

Increasing in-migration: An effect of climate change on the Bitterroot Valley

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Those of us who live in the Bitterroot Valley know what a special place it is. We have abundant clean water in the Bitterroot River and its tributaries, supporting a healthy fishery, riparian zones thriving with wildlife, and open agricultural fields. We have the rugged Bitterroot Mountains on the west and the drier, more rolling Sapphires on the east.

And we have friendly communities, with many small local businesses, plus large employers like GSK, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Rocky Mountain Laboratories. Open lands separate these communities, allowing long views and a feeling of spaciousness.

While climate change has impacted the valley and will continue to do so (see Ravalli Republic article on 6/13/2021), we have so far been spared some of what other areas are suffering. Residents of coastal areas dealing with rising oceans. The sweltering Southwest, the hurricane-battered Southeast, and wildfire refugees from other parts of the West are eyeing the valley with envy and moving here in record numbers (with 1.44% population growth in the county in 2020).

These climate migrants

have realized that they can retire early or work remotely (a realization that was helped along by the shutdowns required during the COVID-19 pandemic) and are moving to more attractive locations. Although official data are not yet available, a local realtor reported that more than a third of new home buyers are from the West Coast and Texas, but that the rest come from all over the country. Besides the still-abundant water and pleasant weather in the Bitterroot Valley, the low taxes in Montana were cited as a reason for moving here.

Climate migrants are placing stress on the Valley. Average home prices have risen 38% in the past five years, with 10.2% of that in the past year, according to a recent Zillow estimate. Forty-four new homes were sold in the first six months of 2021, with a median sale price almost 23% higher than in the same period of 2020, according to local appraiser Darwin Ernst.

Many of those have wells and septic systems, depleting groundwater and potentially polluting what remains. Many newcomers have built or purchased homes in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), which comprises 3% of Ravalli County. These homes are vulnerable to wildfires, which are likely to continue to

become more common as our climate warms and summers become drier. Additional homes in the WUI mean additional stress on emergency services.

Besides stressing the housing market, reducing open land, and increasing homes in the WUI, new migrants to our valley crowd and degrade the amenities that make the Bitterroot attractive. National forests and wilderness areas are becoming more crowded and their trails are eroding from overuse. There is increased hunting and fishing pressure on our fish and wildlife, plus more people on the ski slopes and cross country ski and bike trails. There is increased demand for valley services, like water, sewer and power, and infrastructures, such as roads, bridges, schools, libraries and fire departments.

More people means that everything becomes more crowded, more expensive and more complex with each new household added to our area. If we as a nation and we as Bitterroot Valley residents take action to reduce the human contributions to climate change, perhaps the problem of in-migration will be diminished as other parts of the country remain attractive. A combination of preparation for these changes, as well

as mitigation of climate impacts, is essential if we are to meet these challenges head-on.

What can we do to help us and the Valley accommodate these new residents? One obvious but difficult thing is to improve land-use planning and subdivision regulations. The city of Hamilton is revising its comprehensive plan, and residents should get involved in the process. Also due for revision is the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (which dates from 2009), which should account for a higher population, more homes in the WUI, and the health effects of wildfire smoke.

But the simplest, if not easiest, thing we can do is to incorporate our new neighbors into the community, showing them how we live with our environment and culture (related article in *Montana Outdoors*, May-June issue).

Kit Tilly is a retired microbiologist and Hillery Daily is a retired health care provider. Both are longtime Bitterroot Valley residents who love the Valley and surrounding mountains. They are Bitterroot Climate Action Group founding members, who hope to help the area be resilient in the face of climate change, by mitigating what we can and adapting to the rest.