LIVING IN RAVALLI COUNTY, MONTANA

Authored by Allen Bjergo, the Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board, and county, state, and federal government partners

Dedicated to Allen Bjergo

1935 - 2021
Welcome to the Bitterroot Valley of Montana!

Country life is rich and rewarding—treasured by both Bitterroot Valley residents who have been here for generations, and those who have recently moved here. Life in the “rural” parts of the county is different from life in town, however. The Ravalli County government cannot provide the same level of service that city and town governments provide. There is also an unwritten code of conduct—a “Code of the West”—that is respected by those living here, in keeping with the spirit of Montana’s earlier days. The information included in this publication is designed to introduce this Code and help you make an educated and informed decision as you consider or begin putting down roots in our wonderful Bitterroot Valley—following in the footsteps of Montana’s pioneers by living in Ravalli County’s rural areas.

Did you know?
Stevensville, Pinesdale, Hamilton, and Darby are the only communities in Ravalli County that are incorporated.
On behalf of the men and women of the Ravalli County Sheriff’s Office (RCSO), it is a pleasure to welcome you to Ravalli County. Our dedicated team of professionals include divisions of Communications (911), Patrol, Detectives, Administration, Detention, Emergency Management, and Pre-Trial/Misdemeanor Probation Services. I encourage you to download our free app on your mobile devices to learn more about the RCSO, receive emergency notifications, and communicate easily with members of our Office.

Part of the RCSO’s mission is to keep Ravalli County a safe place for our residents and visitors to live, work, and recreate, within the resources provided to us. As our population grows, calls for service and criminal activity increases. We know it is imperative to maintain a relationship of trust with our citizens in order to provide the best in law enforcement services. We strive to create a trusting and transparent relationship with all of our citizens by treating everyone as we would want ourselves or our families treated. With admittedly low staffing levels for a population of this size, we depend on our ability to communicate and build working relationships with our citizens.

Ravalli County has always been a community of neighbors working with and helping one another. Our expectation is that people moving here or relocating from somewhere else will uphold that tradition and approach their differences from a position of mutual respect and compassion. Agriculture is still very much a way of life here, and requires the patience of neighbors and those sharing our public roads. Property rights, being good stewards of our land both public and private, and the constant care of livestock are important to us. We expect our citizens to embrace the Code of the West and the tenets of helping one another, respecting other's opinions, and treating each other with dignity, respect and compassion.

We hope the information in this pamphlet will assist you as you make your home in our beautiful valley amongst friends and neighbors. Our goal is that all of our citizens will remember what attracted them to the Bitterroot Valley and work hard to make sure it remains the way you found it for generations of Montanans.

Sincerely,

Steve Holton
Sheriff
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9-1-1 Communications Center

ONLY CALL 911 IF YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY
(immediate risk to health, life, or property)

Be ready to:

♦ Provide address or precise location of emergency
♦ Stay on the phone and follow instructions
♦ Answer questions clearly and calmly
♦ Be prepared to provide physical descriptions of suspects, vehicles, etc.

DO NOT CALL 911 if your power is out unless you have an emergency and need fire, ambulance, or law enforcement services.

DO NOT CALL 911 if you see an emergency incident and first responders are on scene—they were sent by the 911 Team.

To report a non-emergency incident call 406.363.3033

If you accidentally call 911, please stay on the line and speak with the communications staff so that law enforcement is not automatically dispatched to determine if an emergency exists.

RCSO SMARTPHONE APP:

Scan the QR code to download the Ravalli County Sheriff’s app and receive alerts, news, tips and more! The app also allows you to communicate with the 911 Communications Center for non-emergency information. You can also visit https://ravalli.us/595/Phone-apps-and-alerts for more information.
**ACCESS OUTSIDE OF TOWN**

The fact that you can drive to your property does not necessarily guarantee that you, your guests, or an emergency service vehicle (Sheriff, fire, ambulance, etc.) can get there easily or during all seasons. Please consider the following:

Ravalli County maintains 550 miles of public roadway, of which only 300 miles are paved. Many public and private roads are **not maintained** (no grading, repair, or snow removal). Investigate road conditions and maintenance to determine services available to your property. Contact [Ravalli County Road & Bridge](#) for more information.

**Response times for emergency services cannot be guaranteed and might be lengthy.**

In extreme weather, some roads may become impassable. You may need four-wheel drive and/or snow tires and chains. U.S. Forest Service roads may be closed or extremely hazardous for travel.

It is not unusual for County snowplows to block your driveway with snow, but know it is illegal to move snow from your driveway into a County right-of-way.

Is there a BRIDGE along your access route? Is the road NARROW? Is there only ONE WAY IN AND OUT? Emergency vehicles may not be able to respond. Access limitations increase risk because of the reduced ability for you to escape natural disasters, such as wildfire, and of first responders to quickly and safely access your area. Check with your local Fire Chief to determine access concerns in your area.
Poor addressing techniques in years past have resulted in discrepancies. Consider your physical address and be aware of issues that make your home difficult for first responders to locate (e.g., duplicate road names, house number out of sequence, etc.). The Ravalli County GIS Department is responsible for road naming and addressing.

Residents can pay for the application of magnesium chloride on County maintained roads to reduce dust and stabilize the road surface. Check with County Road & Bridge to learn more.

Make sure your house number and road name are visible, conspicuous, and legible. Reflective signs help in low visibility conditions (smoke).

There can be legal access issues, especially if your “access” crosses someone else’s property. Make sure you have legal easements if you need them (deeded, not just verbal) and secure legal advice if warranted.

Planning to BUILD? Many large construction vehicles cannot navigate narrow and primitive roads. Private driveways should be wide and sturdy enough to support either emergency or construction vehicles. If your driveway or private road accesses a County road, you may need an Approach Permit. Contact Ravalli County Road & Bridge. If your access is directly onto a State highway, check with the Montana Highway Dept. of Transportation about a Highway Access Permit.

Did you know?

The 13 Fire Districts covering Ravalli County are nearly 100% volunteer. Rural counties survive on volunteerism. Costs are kept down by the willingness of residents to do their part, do without, and take care of each other.
Unpaved roads generate dust, and lots of it. They also often “washboard” when dry and get muddy and slick when wet, causing vehicle maintenance to increase with regular travel. Contact the subdivision’s property owner’s association or the County Road Department to find out which roads are scheduled for improvement to know whether it is an issue that you will have to live with for the long haul.

Newspaper, parcel and overnight package delivery, and U.S. mail delivery may not always be available in rural areas. Check with the agencies that provide these services to ensure delivery.

Did you know?

Roads can become narrow in bad conditions; yielding the right of way is not merely a legal concept, it is a critical safety issue!
MSU Ravalli County Extension Services:


https://ravalli.msuextension.org/

215 S. 4th St., Suite G
Hamilton, MT 59840-2853

Phone: (406) 375-6611
ravalli@montana.edu
Utility availability can be limited in rural areas.

Consider the following:

**Landline telephone** availability might be limited.

**Cell service** might be limited or not available at all.

**Sewer** is generally only available for properties within the municipalities (Stevensville, Hamilton, and Darby) and sewer districts (Corvallis and Victor). All other properties use on-site individual or community septic systems, or other treatment processes. The size location, and maintenance of these systems are important in the proper functioning of the systems and protecting the aquifer.

**Purchasing property with an existing septic tank?** Have the septic tank pumped and inspected by a reliable service.

**Need to install a septic tank?** Contact the Environmental Health Department about obtaining a permit or an inspection. Note that septic tank size is based on number of bedrooms. **DO NOT** start construction before obtaining the necessary

**Water service** is generally only available for properties within municipalities (Stevensville, Hamilton, and Darby) with all others served by on-site individual, shared, or public wells. It is recommended that on-site wells are routinely sampled and tested for Coliform bacteria and nitrates. Water testing kits are available at the Ravalli County Environmental Health Department [https://ravalli.us/159/Environmental-Health](https://ravalli.us/159/Environmental-Health).
Electric and natural gas service may not be available in the more remote areas of Ravalli County. Check with service providers to make sure you have the services you want before you commit to a construction project.

Propane, oil, or wood may be available for heating or utilities, but bad roads may make delivery a challenge!

Some of your utility service lines may cross properties owned by other people in order for service to be extended to your property. Make sure the proper legal easements are in place to allow lines to be installed to your property. If this fails, solar might be an option.

Electric power may not be available in three phase service configurations. If you have special power requirements, check with the service provider.

The costs of electrical service usually includes both a fee to hook into the system (which may be expensive) and a monthly charge for energy consumed. Check with the service provider about costs in your area.

**Power outages happen—be prepared! An outage can turn off your well pump, freezer, heat source, etc.**

**Generators can provide standby power but be sure to keep it outside in the open, away from the garage or any doors or windows as carbon monoxide can be deadly.**

Trash removal is sometimes unavailable or inconvenient in rural areas. It is illegal to create your own trash dump, even on your own land. Many zoning districts also require animal proof trash containers. Contact the Ravalli City-County Environmental Health Department and the Ravalli County Planning Department.

Rural areas of the County are usually not wired for cable tv. Satellite TV and internet are available from several sources.

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Did you know?

If you have trees which threaten power lines, they can be trimmed without your permission.
Be aware of noxious weeds (non-native plants) on your property. You are expected to control weeds and if there is a complaint, the Ravalli County Weed District could treat your weed problem and charge you for the work. Information about noxious weeds is available through the MSU Ravalli County Extension Office.

Ravalli County Weed District
https://ravalli.us/223/Weed-District
406.777.5842
Know what **water rights** are available with your property and their priority according to the use of them. You may not own the water that runs through your property in an irrigation ditch, and you cannot own a stream. Montana’s stream access law allows the public to wade or float a perennial stream to the high water line. Without water rights, you cannot legally take water out of the stream or ditch.

If you have deeded water rights (for agricultural or domestic use) do you understand what you are getting? The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC) Division of Water Resources can explain your water rights certificate and if the rights have been “adjudicated” through the Water Court yet.

You may not be able to drill a well or have access to a water supply without getting approval from the Water Court—you’ll need to know what kind of time and expense that may entail. Do not assume that the owner or real estate agents knows all the details. For more information on the Water Court visit [https://courts.mt.gov/courts/water/](https://courts.mt.gov/courts/water/).

In Ravalli County, a well that yields less than 35 gallons per minute—or less than 10 acre-feet per year—can be permitted. Since the basin is closed, larger amounts are not possible. Visit [http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/water](http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/water) or contact the DNRC Water Resources Missoula office for more information.

Able to drill? Some areas do not produce water and some have wells that are more than 400 feet deep! Consider the potential drilling and installation costs in your planning. Check the public well records or talk to a well driller who can point out the dry spots.

A ditch company or landowner with an easement across your property may legally bring machinery along the ditch to clean and maintain it—this could include burning and removal of trash, soil, and vegetation. No permanent structures can be built on the easement.
Many issues can affect your property in addition to those concerning utilities and access:

- Other property owners may have easements which require you to allow construction of roads, power lines, water lines, sewer lines, and other utilities, as well as maintenance of irrigation ditches, on your land. This may restrict your own development and building options.

- There may be easements that haven’t been recorded, but are “historic.” Title abstract and title insurance companies, or an attorney, can help you track down this information.

- The property may have a conservation easement on it placed by a previous owner. Such easements are perpetual, and cannot be ended or easily changed. They are inspected yearly by a land steward, who will contact you to make an appointment to visit to assure that provisions of the agreement are followed.

- Many property owners do not own the mineral rights below their property. Check your deed or contact an attorney or title company to find out if any minerals may be located under your land and who owns them and has the right to mine or drill for them on your property. There is no oil, few minerals, and some gravel sources in the County.

- You may be provided with a plat for your property by your realtor or seller, but you may wish to obtain the services of a licensed Montana surveyor to ensure the accuracy of your survey.
Fences that separate properties may or may not be on legal boundary lines. The “Apple Boom” of the early 1900s created numerous 10-acre orchard tracts, which are still legal subdivision plats. A survey is the only way to confirm property lines. The old plat may show a right-of-way dedicated to the public through the property. Unless abandoned, someone could open it.

If your plans include construction or subdivision, a permit may be required, as well as a driveway access permit, and individual sewage disposal system permit, a building permit, electric permit, or other requirements. Check with the Ravalli County Planning Department for your needs. [https://ravalli.us/177/Planning](https://ravalli.us/177/Planning)

Many subdivisions and developments have covenants and design guidelines that limit the use of the property. There are also a number of voluntary zoning districts in the County. Check with your realtor or the Ravalli County Clerk and Recorder’s Office for information on these. [https://ravalli.us/129/Clerk-Recorder](https://ravalli.us/129/Clerk-Recorder)

Homeowner’s or property owner’s associations are often responsible for the maintenance of roads and other elements in subdivisions. Check the subdivisions covenants to learn who has various responsibilities and what the association dues are, and check with your realtor or future neighbors to learn if the association is functioning. The County will not enforce covenants.

The property that is an open meadow today may not be such forever. Check the recorded plat of your subdivision to see what uses are platted within it. In addition, check with the Ravalli County Assessors Office to determine if those uses may have changed since the plat was recorded. Talk with the Planning Department about how you would be notified of land use changes next to you.
What Can I Do On My Property?

Continued...

♦ Ravalli County has a dog ordinance and owners are responsible for keeping dogs on their own property. Montana law allows for the shooting of dogs when they are harassing livestock or wildlife. Avoid a tragedy and do the neighborly thing: Keep your four-legged friend at home.

♦ Property lines are expected to be respected. Be aware of boundaries and remind family members and visitors not to trespass on your neighbor’s property, nor bother crops or livestock. You can and should expect the same respect.

♦ Travel is not allowed on irrigation ditch roads by anyone other than irrigation company personnel.

Property maintenance might include agricultural burning or vegetative debris burning, which is very common in the spring and fall throughout the County. Outdoor burning in Ravalli County requires a permit and is open March 1—Nov. 30, but can be closed due to fire danger or air quality concerns. Visit [https://ravalli.us/501/Burning-Permits](https://ravalli.us/501/Burning-Permits) for more information on outdoor burning, and visit [https://app.egovmt.com/burnpermit/](https://app.egovmt.com/burnpermit/) to obtain your free permit, renew an existing one, or to activate your permit. Visit [www.FireintheRoot.org](http://www.FireintheRoot.org) for safe burning tips.
Did you know?

The Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, established on February 4, 1964 to protect migratory birds, is a 2,800-acre refuge located two miles north of Stevensville. About 235 species of birds have been documented on the refuge, with 100 nesting there. Additionally, 37 species of mammals and 17 species of reptiles and amphibians have also been documented there.

WILDLIFE

Nature can provide you with some wonderful, wild neighbors, especially in Ravalli County! However, it is important to be aware of and accommodate the wildlife around you when you live in a rural area.

Coyotes, foxes, skunks, marmots, bears, deer, elk, raccoons, and mosquitoes can be destructive or dangerous (or really stinky). Know how to deal with them humanely and legally.

Be aware that eagles and hawks can carry away kittens and poultry. Predators can get into cages and dig under fences to kill pets or livestock.

Visit Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks for more information about wildlife concerns in your area.

FWP.mt.gov

Hunting has been a way of life in the Bitterroot for centuries. Neighbors may allow legal hunting on their property. Learn about the hunting districts around you, nearby shooting ranges, and laws regarding shooting on private property.

Being “Bear Aware” and having a “bear-proof” trash container is a good idea for any County resident!

Good fencing can help protect gardens, orchards, and haystacks from deer and elk.

WILDLIFE
Fire is a natural part of the ecosystem, but many homes in the Valley are built in fire prone areas and increasing numbers of people also mean increasing numbers of human caused fires. Know your risk from wildfire and take steps to be more wildfire prepared.

Be aware! Sign up for emergency alerts at https://ravalli.us/621/Emergency-Notifications.

Ravalli County has the highest risk to structures from wildfire of any county in Montana. Where your home is located and the “ignitability” of your home and property are primary factors determining your risk. Visit your local fire station or request a free wildfire preparedness site visit through the DNRC at http://dnrc.mt.gov/free-visit. Fire professionals will assess your home and property and provide recommendations for mitigation if needed.

In case of threat to your home from fire—either structural or wildfire—remember that Ravalli County fire districts are volunteer driven, and many homes are in unincorporated areas not formally covered by a fire district. Take steps necessary to prepare your home and property to be more fire safe, but also have an evacuation plan for your family and pets/livestock, including two routes of escape, a “GO Bag,” and a predetermined family meeting place.
Learn about the Ravalli County evacuation process at [https://ravalli.us/622/Evacuation-Guidelines](https://ravalli.us/622/Evacuation-Guidelines). If you feel unsafe, do not wait for the evacuation order—leave early!

**SMOKE**—whether from outdoor burning or regional wildfires—is a common companion in the Valley. Using air purifiers and maintaining clean filters, keeping windows closed, and monitoring air quality on sites such as [www.montanawildfiresmoke.org](http://www.montanawildfiresmoke.org) will help manage the inevitable situation. Visit [https://app.egovmt.com/burnpermit](https://app.egovmt.com/burnpermit) to view current permitted burn activity.

Have more than 10 acres of forested land? Contact the Bitter Root RC&D for grants to make your property more fire safe. A DNRC Service Forester can also provide a free assessment for forest health and wildfire risk.

**Did you know?** The 2016 Roaring Lion Fire southwest of Hamilton was started by an escaped campfire and consumed over 8000 acres, 16 homes, and 49 outbuildings. Structures were lost primarily due to wind-born embers/firebrands and surface fires started from lofted firebrands.
Agriculture is a major economic contributor to Ravalli County. If you choose to live among and next to ranching operations, you may be affected by them. You have the opportunity to help keep ranching viable by learning how you can be a good neighbor to this important part of our community.

Livestock are occasionally moved on public roads. When you encounter a livestock drive, please pull over to the side of the road and allow the drive to pass or proceed forward slowly if a rider directs you to.

Montana has an “open range” law. Whether you own livestock or not, if you do not want cattle or horses coming onto your property, you must fence them out. Maintaining your share of a common fence with your neighbor is important as well. The MSU Extension Office has information about fencing.

The Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board meets regularly to consider agricultural issues and advise the County commissioners about such matters. The pioneer families who settled in the Bitterroot constructed an ingenious system of diversions and ditches for irrigation, which has allowed agriculture to become an important part of our environment. The farmers and ranchers here were truly the first environmentalists, and it is their irrigated properties which create and maintain the beautiful green open spaces of our valley. Minimizing the undesirable impacts of growth on ranching operations will help keep Ravalli County a beautiful place in which to live.
If you’re traveling on dirt and graveled roads adjacent to ranch lands, drive slowly and with care. Excess dust can affect both the health of the cattle and the quality of hay in the fields. Occasionally cattle may get out on the road and at night are hard to see. Slowing down protects livestock and wildlife.

**Livestock may cause odors and noise. It is important to recognize and accept this before you move next door!**

**Chemicals are one tool which may be used to control weeds and remove vegetation clogging ditches, but use of such are regulated by public health and safety laws.**

Disposal of dead animals: Pets may be buried at an appropriate site or cremated. Large livestock may be buried according to sanitary regulations, composted, or taken to the Missoula landfill. Wildlife carcasses are usually composted at a site south of Stevensville junction.

**There will be slow-moving machinery on roads, often signaled by a reflective orange triangle. Please observe the warnings and be patient.**
A CHECKLIST FOR LIVING IN
RAVALLI COUNTY

- Document legal access to your property.
- Verify road width and bridge weights adequate for fire engines and heavy equipment.
- Secure an approach permit to the public road system if needed.
- Verify who maintains and plows the right-of-way to your property.
- Ensure that you will have adequate access during bad weather or flood.
- Verify mail delivery, package delivery, and school bus service.

Utilities:

- TOP PRIORITY: Determine sewage service or septic system layout and maintenance.
- Verify your household water source and secure permits if needed.
- Verify agricultural water/irrigation rights if applicable and schedule of water delivery.
- Verify cell and/or landline telephone service.
- Verify internet service availability (many areas are served only by satellite internet).
- Verify electrical service.
- Verify natural gas and/or propane service needs.
Property:

- Verify all easements needed to access your property.
- Verify/understand easements over your property.
- Understand the laws pertaining to the streams and/or canals on your property.
- Know who may enter your property to perform maintenance.
- Verify who owns the mineral rights under your property.
- Secure a current survey of property before purchasing.
- Ensure title company outlines established rights-of-way and easements on the property.
- Verify permits needed with County Planning Department if any changes are planned.
- Understand Homeowner Association and local zoning rules, if applicable.
- If land is in a conservation easement, understand the details and rules.
- Understand rules and limits regarding livestock, pets, and wildlife.
- Verify if property is within a fire district coverage area.
- Be informed about weed control, fencing, junk laws, flooding, erosion, forest health, and wildfire risk.

Other Considerations:

- There is “open range” within the County; you may need to fence animals out. Learn about neighboring property practices and fencing responsibilities when sharing a boundary.
- Be aware of ice jams and erosion potential.

Understand and verify the above before you buy!
BITTERROOT VALLEY HISTORY

The Bitterroot Valley has a rich history, from the Bitterroot Salish who originally inhabited the area, to Lewis and Clark, to the missionaries, pioneer homesteaders and others who came to the area in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

There are many historical sites throughout the county to visit and the Ravalli County Museum and Historical Society in Hamilton has exhibits and events throughout the year about the history of the Bitterroot Valley and western Montana.

The historic St. Mary’s Mission in Stevensville and the Marcus Daly Mansion in Hamilton are two of the more prominent historical sites in Ravalli County. Tours and other events are offered at each site.

Three nationally recognized trails pass through the Bitterroot Valley and provide excellent opportunities to learn more about the natural and cultural history of the area. These trails are the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail, and the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail. The story of Glacial Lake Missoula is also a fascinating part of the landscape.

Local libraries and bookstores can provide recommendations on resources to help you learn more about the area you are living in and its history. Wherever you look in Ravalli County, there is a wealth of history that precedes you and that has a story worth learning!

The following page contains a few suggestions on places to visit to learn more about the Bitterroot Valley.
St. Mary’s Mission  
315 Charlos Street, Stevensville  
(406) 777-5734  
www.saintmarysmission.org

Ravalli County Museum and Historical Society  
205 Bedford Street, Hamilton  
(406) 363-3338  
ravallimuseum.org

The Daly Mansion  
251 Eastside Highway, Hamilton  
(406) 363-6004  
www.dalymansion.org

Historic Darby Ranger Station Visitor’s Center  
712 North Main Street, Darby  
(406) 821-3913  
www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/bitterroot/recarea/?recid=60256

Stevensville Historical Museum  
517 Main Street, Stevensville  
(406) 777-1007  
www.stevensvillemuseum.com

Victor Heritage Museum  
125 Blake Street, Victor  
(406) 642-3997  
victorheritagemuseum.org
Public libraries in Ravalli County are great resources for information about your community, as well as providing the typical library resources like books, magazines, computers, and printers. Our libraries often have programs for all ages which can be a fun way to meet your neighbors!

**Bitterroot Public Library, Hamilton** 406.363.1670  
[https://bitterrootpubliclibrary.org/](https://bitterrootpubliclibrary.org/)

**North Valley Public Library, Stevensville** 406.777.5061  
[https://www.northvalleylibrary.org/](https://www.northvalleylibrary.org/)

**Darby Community Public Library, Darby** 406.821.4771  
[https://www.darbylibrary.net/](https://www.darbylibrary.net/)

### State & Federal Resources

**Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC)**

- Water Resources, Missoula Office 406.721.4284
- Southwestern Land Office 406.542.4200
- Fish, Wildfire & Parks, Missoula Office 406.542.5500
- Bitterroot National Forest 406.363.7100
Ravalli County Government & Departments

[https://ravalli.us/]

County Commissioners 406.375.6500
Sheriff’s Office 406.375.4060
Clerk & Recorder 406.375.6555
Driver’s License 866.450.8034
Office of Emergency Management 406.375.6655
Environmental Health 406.375.6565
Geographic Information Systems (GIS) 406.375.6622
Planning 406.375.6530
Road & Bridge 406.363.2733
Weed District 406.777.5842
Outdoor burn permits [https://ravalli.us/501/Burning-Permits]

[MSU Ravalli County Extension] 406.375.6611
[Bitter Root Humane Association Animal Shelter] 406.363.5311
[Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce] 406.363.2400