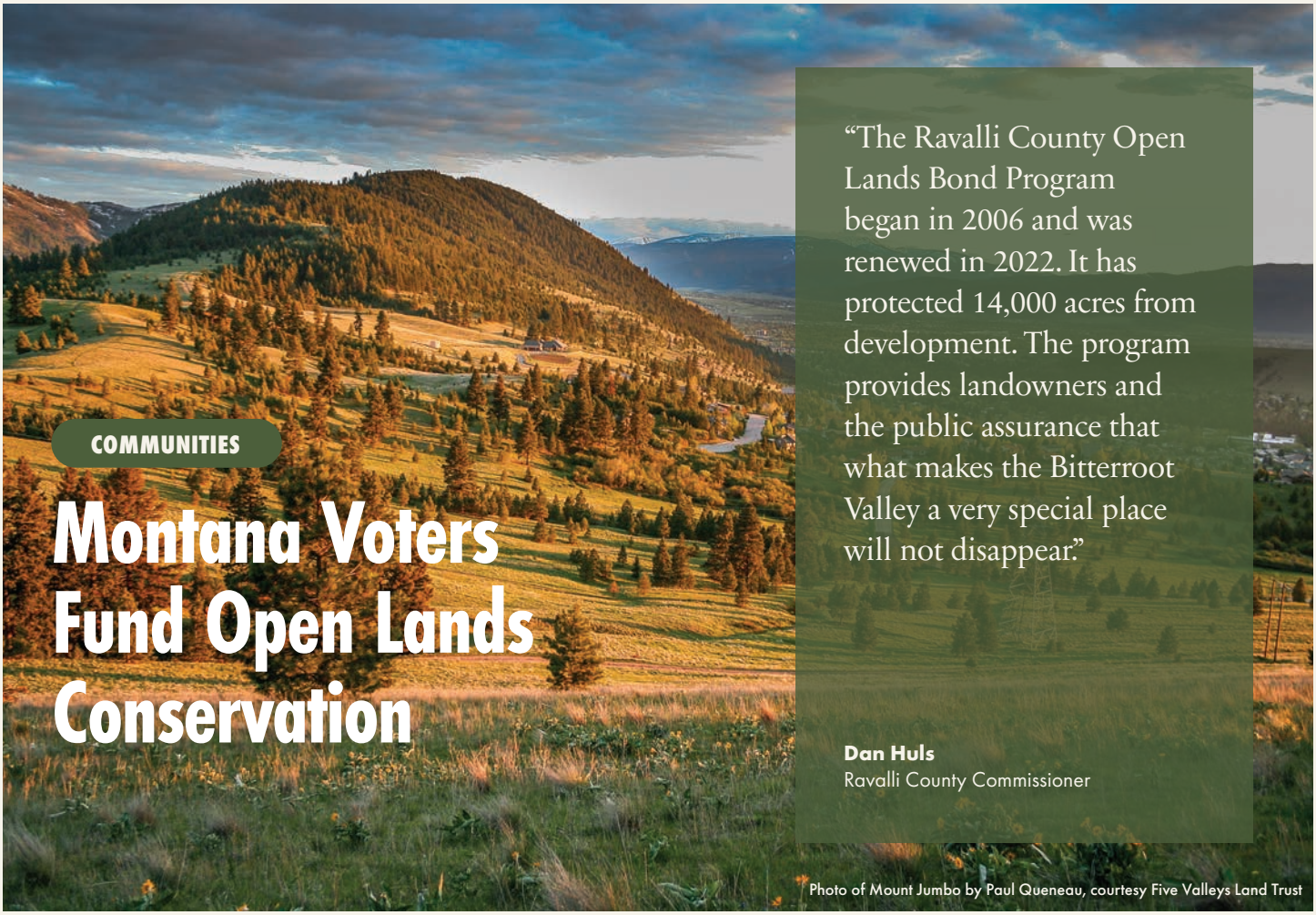

COMMUNITIES

# Montana Voters Fund Open Lands Conservation

"The Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program began in 2006 and was renewed in 2022. It has protected 14,000 acres from development. The program provides landowners and the public assurance that what makes the Bitterroot Valley a very special place will not disappear."

**Dan Huls**
Ravalli County Commissioner

Photo of Mount Jumbo by Paul Queneau, courtesy Five Valleys Land Trust

Across Montana, in Gallatin, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, and Ravalli counties, voters express their support for open space and community recreation. In Missoula and Ravalli Counties, a series of voter-approved Open Space and Lands Bonds have conserved thousands of acres of open space, agricultural lands, wildlife habitat, and community parklands through investments in conservation easements and open lands that protect the area's open spaces. These programs are supported by neighboring communities because they are driven by landowners, respect local values, and are rooted in the voluntary exercise of private property rights.

For almost 50 years, the residents of Missoula County have shown their support for land conservation through voter-approved open space bonds. The continuous existence of the Missoula Open Space Bond has enabled the protection of thousands of acres of private lands and the creation of dozens of parks and trails across Missoula County.

The first bond, passed in 1980 and limited to lands within the City of Missoula, set aside $500,000 to support the finalization of the area's first conservation easement as well as parks and trails along the Clark Fork River. In 1995, city residents came out to pass a $5 million bond that enabled the public acquisition of Mount Jumbo from Five Valleys Land Trust as well as the creation of multiple open spaces and the protection of several private lands through conservation easements.

### WHY THIS MATTERS

Many Montana communities value open space

Montana voters overwhelmingly support conservation easements

Conservation easements make our communities better places to live, work, and play

The $10 million 2006 Open Space Bond encompassed the entirety of Missoula County, with funds jointly managed between the City of Missoula and the County. The 2006 Bond was leveraged 1:4 to raise another $40 million from other programs and enabled the protection of both private lands and the creation of public lands, such as those on Mount Sentinel and on Marshall Mountain. In 2018, Missoula County residents again affirmed their support for conservation by passing a $15 million bond. The 2018 Bond is currently helping to fund conservation projects, including trailhead improvements, conservation easements, and public land acquisitions.



Skalkaho Bend Park, Hamilton / Photo by Jason Savage, courtesy Bitter Root Land Trust

Just over the county line to the south, neighboring communities in the Bitterroot Valley have also answered the call for community support of landowner-driven conservation.

In 2005, the Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board suggested that Ravalli County create a voluntary, non-regulatory landowner driven tool providing local farmers and ranchers with an option to keep their working lands in production. At the request of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board, an all Republican Board of County Commissioners put the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond on the ballot. The $10 million Open Lands Bond was passed by the voters of Ravalli County in 2006 with nearly 60% of the vote.

After 16 years and 38 funded projects conserving 10,367 acres, the Right to Farm and Ranch Board proposed County Commissioners ask voters to consider renewing the Open Lands Program at $10 million in November 2022. In Ravalli County, 71% of the citizens voted to renew the bond.

In Ravalli County, every $1 spent by the Open Lands Program is matched by $3 from other sources, making local investment in conservation go even further. The average Ravalli County residence pays less than $21 per year for the Open Lands Program renewal. It's a small price to pay for a legacy of family farms, healthy wildlife and fisheries, and access for hunting, fishing and recreation.

"Five Valleys Land Trust's conservation work in the Missoula Valley contributes to our quality of life and the strength of our economy. Their success creates the environment in which businesses want to invest and that attracts the workforce that allows them to grow. It's a great model for how communities can come together to shape a more vibrant and predictable future."

– **GRANT KIER, CEO, MONTANA ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP**



**WESTERN MONTANA**
*Missoula County*
*Ravalli County*

**PARTNERING LAND TRUSTS**
*Five Valleys Land Trust*
*Bitter Root Land Trust*

BY THE NUMBERS

## Montana Community Support

# 92.5%

**OF MONTANANS**

Support allowing private landowners the ability to conserve their lands through voluntary conservation easements without government interference

SOURCE: Colorado College. 2025. Conservation in the West Poll. https://cwpoll.org/vis/

# $122M+

**CONSERVATION FUNDS**

Approved by voters through local ballot measures

SOURCE: TPL LandVote® Database, https://tpl.quickbase.com/db/bbqna2qct?a=dbpage&pageID=8

# 84%

**OF MONTANANS**

Say conservation issues are important when deciding whether to support an elected official

SOURCE: Colorado College. 2026. Conservation in the West Poll. https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2026.html