

OPEN LANDS BOND PROGRAM FAQ'S

6/27/22

What is the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program?

- The Open Lands Bond Program (OLBP) is a voter approved program to assist landowners who voluntarily choose to permanently conserve their land.

How did the Open Lands Bond Program begin?

- In 2006, 58% of Ravalli County voters approved the establishment of the program and the issuance of \$10 million in bonds to support it.
- The establishment of an Open Lands Bond Program was originally proposed in 2005 by the Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board as a voluntary, non-regulatory, landowner-driven tool to protect agricultural land from being lost to rapid development. The ballot measure also identified wildlife habitat, water quality, and scenic open space as community assets in need of protection.

Is the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program unique?

- Ravalli County is not alone among rapidly growing counties in Montana in establishing voter-approved Open Lands Bond Programs, sometimes termed Open Space Programs.
- Similar programs exist in Missoula, Gallatin, and Lewis and Clark Counties, with bond approvals ranging from \$10 to \$15 million. Both Missoula and Gallatin Counties have passed bonds to support Open Space Programs multiple times.

Who decides how the money is spent?

- Land projects proposed for funding by the OLBP must meet rigorous criteria that evaluate the property's value as agricultural land, its importance as wildlife habitat, its impact on the water quality of streams, and its value as scenic open space.
- An Open Lands Advisory Board, appointed by the County Commissioners, conducts a site visit, scores the property according to the criteria, and makes a recommendation to the County Commissioners at a public meeting.
- After conducting their own site visit and holding a public hearing, the County Commissioners make a final decision about funding the project.
- The entire process can take a year or more to complete.

How are lands protected under the Open Lands Bond Program?

- The most common way lands are protected is for a landowner to place a conservation easement on his/her property and request financial assistance from the program in doing so.
- A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement that permanently limits development of the land by both the current landowner and all future owners of the land. To accomplish this, a qualified land trust organization works with the landowner to establish the terms of a conservation easement and then is responsible for monitoring and enforcement of those terms in perpetuity.

- In most instances, OLBP funds help to partially compensate the landowner for giving up development rights on the property and help cover the transaction costs necessary to finalize the agreement.
- Conservation easements are not the only tool the county could use to protect land under the program. The county could directly purchase property, although this option has not been employed by Ravalli County. The county has, however, authorized OLBP funds to facilitate the purchase of community recreational access opportunities like parks and fishing access sites. The OLBP helped in the creation of Steve Powell and Skalkaho Bend Parks (owned and managed by the City of Hamilton), as well as the C. Ben White Fishing Access Site on the West Fork (owned and managed by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks).

Do properties protected under the Open Lands Bond Program pay taxes?

- All private property protected by a conservation easement remains on the county tax rolls and continues to pay property taxes.

How have Open Lands Program dollars been spent and matched?

- As of spring 2022, the average cost to the program per acre of protected land was \$726.
- Each dollar expended by the Open Lands Bond Program has received a \$3 match in the form of cash from other funders, as well as value donated by the landowners. Other funders include the federal Farm Bill, conservation groups, and private donors.

What has the Open Lands Bond Program achieved since 2006?

- As of April 1, 2022, 38 projects totaling 10,637 have been approved for conservation, with an additional 10 projects representing an additional 3,500 acres preparing to begin the process. Of those projects completed:
 - 8,953.5 acres are agricultural land;
 - 6,241.5 acres are classified as winter range for elk and deer;
 - 37.02 miles of streams flow through conserved properties;
 - 532.35 acres are riparian habitat;
 - 324.9 acres are wetland;
 - 1,269 acres provide public access.
- Important economic sectors are supported by the types of lands conserved by the program.
 - The market value of agricultural products sold in Ravalli County was \$42.6 million, according to the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture.
 - Private land conservation supports the multi-million dollar hunting and fishing economy in Ravalli County. 37% of elk and 36% of mule deer winter range is on private land and the Bitterroot River and its tributaries all flow through private land.
 - The public access projects that have been supported by the OLBP in the form of public parks or public access to hunting, fishing, and recreation contribute to valley's economy, as well as the quality of life of residents.

Why Is the Open Lands Bond Program Up for Approval Again?

- In 2006, voters authorized Ravalli County to sell bonds totaling \$10 million to support the program. These bonds have been sold in \$2.5 million increments as needed over the past sixteen years. As of April 1, projects that will use more than \$7.5 million have been approved for funding since the program's inception.
- Quite a few projects are just beginning or are about to begin the approval process. If a significant number of these projects make it through to approval, the full \$10 million authorized in 2006 will have been spent.
- If voters approve a new bond, those funds will continue to support projects until the funds are once again expended. At that point, voters would again need to decide whether to continue the program with another bond approval. The Open Lands Bond Program is not supported by a permanent tax and requires voter re-approval each time bond funds are fully expended.

What happens if the Open Lands Bond Program is not renewed before the money runs out?

- If the Open Lands Bond Program is not renewed by voters, it will cease to exist and the ability to assist landowners in conserving properties that meet the criteria of the program will end. A significant, community-driven tool to permanently protect family farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, water resources, and scenic open space would no longer be available in Ravalli County.
- It is likely that many properties in the Bitterroot Valley with high value for agricultural, wildlife habitat, or scenic open space that might be conserved through the OLBP will be sold and developed or converted to other uses.

How does the Open Lands Bond Program impact taxes in Ravalli County?

- In 2022, 4.92 mills were levied on real property not classified as agricultural to support the bonds that have been sold to support the OLBP.
- Bonds issued to support the program have a term of no more than 20 years. This means that, as additional bonds are sold over the years, previously issued bonds will be paid off as they reach their 20-year term and the taxes to make payments on those bonds will also be retired.
- Taxes to support the Open Lands Bond program are listed on each taxpayer's REAL Property Tax Statement.