statewide Funding

Until a better alternative is found, the Chamber supports funding of the six-mill levy for higher education.

AGRICULTURE

Basic Philosophy

The Billings Chamber of Commerce/CVB believes that an economically strong Agriculture Industry is an essential part of the growth and sustainability of our overall economy. With that belief, the Chamber pledges to protect the property rights of those involved in production agriculture. Inherent in these rights is the right to pass property from generation to generation without taxation or penalty.

In addition, the Chamber supports movement toward a taxation system built on the premise of low flat and fair tax assessment. This is founded in the belief that special incentives, while they may benefit a small sector of the economy, result in higher taxes for all.

Given the fact that Production Agriculture is closely tied to land usage and stewardship, the Chamber supports the development of natural resources in a manner that is both economically viable and environmentally sustainable for the long term.

These resources include the following:

- Water and the right to water usage and perpetuation of water rights granted decades ago. In addition the Billings Chamber supports water quality regulations that are founded in need for economically sustainable production.
- Development of energy related resources including coal and natural gas along with renewable energy from wind, solar and hydropower resources. Support of this development includes not only discovery and production of these resources but also the forms of transportation and distribution systems for these resources.
- Livestock and Wildlife Resources. Balancing the rights of Agricultural Producers as they relate to the protection of livestock from the threats of wildlife disease transmission and predatory attacks balanced with the economic benefit gained from the wildlife itself in the form of hunting income and tourism income.

Prior to the start of the 2013 Montana legislative session as well as during the session, the Chamber will consult with and maintain an active involvement with the various state agriculture organizations to determine issues of importance to the agriculture community. It will communicate these areas of concern to the membership, seek input, and determine an appropriate course of action as needed.

Specific Issues

Water Resource Management:

Water Rights Protection - The Chamber believes that there should be no dilution of water rights and, if anything, these rights should be reaffirmed and strengthened. The Chamber will monitor bill draft requests, proposed and introduced legislation and plan a strategy to deal with issues as they come forth.

Regulations regarding Exempt Water Wells - The Chamber believes that individual property rights need to be protected and agricultural use water well development should be exempt to the extent established in current law.

Water Quality and Soil Quality Issues

The Billings Chamber feels that Montana's existing law should be maintained and supports state's rights to make these determinations.

Water Marketing

The Billings Chamber will oppose any attempt to pass legislation that will dilute our rights and urge the state to determine and define "navigable" waters.

Land Use:

Private land purchases by the state of Montana - Protecting the rights of property owners is fundamental to the success of a free market economic system, and is an important cornerstone upon which our nation was founded. A strong local economy depends on preserving the right of responsible individuals to freely own, use and transfer real property. There should be no net loss of private land to state ownership.

Wildlife Management:

Wild Bison - The Chamber opposes the concept of wild & free roaming bison and the ability of bison or any other alternative livestock to move freely from location to location. Our belief is that this would be taking property rights from private landholders, and will adversely affect public safety.

Responsibility for Wildlife - The Chamber believes that the responsibility for the management of elk, bison and wolves should be managed in such a manner that agricultural producers will not be adversely affected by the threat of disease and/or predation.

Agriculture Business Development:

Agriculture Research, Development and Education - We believe that research stations such as the Southern Agriculture Research Center at Huntley provide an invaluable service to the Billings area in particular and the state of Montana in general when it comes to agriculture production. We support continued operation of these stations at or greater than the current level of funding in order to attract and retain quality research and personnel. We will also oppose any attempt to reduce their funding or scope of work.

We also support the continuation of the Extension Service Programs at or above current staffing and funding levels.

Finally, we support the continuation of Agriculture Education at all levels, from K-12 through college and encourage higher education to expand and develop new programs and classes as new technology is developed.

Transportation Infrastructure - The Chamber supports the development of new transportation infrastructures and maintenance of existing systems, including highways, rail lines and pipelines. We oppose any efforts to impede the development of these infrastructures.

Market Development - The Chamber supports and encourages the development of new commodity markets as means for Montana producers to take advantage of viable and attractive markets for the advancement of new and improved practices and technology.

CONTACT INFORMATION



Billings Chamber of Commerce
Convention and Visitors Bureau

815 South 27th Street
P.O. Box 31177
Billings, MT 59107-1177
P (406) 245-4111
F (406) 245-7333
BillingsChamber.com

Staff

Name

Title

Email Address

John Brewer, CAE	President/CEO	john@billingschamber.com
Alex Tyson	Executive Director, Convention and Visitors Bureau	alex@billingschamber.com
Bruce MacIntyre	Director, Government Affairs	bruce@billingschamber.com
Keri Wilson	Membership Relations Manager	keri@billingschamber.com
Kama Humphrey	Events Manager / Director, Leadership Billings	kama@billingschamber.com
Jennifer Reiser	Director of Operations	jennifer@billingschamber.com
John Bowman	Membership Recruitment Manager	jb Bowman@billingschamber.com
Tom Krause	Sales Manager, Convention and Visitors Bureau	tom@billingschamber.com
Rene' Beyl	Membership Development Assistant	rene'@billingschamber.com
Kelly McCandless	Communications Manager	kelly@billingschamber.com
Caitlin Hall	Visitor Services Assistant	caitlin@billingschamber.com
Linda Gleason	Accountant	linda@billingschamber.com
Nick Mann	Director, Southeast Montana Tourism	nick@southeastmontana.com

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Max Graham	Chair, Healthcare Task Force
Bruce Parker	Chair, Taxation Task Force
Ginny Hart	Chair, Tourism Task Force
Steve Wahrlich	Chair, Tourism Business Improvement District
John Stricker	Chair, Workforce/Business Development Committee
Bill Cole	Chair, Transportation/Managed Growth Task Force
Jennifer Quinn	Chair, Education Committee