

We Are Not Limited by Land, But by Water

A Letter to the Blaine County Commissioners and City Officials of the Wood River Valley

My name is Greg Loomis. I have lived in the Wood River Valley for nearly 50 years and own property in Hailey. During that time, I have watched our valley grow and prosper. I have also watched increasing pressure placed on our roads, infrastructure, housing market, water resources, and quality of life.

Today, I am writing to express concerns regarding the proposed Blaine Crossing development on Flying Hat Ranch between Hailey and Bellevue. The project proposes annexation of approximately 108 acres into Hailey for high-density housing, industrial uses, commercial development, and a hotel, with an additional 120 acres potentially annexed into Bellevue for future development.

My concern is not simply this project. It is the cumulative impact of this project combined with the many other large developments that have been approved, are under construction, or are being proposed throughout the valley.

The question is not whether one project can be supported. The question is whether the Wood River Valley can sustain the combined impacts of continued growth on our water resources, infrastructure, traffic, and quality of life.

Water Must Come First

For years I have maintained a simple principle:

"We are not limited by land, but by water."

Land can always be developed. Water cannot be created.

The proposed development's water demand is being compared to current agricultural use. However, agricultural water use varies based on crops, weather conditions, conservation efforts, market conditions, and seasonal fallowing. A field using less water today may still hold the right to return to full agricultural production tomorrow.

Any water analysis should compare future development demand against the minimum agricultural use allowed under existing water rights, not simply against current conditions.

I am also concerned that the developer has hired and paid for the firm conducting the water-use analysis. While that may be standard practice, projects of this scale warrant independent review. Residents deserve confidence that conclusions regarding groundwater use and aquifer impacts have been verified by experts working on behalf of the public, not solely the applicant.

Protecting Silver Creek

Silver Creek is one of Idaho's greatest natural treasures, and its health depends on the groundwater aquifer that sustains it.

Groundwater withdrawals associated with development are generally permanent, while agricultural water use can fluctuate because of crop rotation, conservation practices, weather conditions, market conditions, and seasonal fallowing. Before agricultural land is converted to urban development, decision-makers should carefully consider whether doing so will place additional long-term pressure on the aquifer that supports Silver Creek.

If groundwater resources are significantly depleted or impaired, recovery can take many years and, in some cases, decades.

Growth, Housing, and Traffic

Anyone who lives in the Wood River Valley sees the effects of rapid growth every day. Traffic congestion continues to increase. Road construction seems endless. Public infrastructure and services are being stretched to keep pace.

At the same time, housing costs have become so high that many workers can no longer afford to live near their jobs and are forced to commute from outside the valley, increasing traffic on Highway 75 and local roads.

Adding more housing units alone does not guarantee affordability, nor does it necessarily reduce traffic or commuting patterns. Before approving additional large-scale development, we should ask whether we are addressing the root causes of these problems or simply creating demand for even more growth.

Quality of Life Matters

People choose to live in the Wood River Valley because of its open spaces, scenic beauty, wildlife, recreation opportunities, and strong sense of community.

Those qualities are not guaranteed. They can be lost one project at a time.

Growth is not simply about adding homes, hotels, commercial buildings, and industrial space. It is about determining whether the resources that sustain life in this valley can support that growth.

If we fail to consider cumulative impacts today, future generations may pay the price through diminished water resources, worsening traffic congestion, declining wildlife habitat, and a reduced quality of life.

A Call for Responsible Planning

I respectfully urge the Blaine County Commissioners, the Cities of Hailey and Bellevue, and all decision-makers involved in this proposal to:

- Require independent peer review of water-use and groundwater studies for projects of this scale and significance.
- Evaluate cumulative impacts from all current and proposed developments throughout the valley.
- Fully assess potential impacts on Silver Creek and the regional aquifer.
- Consider existing traffic, infrastructure, and public service limitations before approving additional growth.
- Ensure comparisons between agricultural and development water use account for water rights, seasonal fallowing, and the ability to return land to full agricultural production.
- Slow the pace of development until long-term water availability and infrastructure capacity can be clearly demonstrated.

The decisions made today will shape the Wood River Valley for generations.

As someone who has lived here for five decades, I believe we have a responsibility to leave future residents a healthy valley with clean water, functioning infrastructure, protected natural resources, and the quality of life that attracted so many of us here in the first place.

We must remember that once open land is developed, it rarely returns to its previous state. Water, open space, and community character are resources that become increasingly difficult to restore once they are lost.

The question is not whether Blaine Crossing at Flying Hat Ranch can be built. The question is whether it should be built before we fully understand its cumulative impacts on water, traffic, infrastructure, housing, and the future of Silver Creek.

The Wood River Valley is a remarkable place. Let us not sacrifice the very resources that make it special in pursuit of growth that outpaces our ability to sustain it.

Respectfully,

Greg Loomis
Hailey Property Owner
Wood River Valley Resident for 50 Years