

**Chris Taggart**

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**From:** Sharon Schroeder <jimandsharon.schroeder@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, November 26, 2019 1:11 PM  
**To:** Ravalli County Commissioners Office  
**Subject:** RCPP Letter of Support from OLB  
**Attachments:** RCPP Amended; Final.docx

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**NOV 26 2019**

**Ravalli County Commissioners**

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Hello BCC,

As an advisory board to the Board of County Commissioners, the Open Lands Board would like to share the letter of support we intend to provide to the Bitter Root Land Trust. They will submit it with their Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) application, which is due December 3rd. The OLB voted unanimously to approve the wording. We are not committing any funds, but are committing conservative in-kind hours for the review of each project brought to our attention in the next 5 years.

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.

Thank you for your time!

Happy Thanksgiving!!

*Sharon*



## Ravalli County Open Lands Board

November 21, 2019

Bitter Root Land Trust  
PO Box 1806  
Hamilton, MT 59840

Dear Bitter Root Land Trust:

We would like to express the support of the Ravalli County Open Lands Board (OLB) for the Bitter Root Land Trust's (BRLT) proposal to the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The Open Lands Board is familiar with the elements of BRLT's RCPP proposal and supports its innovative and unique use of the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Program to conserve high value agricultural properties that do not rank well under the current program, as well as conservation of agriculturally important soils.

The Ravalli County Open Lands Board operates as an advisory board to the Ravalli County Board of County Commissioners. Our objective is to work with the citizens of Ravalli County to preserve open lands throughout the county's rural and urban areas that protect working farms and ranches, water quality, river corridors, timberlands, important wildlife habitat, scenic views and vistas, and diverse recreational opportunities.

The citizens of Ravalli County passed a \$10 million bond in 2006 to support this objective. The first Open Lands project utilizing those funds was approved in 2009. Since then, we have approved thirty (30) conservation easement projects submitted by BRLT. Facts important to note are:

- 26 of these projects have successfully closed, with the remaining four anticipated to close successfully.
- Over 7,200 acres have been conserved, including:
  - 3,500 acres of agriculturally important soils.
  - 4,000 acres that are within BRLT's proposed RCPP geographic priority area.
- The Open Lands program has provided \$3 million in funding to match the \$4.4 million of funds provided for 16 agricultural conservation easements. The ability to match the funding of these programs has greatly amplified the work of each entity.
- 80% of the OLB-approved projects possess productive agricultural operations.

The success of the Ravalli County OLB is in large part due to the relationship we have with the BRLT. The projects brought to us are well vetted. That is because the BRLT has built strong relationships with private landowners and has established respect and trust within the agricultural community. And the BRLT has a very strong track record closing projects successfully, on time and on budget!

Many of the properties conserved through the work of the OLB, ALE and BRLT over the last decade lie adjacent to, or near, smaller tracts of land, which fall below the average county farm size but still possess high value agricultural resources. These smaller tracts



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connect existing, larger conserved farms and ranches. They provide lease opportunities for existing operations. They support small scale, diversified agricultural operators. And they have the potential to provide an opportunity for beginning farmers and ranchers to own a piece of the Bitterroot, with conservation easements helping to make that ownership more affordable, and thereby actually possible. However, many owners of these smaller tracts find it financially difficult to pursue a conservation easement using only the County's OLB funds. The innovative and unique use of the ALE Program through this RCPP proposal will provide the matching financial assistance necessary to conserve these smaller tracts of land.

Approximately \$4.5 million of our \$10 million Bond remains. That amount is sufficient to satisfy the match needed to complete the conservation easements proposed in BRLT's RCPP application. Based on the history of projects brought to the OLB by BRLT thus far, we anticipate the projects developed through this RCPP will continue to fit very well with our Open Lands program and that we will be able to recommend the matching funds necessary to complete those projects. That being said, we obviously cannot commit specific dollar amounts to projects until we have received and reviewed each individual application to ensure that it is a fit with our program. We can, however, commit the time of our volunteer board members in the review of any and all conservation projects brought forth by BRLT. A conservative estimate of our in-kind hours is detailed in the chart enclosed with this letter. Our Board spends at least 66 hours of volunteer time on each and every project presented for our review. **With the BRLT's plan to bring eighteen projects forward through the RCPP in the next five years, the value of the OLB's donated time will exceed \$29,700.**

We deeply appreciate the Agricultural Land Easement Program's history of partnership with the Bitter Root Land Trust and the Ravalli County Open Lands Board, which has resulted in the conservation of thousands of acres of high value agricultural land in our community. We are excited for the opportunity to expand this partnership through the RCPP project proposed by BRLT, which will further ensure that agriculture remains a strong part of the culture and economy of the Bitterroot. We are in strong support of BRLT's RCPP proposal and committed to contributing the time and recommend funding necessary, with appropriate review, to make it successful.

Sincerely,

Sharon Schroeder, Chair  
On behalf of Ravalli County Open Lands Board

*Enclosure: Ravalli County Open Lands Board's In-Kind Contribution Table*



## Ravalli County Open Lands Board

Year	Specific Activities/Deliverable	Associated Local, State, or Federal Program or Initiatives	Amount	Limits	Contribution Type		
					FA	TA	(Cash or In-Kind)
2020-2024	Project Introduction to Board		5 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind
2020-2024	Property Site Visit		24 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind
2020-2024	Application Review & Scoring		15 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind
2020-2024	Conservation Subcommittee Review		6 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind
2020-2024	Open Lands Board Review Hearing		10 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind
2020-2024	County Commission Review Hearing		6 hrs/project @ \$25/hr				In-Kind

*\* As currently proposed in BRLT's RCPP application, the we anticipate the need to review eighteen conservation easement proposals during the five year RCPP project. This will collectively result in 1,188 hours of in-kind time by the Ravalli County Open Lands Board.*