

## News release

### Big Sky Country National Heritage Area group releases draft of feasibility study for public comments and questions

Date: June 30, 2020

#### For Immediate Release

GREAT FALLS, MONTANA – Big Sky Country National Heritage Area Inc. has released a draft feasibility study for a 45-day public review, with an Aug. 15 deadline to comment.

The Feasibility Study must prove that the proposed National Heritage Area (NHA) has distinctive natural, historic, and cultural resources; as well as strong customs, folklife, and traditions that represent our American heritage. In essence, nationally significant stories of the people and places are needed to qualify for NHA consideration. The draft Feasibility Study meets these requirements for creating a National Heritage Area in Cascade County and along the Missouri River in a portion of Chouteau County. The public is invited to review the draft document on the organization's website at [www.bigskycountrynha.org](http://www.bigskycountrynha.org).

Designation would mark the first Montana location to receive the national honor and be added to a list of at least 55 national heritage areas across the country. National Heritage Areas involve innovative partnerships in which a local nonprofit organization helps coordinate projects identified by interested landowners and public agencies while protecting private property rights. Approved National Heritage Areas are eligible to receive federal funding to work with partners promoting tourism; assisting with cultural events; offering technical expertise to groups seeking to restore historic structures or enhancing the area's cultural amenities; helping promote the area's economy through its unique cultural and historic features; and more. Federal funding is not guaranteed.

Members of the public are encouraged to read the draft Feasibility Study, available in city libraries in Belt, Cascade, Fort Benton and Great Falls, or online at [www.bigskycountrynha.org](http://www.bigskycountrynha.org), and to comment or ask any questions about the report findings. Comments will be accepted through Aug. 15, 2020.

Jane Weber, a Cascade County commissioner and current chairman of Big Sky Country NHA, says the multi-year effort is bolstered by the fact that four National Historic Landmarks in the area – the First Peoples Buffalo Jump near Ulm; artist C.M. Russell's log cabin studio and home in Great Falls; the townsite of Fort Benton, known as the birthplace of Montana; and the Lewis and Clark portage route in and near Great Falls – have already been designated by the federal government.

"The value of our area's history and landscape is often overlooked," Weber said. "Central Montana has many outstanding historical and cultural places to visit and stories to tell." She added, "NHA designation can highlight our beautiful places and stories." If approved, Weber said, designation as an NHA would not affect anyone's private property rights, and specific language preventing any unwanted action by the NHA group would be included in the enabling legislation.

"This is a group that would help communities conduct historic preservation projects, enhance area cultural places, promote the area economy, bring more jobs to the area, and give Montanans one more thing to be proud of in Big Sky Country," Weber said.

Area mayors have already offered support for the heritage area effort. Now, Big Sky Country NHA Inc. is seeking a response to the Feasibility Study from Montanans throughout the area.

The study was conducted with the help of two consultants: Augie Carlino, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pittsburgh, Pa., and Nancy Morgan of Tallahassee, Fla., a former co-director of the Cane River National Heritage Area in Natchitoches, La.

Area residents and businesses have donated tens of thousands of dollars so far to the Montana NHA effort, including Arco/BP and NorthWestern Energy, the largest provider of electricity in Montana.

The efforts of the all-volunteer Big Sky Country group have been praised by supporters wanting to draw more tourists to the region, help with renovation of historic structures, enhance the area's economy and take advantage of the area's location midway between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks in Montana and Wyoming.

The NHA concept was launched during the 1980s by President Ronald Reagan's administration as a more cost-effective way to preserve history by encouraging local partnerships rather than establishing new National Parks. Economic analyses of existing NHAs estimate that one dollar of federal funds invested in an NHA attracts \$5 of economic value to the local area.

Some NHAs are large; for example, the entire state of Tennessee is designated an NHA. Existing NHAs enjoy bipartisan support in Congress and in many states. U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, Senate Majority Leader, is actively promoting the establishment of an NHA in his home state of Kentucky.

The public has 45 days to comment on the feasibility study. Comments will be accepted through Aug. 15, 2020, and incorporated into the final Feasibility Study for consideration by Congress and the National Park Service.

#### **TO COMMENT ON THE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA FEASIBILITY STUDY:**

Review the Feasibility Study online at: [www.bigskycountrynha.org](http://www.bigskycountrynha.org) or in person at public libraries in Belt, Cascade, Fort Benton and Great Falls.

Provide specific comments about the study online on the Big Sky Country National Heritage Area website, [www.bigskycountrynha.org](http://www.bigskycountrynha.org), and click on the link that reads: **Make your views known.**

Or comment by mail to:  
Big Sky Country NHA, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1323  
Great Falls, MT 59403

**Timeline:** July 1, 2020 – Feasibility Study officially released; Aug. 15 – Deadline to comment on study