

Introduction

Welcome to Big Sky 55+. We are an organization of Montanans 55 and older who are mobilizing our voices, experience, and power to make our state a better place for current and future generations and to advance the human dignity of all.

We are working for a future where all Montanans can live, work, raise a family, and retire in safety and dignity as they get older. We want a future where young people can pursue an education without crippling debt. We cherish Montana's safe and healthy communities where being a good neighbor is the norm, not the exception. We want all of us to have access to quality, affordable health care whether we live on a farm, in a city, or on a reservation. We want a future that keeps Montana's constitutional promise of a clean and healthful environment.

We believe in the public good that supports this vision and are prepared to fight for it. But everywhere it is under attack. Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are threatened. At the same time, the tax revenues that fund these programs and other essential public services are in jeopardy, as taxes are cut for the wealthy. This shifts more of the burden to pay for these services from the wealthiest onto the rest of us. This is not right, it's not moral and it hurts our economy.

Protecting these values is challenging work, and Big Sky 55+ brings an experienced Board and a smart, energetic staff who are up to the challenge. The members of Big Sky 55+ come from all walks of life — teachers, farmers and ranchers, conservationists, faith leaders, health professionals, firefighters, small business owners, attorneys, community volunteers, union members, and more. Some of us are retired, some are still working. Some have served on local school boards, city councils, and even the Montana Legislature. All of us have been active for decades in pursuit of the common good in an effort to provide opportunities for a happy, purposeful life for our families and generations into the future.

Our platform outlines the steps we believe are important in shaping the future character of Montana. These steps will help guide our policy, electoral, and accountability work.

Background

The United States emerged out of the Great Depression with a new focus on making the economy work for all Americans, not just the elite few. We came together as a nation to invest in people, families, and communities. Leaders of both parties supported policies designed to strengthen the common good, reward hard work, and create a healthy, functioning society. President Franklin D. Roosevelt boldly asserted that each one of us is entitled to a life free from want and fear.

New Deal programs such as Social Security lifted millions of people from the threat of crushing poverty. (Montana led the charge in a significant way. In the mid-1920s, almost a decade before federal Social Security, a Republican-led legislature and Republican governor established a pension for elder Montanans in need, which served as a template for the federal government years later. Montanans have a long history of caring for one another.)


Working people gained stronger rights to collectively bargain. Progressive taxation systems were implemented, requiring the wealthiest individuals and businesses to pay their fair share. While leaders recognized the power of markets as the driving engine of the economy, they also recognized the government's role in regulating those markets to prevent the excesses that caused the Great Depression.

From the 1940s into the 1970s, the country experienced a strong bipartisan focus on opening the doors of opportunity through higher education. We saw a growing awareness of the need to protect the natural environment for future generations. Medicare and Medicaid were created. We passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Montana adopted a new constitution that recognizes the distinct culture of American Indians and our duty to preserve their cultural integrity.

In the '70s and '80s, things began to change. Momentum shifted toward policies that place radically less value on the common good. Proponents of this philosophy support taxation systems that favor wealthy individuals and large corporations. They continue to cut government spending on social safety net programs. They continue to attack regulations that protect the environment and keep the financial system honest. And they relentlessly push to defund and privatize public schools and other public services.

Their economic philosophy, also known as trickle-down economics, attacks the very idea of a society based on collective responsibility to our neighbors, the environment, and future generations. Under the guise of "individual freedom," it champions an agenda that has resulted in severe environmental degradation, social inequality, and unprecedented economic inequality.

In Montana, politicians who adhere to this economic philosophy dominate our legislature and state offices as of 2021.



Big Sy 55+ embraces a different vision—one that works for all Montanans. We believe real freedom is impossible without safe, strong communities; clean air and water; affordable homes; access to health care; and a good education for our kids and grandkids. We believe most Montanans want these things.

Our key mission is to mobilize Montana citizens 55 and older to advocate for these values. The majority of Montana voters are 55 and older. This gives us a significant opportunity to create positive change. We provide solid information to these voters about issues and elections that affect them and their families. We encourage them to vote. Finally, we pressure elected officials to pass laws that bolster the common good.

We hope you will join us to make this vision a reality.

Protecting and Expanding Social Security and Medicare

A secure income and access to healthcare are necessities as we age. We need a comprehensive approach to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, geography, gender, race, or vocation, has a guaranteed opportunity to retire with a secure income and access to healthcare that will allow them to live their lives with dignity and independence.

Montana is the fastest aging state in the west. This makes Social Security even more vital to our residents, our communities, and our economy. Montana has always supported seniors and was the first state to create a pension for retirees, later becoming part of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Retirement security is especially needed in small, rural counties where Social Security's monthly payments keep hometown businesses open. Its modest income buys everyday essentials like groceries, gas, and local services. For two-thirds of Americans, Social Security is half or more of their income, and it's paid out in sums often so small that they are only a shade away from poverty. For one-third of Americans, Social Security is their only income in retirement. And for one-third of retired Americans, Social Security is their only source of income.

Americans have come to depend on Social Security as a retirement plan as workplace pensions and employer plans have dwindled. This is especially true for women. In recent years, we've been told that there will be nothing left by the time we need it despite having contributed over a lifetime of work. This myth is the creation of those who vehemently opposed Social Security since its creation, disregarding its history as one of our most dependable anti-poverty institutions.

Medicare Is the Cornerstone of Senior Care

For over 50 years, Medicare has provided vital health care services from annual wellness checkups to long-term care for those 65 and older --nearly 20% of Montanans. It insures more than 236,000 Montanans, half of whom live on incomes close to poverty. Medicare serves as a foundation, but there are obvious gaps in its coverage such as basic dental, hearing, and vision. Addressing these and other preventive services is being discussed now in the U.S. Congress as "human infrastructure." The term human infrastructure refers to the aspects of facilities and systems that affect and involve people such as healthcare, childcare, education, and job training.

As medical care costs rise faster than most parts of the economy, the need to address Medicare's funding and health care costs in general grows in importance. People on Medicare now spend three times more of their income on health coverage than younger households.

Improve Access to Long-Term Care

Contributing to the crisis is the need for long-term care which affects people of all ages and further strains our economy. Thousands of seniors do not receive the long-term care they need because of its cost. This leads to financial stress on millions of families, especially those in the “sandwich generation”— one in six adults—who are not only caring for their children but also aging parents.

Community-based care provides a less costly option than institutionalization and allows people to live independently with dignity. A significant barrier for those who want to remain in their homes and communities is a lack of access to affordable care delivered by a well-qualified and well-paid workforce.

Expand Retirement Security

Social Security benefits reduce poverty. Without it, 22.2 million more Americans would be poor, and 44 percent of elderly Americans would live below the official poverty line. Seventy-five million working Americans do not have a retirement plan, and half of all Americans have less than \$10,000 in savings. Nearly one in four Montanans earn Social Security benefits as retirees, widowers, surviving children and people with disabilities. While some politicians seek to undermine Social Security, there are simple solutions to ensuring that every American receives the full amount of Social Security benefits they spent their entire lives earning.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support public policies that preserve, strengthen, and extend Social Security including eliminating the cap on taxable earnings.
- Support policies that capture passive income such as investment income, capital gains, rent, etc.
- Support public policies that preserve, strengthen, and expand Medicare; implement common sense reforms to prescription coverage that ensure people can access vital medicines; cover preventive care; and add coverage for vision, dental, and hearing.
- Support robust community-based support systems, services, and workforce development that enables older Montanans to maintain their independence and stay in their homes.
- Support policies that increase access to long term care services that enable people to age in dignity and grace.

Healthcare for All

On December 10, 1948, the United States voted to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirming our commitment to healthcare as a basic human right. Most countries with advanced market economies, except the United States, now provide healthcare for all as a matter of right. Instead of implementing policies that would fully recognize that right, the United States has cobbled together a health care system that is more expensive than any other country and provides demonstrably inferior healthcare results.

Our healthcare system is broken and needs to be fixed.

Quality affordable healthcare helps individuals and families get the care they need as soon as they need it. It removes the worry of affordability, encourages people to get preventive care, and leads to early diagnosis of illnesses when the illness can be more easily, effectively, and inexpensively treated. It supports a better society for all of us.

The burden of unpaid medical bills falls heavily on rural Montana. Our rural hospitals and clinics depend on medical payments from Medicare and Medicaid. When hospitals provide services to Montanans who cannot pay for them, the hospitals can become insolvent and must be closed. While no rural hospitals have closed since the expansion of Medicaid in 2015, constant attacks to undermine Medicaid at the state level leave the longevity of our rural hospitals in a precarious position. Hospital closures are catastrophic for our rural communities.

We support policies and initiatives that will reduce the cost of healthcare, help our rural hospitals, and provide better services for ourselves and our neighbors.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support reforming Medicare to include dental, vision, and hearing services.
- Support providing Medicare the right to negotiate drug prices as an effective way to control the price of medications.
- Support the protection of Medicaid Expansion so that Montanans have access to healthcare regardless of their income and so our hospitals can be properly reimbursed for their services.
- Support maximizing the use of telemedicine and expanded broadband internet to rural Montana areas.
- Support extending health services for veterans.
- Support making Indian Health Care Services portable so that Native Americans can access healthcare wherever they live.
- Support long term care for folks with disabilities
- Support lowering the age of Medicare eligibility
- Support restoring funding to mental health services

Economic Security for All

Human dignity and the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are cornerstones in our state and federal constitutions. These values undergird our support for economic security for working families throughout their lifespan. Broadly supported shared investments in public infrastructure, public education, land grant colleges, Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare have embodied these fundamental, shared American values in long standing economic policies.

Montana now faces many challenges in achieving economic security and opportunity for all. Our state and nation are plagued by growing and unprecedented disparities in wealth, with a small group of ultra-rich capturing vast quantities of wealth while working families struggle to keep even, living just one illness, accident, or car emergency away from economic catastrophe. According to a recent analysis by the Pew Research Center, the wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016. The 50 richest families in the US have 17 times more wealth than the poorest 165 million Americans.

In order to address these issues and move forward we need to ensure that our economy is fair and works for everyone.

Require Corporations and the Elite to Pay their Fair Share

Corporations continue to make record profits, yet far too many of them pay nothing in federal income tax. Federal and state lawmakers have given massive tax breaks for the wealthiest, while shrinking public services or shifting the costs of basic community needs (like schools) onto the backs of working families and retirees. This disinvestment diminishes vital community institutions that have historically been the gateway of opportunity for Montana's middle- and lower-income families to succeed and thrive.

Support the Fight for Living Wages

The COVID pandemic spotlighted the critical importance of essential and frontline workers who kept our communities safe and our economy rolling. It also underscored their value, which has long gone unrecognized. In the aftermath of COVID, some employers discovered that they could not find the workers they needed at the low wages they were offering. As the economy is rebuilt, it is time to reassess and prioritize the importance of essential and front-line workers to our wider community well-being and ensure living wages and benefits necessary for them to continue to perform these vital jobs.

Supporting Workers' Rights to Raise Wages and Improve Workplace Standards

When workers come together and have a voice at work, they have the power to improve their wages and benefits and ensure they are treated with dignity on the job. Our current labor laws do not support workers who want to form a union. It's time we reform laws to protect workers who want to bargain

collectively for better pay and better working conditions. We need to support new ways for workers to form organizations that can raise wages across the economy.

Affordable Housing is Vital to Economic Security

In many Montana communities, workers, young families, seniors, veterans, and students cannot afford to put a roof over their heads, or are relegated to substandard, inaccessible, and unhealthy housing, or pushed out into long-distant commutes between workplace and affordable housing. It is critical that local, state, and federal policies address this issue and ensure that all Montanans can find affordable, decent, healthy, and safe housing in the communities where they work, retire, study, and raise their families.

The housing crisis varies around the state. In some areas, Montana's workers cannot afford to live anywhere near where they work. In other parts of the state crumbling infrastructure and lack of investors prevent Montanans from accessing safe, healthy, and affordable shelter. State, federal and local elected officials must establish policies that incentivize affordable housing in a variety of Montana's settings, including urban, historic neighborhoods, rural communities, and Native American reservations.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support fair and progressive tax structures that fully fund state and federal governments, education, public safety and services, and infrastructure.
- Support strengthening workers' right to organize for fair wages, benefits, and safe working conditions.
- Support living wage initiatives that ensure that workers providing for the vital needs of the community and the economy can afford decent living conditions and support their families.
- Support policies that incentivize and ensure affordable healthy housing opportunities in all Montana communities sufficient to meet the needs of workers, families, retirees, veterans, and students.
- Oppose all Right to Work legislation, including any and all anti-worker legislation that unfairly favors corporations over workers.

Quality Education for All

"(1) It is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. Equality of educational opportunity is guaranteed to each person of the state" (Montana Constitution, Part X, Education and Public Lands Section 1).

As seniors, we know that a quality, adequately funded public education system, from early childhood through higher education, is essential for building strong families, strong communities, and a strong Montana. Public education opens doors for success and helps level the economic playing field. Democracy can only function with an educated citizenry. Yet public education faces enormous challenges and outright attacks, including efforts to undermine, defund, and privatize it.

Because of funding cuts at the state level over recent decades, Montana has seen an unfair shift in responsibility for Pre-K-12 school funding from the state onto local taxpayers. This has created significant disparities among school districts, with high-income communities able to afford more educational opportunities than lower-income communities. In addition, state funding cuts for higher education have forced continual tuition hikes, making it more difficult for Montana families to afford higher education.

Big Sky 55+ believes that a strong public school system, from early childhood through adult/higher education, must provide all students, regardless of gender, race, economic status, or special needs, with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to participate in our society and our economic systems. We need to eliminate the disparities in school funding and student achievement.

Montana is one of only a handful of states without state funded voluntary Pre-Kindergarten. Voluminous research shows that thousands of Montana children every year will enter Kindergarten so far behind they can never catch up without Pre-K. Head Start, for example, is a highly successful but chronically underfunded program that prepares low-income children to succeed in school, helping break the cycle of poverty in families.

Teachers are the most important factor in the quality of a student's education. Attracting and keeping excellent teachers requires high quality training along with salaries and benefits that make it possible for teachers to stay in the profession.

Post-secondary education is vital in today's economy. Most good jobs require at least some level of post-secondary education. We must make college and vocational training accessible and affordable for all Montana students and stop burdening students and their families with mountains of debt. Montana's higher education institutions provide research in fields from agriculture to advanced technologies to the humanities. This research fuels the creation of new businesses and jobs in the state.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support adequate school funding to meet our constitutional responsibilities to all public schools, both rural and urban, regardless of zip code. This includes equalizing Pre-K-12 school funding at the state level by levying a greater percentage of statewide mills to fund schools.
- Support adequate state and federal funding for free voluntary Pre-K including Head Start.
- Support efforts and funding to reduce disparities in school achievement.
- Support adequate state and federal funding for higher education.
- Reduce student debt and seek tuition-free options to allow access for all students.
- Support our teachers and other school staff in quality pay and benefits.
- Support Montana's current requirement for licensed, certified, well-trained teachers in our Pre-K-12 public schools.
- Oppose efforts to divert taxpayer dollars from public schools to private and charter schools.
- Support state funding to include American Indian history and culture in public schools and higher education as required by the state constitution (Indian Education for All).
- Support state and federal funding for tribal colleges.
- Support the 6-mill levy, a crucial part of higher education funding in Montana since 1948 that goes to voters for approval every 10 years.

Right to a Clean and Healthy Environment

We believe we have the responsibility to leave a clean and healthful environment for future generations. It is our constitutional right (Montana Constitution, Article IX) and our charge to pass on our rich natural legacy of clean air and water, wildlife, open space, and fertile lands in excellent condition.

The natural environment provides the bare essentials for our survival – water, oxygen, and food. Scientific evidence also indicates that exposure to nature (“greenspace”) has significant mental and physical health benefits for people of all ages. Countless Montanans have worked for decades to pass laws that protect clean air and water, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, clean up pollution, preserve agricultural land, create parks, and protect Wilderness areas and other non-motorized areas – some of the last few respites from the speed and noise of the modern world. Most of these protections are threatened.

The trend to build large second homes in prime forest for the ultra-wealthy negatively affects Montana's wildlife habitat/migration corridors and increases management problems and public safety concerns in the wildland interface.

Climate change presents the most pressing threat facing the natural environment and humanity itself. Intense heat waves, droughts, mega-storms, crop failures, species extinction, and loss of freshwater pose severe perils. As with all environmental injustices, working families and lower-income people are at greatest risk.

Montanans are experiencing the effects of climate change firsthand as the American West becomes a tinderbox. We're seeing longer, more extreme, and more frequent droughts and an ever-longer wildfire season that could eventually last all year, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. (ucsusa.org/climate) The financial and health costs of wildfires are staggering.

But change is still possible. “Science suggests that we can avoid the worst impacts of climate change if we limit warming to under 2°C. To do so, we need a much cleaner economy by mid-century or sooner. Fossil fuel companies need to stop preventing climate action. And leaders in the U.S. need to act” (Union of Concerned Scientists, ucsusa.org/climate).

Climate impacts are directly linked to the burning of fossil fuels like oil and coal that release carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere. As a fossil fuel producing state, Montana faces additional challenges as we move away from fossil fuels and toward sustainable industries in both rural and urban communities.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support a wise transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as rooftop solar in new construction, wind production where viable, and electric cars.
- Support communities that are transitioning from fossil fuels; mining; and other extractive, boom/bust economies to more sustainable and diverse economic opportunities.
- Support job retraining for workers in fossil fuel and other extractive industries.
- Support clean-up and restoration of historic environmental damage.
- Support protecting and conserving Montana's precious water, its lakes, rivers, and streams.
- Support access to our public lands and oppose efforts to sell or transfer them.
- Support our state and city parks and trails.
- Oppose efforts to weaken laws that protect Montana's environment.
- Oppose efforts to open our designated Wilderness areas and other nonmotorized areas to low-flying aircraft, drones, and mechanized travel.
- Support land-use planning to minimize impacts of home development on the natural environment and on productive agricultural lands, which preserve open space and Montana's historic beauty.
- Support protecting special places like the Badger Two Medicine for future generations.

Social, Economic, and Racial Justice

Each of us is entitled to live in a society that supports social, economic, legal, and racial justice for all. But our economic and legal systems strip power from common folk and concentrate power in a tiny minority while our criminal justice and prison systems impose unjust burdens upon Native Americans and other minorities. We support reforms that will help correct these problems and create a just society for all of us.

We believe in equal pay for equal work regardless of gender or race. Today, women in Montana earn 22% less than men; Native Americans and other people of color, even less. We support policies that advance economic equity and prohibit wage discrimination based on race, sex, gender, disability, or age.

We believe in a woman's right to make her own health care decisions without the interference of the government.

The criminal justice system touches every single one of us. It claims a substantial part of the taxes that we pay to the state. Most of us know someone who was processed through the system and who suffered from its inequities. It keeps innocent people in jail just because they cannot afford to pay a bail bondsman to secure their release pending trial. This destroys their employment, ruins their family and community lives and forces us to build bigger jails and prisons, adding to our tax burden. The injustice of the system falls disproportionately on Native American peoples who account for over 18% of the incarcerated population while only representing 7% of our population. We support comprehensive criminal justice reform to eliminate these inequities.

Some Montanans are discriminated against in employment, housing and public accommodations because of their gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. We support city and statewide efforts to eliminate this discrimination.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Oppose legislation and ballot measures that discriminate against people based on gender, race, religious beliefs, age, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, political beliefs or social condition in employment, housing, provision of public services, credit, and public accommodations.
- Support expanding the Human Rights Act to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. In addition, we support Non-Discrimination Ordinances and the amendment of our Biased-Base Crimes Act to provide more protection for these groups.
- Support efforts to ban discriminatory practices in any public service.
- Oppose efforts that interfere with a woman's right to make her own healthcare decisions.
- Support efforts to abolish capital punishment in the state of Montana.

Native American Equity in Montana

Native Americans have lived here for thousands of years, long before the State of Montana existed, and now reside on seven reservations and throughout our urban areas. They are a growing population composed of 6.7% of people who identify as Native American exclusively up to 9.5% of people who are of two or more races. Native children are just over 10% of the student population in our public schools.

Each tribal nation has a proud history and unique cultural heritage and language. Each also has a legal relationship to the Federal Government based on a long history of treaties and laws. The government-to-government relationships recognize the sovereignty of tribal nations as the basis of their relationship with the Federal Government and the State of Montana.

Native American people face many challenges in their daily lives, both on and off reservation. Solutions can be found through cooperative efforts and support among the tribal nations and Federal, State and Local Government systems.

Equity for Native Americans in Montana is challenged in a number of ways:

1. Severe health care disparities show that American Indians in Montana have a median lifespan 17 years shorter than white people. Native American men die 15 years earlier than white men, and women 19 years earlier than white women. Death rates are higher for those with heart disease, diabetes, chronic liver disease, congenital disorders, and injuries. Covid-19 took a deadly toll, killing Native Americans at twice the rate as white people in the state.
2. The highest rate of suicide in Montana persists among American Indians. In 2019, 40 per 100,000 American Indians lost their lives to suicide compared with 26 per 100,000 in the general population. Deaths linked to suicide, alcohol, and drugs were more than twice as high for tribal members throughout the U.S. in 2017 and 2018.
3. Educational achievement is improving, but American Indian students face higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and lower achievement levels than their non-Indian peers. Additionally, school districts in Indian Country are more likely to be under-resourced and experience higher teacher turnover.
4. American Indians' incarceration rates are disproportionately higher in our prison system despite being undercounted in the prison population.
5. Violence against women as well as missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is a high-profile state and national issue. Montana is 5th highest in the nation for MMIWG with over 3,250 individuals reported missing between 2017-2019. A disproportionate number of Indigenous men go missing as well.
6. Substance abuse, generational poverty, unemployment, and inadequate housing are persistent problems.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support the sovereignty of Montana’s tribal nations and their government-to-government relationships.
- Promote the inclusion of American Indian history and culture in our K- higher education systems as outlined by our state’s constitution and state statutes.
- Support increased access to health insurance, preventive, and primary health care to reduce health care disparities.
- Support efforts to reduce the high rates of incarceration in our criminal justice systems.
- Support efforts to improve the social and economic well-being of Montana’s Native American families both on and off reservation.
- Support increased participation in the political systems, including supporting progressive candidates and increased access to voting through satellite voting centers in our reservation communities.

Strengthening Montana's Rural Communities

Montana is a predominantly rural state. Montanans value our rural communities, lifestyle and the open landscapes. Rural communities are aging faster than the rest of the state. These communities are stewards of vast landscapes, water, food and fiber, natural resources, and wildlife essential to society and the ecosystems that sustain life. They embody a culture and ethic that celebrates hard work, hospitality, and neighborliness. The needs of rural citizens and their communities include:

Infrastructure Funding

Well-maintained infrastructure is vital for agriculture and local businesses to thrive. Water and sewer systems, volunteer fire departments, local law enforcement, public schools and well-maintained highways and roads keep our communities viable and livable. Rural communities struggle to fund these services. Infrastructure investments help maintain and improve businesses and communities and create good paying jobs.

Utilities

Rural communities need broadband internet access as well as improved telephone services including cell and landlines. Electric co-ops need to be open, democratic and responsive to the communities they serve.

Rural Health Care

Rural hospitals, telemedicine, veterans' health care, and mental health care are key to viable rural communities. Seniors need a range of care options from home health care to rehab centers and nursing homes.

Support for Family Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture

Farmers markets, farm to school, farm to table restaurants, small manufacturing of food products, niche markets--these provide jobs and access to locally sourced, sustainable foods. Rural voices must be heard on fair trade, concentration in the meatpacking industry, country of origin labeling and the Farm Bill.

Farm Transition to Next Generation

We support ways to help foster the next generation of those who will grow our food, including access to capital, mentorship for beginning farmers and ranchers, and improved extension services.

Climate

Rural communities and the systems that sustain them are particularly vulnerable to climate change. With the increase in wildfires and deepening drought, family agricultural operations deserve national and state mitigations and protection.

Education

Public schools are vital to rural communities and are community and social hubs. Once a small town loses its public school, it loses its identity and its ability to attract young families to farm and ranch.

Energy Self Sufficiency

Renewable energy generation, such as solar and wind, and energy-efficient design innovations open many opportunities to generate revenues, lower production costs, and reduce carbon pollution in rural and agricultural settings.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support state and federal policies that positively affect rural communities and oppose harmful policies. Positive initiatives include strengthening local food systems, food security, and on-farm energy generation and self sufficiency.
- Support reforms in federal farm legislation to strengthen rural communities and family farms, such as fair trade, country of origin labeling, and provisions to ensure fair competition in the livestock industry.
- Support strong food security (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in federal farm bills, which provides necessary assistance for rural communities and citizens as well as farmers and ranchers.

Fair Taxation and Revenue

Taxes are a statement of who and what we value as a society. Big Sky 55+ stands for fairness and shared responsibility in Montana's tax policy in order to address the needs of our communities. These include education, infrastructure, public safety, and public health. A progressive system recognizes and allocates the costs of funding public services in proportion to the individual's ability to pay. An old adage goes, "Many hands make light work." So, too, broadly shared taxes spread the load widely and lessen it on those least able to pay.

We support a state system of taxation that provides sufficient funding for public services. Tax revenues should fully fund our schools through post-secondary education. These revenues should also be invested in public safety, essential infrastructure including roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, broadband networks throughout the state, and the human services upon which so many families and seniors rely. These services fuel the economy and make democracy possible.

Income Taxes

A progressive income tax, a system of graduated tax rates which increases as income levels rise, is the fairest instrument to allocate the shared costs of government. As Montana's economy transitions away from natural resources, it is critical that the state employs progressive income taxes to generate needed revenues. Fairness also requires that income derived from passive investments be taxed commensurate with income derived from employment.

Natural Resource Taxes

Montana's history of mineral extraction, coupled with volatile boom and bust market cycles and numerous legacies of environmental contamination, necessitates the continued taxation of natural resources in order to cover the public costs of development and the restoration of land to sustain future productivity. The creation of trusts preserves temporary resource tax revenues to ensure long term benefits to the state. Resource tax revenue streams are declining as a share of the wider statewide economy as new economic sectors emerge, including outdoor recreation and tourism, digital and knowledge-based manufacturing, financial services, and health care. Public policy must adapt, as the economy evolves and natural resource extraction declines, to ensure that the economy continues to generate the revenues needed to fund critical services and infrastructure.

Sales Taxes

Sales taxes are often "regressive," meaning low-income people pay a higher percentage of their income than wealthy people. They have been employed in limited, targeted areas in Montana, sometimes earmarked to a specific budget need, as in tourism taxes funding travel industry promotion and marketing or gas taxes used to leverage federal highway dollars. Reliance on general sales taxes to fund basic government services shifts the burden away from those most able to pay onto those least able to pay.

Property Taxes

Montana relies heavily on property taxes to fund education and other critical local government services. Because property values vary widely among districts, funding for local levies also varies widely depending on the county. Without a state equalization account, property tax funding for education results in enormous unconstitutional disparities in education. In addition, recently passed tax breaks for corporations affect local schools and governments. This has resulted in higher residential property taxes, affecting in particular many elderly fixed-income homeowners and lower-income families least able to pay.

We support a progressive and broadly shared system of taxation sufficient to fund public services and infrastructure.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support progressive individual and corporate income taxes based on the ability to pay, and resist efforts to lower the income tax rates on those most able to pay.
- Support efforts to increase tax rates on “passive income” derived from investment activity and oppose efforts to shelter income or transfer it out of state without paying Montana taxes.
- Support continued severance taxes and creation of trusts from non-renewable natural resources to cover the community impacts of development, clean up pollution, and help compensate future generations for the loss of their natural resource legacy.
- Oppose broad use of the general sales tax as a major source of general government revenues.
- Support property tax reforms to mitigate against over-reliance on residential low income and senior taxpayers; and oppose the elimination or lowering of business equipment taxes and other industrial property taxes, effectively shifting the burdens onto residential property owners least able to pay.
- Support property tax appraisal that is based on current value.
- Support adequate funding for a tax collection system that is both fair and efficient.
- Support efforts to capture income derived in Montana and oppose efforts to shelter income or transfer it out of state without paying Montana taxes.

Protecting and Defending Democracy

We are committed to democracy. In a democracy, each of us is entitled to equal political power; and no one is entitled by birth, economic status, gender, or race to more political power than his or her fellow citizen. We believe in the principle of one person, one vote. Equality in the exercise of political power is the essence of our democracy and it flows from the right to vote.

Any law or policy that tips the scales of political power in favor of one group or another is an attack on democracy and we oppose it. These attacks come in many forms and include:

- making it more difficult to register and vote;
- partisan gerrymandering;
- the lobbying industry, and the vast sums of money that special interests spend on lobbying;
- huge campaign expenditures that corporations and the wealthy are allowed to make without limit to candidates who favor their interests;
- attacking the legitimacy of our democratic processes such as voting, counting votes and certifying our elections.


Constitutional Checks and Balances:

The unprecedented 2021 legislative and executive branches' assault on the judicial branch and its independence foreshadows an even more dangerous threat to Montana's 1972 Constitution in the coming decade. Montana's 1972 Constitution is internationally recognized by scholars for its extraordinary breadth, inclusivity, and vision. Its assertions requiring open government, the rights to privacy, to equality in education, and to a clean and healthful environment represent groundbreaking advances in democracy.

At the federal level, the rule of law, civil service protections from political patronage and retribution, separation of powers, and democratic norms are also under assault.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support the reinstatement of election day voter registration and oppose efforts to create barriers to voting.
- Support efforts to increase voter registration and turnout on election days.
- Support the use of mail in ballots.
- Support efforts to provide more satellite polling stations in our rural counties and reservations.
- Oppose onerous voter identification laws.
- Support severe penalties for making or displaying false or misleading voter information.
- Support limiting the amount of money that can be spent in elections and limiting the time frame in which electioneering can occur.
- Support public funding of elections.
- Support prohibiting for profit corporations from participating in elections in any manner.

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- Support electing U.S. Presidents by popular vote.
 - Oppose partisan gerrymandering.
 - Support expanding civics education in our schools to assure that the public has a solid grounding in democratic values and processes.
 - Work to preserve and protect both state and federal constitutions and oppose efforts to dismantle key provisions, including rights to privacy, to a clean and healthful environment, to equality in educational opportunity, and the independence of Montana's Board of Regents to govern higher education.

Montana Veterans

Montana's veterans have sacrificed for our great country. We must honor that sacrifice by taking care of them and their families. We can do better at taking care of veterans. Montana has one of the nation's highest rates of per-capita active-duty soldiers and veterans. The state's annual veteran suicide rate is nearly twice the national average. Stronger support is needed to provide veteran health services and to help military men and women transition back to civilian life.

Healthcare Choice and Affordability:

Rural veterans face more obstacles to accessing timely and quality care. The Veterans Choice Act must better serve and meet the needs of veterans in both urban and rural areas by:

- Increasing accountability at the Veterans Administration
- Keeping rural hospitals open
- Expanding access to health care and enhance mental health services for veterans.
- Making it easier for veterans to access telehealth and the benefits they earned.

Economic Development and Transitioning to the Workforce:

Transitioning from active duty service to civilian life is a difficult process for many veterans. Through entrepreneurship, access to higher education, and transitional programs, veterans and their families can get the help they need to successfully adapt to their new lives. Providing incentives to businesses that encourage the training and hiring of veterans ensures that the individuals who served our country have the ability to make a livelihood for themselves when they come home.

Big Sky 55+ will:

- Support and promote full and adequate funding for the Veterans Health Care Administration.
- Oppose all efforts to privatize veterans' services.
- Support federal and state legislation that protects and enhances veterans' health care throughout their lifetime.
- Support national and state presumptive illness legislation that guarantees disability compensation to veterans and firefighters who develop certain diseases attributable to their time in service.
- Support the Department of Defense's Transition Access System to fully inform service members separating from the military of benefits and resources available to them.
- Support the expansion of mental health programs and suicide prevention.
- Encourage veterans advocating for and accessing physical and mental health care.

Our Board

Our board members have been dedicated advocates, public servants, and community members for decades in the state of Montana. Their leadership and experience are Big Sky 55+'s biggest strengths. We want to give a special thanks to Elizabeth Marum, Margaret MacDonald, Sanna Porte, and Jon Ellingson for their direct contributions to this document.

Board Members:

Ken Toole - Chair

Terry Minow - Vice Chair

Pat Sweeney - Treasurer

Elizabeth Marum

Michael DesRosier

Angela Russell

Pam Carroll

Margaret MacDonald

Jon Ellingson

Barbara Archer

James Steele