

Draft Environmental Assessment



Somers Beach State Park Development Proposal

January 2023



**MONTANA FISH,
WILDLIFE & PARKS**

**Somers Beach State Park Development Proposal
Draft Environmental Assessment
MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110**

Executive Summary
Somers Beach State Park Development Proposal
Draft Environmental Assessment

In October 2021, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) acquired the 106-acre Somers Beach on the northwest shore of Flathead Lake for inclusion into Montana's state park system as Somers Beach State Park (SBSP). The previous owners permitted public access to the property for many years, and designation as a state park would perpetuate public enjoyment and access.

Interim developments have been completed since acquisition including an access road, parking lot, and erosion control beach to protect the loss of shoreline and conserve wetlands. Park boundaries have been marked and site cleanup has begun with the removal of old fencing materials.

On March 16, 2022, FWP staff initiated a public planning process to guide the next phase of park development. A virtual public information meeting provided insight into the process and anticipated timeline, and a survey tool was implemented to gather input regarding public preferences for future park service level and experience settings in accordance with the Montana state park classification system. FWP staff received 1,284 completed surveys over the month it was open, providing a good cross-section of community values and desires as they relate to the development of Somers Beach State Park.

Using feedback from the survey, a pair of on-site open house meetings were held in July of 2022. FWP gathered more specific public feedback on the type, style and desired location of park amenities that are consistent with experience and service levels that garnished the highest level of support in the spring survey.

The public comment period for this draft EA will extend for 30 days beginning Jan.13, 2023. Written **comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m. Feb.13, 2023,** and can be mailed to Somers Beach Development Proposal EA; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 490 N. Meridian Road; Kalispell, MT 59901 or sent by e-mail to: Stevie.Burton@mt.gov.

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region One headquarters in Kalispell; the Montana State Library in Helena; and on the FWP website (<http://fwp.mt.gov>) under Public Notices.

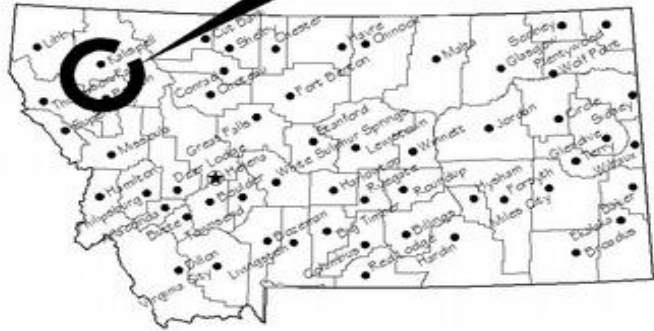
PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. **Type of proposed state action:** FWP proposes to make interim amenities established at Somers Beach State Park in March 2022 permanent, and to develop a second phase of visitor amenities.
2. **Agency authority for the proposed action and compliance with the Montana Environmental Protection Act:** The 1977 Montana Legislature enacted 87-1-209, MCA, which provides authority for FWP to acquire, develop, operate, and maintain lands or waters for state parks and outdoor recreation. The 2021 Montana Legislature, through appropriations made in House Bill 5, directed FWP to make expenditures for the purchase and development of Somers Beach State Park.

FWP prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA (ARM 12.2.429, *et. seq.*). An EA functions to determine the need to prepare an EIS through an initial evaluation and determination of the significance of impacts associated with the proposed action. Further, an agency is required to prepare an EA whenever statutory requirements do not allow sufficient time for the agency to prepare an EIS. This document may disclose impacts over which FWP has no regulatory authority.

3. **Name of project:** Somers Beach State Park Development Proposal.
4. **Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency)** FWP is the project sponsor.
5. **If applicable:**
Current Status of Project Design (0% complete)
6. **Location affected by proposed action (county, township and range):**
Flathead County township 27N Range 21W

Project Location



North



Location Map

No Scale



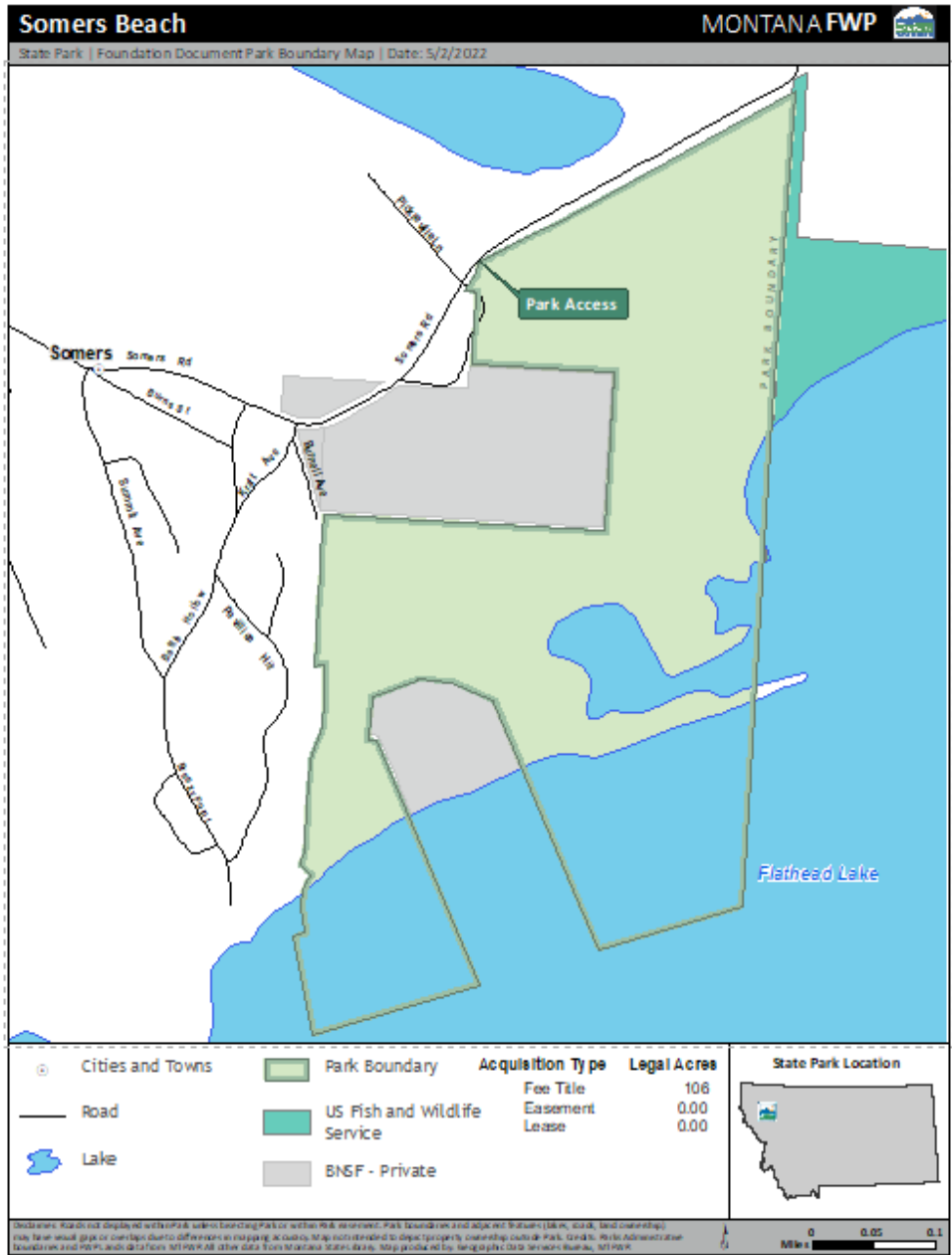
North



Vicinity Map

No Scale

General project location



7. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

<u>Acres</u>	<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:	(d) Floodplain <u>25</u>
Residential <u>0</u>	
Industrial <u>0</u>	(e) Productive:
(b) Open Space/Woodlands/Recreation <u>49</u>	Irrigated cropland <u>0</u>
	Dry cropland <u>20</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas <u>12</u>	Forestry <u>0</u>
	Rangeland <u>0</u>
	Other <u>0</u>

8. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

Permits:

- (a) DEQ Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan to be acquired and administered by contractor, as required.
- (b) US Army Corps of Engineers: Section 404, Section 10 Clean Water Act Permit.
- (c) Montana Department of Environmental Quality: 318 Short Term Turbidity Authorization.
- (d) Flathead County Planning and Zoning: Lake and Lakeshore Construction Permit; Floodplain Development Permit; Building Permit.

Funding:

Approximately \$2 million.

Funding authorized by the 2021 Montana Legislature and public donations made through the Montana State Parks Foundation and the Flathead Land Trust.

(b) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:

Agency Name and Type of Responsibility

US Environmental Protection Agency
Ongoing site monitoring obligations related to groundwater contamination

Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Ongoing site monitoring obligations related to groundwater contamination

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Oversight of Groundwater Control Area

9. Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the purpose and benefits of the proposed action

In Alternatives B and C, FWP evaluates impacts to the human and physical environments for the second phase of park development at SBSP following a robust public planning process. In the spring and summer of 2022, FWP enjoyed strong public participation in efforts to gauge preferences for future park development and levels of service at the newly acquired SBSP. Using the Montana State Parks Classification System, 55% of participating public identified a service-level designation of **rustic** as the best fit for SBSP. The definition of rustic in this classification system is a site that attracts visitors who expect a self-directed experience with limited amenities. 33% of the participating public identified **core** as the appropriate service level designation for the park. The definition of core is a park that provides moderate amenity and service levels. Only 12% of participating public identified a

service level of **enhanced**, which offers the highest level of amenity and service in the classification system.

Additionally, FWP staff gauged public preference for a setting designation. The classification system provides three setting designations:

Natural parks are defined as parks that connect visitors with nature in ways that may cause them to learn, reflect, and appreciate. Such experiences may provide the opportunity for solitary reflection in the presence of Montana’s scenic beauty, or they may engage the visitor with others as they explore natural processes related to exceptional geologic, wildlife, botanical, paleontological, riparian, and riverine environments.

Heritage parks are defined as parks that invite reflection on the past by revealing the stories of Montana’s cultures and histories in the very places where they occurred. Heritage parks provide opportunities to view, explore, or learn about the cultural and historic features unique to the site.

Recreation parks are defined as parks that encourage play in adult and child alike through a variety of options for outdoor activity. A park may provide a specific type of outdoor recreation – e.g., fishing, camping, hiking, boating – or a mix of diverse outdoor opportunities ranging from active to passive and from solitary to social in nature.

48% of participants identified *natural* as the most appropriate setting for SBSP, while 38% identified *recreation*, and 13% identified *heritage* as their preferred setting. It’s important to note that most parks in the Montana state park system offer elements of all three setting types, but participants were asked to identify their top choice in this regard. Together the service level and setting designation help to define SBSP within the Montana state park system and will provide guidance for the development and management of the park into the future. The alternatives that are presented in this analysis reflect those preferences.

Alternatives B and C include common basic design features that provide for public safety, operational efficiency, and site stewardship, and are features of most state parks in the system. A variety of other amenities are also proposed in Alternatives B and C consistent with the service level and setting designation preferences that were expressed for SBSP during the public planning processes. Alternative C includes limited overnight accommodations in two locations at SBSP. The first is three cabin sites on the west side of the park and the second is a lobe of tent sites for hikers and bikers on the east side. Alternative C is FWP’s preferred alternative.

Base Features

Alternatives B and C include the following common basic design features that provide for public safety, operational efficiency, and site stewardship, and are features of most state parks in the system.

Entry station – An entry station is a place to collect entry fees and offers a location to disseminate visitor information. Entry stations may be either staffed or un-staffed depending on design and intended function.

Host site(s) - At state parks on Flathead Lake and elsewhere, FWP provides full-service RV host sites to accommodate seasonal staff; both volunteer and paid. These sites provide

water, sewer, and electrical hookups to accommodate a consistent on-site presence to enhance management of the site.

Restrooms - Due to proximity to municipal sewer services, flush restrooms may be a feature of SBSP where feasible. It may be necessary to provide vault latrines in areas of the park that are far removed from Somers Road.

Drinking water - Proximity to municipal water will eliminate the need for developing a well and lessens the cost of providing drinking water.

Administrative building - A small administrative building will be needed to provide storage for equipment and supplies and may also provide a workstation for staff.

Wayfinding signage - External and internal wayfinding signage would be installed to identify the park and direct visitors.

Trails – Universally accessible trails would provide connectivity within the park.

Classification Based Features

Alternatives B and C include a variety of other amenities that are consistent with the service level and setting designation preferences for SBSP that were expressed during the public planning processes.

Land based amenities

Picnicking facilities such as designated picnic areas with tables, small picnic shelters, and reservable group-use shelters were among the most popular land-based visitor amenities identified in the survey, open house and virtual planning meetings.

Water based amenities

An area to hand-launch small boats was identified by the public as the most appropriate water-based amenity for SBSP. A hand launch would provide the ability to deliver small boats to the lakeshore but would not include a concrete boat ramp like those found at most FWP sites on Flathead Lake. Due to shallow water depths near the park's shoreline during full pool, the site would not be suitable for a larger launching facility, nor would that be consistent with the desired setting and service levels. A concrete boat ramp is readily available to support those opportunities at nearby Somers Fishing Access Site.

Trails

FWP proposes to provide inter-park trail connectivity via universally accessible non-motorized trails. Public planning participants expressed a strong preference for pedestrian trails, and to a lesser degree bicycle trails to connect amenities within the park and provide for exercise and exploration. Participants were also asked to identify trail surface preferences. The two most popular preferences were native tread or "bare earth" and board-walked trails in areas that are within the 100-year flood plain or designated wetlands. For the sake of accessibility, all proposed trails within the design alternatives would have surfacing that accommodates mobility assistance devices.

Interpretive Displays

FWP recognizes an opportunity to provide educational and interpretive materials exploring the rich cultural and natural history of the site. During the open house and virtual planning meetings participants expressed a preference for interpretive panels and interactive displays over other delivery mediums such as QR codes. FWP has engaged the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in the site assessment and planning process to better know the site and its pre- and post-contact uses, and to seek opportunities to enhance and partner on development of interpretive and educational offerings.

Overnight accommodations

61% of participants who participated in the survey preferred that the park be designated as day use only. The subsequent open house and virtual planning meetings rendered a different result with approximately 75% of participants indicating that some type of overnight accommodation should be available at the park. In both cases, those who wanted overnight accommodations had a strong preference for tent camping with a secondary preference for small cabins. Alternative C is FWP's preferred alternative and includes both of those limited overnight accommodations.

Purpose and Benefit of Proposed Action

FWP proposes to develop recreational opportunities at SBSP in a manner that is sustainable and causes no significant adverse impacts to the human or physical environments. SBSP is the most recent addition to Montana's State Park System, and it is in an area of high recreational demand. The site has seen public utilization for several decades courtesy of the previous owners. SBSP is comprised of lakeshore, wetlands, floodplain, and uplands, and is situated between the federal Flathead Lake Waterfowl Production Area (FHL WPA) and the townsite of Somers. The intent of developing recreational amenities is to guide and enhance use in a way that minimizes visitor impacts and conserves important natural, cultural, and recreational resources. Benefits include improved accessibility, opportunities for outdoor recreation, wildlife viewing and interpretive and educational programming.

DEFINITIONS: The impact analysis will identify and evaluate direct, secondary, and cumulative impacts to the human environment.

Human environment are those attributes, including but not limited to biological, physical, social, economic, cultural, and aesthetic factors, that interrelate to form the environment.

Direct impacts are those that occur at the same time and place as the action that triggers the effect.

Secondary impacts are further impacts "to the human environment that may be stimulated or induced by or otherwise result from a direct impact of the action." ARM 12.2.429.

Cumulative impacts "means the collective impacts on the human environment of the proposed action when considered in conjunction with other past and present actions related to the proposed action by location or generic type. Related future actions must also be considered when these actions are under concurrent consideration by any state agency through pre-impact statement studies, separate impact statement evaluation, or permit processing procedures." ARM 12.2.429.

Where impacts are expected to occur, the impact analysis estimates the duration and intensity of the impact. The duration of an impact is quantified as follows:

Short-term: Short-term impacts are defined as those impacts that would not last longer than the proposed action.

Long-term: Long-term impacts are defined as impacts that would remain or occur following completion of the proposed action.

The severity of an impact is measured using the following:

No impact: There would be no change from current conditions.

Negligible: An adverse or beneficial effect would occur but would be at the lowest levels of detection.

Minor: The effect would be noticeable but would be relatively small and would not affect the function or integrity of the resource.

Moderate: The effect would be easily identifiable and would change the function or the integrity of the resource.

Major: The effect would irretrievably alter the resource.

Some impacts may require mitigation. As defined in ARM 12.2.429, mitigation means:

- (a) avoiding an impact by not taking a certain action or parts of an action.
- (b) minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of an action and its implementation.
- (c) rectifying an impact by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment; or
- (d) reducing or eliminating an impact over time by preservation and maintenance operations during the life of an action or the time period thereafter that an impact continues.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

Under the No Action Alternative FWP would not install any additional visitor amenities beyond what is currently provided. A parking lot and a single portable toilet are present at the park, and the east and west boundaries have been marked. Visitors to the park have pioneered a foot path from the parking lot to the Flathead Lake shoreline in the eastern half of the park, and they utilize Burnell Avenue to access a primitive road leading to the lake on the west side of the park. This alternative would result in the least amount of change to the park's current condition.

Under the no action alternative, none of the developed recreational opportunities identified in the public planning efforts would be installed. Trails would be limited to pioneered trails, and access for people with disabilities would not be enhanced. Flushing toilets and drinking water would not be provided.

Under this alternative host sites would not be provided and thus, camp hosts would not be stationed at the park. Administrative functions would be conducted remotely, and maintenance equipment and supplies would not be stored at the park.

Sanitation needs would be met via placement of portable toilets, and animal resistant trash receptacles would be placed on the existing parking lot, which would remain gravel along with the entry road.

Alternative B:

Alternative B (see Figure 3) would provide several visitor amenities that are consistent with rustic and core levels of development within the FWP state parks classification system while enhancing the natural and recreational experience opportunities.

Administrative site and main entrance development

Utilizing the recently completed park entry road and parking lot, FWP proposes developing this location as the permanent main park entrance. The existing park entrance provides a central location that is well screened from most surrounding residential properties and eliminates the need to disturb additional ground. This proposal includes paving the existing gravel surfaces and building a 12'x8' entrance and fee station. The entrance station provides the ability to staff the park's entrance during busy visitation periods. Park staff use entry stations to disseminate information and collect fees when required, in accordance with the Montana State Parks Fee Schedule. In other state park units on Flathead Lake entry stations have proven to be a highly effective tool in managing visitor use during peak season visitation. This has been accomplished by entry station attendants reinforcing important park regulations such as the need to keep pets leashed, or reminders about closing hours. Additionally, entry station attendants perform as a conduit to law enforcement and emergency services. The station would be located a short distance to the southwest of the existing park entrance on Somers Road.



TYPICAL STATE PARK ENTRY STATION

FWP proposes the development of two camp host RV sites in the proximity of a proposed maintenance shed. Host sites would provide water, sewer, and electrical hook-ups for camp hosts to use with their personal RVs, thus making it easier for them to remain on site during the summer and shoulder seasons. Most state parks and some of the fishing access sites in northwest Montana utilize host sites as a proactive tool in preventing nighttime disturbances and providing visitor service.

Utilizing the space directly to the north of the existing parking lot, FWP proposes the construction of a 24'x36' picnic shelter, natural playground, and restroom with flushing toilet. Utilizing existing vegetation, and creating a landscaped berm with additional plantings, FWP would locate these amenities in such a way as to be partially screened from adjacent residential properties and be easily accessible from the existing parking lot. The picnic shelter would accommodate gatherings of up to 50 people and would be available for rent.



TYPICAL NATURAL PLAYGROUND



24'x 36' PICNIC SHELTER

The playground would utilize natural materials to create a play space for young children immediately adjacent to the picnic shelter. Both facilities would be served by a restroom with flushing toilets. Animal resistant trash and recycling receptacles would be placed adjacent to the picnic shelter and restroom, and public drinking water would be provided via a drinking station in the same proximity.

Lakeside visitor amenities

During the open house, FWP heard strong support for providing additional shoreline amenities. As a result, FWP proposes the construction of a hand boat launch for small watercraft along the park's southeastern shoreline. Approximately 650' of existing pioneered trail would be converted to a 20' wide, gravel surfaced road and cul-de-sac that would permit visitors to deliver recreational equipment to the water's edge before returning to the main parking lot to park. Four Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) parking spaces would be provided near the cul-de-sac.

FWP proposes enhancement of up to 922' of existing dynamic equilibrium beach shoreline to reinforce the structure against higher than anticipated full pool lake elevations experienced in 2022, with the added benefit of providing an expanded visitor-friendly lake shore.



SBSP WEST SIDE BEACH

During the winter and spring months of 2022, contractors installed a dynamic equilibrium beach (see figure 1) to mitigate severe shoreline erosion along the park's lakeshore. The dynamic equilibrium beach is an alternative to traditional rip rap shoreline protection and is intended to stop the loss of existing wetlands due to wave erosion. The structure provides a natural transition from the aquatic environment along the shoreline to a fringing wetland that maintains a hydrologic connection with the lake. This was accomplished by placing various sized, screened pit run (rocks) along approximately 1,985' of shoreline. Early observations indicated that it is performing as intended, and erosion has been substantially mitigated, with signs of wetland regeneration as early as July 2022. Flathead Lake however was well above the normal full pool elevation of 2893' in June during run-off and again in late August of 2022. If this phenomenon happens in future years, it may result in the dynamic equilibrium beach becoming less effective at preventing the marsh shoreline from eroding in the future. This proposal would include the placement of additional materials on the existing dynamic beach in anticipation of lake elevations of 2894' and a more significant breaking wave height of about 1'. This proposal would result in a wider beach to absorb the wave energy and reduce the over-wash severity.

Additionally, a gravel spit would be incorporated to control the direction of sediment transport, to enhance deposition of fine sediments and to radiate wave energy away from the shoreline. Gravel spits have been used in several locations along previous north Flathead lakeshore projects. Natural colonization by riparian and wetland plants occurred rapidly thereafter and for years to come. (Lorang, 2019). An added benefit to building the beach up to 2894' would be the ability for park visitors to access more park shoreline during full-pool lake levels.

FIGURE 1



Figure 1 illustrates the linear beach segments of the existing dynamic equilibrium beach and volume of 3" minus screened pit run (small rocks) needed to reinforce the beach.

FIGURE 2

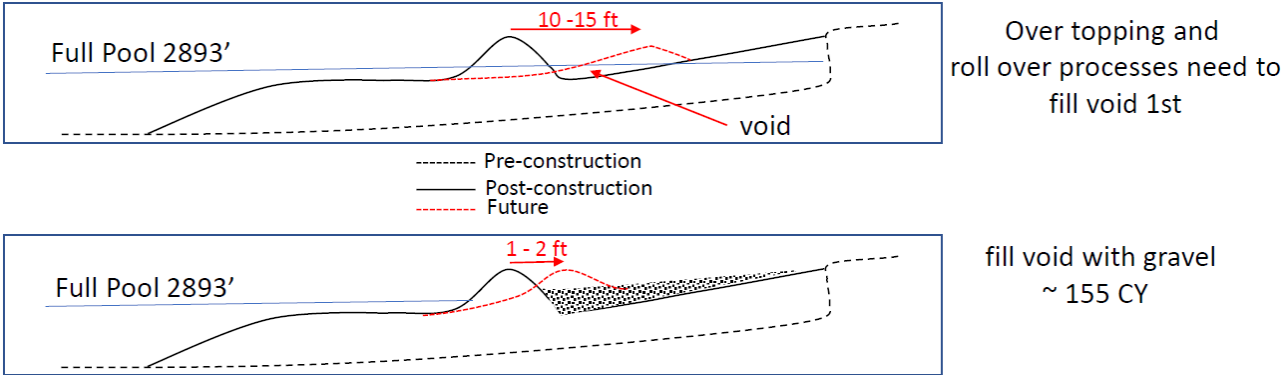


Figure 2 illustrates the park’s shoreline prior to installation of the dynamic equilibrium beach, post construction of the beach in the spring of 2022, and the required fill areas that would be utilized to reinforce the beach to withstand lake elevations of 2894’. The result would be the placement of between 1,200 cubic yards and 1,475 cubic yards of additional material.

Finally, approximately 125’ feet of board-walked trail would be developed to provide access from the ADA parking spaces to a 12’X16’ viewing platform that would parallel the lakeshore to the southwest of the cul-de-sac. The viewing platform would provide an opportunity to enjoy the lakeshore for people with mobility limitations. The development of these lakeside visitor amenities would take place within designated wetlands and designated floodplain lands and would be contingent upon successful acquisition of the required county, state, and federal permits.

Burnell Avenue amenities

Under this alternative Burnell Avenue would serve as an administrative access, and as a visitor walk-in entrance to the west side of the park. A trailhead kiosk and fee station would be located at the park’s northwest entrance and the existing primitive one-lane roadway would be improved to provide better walking and ADA access.

FWP proposes the development of a picnic area and restroom near the existing gravel beach. The picnic area would include a small picnic shelter to accommodate up to three standard sized picnic tables. A vault latrine would be installed proximate to the picnic area on the west side of the road.

Trails

FWP has consistently heard support for the development of a non-motorized trail system to provide connectivity within the park, and to present or future trail systems outside of the park. FWP proposes the construction of up to 1.6 miles of crushed gravel trail within the park, and development of trailheads at the northeast corner of the park and at the terminus of Burnell Avenue on the park's northwest side. These trailheads would utilize small kiosks that provide visitor information, regulations, and fee schedules. Trailheads would be intended as walk-in entrances to the park. BNSF owns two inholdings within the park. FWP and BNSF are exploring terms of an agreement to allow public access across the northern parcel via a trail connecting the main SBSP parking lot with the Burnell Ave trail. This trail segment would add approximately 1,050' of trail and would be contingent upon successful negotiation of terms.

Signage and fencing

Two-rail wooden fencing like the type installed at the current entry road and parking lot would be installed parallel to Somers Road along the park's northern boundary. An entry sign and internal directional and regulatory signage would be included as needed, and wayfinding signage would be installed outside of the park per county and Montana Department of Transportation regulations.

Landscaping and vegetative planting

The northeast portion of the park is currently utilized for alfalfa production, and FWP proposes a more natural appearance for this section of the park. Recognizing the importance of maintaining open space and a high quality viewshed, FWP proposes using low, earthen berms in conjunction with native shrubs and trees to develop screening for adjacent residential property owners and provide texture within the park's northeastern footprint to enhance trail experiences and wildlife habitat and viewing.

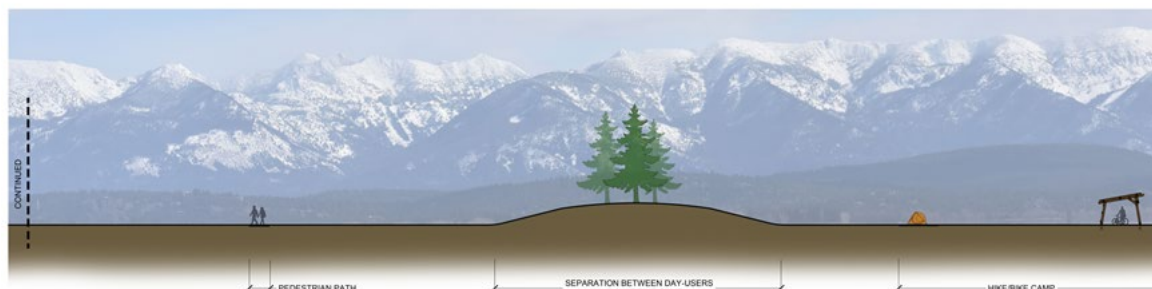
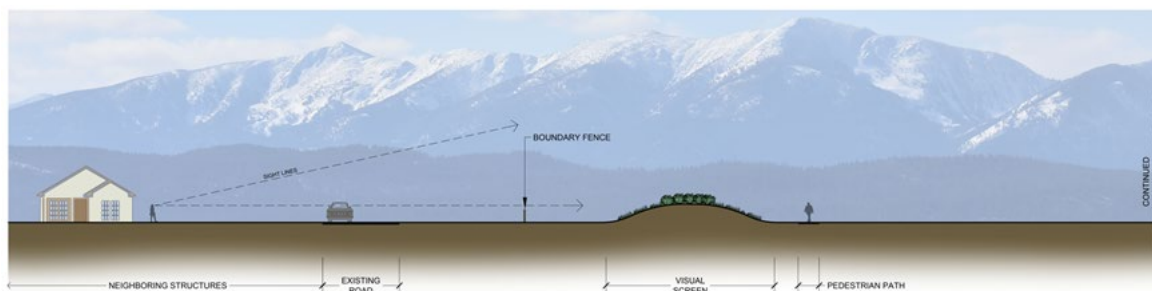


ILLUSTRATION OF HOW LANDSCAPED BERMS COULD BE USED TO PROVIDE VISUAL SCREENING WITH SBSP

This proposal would include gradually transitioning the alfalfa field to perennial wheatgrasses with addition of shrub and tree plantings. Shrub and tree plantings would be grouped and temporarily protected in wire enclosures throughout establishment. The Kalispell area FWP wildlife biologist recommends the following mix of wheatgrass species:

Intermediate Wheatgrass	<i>Thinopyrum intermedium</i>
Basin Wild Rye	<i>Leymus cinereus</i>
Slender Wheatgrass	<i>Elymus trachycaulus</i>
Streambank Wheatgrass	<i>Elymus lanceolatus</i>
Tall Wheatgrass	<i>Thinopyrum ponticum</i>
Orchard Grass	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>

Dependent on local availability, woody species would be a mix of hawthorn, dogwood, willow (booth, Geyer's, Drummond, and others), snowberry, wild rose, serviceberry, chokecherry, aspen, cottonwood, ponderosa pine and juniper.

Figure 3.



Alternative C:

Alternative C (Figure 4) includes the administrative and day use related visitor amenities proposed in Alternative B with the addition of limited overnight accommodations on the west and east sides of the park. Alternative C is FWP’s preferred alternative.

In Alternative C, FWP proposes the development of up to three small cabins that would be installed on the park’s west side, located east of Burnell Avenue to preserve the viewshed of neighboring properties.¹ Existing vegetation on both sides of the roadway would provide screening for residential properties on the park’s west boundary. The cabins would be available for nightly rental through the state parks campsite reservation system. The cabins would provide electrical service, and a single vault latrine would serve all units. The existing roadway would be improved and parking for cabin renters would be provided at the cabin sites. Vehicle access would be granted for cabin renters via an administrative gate code. General day use access would otherwise be restricted to walk-in access as described in Alternative B.



12’x12’ CABIN – FINLEY POINT - FHLSP

In Alternative C, FWP also proposes a small tent camping opportunity on the east side of SBSP that would be modeled after the shared hiker/biker tent sites at Whitefish Lake State Park and the Wayfarers Unit of Flathead Lake State Park. This installation would provide a covered common area that is utilized for cooking. Animal resistant food and garbage storage containers and drinking water would be provided. Surrounding the common area in satellite fashion would be up to six 10’x10’ tent pads. These sites would be available on a first-come basis for people arriving to the park on foot, by bicycle, or by other non-motorized means such as kayak or canoe. The shared hiker/biker site would be serviced by a vault latrine. Overnight vehicle parking at the main parking lot for use of these sites would not be allowed.

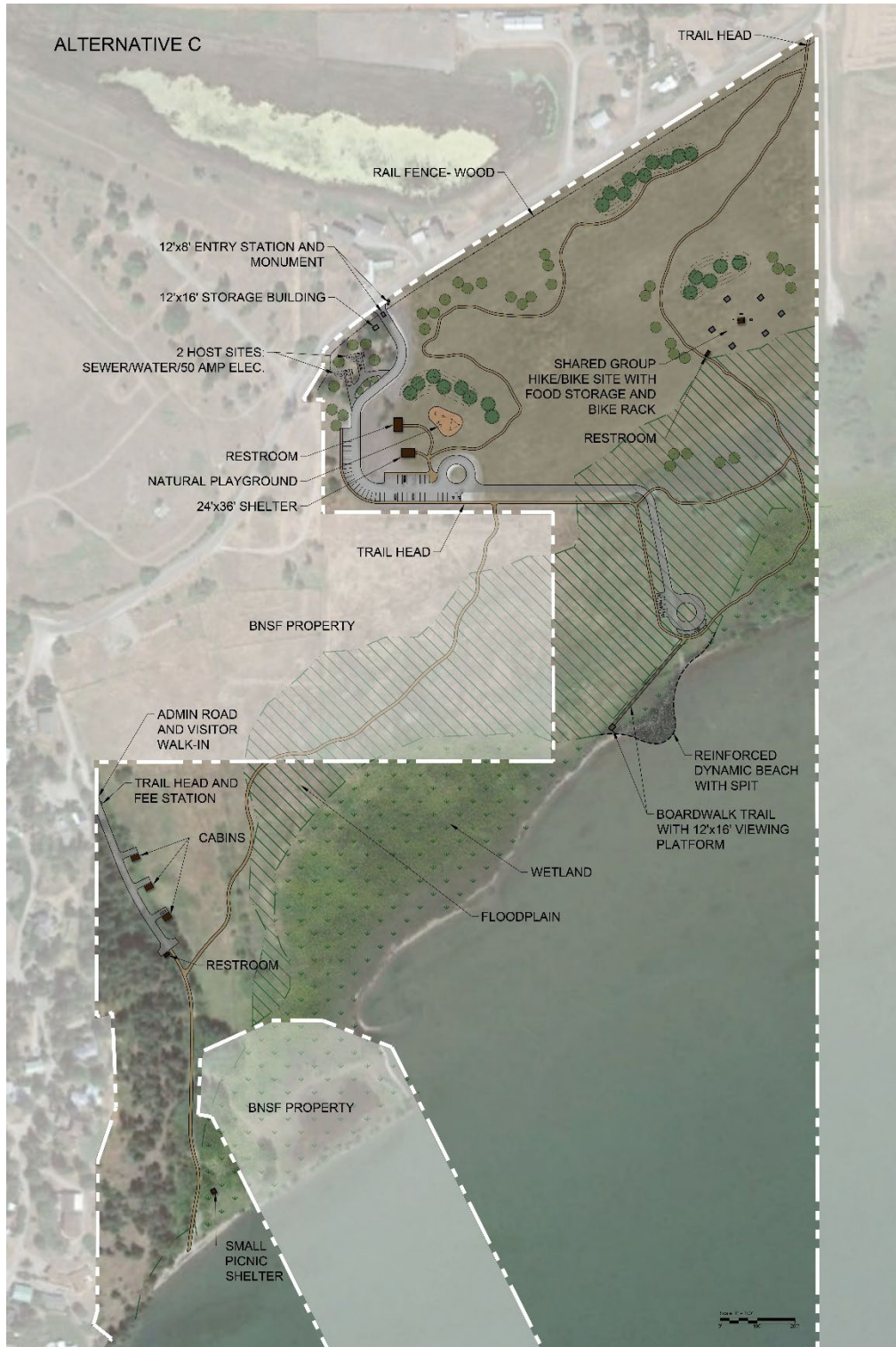


SHARED HIKER/BIKER TENT SITE AT FHLSP-WAYFARERS



¹ During the public planning meetings, FWP consistently heard that RV camping was not desired.

Figure 4.



EVALUATION AND SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION ("ALTERNATIVE C" or "PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE") TO THE PHYSICAL AND HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS

Current Conditions

SBSP consists of a combination of Montane grassland, wet meadow, emergent wetlands, seasonally flooded lakebed, and agricultural habitats which support a wide range of wildlife species. According to a search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database, 13 species of concern have been identified within two miles of SBSP: fisher, grizzly bear, great blue heron, evening grosbeak, trumpeter swan, varied thrush, Clark's nutcracker, Brewer's sparrow, common tern, westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, pygmy whitefish, and oblique mud snail. Bald eagles, which are listed as a special status species have also been observed nearby. Grizzly bear and bull trout are listed as threatened. While grizzly bears may pass through Somers Beach State Park, it is not critical habitat, and the proposed project would have negligible impacts on grizzly bears and their habitat. The proposed project would not impact adjacent streams or Flathead Lake and would have negligible impacts on bull trout and their habitat.

SBSP is located immediately to the east of the Somers townsite and several residential properties. SBSP forms a buffer between the town and the FHL WPA. Park grounds are a mix of agricultural and undeveloped uplands that transition to wetlands near Flathead Lake. There are several old and failing wire fences throughout the property along with other debris from past agricultural and industrial activities. The western side of the park possesses the only developed road, which extends from the southern terminus of Burnell Avenue through the park to Flathead Lake. There is further evidence of industrial use there, and numerous piles of imported fractured rock remain, left over from shoreline riprap which was installed along the southern BNSF parcel fronting the lake. A significant portion of the park's 106 acres is lakebed. Approximately 45 acres of parkland becomes exposed lakebed when Flathead Lake reaches low pool every year. The exposed lakebed is used by recreationists for hiking, mountain biking, skiing, ice skating, etc. During full pool the primary park use has been for walking, with most of the use originating from the parking lot. Visitors follow a pioneered trail to the lakeshore from there.

The site holds cultural significance to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, with particular importance to the Kootenai community.

Vehicle access to SBSP is via the recently constructed gravel access road and 50-car parking lot fronting Somers Road in the north-central region of the park. Basic user regulation signage, a fee station, portable toilet, and an animal resistant trash receptacle have been placed on the east end of the parking lot. Park boundaries have been marked on the east and west sides of the park to delineate the site from residential properties and the federal FHL WPA. There are two private inholdings within the park owned by BNSF. BNSF inhold-

ings have been the subject of remediation work to address underground contaminants associated with previous industrial use in the area. Following soil and groundwater sampling in the 1980's, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that approximately 14 acres of the Somers BNSF property were contaminated and declared those a superfund site in 1984, after which BNSF entered a consent decree with the EPA to clean up the contaminated soils and groundwater. Some impacted soils were excavated and removed to a land treatment unit for bioremediation, and some were left in place and covered with clean fill soil. In 2003, EPA and Montana DEQ certified that cleanup of the soils was complete.

Cumulative Impacts:

FWP has reviewed past, present, and potential future actions related to SBSP by location or generic type. The following actions were identified:

- The adjoining FHL WPA.
- The nearby Somers Fishing Access Site (FAS).
- Prior state-sponsored interim development and bank stabilization projects associated with the SBSP; and
- A planned, yet to be officially proposed, large subdivision adjacent to the proposed SBSP

With consideration for the above-cited actions, approval of the proposed SBSP project would result in the potential for cumulative impacts to the various resources analyzed in this Draft EA. No significant adverse cumulative impacts would be expected because of the proposed action.

FWP is unaware of any other related actions under concurrent consideration by any state agency through pre-impact statement studies, separate impact statement evaluation, or permit processing procedures that would interact with the impacts of the proposed action to create cumulative impacts. The impacts analysis below further evaluates potential cumulative impacts by resource category analyzed.

1) Topography, Geology and Soil Quality, Stability and Moisture

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action: Development of restrooms, a picnic shelter, cabins, maintenance shed, entry station, tenting facilities and boat hand launch would result in short-term disruption, displacement, and minor compaction to area soils in locations immediately proximate to those developed amenities. Development of accessible trails would result in negligible, long-term alteration of soils. FWP Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be followed during all phases of development and construction. BMPs include any conditions of approval by permitting agencies for work in this area, including the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and Flathead County. Typical BMPs include but are not limited to silt fencing, straw or rock wattles, sediment settling ponds and revegetation for erosion and sediment control along with lined concrete washout basins (if needed). On-site petroleum spill containment tools would be required for pollutant protection. The contractor's stormwater pollution protection plan would be a submittal requirement.

The augmentation of the existing dynamic equilibrium beach could result in short-term, minor lake-bed disturbance associated with equipment used to place materials. The placement of dynamic beach materials in 2022 was completed while Flathead Lake was at low pool and resulted in temporary tire tracks and rutting to the lake bottom. As high water returned, those marks eventually disappeared and are no longer visible. Turbidity was minimal and the ground was predominantly frozen along the shoreline.

Minor and long-term impacts to wetlands would be incurred via the development of a hand boat launch, access road, and ADA parking spaces within the wetlands on the park's southeast corner. Approximately .45 acres of designated floodplain would be permanently converted to a gravel road surface. Implementation of this element of the proposed action would be contingent upon approval and permitting by the Army Corps of Engineers, which would specify mitigation measures and best management practices for construction.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

Expansion of the dynamic equilibrium beach is expected to further reduce erosion. The loss of wetlands prior to the completion of the beach installation in 2022 has been estimated at approximately 2 meters per year. The enhancement of the dynamic beach will potentially increase wetlands by allowing recently eroded areas to accumulate silt and other organic debris, and eventually revert to wetland plant communities.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action

Previous shoreline stabilization work associated with the dynamic equilibrium beach at SBSP would be further improved by planned shoreline stabilization work activities associated with the proposed action. The Somers Fishing Access Site (FAS) is located a short distance to the west along US Highway 93 and provides public access to local recreational opportunities. FWP is also aware of a proposed large residential subdivision in the early stages of planning for a property located directly north of SBSP.

Minor, long term beneficial cumulative impacts to local topography, geology, soil quality, stability, and moisture associated with the proposed action would be expected due to prior bank stabilization activities. Short-term and minor cumulative impacts to local topography, geology, soil quality, stability, and moisture could result from development of the subdivision; however, any cumulative impacts associated with the proposed action would be beneficial and minor. The existing Somers Fishing Access Site would not further impact such resources. Overall, any cumulative impact associated with the proposed action would be minor.

2) Air Quality

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action: The proposed development would include some use of heavy machinery during construction work. Construction work would result in short term, minor, and temporary fugitive dust or particulate matter emissions from activities necessitating ground disturbance and exhaust emissions from heavy equipment fuel combustion. FWP Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be followed during all phases of future development and construction. Construction specifications for the project would require the contractor to mitigate dust with BMPs. If water is used to control dust, the required DEQ Stormwater

Permit would dictate methods for controlling run-off and sediment from entering surface waters. Vault latrines or portable toilets would be provided, which can create objectionable odors. Both would have scheduled service to minimize odors.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action:

Campfires are not currently permitted in SBSP, nor would they be under the proposed action.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action:

No long-term adverse cumulative impact to local air quality would be expected because of the proposed action because none of the proposed action activities, prior park improvements, bank stabilization activities, the existing FHL WPA, the existing Somers FAS, nor the planned subdivision adversely impact air quality resources.

3) Water Quality, Quantity and Distribution

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action: The proposed action involves the paving of the parking lot and access road. That development would cause changes to drainage patterns and the rate of surface run-off. BMPs would be implemented during all phases of development pre and post construction, and contractors would be required to obtain a stormwater permit from DEQ prior to initiating work. Improvement design would include a permanent retention or detention pond, sized to take the peak volume from stormwater runoff and release it at the pre-development rate to prevent erosion and provide pollutant protection from any surfaces disturbed or hardened. Stormwater retention/detention ponds would be inspected and maintained by staff on a continual basis. Calculations differentiating the runoff increase from the current gravel surfacing to a paved surface will dictate the size and location of stormwater retention improvements. Currently adequate stormwater retention is provided by oversized swales along the down-gradient side of the road, around the cul-de-sac, and along the down gradient (south) edge of the lot. After asphalt paving the existing road and parking lot, stormwater retention volume would need to be increased by approximately 12%. A pond or deepened swales would be constructed on the down-gradient side of the parking lot which is between the lot and the southern property boundary line.

Elements of the proposed action would be constructed within the 100-year floodplain. Flood conveyance is not expected to be altered. Construction would not proceed without a valid floodplain development permit from Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Low pool lake levels will allow the construction of shoreline stabilization to occur without entering the lake water. The shallow lake bottom in this location is silty sand and lies at a very low sloping angle. Some turbidity of the fine-grained soils is natural to this area. The shoreline lake bottom will be disturbed by the tracked equipment placing the dynamic beach gravels, but it will not affect lake water turbidity when the lake level slowly rises to full pool in the spring and summer.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action: The addition of up to 1,474 cy of additional 3" minus pit run (small rock) to fortify the existing dynamic equilibrium beach would enhance

beach stabilization and reduce erosion as evidenced by previous dynamic equilibrium beach and shoreline stabilization work at SBSP and other locations on Flathead Lake.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action:

The adjoining FHL WPA is managed to maintain natural vegetation. Maintenance of local natural vegetation communities lessens stormwater runoff resulting in improved water quality and decreased evaporation. Previous shoreline stabilization work associated with the dynamic equilibrium beach at SBSP has reduced turbidity on the SBSP's shoreline during full pool conditions. The addition of up to 1,474 cy of additional 3" minus pit run (small rock) to fortify the existing dynamic equilibrium beach would enhance stabilization and further reduce erosion. The Somers FAS is located a short distance to the west along US Highway 93 and provides public access to local recreational opportunities. Public use of the existing Somers FAS has the potential for short-term and minor adverse cumulative impacts to water quality in the affected area; however, the proposed SBSP would generally protect against such impacts by reintroduction of native vegetation thereby improving or providing beneficial cumulative impact. FWP is also aware of a proposed large residential subdivision in the early stages of planning for a property located directly north of the proposed SBSP. The planned subdivision also has the potential to impact water quality through stormwater runoff from replacement of natural vegetation with subdivision structures and parking lots.

A long term, minor beneficial cumulative impact to local water quality, quantity, and distribution would be expected because of the proposed SBSP due to increased promotion of natural vegetation and bank stabilization activities associated with the proposed SBSP.

4) Vegetation Cover, Quantity and Quality

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action:

During the acquisition of SBSP, a noxious weed inspection was completed by the Flathead County Weeds and Parks Department, which indicated that spotted knapweed, Canada thistle, bull thistle, and hounds' tongue are present on the property. The report further indicates that Canada thistle is the most prevalent noxious weed with patchy distribution throughout the property. FWP will implement a noxious weed control program which may include spraying, biological control, and hand pulling as needed. As was required during the 2022 dynamic beach project and the Interim Improvements project, any heavy equipment entering the site would be required to have been washed prior to arrival on the job site to avoid the spread of noxious weeds and any inadvertent fuel, oils, or greases from creating pollution. This would be specified in the Project Manual, discussed during the construction meetings and if a DEQ Construction Stormwater Permit is required, it will also be a part of the prerequisite permitting.

The property affected by the proposed improvements includes montane grasslands, wet meadows, emergent wetlands, agricultural lands, and seasonally flooded lakebed. These areas support a wide range of native and non-native grasses, sedges, forbs, shrubs and coniferous and non-coniferous trees. The proposed action could have minor, short-term and adverse impacts on the diversity and abundance of plant species in the vicinity of disturbed areas associated with construction. Long-term impacts are expected to be

beneficial under the proposed action, as plant community diversity would be improved, and noxious weed infestations would be reduced.

The proposed conversion of approximately 18 acres of what is currently alfalfa to native plant communities is expected to have minor beneficial long-term impact on the diversity and abundance of vegetation in the park. This proposal would include gradually transitioning this field to perennial wheatgrasses with addition of native shrub and tree plantings.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action: The proposed conversion of the alfalfa field to native plant communities is expected to provide a greater diversity of wildlife forage, habitat, and security.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action:

Development of the planned subdivision would likely result in moderate adverse impact to area vegetation. The proposed action may offset some of those impacts by providing further shoreline stabilization, wetland protection, and enhancement of diverse terrestrial plant communities. In combination with the FHL WPA focus on wildlife habitat conservation, the proposed action is expected to result in a beneficial cumulative impact to local vegetation cover, quantity, and quality.

5) Terrestrial, Avian, and Aquatic Life and Habitats

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

Construction activities and noise would temporarily displace some animal species and those species would likely return upon completion of construction. Construction of recreational amenities and infrastructure such as roads, parking area, trails, playgrounds, picnic areas, campsites, and cabins would have minor, long-term adverse impacts to some currently undeveloped wildlife habitat. This habitat conversion would be consolidated in concentrated areas to limit this conversion to a small portion of the property and the remainder of the park would remain undeveloped. FWP would minimize placement of recreational amenities and infrastructure in critical wildlife habitat and sensitive wetlands areas of the park. These impacts would be minor overall given the low percentage of undeveloped wildlife habitat that would be impacted compared to the whole of the surrounding SBSP and FHL WPA.

The proposed improvements to the dynamic equilibrium beach would have negligible short-term impacts to wildlife species. Construction would occur while the area is dry and fish species and habitat would not be affected. Some wildlife species could be temporarily displaced during completion of the proposed project.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

The development of visitor amenities and the public's use of them could have long-term minor adverse impacts to some animal species and their habitats in the park. FWP would implement park user rules that mitigate disturbance from pets and other human activities. This property has been in use by people and pets for decades without regulatory oversight.

Formalized access, informational and regulatory signage, and staff presence would mitigate adverse impacts to wildlife through active management of the site and visitors.

During public scoping and planning processes, FWP staff frequently heard concerns related to trespass on the neighboring FHL WPA during the annual spring bird-nesting closure of March 1 through July 15. FWP staff would continue to partner with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to provide education and awareness regarding the annual spring bird-nesting closure on the WPA.

The dynamic beach improvements would provide moderate, long-term benefits to wildlife habitat by restoring and protecting wetlands from erosion while allowing them to function naturally.

The proposed conversion of approximately 18 acres of what is currently alfalfa to natural plant communities is expected to have moderate long-term beneficial impacts on the diversity and abundance of both game and non-game animal species by providing greater diversity of wildlife forage, habitat, and security.

Approximately .45 acres of designated floodplain would be converted to a gravel hand-launch facility which would have a minor adverse impact to wildlife. FWP would implement BMPs into the hand launch design if approved.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action: Development of the planned subdivision would likely result in minor to moderate adverse impact to area wildlife and their habitats. However, the beneficial impacts from prior and proposed shoreline stabilization activities at SBSP in combination with proposed habitat enhancements may provide some mitigation. In combination with land and vegetation management practices in the adjoining FHL WPA, any cumulative impact to terrestrial, avian, and aquatic life and habitat quantity and quality associated with the proposed action would be minor and beneficial.

6) Noise

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

There would be temporary, minor noise impacts associated with construction equipment and personnel. FWP would set hours of operation for construction to prevent early morning and evening construction noise.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

The development of visitor amenities could result in a minor short-term increase in existing noise levels during peak use periods. While the property has historically seen heavy public use, the development of state park amenities may draw more visitors, resulting in the potential for noise. Noise levels associated with the interim amenities developed in 2022 have not resulted in complaints, and in fact may have provided some relief to neighbors by vastly reducing the amount of parking that occurs along Somers Road. The proposed action would enhance regulatory signage and on-site staff presence would serve to proactively mitigate noise.

Night closures would be in effect for all visitors except registered campers and cabin users. FWP would mitigate nighttime noise through notification and enforcement of posted quiet hours. Overall, noise issues may increase slightly during the day due to increased visitation but may decrease at night due to active management and enforcement of rules and regulations.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action:

Although peak visitation patterns have not yet been established at SBSB, historic use and early observations at the park suggest that peak use may occur during the months that Flathead Lake is at low pool. Low pool occurs in the winter and spring months. This appears to be the case with the FHL WPA as well, with a secondary peak during the fall and winter upland bird and waterfowl hunting seasons. The FHL WPA is closed to public entry from March 1 to July 15 every year. Peak use at Somers FAS occurs during the summer months, so overlap of peak visitation periods may be minimal. Moderate short-term increases in noise could result from the cumulative effect of a proposed residential development north of SBSB, combined with noise generated during peak use periods at SBSB, the FHL WPA and Somers FAS. FWP would mitigate nighttime noise at SBSB through enforcement of park rules and closures. Overall, any cumulative impact associated with the proposed action are anticipated to have a long-term minor adverse impact.

7) Land Use

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

Under the previous owner, the site's primary uses included outdoor recreation, agriculture, and open space. FWP anticipates land use under the proposed action to remain largely the same. The conversion of approximately 18 acres of cultivated alfalfa to non-agricultural open space is the most notable land use change. Prior to October 2021, this acreage produced alfalfa to be harvested for private use or for sale. Overall impact to agricultural production in the area is negligible.

The remaining terrestrial acreage is comprised of uplands, floodplain and wetland habitats open to outdoor recreation. Park amenities would be developed in compliance with all applicable requirements and best management practices to conserve wetlands, floodplains, riparian areas and associated uplands that help sustain water quality, important fish and wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities. Approximately .45 acres of the park is below the normal full pool elevation of Flathead Lake and is exposed during low pool periods. The exposed lakebed has become a popular recreation area during low pool (typically winter and early spring) and would remain as such under the proposed action.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

There is potential for increased public use of the FHL WPA via the state park. FWP will work cooperatively with the USFWS to better inform the public of seasonal nesting closures and other use regulations and expects impacts to be negligible.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action:

Development of the planned subdivision would likely result in moderate adverse impact to area land use regarding land conversion from agricultural or open space to residential. However, the proposed action, in combination with the adjoining FHL WPA, would result in

maintaining public outdoor recreation opportunity, open space, viewsheds, and increased wildlife habitat and security. The proposed actions may help mitigate adverse impacts associated with residential conversion. The proposed action, in combination with Somers FAS and the FLH WPA is expected to have a negligible impact to land use.

8) Risks/Health Hazards

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action: FWP has not identified direct risks or health hazards associated with the proposed action. The proposed action may limit risk and health hazards for people with disabilities and for the general public by providing ADA compliant amenities such as walking paths, latrines, sanitation services and on-site staffing.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

There is a negligible risk that the mitigation actions undertaken by BNSF on inholding property within the park could fail, releasing hazardous substances into Flathead Lake that could expose people to creosote-contaminated water. Numerous monitoring wells exist on both the BNSF and SBSP properties, and no active cleanup is ongoing. Semi-annual sampling of the municipal well has shown no contaminants of concern are present in the municipal water system, and EPA and DEQ have provided letters of support for a state park at this location. FWP has clearly marked park boundaries and will provide visitor information regarding property lines and well casings. The contaminated groundwater plume underneath the properties presents minimal risk to public health if it remains undisturbed. FWP is committed to leaving the plume undisturbed in any future park development and will coordinate all development with DEQ and the EPA to ensure the contamination remedies and the public at large are protected.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action

SBSP, Somers FAS, the FHL WPA, and a proposed residential subdivision north of Somers Road could cumulatively result in a moderate hazard to pedestrians associated with increased vehicle traffic in the Somers vicinity. Somers FAS traffic largely occurs on US Highway 93 and is not anticipated to impact Somers Road. The proposed action would make permanent the entrance road and parking lot that were installed at SBSP in 2022. These amenities have greatly reduced parking complaints on Somers Road. FWP would work with MDT to pursue signed pedestrian crossings, and would work with the community of Somers, non-governmental trail organizations, and Flathead County to promote and pursue bicycle/pedestrian trails that connect the park with current or future trail systems.

9) Traffic/Community Impacts

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

The previous owners allowed public use of the property that resulted in cars parked in adjacent neighborhoods and along Somers Road. The development of the interim parking lot in July of 2022 significantly reduced parking complaints along Somers Road. Development of additional amenities could result in more visitation to the area.² Increased visitation would result in a corresponding increase in vehicle traffic on Somers Road. A traffic counter monitored by the Montana Department of Transportation on Highway 93, just north of the turn onto Somers Road, calculated the annual average daily traffic in 2022 at that location as 18,801 vehicles. The counter lies approximately .50 miles from Somers Road and approximately 1.13 miles from the entrance to the SBSP parking lot. The addition of limited overnight accommodations in the form of rental cabins would result in a minor increase in visitor vehicle traffic on Burnell Avenue. Visitors with a cabin rental would be provided with a code that allows vehicle access for the duration of the rental. Cabin users would be limited to two vehicles per cabin to minimize total daily vehicle traffic on Burnell Avenue. Other visitor access to the west side of SBSP would be limited to walk-in access.

There may be a moderate increase in pedestrian traffic crossing Somers Road to access walk-in entrances at the northwest and northeast corners of the park. FWP would work with MDT to pursue signed pedestrian crossings, and would work with the community of Somers, non-governmental trail organizations, and Flathead County to promote and pursue bicycle/pedestrian trails that connect the park with current or future trail systems.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

There is potential for increased commercial activity within the Somers community because of park visitation. This would most likely be reflected in surrounding retail or service-oriented businesses.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action

SBSP is proximate to the Somers FAS which sees heavy visitation during the summer months. The adjoining FHL WPA has historically seen peak visitation during the winter and spring months when Flathead Lake is at low pool, and the site is closed to public entry March 1 through July 15 of each year. FWP is aware of a proposed residential subdivision in the early stages of planning for a property located directly north of the proposed SBSP. There is potential for the proposed action to increase use at SBSP which could combine to create a long-term minor increase in traffic in the vicinity of Somers. The development of an interim access road and parking lot in 2022 has significantly reduced parking complaints along Somers Road. FWP anticipates a minor long-term adverse cumulative impact to traffic as a result of the proposed action and would work with Flathead County and the Montana Department of Transportation to address traffic and pedestrian safety issues if they arise.

² Annual visitation data for SBSP is not yet available; surrounding state park units on Flathead Lake saw a 25% increase in visitation in 2020 due primarily to the national pandemic. In 2021 and 2022, annual visitation estimates for the Flathead Lake State Park units returned to 2019 visitation levels.

10) PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

By law, FWP pays taxes to counties equal to the amount that a private landowner would be required to pay per MCA 87-1-603. There would be no change in taxes received by Flathead County because of the proposed action.

The proposed action would result in additional managerial duties for FWP. Staff assigned to the park now consist of a district recreation manager, a park ranger, and a recreation technician. These employees manage SBSP and several area FWP recreation sites. The Region One maintenance team provides maintenance coverage, and game wardens based in Kalispell and Bigfork provide law enforcement coverage. If park host sites are developed as proposed, volunteer hosts would live on-site during peak use periods to aid with staffing needs.

FWP would schedule routine and frequent staff presence during peak use periods to provide visitor services, minimize conflicts, address neighbor concerns, collect user fees, and inform visitors of use restrictions. Annual operations costs would be associated with providing public sanitation, trash removal, site maintenance, boundary marking, noxious weed control, and other operational costs. The total estimated annual operations and maintenance costs is estimated to be approximately \$96,000. Impacts associated with this cost-estimate would be minor and long-term as revenue from cabin, tent, and day use site rentals and nonresident entry fees would support state park operations.

The proposed action would not draw heavily on utilities, with a very limited use of municipal sewer, water, and electrical services.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

FWP does not anticipate secondary impact to public services, taxes, and utilities.

Cumulative Impacts of the Proposed Action

There is potential for use at SBSP to increase beyond what occurred under private ownership. In combination with a proposed large-scale residential development in proximity to the park, the FLH WPA, and the Somers FAS, there could be a moderate, long-term impact to public services and utilities. FWP provides law enforcement coverage with game wardens and utilizes state park staff to proactively address potential law enforcement issues at its sites.

11) AESTHETICS/RECREATION

Direct Impacts of Proposed Action

FWP expects that the proposed action would result in moderate long-term beneficial impacts to the aesthetics and recreational opportunities in the affected area. The proposed action would continue the removal of old fencing materials and debris to create more uninterrupted open space. Where fences are used, wooden rail fences, similar to the one recently installed in conjunction with the parking lot, would be installed for visual appeal and consistency.

This proposal would convert the existing alfalfa field to a more natural setting with a wide diversity of plantings to increase the naturalness of the park's northeastern quadrant.

Proposed cabins on the west side would be positioned east of Burnell Avenue and the existing tree lines and dense vegetative cover on the west side of Burnell Avenue would be maintained to preserve the viewshed of neighboring landowners.

Low, earthen berms would be placed in combination with plantings of grasses, shrubs, and trees to screen the shared group tent site, picnic shelter, restroom, and natural playground from neighboring properties on the north side of SBSP. The proposed host camp sites and administrative building would be placed south of the existing tree line that borders the park's access road to the west, and additional tree plantings would be included to bolster screening. All building would utilize designs and colors intended to blend with their surroundings and minimize visual impacts.



TRAILHEAD EXAMPLE

The proposed action would provide a moderate long-term increase in recreational opportunities to park visitors including the surrounding community of Somers. Proposed visitor amenities would enhance the ability to swim, walk, boat, and view wildlife. Visitor amenities would be designed to be accessible and thus provide more opportunity for people with mobility needs.

Secondary Impacts of Proposed Action

There are no anticipated secondary impacts to aesthetics and recreation because of the proposed action.

Cumulative Impacts of Proposed Action

The Somers FAS is located on the west side of Somers opposite SBSP and provides public access to Flathead Lake. FWP is aware of a proposed large scale residential development to north of SBSP. It is

not known to what degree the development would alter the aesthetics of the area, but the proposed action would enhance existing viewsheds and open space qualities that are present in the adjoining FHL WPA and surrounding agricultural lands, while providing more public access to Flathead Lake. SBSP would provide additional accessible trails to Somers and the surrounding area, with the long-term potential to connect with existing and future trail systems.

12) Cultural and Historic Resources

In keeping with the Montana Antiquities Act and related regulations, all undertakings within State Parks are assessed for their potential to affect cultural resources. Any temporary or permanent developments within SBSP will require prior cultural resource assessment. Where indicated, cultural resource inventories including pedestrian survey and/or subsurface testing will occur through consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office. The process for cultural resource inventory and consultation is outlined in Administrative Rules 12.8.501-12.8.510. FWP also consults with all tribal historic preservation offices affiliated with each park in accordance with FWP tribal consultation guidelines. The Tribal Historic Preservation Office will determine whether cultural resource monitoring is required during implementation. In addition, FWP is committed to working with the Kootenai Culture Committee to develop educational and interpretive material regarding the cultural significance of SBSP.

Direct Impacts of the Proposed Action

This project will mitigate adverse effect to cultural resources through the cultural resource inventory process, including consultation with the SHPO and THPO. If cultural resources are unexpectedly encountered while implementing the proposed work, FWP will implement our “Unexpected Discovery” policy, which includes leaving artifacts in place if possible, and temporarily halting construction to determine the nature and significance of the finds. If requested, staff from the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Office may be on site during any excavation to observe and protect artifacts should any be disturbed or discovered.

Secondary Impacts of the Proposed Action

CSKT has shared concerns regarding the potential for visitors to disturb or remove important cultural resources from the park. Of particular concern is the removal of artifacts from the lakebed when it is exposed during low pool in the winter and early spring months. FWP shares these concerns and will work with CSKT to develop an inventory and monitoring program for artifacts and archaeological sites within the park. The collection or removal of artifacts is strictly prohibited under the Montana Antiquities Act and related regulations, and user regulations for SBSP will prohibit motorized travel on the lakebed to avoid disturbance. The expansion of the dynamic equilibrium beach in the proposed action would help protect artifacts and cultural sites from shoreline erosion, but artifacts may still be exposed by wave action on the lakebed.

Cumulative Impacts of the Proposed Action

Though this project will avoid direct adverse effect to cultural resources, any large ground-disturbing project increases the potential for the unexpected discovery of cultural resources, as discussed above. Increased visitation also has the potential to create additional opportunities for illegal collection of exposed artifacts. Recent state actions that have been positive for cultural resources in this vicinity include initially procuring Somers Beach State Park for the public. When the property was private, its cultural resources were not protected under the Montana Antiquities Act. In addition, the dynamic equilibrium beach installed in 2022 protects artifacts and cultural sites from shoreline erosion.

SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT BY THE NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

None of the development described in Alternatives B or C would occur under the no action alternative. This would have a variety of potential minor and moderate short-term and long-term impacts to the human environment in the area affected by the proposed project.

There would be no enhancements to recreational opportunity under the no action alternative, but site use would be expected to continue in a less directed and mitigated manner. For example, under existing conditions users are “pioneering” trails due to a lack of formally sited trails. This may result in visitor use patterns that are less safe, more disruptive to neighbors on the west and north sides of the park, and more disruptive to wildlife and habitat, and that pose a greater risk for disturbance of cultural sites and artifacts than the proposed action.

Under the no action alternative, FWP would leave the existing alfalfa field unaltered, which would require two to three annual cuttings. This would diminish the potential to improve wildlife habitat in that portion of the park and could result in greater disturbance of wildlife during alfalfa harvest.

Without enhancement of the dynamic equilibrium beach, there could be subsequent wetlands erosion if Flathead Lake continues to remain above typical full pool elevations for periods of time as happened in 2022 resulting in less protection of artifacts and cultural sites from shoreline erosion.

Staff presence would be less consistent without installation of an entry station and host camp site, which could result in fewer proactive visitor contacts and slower response to disturbances, or other issues.

Revenue from cabin, tent, and day-use site rentals would not be collected to support state park functions. Collection of nonresident entry fees would be diminished.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

Overall, this EA found that the proposed action of developing visitor amenities would provide a wide range of recreational, wildlife, and habitat benefits with mostly minor and some moderate adverse impacts.

Impacts from increased use to neighboring properties would be mitigated by FWP assuming increased active management of the property. Some existing issues, such as resource damage, trespass, noise at night, and pet and litter issues, are expected to improve under the proposed action with FWP's increased presence. This EA found no significant adverse impacts to the human environment would result from the proposed action.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There has been substantial public involvement in this proposal. On March 16, 2022, FWP initiated a public planning process to guide the next phase of park development. A virtual public information meeting provided insight into the process and anticipated timeline, and a survey tool was implemented to gather input regarding public preferences for future park service levels and experience settings in accordance with the state park classification system. FWP received 1,284 completed surveys over the month it was open providing a good cross-section of community values and desires as they relate to the development of Somers Beach State Park.

Using feedback from the survey, a pair of on-site open houses were held in July of 2022. FWP staff gathered more specific public feedback on the type, style, and desired location of park amenities that are consistent with experience and service levels that garnished the highest level of support in the spring survey. Public input gathered during these planning efforts was utilized in the development of the alternatives considered in this draft environmental assessment.

The public will be notified of this proposal by way of a statewide press releases in the *Independent Record*, *The Daily Interlake*, and the *Flathead Beacon*, and by public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. Individual notices will be sent to those that have requested one.

FWP will analyze all substantive comments regarding the proposed action prior to making final decisions about the adequacy of the analysis in the EA, modifications to the proposed action, or the necessity of preparing an EIS. FWP will include a summary of comments or, if impractical, a representative sample of all comments and the agency's response to all substantive comments with the decision notice.

2. Duration of comment period, if any.

FWP determined a 30-day public comment period constitutes the appropriate level of public involvement for the proposed project.

The public comment period will run from, Jan.13, 2023 until, Feb.13, 2023 at 5:00 pm. Comments should be sent to: Somers Beach State Park Development Proposal EA; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 490 N. Meridian Road; Kalispell, MT 59901. or via e-mail to: Stevie.Burton@mt.gov.

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)?

No. Based on an evaluation of the primary, secondary, and cumulative impacts to the physical and human environment, this environmental review found no significant impacts from the proposed action. In determining the significance of the impacts of the proposed project, FWP assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. FWP assessed the growth-inducing or growth-inhibiting aspects of the impact, the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value affected; any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit FWP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws. As this EA revealed no significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

2. EA prepared by: Dave Landstrom, Tony Powell, Rachel Reckin, and Hope Stockwell.

3. List of agencies and organizations consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division
Wildlife Division
Fisheries Division
Design & Construction Bureau
Lands Section
Legal Section

Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Burlington-Northern Santa Fe

**TOURISM REPORT
MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) & MCA 23-1-110**

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has initiated the review process as mandated by MCA 23-1-110 and the Montana Environmental Policy Act in its consideration of the project described below. As part of the review process, input and comments are being solicited. Please complete the project name and project description portions and submit this form to:

Jan Stoddard, Bureau Chief
Office of Tourism, Brand MT
301 S. Park Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

Project Name: Somers Beach State Park Development

Project Description: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing developments to Somers Beach State Park near Somers, MT. The proposal includes a range of alternatives that include visitor amenities such as restrooms, trails, a carry-on boat launch, an improved recreational beach, picnic shelters, wildlife viewing platforms tent camping, and rental cabins. Some or all of these improvements could be included in the preferred alternative and public comment will be taken into consideration before a final Decision Notice is issued. The proposal also includes administrative facilities including an entrance station, maintenance shed, and on-site host campsites. FWP acquired the 106-acre property in October of 2021 for inclusion in the Montana State Parks system and developed an access road and parking lot in the spring of 2022.

1. Would this site development project have an impact on the tourism economy?
NO **YES** If YES, briefly describe:

As described, this project has the potential to positively impact the tourism and recreation industry economy if properly maintained. The opportunity to recreate in Montana is marketed to destination visitors from around the world. This includes emphasizing recreational opportunities in accessible locations. Somers Beach State Park is an essential asset for Montana's outdoor recreation industry.

In 2021, Montana's 12.5 million non-resident visitors spent over \$5 billion in the state according to a 2022 report from the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR). Montana residents use and value state parks. A 2018 ITRR study confirmed that over half of Montana residents 18 and older use Montana State Parks at least once a year and that the importance of having state parks is agreed upon by all residents.

Additionally, Montana State Parks are seeing record numbers in visitation as access to recreational activities is in high demand for resident and non-resident visitors. The intent to visit has dramatically increased due to the pandemic and a desire for safe outdoor recreation experiences.

2. Does this impending improvement alter the quality or quantity of recreation/tourism opportunities and settings?
NO **YES** If YES, briefly describe:

This project will improve quality and quantity of tourism and recreational opportunities with the addition of specific amenities as mentioned in the project description. These improvements are important and critical components for long-term sustainability of this asset. We are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

Signature Jan Stoddard Date 9/21/22