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Affordable housing efforts hit roadblocks

It wasn't for a lack of effort, but 2017 was a year of fits and starts when it came to addressing Big Sky's affordable housing needs.

On Feb. 28, Gallatin County commissioner Joe Skinner and chairman Don Seifert denied the Bough Big Sky Community Subdivision's preliminary plat approval, citing construction variances that did not meet the county subdivision safety standards.

Another potential means of funding affordable housing was shot down in late March when the Montana Senate voted 25-25 on Senate Bill 343. Dubbed a "Penny for Housing," the bill would have allowed resort tax communities to vote on a 1-percent increase on collections for affordable housing efforts.

Another independent project spearheaded by Big Sky developer and realtor Scott Altman was halted when Gallatin County commissioners on Nov. 14 unanimously denied preliminary plat approval for a workforce housing subdivision located near Ace Hardware.

Commissioners Don Seifert, Steve White and Joe Skinner voted down the subdivision based upon the recommendation of Gallatin County planners and traffic engineers who felt it would be unsafe without the addition of turn lanes. Constructing the turn lanes is anticipated to cost approximately \$1 million, a sum that Altman said was unlikely he would fund himself.

There were some positive steps forward made in 2017. Last year saw the formation of the Big Sky Community Housing Advisory Committee, a volunteer-based board working closely with the HRDC to implement solutions for various housing needs, from down-payment assistant programs, to incentivizing homeowners to shift from short term to long term rentals.

Big Sky Resort added approximately 200 employee beds between its Golden Eagle accommodations in the Meadow, and Mountain Village housing, which may free up housing for fulltime residents.

In late November, a revised subdivision pre-application for the development of the Bough parcel was submitted to Gallatin County, on behalf of Big Sky resident and landowner Loren Bough, and is still being processed. Meanwhile Scott Altman shows no signs of giving up on his plans to develop affordable housing on his plot of land off of Lone Mountain Trail.



OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO



(ABOVE) PHOTO COURTESY OF THE KENNEDY FAMILY

(BELOW) PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GALLATIN NATIONAL FOREST AVALANCHE CENTER



Imp Peak avalanche spotlights efforts of local search and rescue

The news of the country's first avalanche fatality of the season, in Big Sky's backyard, sent shockwaves around the world.

A slide on Imp Peak in the southern Madison Range, on Oct. 7, claimed the life of 23-year-old Inge Perkins of Bozeman. Her boyfriend Hayden Kennedy, 27, was skiing with her and later chose to end his own life in the aftermath.

Perkins was an elite climber and skier, and had been building an impressive resume in the mountains before her death. Kennedy was an accomplished rock climber, before he took his talent to the world's high peaks, completing astonishing ascents from Patagonia to the Himalayas.

Near the bottom of Imp Peak's north couloir, around 10,000 feet, the couple triggered an avalanche while ascending on skis with skins. Perkins had an avalanche transceiver with her, but it was turned off at the time of the accident and Kennedy was unable to find her.

Andy Dreisbach was on scene for the recovery of Perkins' body. A seven-year Big Sky Search and Rescue veteran, Dreisbach began his SAR career as an 18-year-old. Yet he still had a tough time recounting this particular call to his 7-year-old son.

"He's not a boy in a bubble—but suicide. That's a whole different creature to come home with," Dreisbach said. "And I don't think about it much, because I've been doing search and rescue for a while and I [ski] patrolled for a long time. ... You don't have time to get emotional about it, you just have to go through the motions and what you're trained to do."

Jason Jarrett is a captain with the Gallatin County Sheriff's Office and has been commander of Gallatin County Search and Rescue for two decades. He said SAR responders are "team over self," who don't readily open up to outsiders about the difficult work they do.

"The bottom line of it is that the people that are in search and rescue—and we have world class members because that's who lives here—unanimously do this for their support of the active outdoor lifestyle," Jarrett said. "And when things go bad, these are the people you want coming to look for you."

Big Sky business is booming

The Big Sky Chamber of Commerce reported record-breaking membership with numbers topping 400 at year's end, and a total of 11 ribbon cuttings for a myriad of new businesses that opened in 2017. In late June at the 20th annual chamber dinner, the theme was growth, growth, and more growth, with reassurances from land developers, business owners, the chamber, and Sen.

Steve Daines, that not only was this growth within manageable limits, but will be hugely beneficial for Big Sky.

"Big Sky is growing, yes," CrossHarbor principal Matt Kidd said. "But in my opinion it is measured, and it is happening with wide levels of community involvement and partnership amongst the largest stakeholders in the area."

Kidd concluded his speech by announcing the construction of the Wilson Hotel, a Marriot Residence Inn, in Big Sky Town Center. Lone Mountain Land Company broke ground on the Wilson Hotel on July 21. The 118,000-square-foot building will have 129 rooms, with approximately 6,000 square feet of ground floor commercial, including a full-service restaurant, bar and lounge area. Big Sky's first major hotel brand is estimated to generate nearly \$1 million in resort tax and lodging tax collections combined each year, and is slated to open during the 2018-2019 ski season.

"There are about 55 other counties [in Montana], maybe 54, that would give their eyeteeth to come to a chamber of commerce dinner like this tonight and talk about the fact that we have to be kind of worried about 'explosive growth' or 'growth at all,'" Daines said during his chamber dinner keynote speech. "Look at your numbers ... by every measure it's an incredible Montana success story."



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Big Sky voters approve fire department funding

The Big Sky Fire Department’s mill levy request was approved by local voters in November, and will facilitate the department’s plans for expansion.

“It’s a great opportunity for us to be able to expand our ability to provide services to the community,” BSFD Chief William Farhat said of the \$1.5 million request. “It’s a relief, but now the work starts.” By 2021, Big Sky’s two fire stations should be renovated and 11 new employees hired, thanks to the mill levy approval.

In 2016, the fire department contracted Emergency Services Consulting, International to perform an evaluation of Big Sky and the department. This study identified a need to expand fire department facilities and increase staffing as the area’s population continues to boom.

Station 1, in the Westfork Meadows neighborhood, will see facility updates to the bathroom, kitchen and bedrooms, and a leaking roof will be repaired. At Station 2, located adjacent to Big Sky Resort, the department plans to add bedrooms to accommodate 24-hour occupancy.

Ground breaking on these renovations is planned for the spring, with completion anticipated by the beginning of 2019.

In 2018, the department plans to hire a fire marshal who will help with wildfire prevention and education, and firefighters and a fire inspector will be hired in stages so that by 2021 there will be nine additional firefighters working in the department.

Currently, BSFD does not have adequate staffing to respond to incidents 41 percent of the time, and incidents requiring the department’s response have increased by 101 percent since 2005.

The mill levy will generate \$1.5 million for the department annually and cost property owners approximately \$3.27 a month or \$39.30 a year per \$100,000 in property value.

The Big Sky Fire Department was formed in 1971 and established as a fire district in 1979, and now serves more than 80 square miles surrounding Big Sky.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BIG SKY FIRE DEPARTMENT



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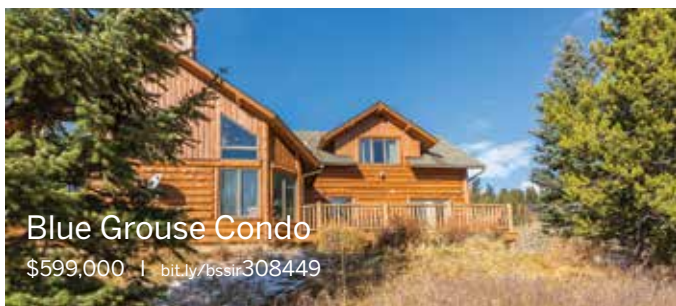
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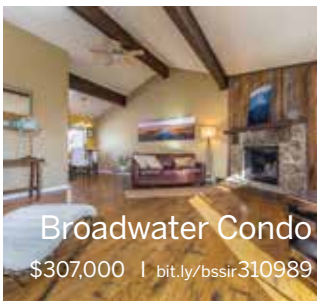
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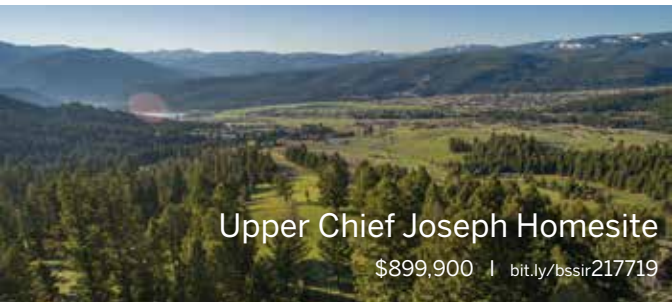
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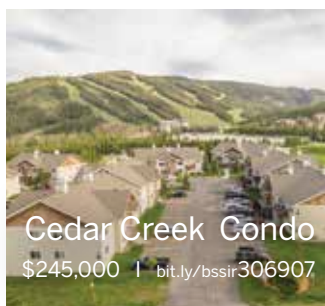


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Big Sky's water, infrastructure takes center stage

Big Sky's water and sewer, traffic and electricity, and infrastructure were at the front of many community conversations in 2017.

After a year and a half of monthly meetings, the Big Sky Sustainable Water Solutions Forum is close to finalizing a recommended plan of action to address the complex web of water-related issues facing this community, both for the short and long term. The plan is slated for presentation in late January and once approved, it will become part of a comprehensive watershed stewardship plan that stretches into 2028 and beyond.

Wastewater reuse continues to be the touchiest issue related to Big Sky's water, but consensus was reached to propose moving forward with using



OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO

treated wastewater for irrigation, snowmaking and groundwater recharge. During the most recent forum meetings, community needs were identified as follows: water reuse, conservation and restoration; the expansion of surface and groundwater monitoring; and forming partnerships with residents in Gallatin Canyon to address loosely regulated septic systems.

In addition to developing a plan for Big Sky's water, community groups have also addressed plans for Big Sky's increasing traffic. Last summer, the chamber of commerce sought input on a traffic study that found a number of intersections along Lone Mountain Trail in need of improvements like turn lanes and signals, including the entrances to Ace Hardware, Roxy's Market, Big Pine Drive, Andesite Road and Big Sky Resort Road.

Big Sky's second stoplight, located at the intersection of Lone Mountain Trail and Ousel Falls Road, was installed this summer thanks to the efforts of the nonprofit Big Sky Community Organization.

Earlier this year, utility company NorthWestern Energy announced a plan to build an electrical substation, which the company says is necessary to accommodate growing demand and reduce the likelihood of a power outage by adding redundancy to the grid.

After encountering considerable input from concerned property owners, NorthWestern Energy hired the Burton K. Wheeler Center to facilitate a months-long community engagement process, and two primary sites have been identified for the location: one at the Midway site near the Antler Ridge neighborhood and a second option across Lone Mountain Trail on the Rainham site.

Year of the grizzly

This past summer, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service turned grizzly bear management over to Montana, Wyoming and Idaho after delisting the Greater Yellowstone's grizzly population from the Endangered Species Act.

The bears were originally listed in 1975, under a strict no-kill policy that was coupled with efforts to preserve habitat. After 42 years, the estimated 136-bear population has rebounded to approximately 700 individuals.

The ruling to delist the grizzlies, which does not apply to the approximately 1,000 grizzlies living near the northern Continental Divide, has met opposition from dozens of American Indian tribes, conservation groups and some scientists, but wildlife officials say the population is healthy and ready for management.

In recent years, Greater Yellowstone grizzlies have been expanding their territory, and have been found in places where they haven't been seen in decades.

"We're basically reaching the carrying capacity," said Frank van Manen, a research wildlife biologist for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team. "They're running out of places [within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem]."

In some areas of the region, grizzlies are reaching such high densities that human conflict has become prevalent. In 2016, for example, Wyoming recorded 223 cases of conflict between grizzlies and humans, followed by Montana with 118, and Idaho with two.

Unique among other wildlife, the grizzlies of Greater Yellowstone will be managed cooperatively by Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, at least for the first few years.

The Yellowstone Grizzly Coordinating Committee met for the first time Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 in Pray, Montana, in order to discuss the conservation strategy for the newly delisted bruins. Key aspects of the conservation strategy



NPS PHOTO

include maintaining at least 500 bears in the Greater Yellowstone; monitoring the distribution of sow grizzlies with cubs; and monitoring bear mortality each year. The committee is also tasked with meeting defined genetic management objectives.

Specific steps that might be considered in the future for grizzly management include building vehicle overpasses to allow bears to more readily expand into suitable habitat; increasing public education for those living in high-density bear areas; and allowing regulated hunting when and where appropriate.

Critics of proposed grizzly hunts fear that hunting could reverse decades of bear recovery, and several pending lawsuits currently call grizzly bear delisting into question.

BIG SKY LOCALS



PHOTO BY BRIAN WILSON

Ted McClanahan

Big Sky local reflects on career as smokejumper

Published in the Sept. 5 edition of EBS

When asked about what he will miss most about jumping out of planes for a living, McClanahan says it will be the camaraderie. “Sure there is a sacrifice—being away for extended periods of time—but I’m lucky to be part of a group of guys who ...” He pauses and thinks, then says, “a group of guys who know how to get things done.”



PHOTO BY RUTH FARNAN

Jason Singer

Visitors, locals assist after man collapses alongside Ousel Falls Road

Published in the July 21 edition of EBS

Jason Singer, a victim of cardiac arrest on the Ousel Falls Trail, was administered life-saving care by passersby Rachel Lee and Big Sky local Kevin Budd. Lee and Budd took turns carrying out the laborious chest compressions while they waited for an ambulance to arrive.

“I don’t know how I can ever thank Kevin,” Jason’s wife Jill said. “I just keep thinking about our kids, seeing their three faces, and thinking how could they live without their dad?”



PHOTO BY KITTY BROWN

Local legends lost

Devon White

If a mark of a life well lived is the crowd that turns out to celebrate you upon your death, then Devon White knew a secret or two. An estimated 700 people packed into the Buck’s T-4 Lodge ballroom Sept. 10 to remember White, co-owner of the Corral Bar, Steakhouse and Motel, and purportedly Big Sky’s longest, living fulltime resident until his passing Sept. 4, 2017.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBIN FAMILY

Mark Robin

Mark Robin arrived in Big Sky in 1993 with his wife Jackie, their dog Niner, a cat, and baby Andrew. Robin was a poet and a Mets fan; a man who would spend nearly the next three decades raising his family, building a business that became an anchor of the Big Sky community, and pursuing his many, varied passions. Robin lost his battle with ALS on Dec. 18, four days before EBS published the results of its annual Best of Big Sky survey, where he was voted Community Member of the Year.

ALS in the news

Riley Becker

Lone Peak sophomore summits Matterhorn

Published in the Sept. 29 edition of EBS

Riley Becker says the hardest challenge was to overcome mental obstacles. “When you’re going up there, it feels like it’s taking a while. You’re breathing hard. You just have to remember, time is time. Nine hours is nine hours, whether you are climbing or sleeping.

“There were times when I felt like I wasn’t a good enough climber, then I’d just do it, and I realized I was,” she said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC BECKER



PHOTO BY COOPER RAASCH

Freeride athletes

Big Sky freeride athletes finish season strong: Holden Samuels wins his second Junior NorAm title

Published in the April 14 edition of EBS

For the second consecutive year, Big Sky snowboarder Holden Samuels won the Junior NorAm Championship event of the International Freeskier and Snowboarder Association tour.

Nehalem Manka earned enough points on the tour throughout the season to secure fourth place overall in the 12-14 skier division. Nehalem’s younger sister Skylar wrapped up her competition season at Grand Targhee Resort on April 2, finishing as the top North American IFSA skier in the under-12 division.

Peter Manka, Nehalem and Skylar’s coach and father, said it was a good year for Big Sky freeriders. They competed against athletes from all over the U.S. and Canada and closed the season with two champions and one top-five finisher. “Big Sky kids know how to ski,” he said.

Gus Hoffman

The kid’s got grit: Big Sky local survives near-fatal horse accident

Published in the Sept. 29 edition of EBS

It’s easy to rattle off the ingredients in the recipe for disaster that occurred in Gus Hoffman’s life on June 21: a storm, a tree branch, the likely presence of a yearling grizzly, a spooked horse, a stumble and a kick delivered square to the throat.

What isn’t so easy to figure out is just how, exactly, Gus was able to climb back on the horse who kicked him and ride 2 miles for help with a severed windpipe and internal hemorrhaging.



PHOTO BY BETH HOFFMAN

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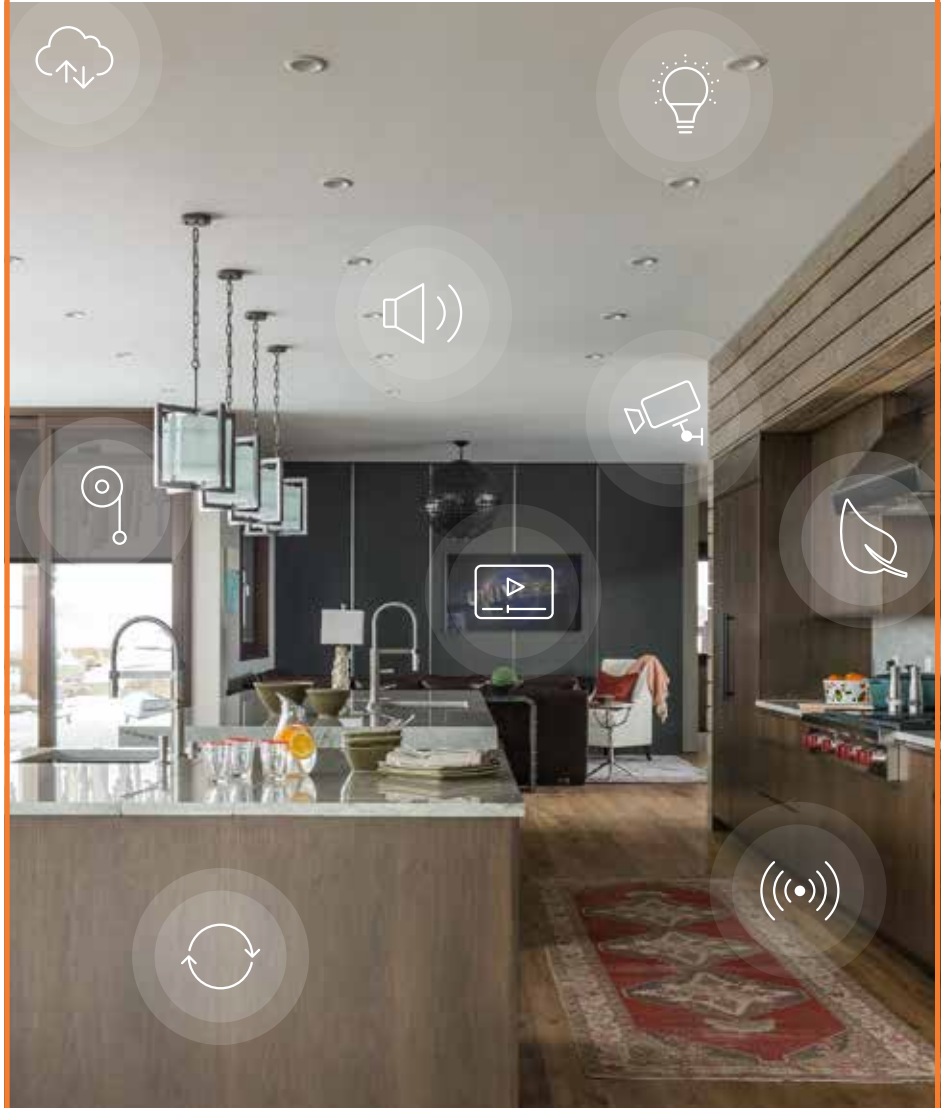
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PHOTO BY MARK PIEPER

Montana weathers million-acre burn

Dry conditions plagued Montana in 2017, leading to a costly wildfire season. More than 700,000 acres of national forest lands burned in the state over the summer.

Coupled with private land, that number tipped over 1 million acres and in an October publication, the state's legislative fiscal division reported that 2017 was likely the most expensive fire season in the state's history, reaching a cost of \$74.2 million. Combined with support from the federal government, the cost to put out Montana's flames nearly reached \$400 million.

Philip Higuera, professor of fire ecology at the University of Montana, said the biggest factor impacting wildfire year-to-year is drought, which means it isn't uncommon to see such variability in fire activity each year.

"Big picture, the reason that Montana has experienced such an extreme fire season this year is because of an extreme drought," he said in September. Fuels dry out and with a lack of precipitation the flames continue to rage, he added.

Roughly 2,000 fires were reported on Montana's national forest land this year, the largest of which included fires near Lincoln, Seely Lake and Libby.

With snow storms in the fall extinguishing the last remaining flames, the U.S. Forest Service is now tasked with cleanup and efforts that include replacing culverts and reshaping roads to prevent sediment from sliding down hillsides, as well as identifying burned areas that can be salvaged for timber and areas where trees should be planted.

In order to tackle the large, post-fire cleanup, Forest Service Northern Regional Forester Leanne Marten formed the first-ever regional post-fire response incident management team. This will include the use of satellite imagery and biophysical modeling in order to pinpoint the areas in need of recovery work.



A billion dollar bet: Big Sky's development history

Big Sky Resort, tucked among the wild peaks of southwest Montana, began with NBC News anchor Chet Huntley's dream of "if you build it, they will come" in 1973 and is now attracting visitors and second homeowners in droves. Today, Big Sky epitomizes the modern Wild West as developers are betting big money, to the tune of \$1 billion by some accounts, that it will be the world's next great destination resort community, while its full-time residents hang on for the ride.

In a five-part series, EBS charted the development history of a community that sprouted at the base of a ski area—unusual for Western resorts that typically began as mining or railroad towns where ski infrastructure followed.

This series took readers through the unorthodox development history of Big Sky, from Huntley's big idea in the '70s; Boyne Resort's purchase of the resort after Huntley's untimely death; Tim Blixseth's acquisition of large swaths of land around Big Sky Resort and his founding of the private Yellowstone Club; financial ruin of three large resorts during the Great Recession and CrossHarbor Capital Partners' acquisition of them in bankruptcy court; and the explosive development, challenges and opportunities happening here today.

At the core of the community is an iconic, towering peak that's been drawing snow speculators for more than four decades.

As documented in this series, and other stories published by EBS, Big Sky has enough developable land to at least double in size. The current challenges of



PHOTO BY MIKE MCCULLEY

affordable housing, water and sewer rights, traffic issues, and development impacts on wildlife habitat and connectivity will necessitate a collective effort by the various developers, districts boards, HOAs and nonprofit organizations that serve as Big Sky's quasi-government in this unincorporated community.

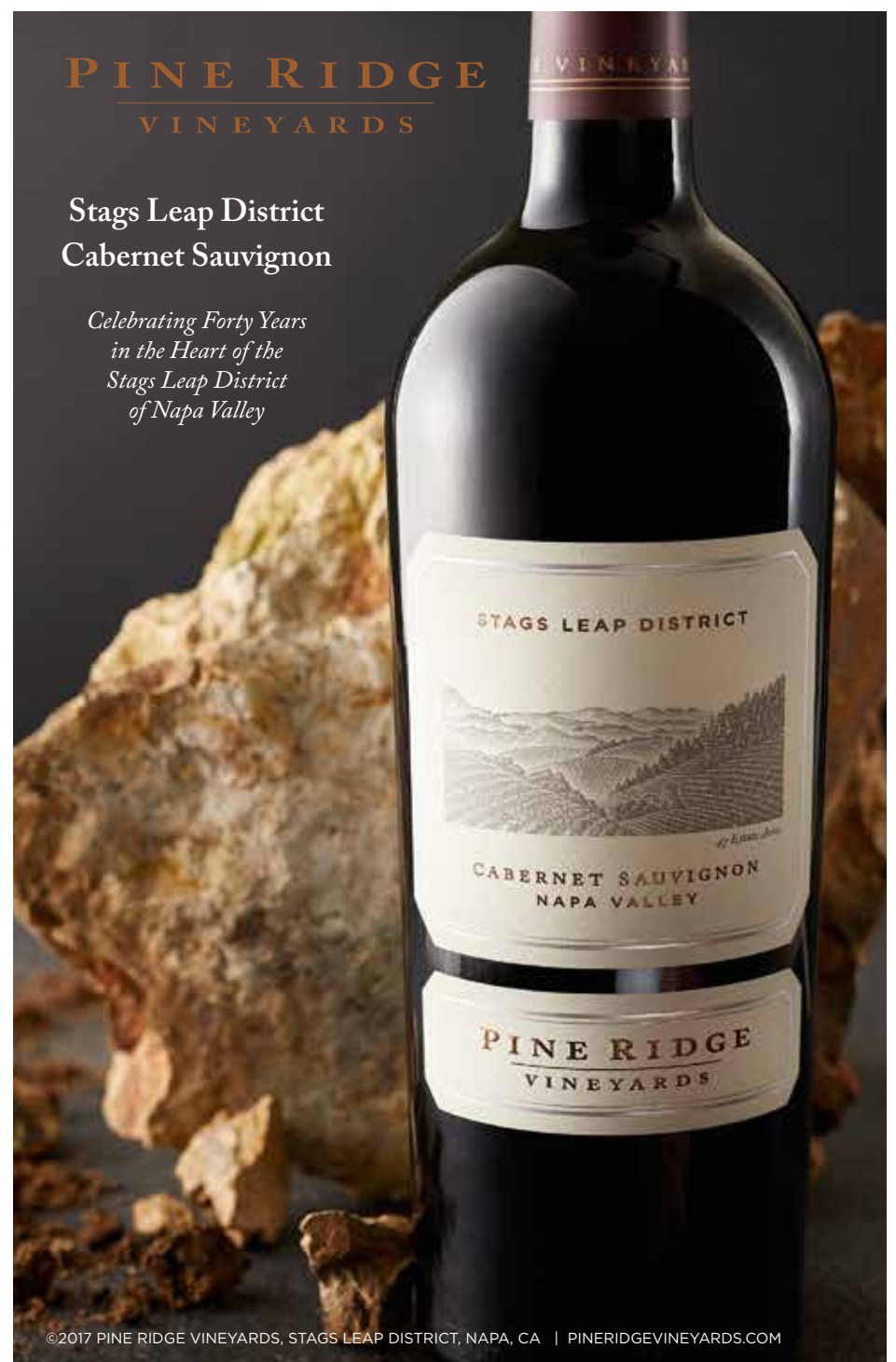
Read the full series, beginning with part one at explorebigsky.com/a-billion-dollar-bet/21682.




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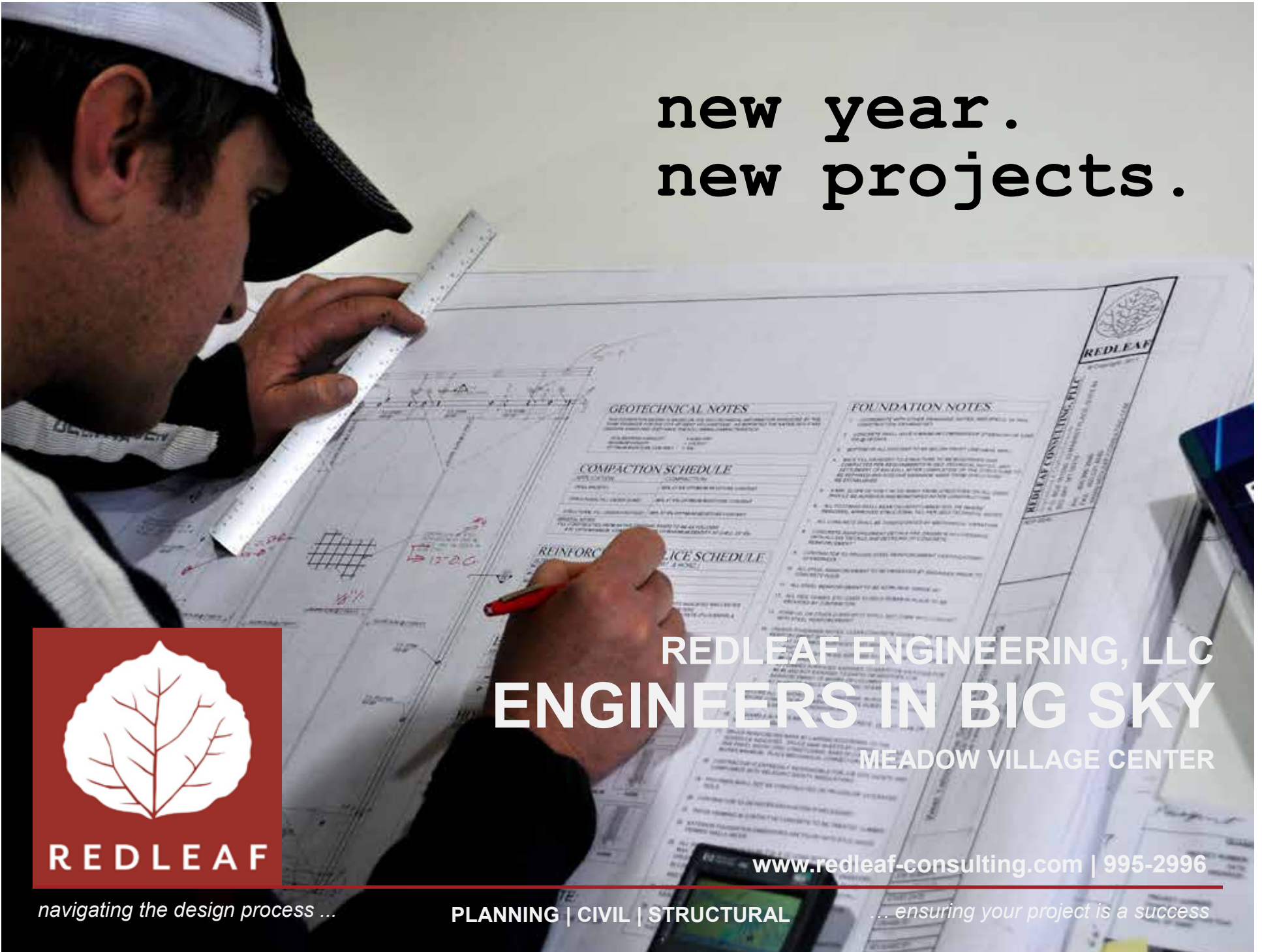
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Public land issues in local, national spotlight

The debate between protecting public land and allowing for commercial development made waves throughout the western U.S. in 2017. On the national stage, President Donald Trump ordered Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to review the designation of select national monuments created after Jan. 1, 1996, which included the Upper Missouri River Breaks in Montana.

While Montana's national monuments remained unchanged, Utah's Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments were dramatically reduced in size.

In October, the National Park Service proposed an increase to entrance fees at 17 of the most highly visited national parks during peak visitor seasons. Intended to generate revenue for infrastructure maintenance, the proposal includes more than doubling entry fees at Yellowstone and Glacier national parks during the peak five-month period beginning in May. An extensive public comment period closed Dec. 22.

With conversations stirring over public land, the country's waters also came under discussion. Bipartisan federal legislation that would designate 20 miles of Montana's East Rosebud Creek as wild and scenic, thereby protecting the river in its free-flowing state, recently passed the Senate with support from Montana Sens. Jon Tester and Steve Daines.

Rep. Greg Gianforte has introduced companion legislation in the U.S. House. Should the bill pass, East Rosebud Creek, which flows out of the Beartooth Mountains, will become the first Montana stream designated wild and scenic in nearly 40 years.



PHOTO BY DONNA LAWSON

Closer to Big Sky, the U.S. Forest Service is currently revising the Custer Gallatin National Forest management plan. With 3.1 million visitors annually, the Custer Gallatin National Forest is the ninth most-visited national forest in the country.

Steve Johnson, a Big Sky resident who sits on several local planning boards, attended some of the revision meetings. He pointed out in an interview with EBS that Big Sky is surrounded by national forest, so things like trail access and designations, area closures and wildlife impacts are important concerns. "Big Sky needs to weigh in on that," Johnson said.

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