

Andre Orengo

## **As deadline approaches, Bozeman risks being left out of the interlocal agreement**

County Commissioner Zack Brown has given the city of Bozeman until Friday to announce whether or not they will join an interlocal health agreement, which requires each county to establish a governing board. Failure to sign will result in Gallatin County and Belgrade redrafting the agreement to exclude Bozeman.

The current draft of the interlocal agreement was finalized in March, with both the County and the City of Belgrade officially putting pen to paper last month. The City of Bozeman however has yet to sign based on disagreements over the makeup of the “Governing Body” that will oversee the county health department and board.

Gallatin County Commissioner, Joe Skinner, is surprised that Bozeman hasn’t made a move to approve the compromise. He said, “We’re down to the wire, if the city is not going to join the interlocal (agreement) we don’t have time to do it.”

Failure to sign would require Bozeman to establish its own health department, defeating the agreement's original purpose, which is to merge the city and county health boards.

It is time for Bozeman to make a move regarding the agreement. Gallatin County Attorney, Marty Lambert, had this to say, “Look at this process that was set in motion a year ago when the governor signed that bill, and yet here we are with important deadlines approaching.”

The proposal of the new agreement is in accordance with House Bills 121 and 257, which were signed into law by Gov. Gianforte in June of 2021.

The new House Bills required that county and city health departments and boards be overseen by “Governing Bodies” which include elected officials. With the current agreement between Gallatin County and the City of Bozeman set to expire in June of 2022, time is running out for Bozeman to agree to the new terms.

In July of 2021, Gallatin County crafted a new interlocal agreement which included both the City of Bozeman and Belgrade. To abide by the new laws that had passed, they set the governing body as the Gallatin County Commission

While both the County and Belgrade maintained this was the best agreement possible, Bozeman had its reservations. During a public meeting between Bozeman, Belgrade, and Gallatin County in February of 2022, Bozeman insisted that having the County Commission as the governing board would not work because it would leave the city government unrepresented in the decision-making process.

In the following month, Bozeman continued to try and find alternatives to the current agreement by sending a letter to the County which included both questions about the draft and suggested edits that could be made.

Ten days later, Bozeman received a letter back from the county both rejecting the suggestions they made and answering the questions they had.

In regards to how this agreement may impact the citizens of Bozeman, county commissioner MacFarlane said, “No matter what Bozeman decides to do for their own government and their own services, from the perspective of the health department, there would be no change for the citizens of Gallatin County.”

According to Gallatin County Health Officer, Lori Christenson, whether Bozeman signs the agreement will have no reflection on the services the health department provides. She also said, “From a public health perspective, we don’t look at boundaries when we talk about providing services.”

The City of Bozeman’s spokesperson, Dani Hess, said the city could not speak about the interlocal agreement because details are still being worked out.

With July 1<sup>st</sup> being the deadline for having a new agreement, the ball is in Bozeman’s court.