

## Facts about National Heritage Areas and the Big Sky Country NHA effort

### General Facts about NHAs

1. National Heritage Areas (NHA) are specific geographic regions where significant historical events occurred or are extraordinary places that represent the nation's heritage. NHAs assist communities who work with partners to provide technical assistance or research, acquire funding for interpretive projects or programming, assist with building rehabilitation projects – ultimately stimulating economic growth and diversity.
2. There are 55 National Heritage Areas in the United States, the latest six NHAs were established in 2019 in the Public Lands bill.
3. NHAs are bipartisan efforts. The Reagan administration supported the first NHA for the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1984. Senator John McCain supported the Yuma Crossing NHA, designated in 2000. Senator Mitch McConnell is currently working to establish the first NHA in Kentucky. NHAs were created to assist local communities interested in improving their ability to enhance their historic, cultural, and natural resources.
4. NHAs were created with the intent that federal appropriations made to an NHA would be matched by local investors through private grants, donations, and in-kind services to multiply the value of any federal appropriation. On average, NHAs generate \$5.00 of local and private investment for every \$1.00 of federal funds appropriated, an excellent return on investment.
5. NHAs are simply an honorary designation. They do not have any regulatory authority. Congress bases its decision to designate an area on whether a region can identify historic, cultural, and natural resources of NATIONAL significance to the American heritage. The local community must prepare and submit a Feasibility Study demonstrating their national significance. The National Park Service reviews the Feasibility Study to determine whether the ten criteria required to become an NHA have been satisfied.
6. Once designated, how a region's history is interpreted and honored is in the hands of local residents working with a *Coordinating Entity* like Big Sky Country NHA, Inc. A *Coordinating Entity* brings willing partners together to work on projects that promote, educate, interpret, and preserve our heritage. The NHA board is responsible for the fiscal accounting of the organization and for facilitating partner engagement in projects within the boundary of the NHA.
7. NHA designation *does not* grant the local coordinating entity with any regulatory authority to influence, change, or override any city, town, county, state, or federal ordinances, regulations (i.e.; zoning), or laws governing their jurisdictions.
8. Eminent domain is not allowed by NHAs.
9. Although not guaranteed, federal funding can be made available to NHAs for partnership projects under the following limitations:
  - a) Federal funds must be matched one-for-one by the local community.
  - b) Federal funds may not be used to purchase land.
  - c) Federal funds must be used on projects within the NHA project area.
  - d) An annual report documenting how an NHA matched the federal appropriation and how the federal appropriation was expended.

10. Congress appropriates funding to the National Park Service, which serves as a fiscal agent for the NHAs by ensuring federal funds are properly distributed and accounted. The federal government cannot appropriate money directly to a not-for-profit corporation. The NPS serves as the fiscal entity for Congress by distributing the funds to each NHA and monitoring their use.
11. The NPS may provide technical advice to a *Coordinating Entity* facilitating the NHA projects, but they have no control over the partner projects facilitated by the *Coordinating Entity*.
12. Federal funds may only be used for projects within the NHA project area.
13. NHAs are not designated in perpetuity. They must be re-certified by Congress every ten years. NHAs must demonstrate they have responsibly matched and expended federal appropriations and annually submitted the required reporting documents to the National Park Service.
14. Private property rights are not affected by NHAs and specific legislative language is required in all Congressional designation bills to ensure the rights of private landowners are honored. A 2004 Government Accounting Office (GAO) found that existing NHAs did not impact private property rights. Since that time, no NHA has been shown to have impacted private property rights.
15. In 2017, Big Sky Country NHA, Inc. passed a resolution to ensure no federal funds would be used to acquire real property; the NHA would not modify nor affect any authority or law/regulation established by federal, state, tribal, or local governments; the NHA would not impact the appropriation of water or water rights; and the NHA would not impose any restrictions on private properties.

## Brief History of Big Sky Country National Heritage Area, Inc.

1. The idea for a National Heritage Area originated in the Great Falls city planning office and was discussed with the Historic Preservation Advisory Commission (HPAC), a joint city-county commission whose role is to advise elected officials on historic structures in the region and education about the communities' history. The HPAC conducted a community meeting (Grand Tour I) in January 2015 and invited the Executive Director of the Yuma Crossing NHA to make a presentation. The purpose of this initial meeting was to gauge the interest of the community. Over 100 people attended from Great Falls, Fort Benton, Helena, Butte, Monarch, and other rural communities. The response to pursue an NHA designation was overwhelmingly positive.
2. A board of directors was established and included a city and county commissioner, historians, a state parks official, tourism specialist, and other interested community members. In spring 2015, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization (the Upper Missouri River Heritage Area Planning Corporation, Inc.) was created under Montana and federal regulations. The initial members were from Great Falls and Fort Benton. Additional board members were later added - including a member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians appointed by the Tribal Chairman; the Executive Director of the MT History Foundation; a rancher/educator from the Fort Benton area; a civic-minded community activist from Fort Benton; a retired journalist; and a fundraising specialist.
3. The initial board of directors identified its mission and defined several "themes" to be considered in defining the national significance of the area.
4. A second community meeting (Grand Tour II) attended by 100 people was held in 2016. Attendees were asked to comment on the draft themes and identify places with historic or cultural stories.
5. In 2016-2017, the NHA board of directors raised \$50,000 to engage the assistance of professional contractors to help prepare a Feasibility Study. Contributors to this effort included Northwestern Energy, Atlantic Richfield Company, Visit Great Falls, MT, and individual private citizens. All BSCNHA board members contributed to the organization.
6. Throughout 2016-2017, BSCNHA board members made over 34 presentations to service clubs, county commissioners, city commissioners, the Cascade Conservation Council, and private organizations upon request. Press releases were issued to publicize their availability to discuss the project with interested parties and organizations.
7. In 2018, BSCNHA contracted Nancy Morgan and Augie Carlino of Point Heritage Development Consulting to guide the board through preparation of the Feasibility Study. In the two years it has taken to assemble the required materials to meet the ten required criteria to demonstrate worthiness as an NHA, the following has been accomplished:
  - a) Conducted 22 stakeholder interviews with business leaders, historians and local residents about the project and the BSCNHA Inc.'s ability to sustain the effort.
  - b) Held six public meetings in various communities – Helena, Fort Benton, Great Falls, Black Eagle, and Belt.
  - c) Established a panel of experts to review and comment on materials.
  - d) Finalized a "Statement of National Significance."
  - e) Refined the list of related resources, as initially identified by citizens at public meetings.
  - f) Named the NHA to underscore Montana's geography - *Big Sky Country NHA* (BSCNHA)
  - g) Proposed a NHA project area, including all of Cascade County and a portion of Chouteau County from the Cascade-Chouteau county line along the Missouri to Decision Point (near Loma).

- h) Self-identified as the *Coordinating Entity* to continue the work of the NHA effort.
  - i) Recommended and implemented several projects within the NHA project area.
8. The draft Feasibility Study was released for a 45-day public review from July 1, 2020 – August 15, 2020. The document was posted online, and an online comment form was created on the BSCNHA website to create an easy way to comment. Notice of the open comment period was sent to over 400 individuals on the BSCNHA Constant Contact list. News releases were published in the Great Falls Tribune, Billings Gazette, Helena Independent Record, Fort Benton River Press, Cascade Courier, and announcements were made from GF radio stations. Additionally, hard copies of the draft Feasibility Study were made available in all public libraries throughout Cascade County and in Fort Benton, as well as in the city/county commission offices, state offices, Congressional offices, and the four National Historic Landmark locations within the project area.
  9. In fall 2020, comments received on the draft Feasibility Study will be incorporated into the final Feasibility Study and sent to the National Park Service to determine whether the ten required criteria for NHA consideration have been satisfied.

## Reference Sources

- Big Sky Country National Heritage Area, Inc. website, [www.bigskycountrynha.org](http://www.bigskycountrynha.org)
- The Alliance of National Heritage Areas website, [www.nationalheritageareas.us](http://www.nationalheritageareas.us)
- National Park Service websites, [www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas) and [https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/economic\\_impact\\_studies.htm](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/economic_impact_studies.htm)
- Heritage Areas: Background, Proposals and Current Issues by the Congressional Research Service, August 20, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL33462.pdf>
- *From Skepticism to Support: National Heritage Areas in the West* by Eleanor Mahoney, NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow, an article published in the Utah Historical Quarterly, Vol. 88, NO. 2, 2020, <https://nam12.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.jstor.org%2Fstable%2F10.5406%2Futahhistquar.88.2.0129&data=02%7C01%7C%7Ca2bb8e4739c547fd1e4a08d84fb29d57%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C637346976709537809&sdata=7eQT9zSNcuEXm%2FSYRtQcVXcWluq7tB%2F78sSKOtqhk2Q%3D&reserved=0>
- *From Parks to Partnerships National Heritage Areas and the Path to Collaborative Participation in the National Park Service's First 100 Years* by Alan W. Barton, an article published in Natural Resources Journal, Volume 56, Issue 1, Winter 2016, <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1007&context=nri>
- Fort Benton River Press, *Guest Opinion: Cascade & Chouteau counties are national treasures*, by Carroll Van West, Director of the Tennessee Civil War NHA, published September 23, 2020
- Testimony to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, National Heritage Area Act of 2019 (H.R. 1049) presented by Sara Capen, Chairwoman of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas and Executive Director of the Niagara Falls NHA, April 30, 2019, Appendix B includes an article titled: *Dispelling Myths and Falsehoods on the Issue of Private Property Rights and National Heritage Areas* <https://naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Capen,%20Sara%20-%20Written%20Testimony.pdf>