

FACT SHEET

CONCERNED CITIZENS OF THE VALLEY

Mission

To promote fiscally and environmentally sound solutions to infrastructure challenges faced by the communities of Colter Pass, Cooke City, and Silver Gate, Montana, within the upper Soda Butte Valley.

Concerned Citizens of the Valley (CCV) is a registered Montana 501(c)4 non-profit grassroots organization. We work with individuals and groups, including government agencies, to further the healthy development of our communities. Examples of infrastructure on which we may focus include bridges, trails, roads, and, most critically at this moment, wastewater treatment systems. Our supporters represent a cross section of residents and business owners. Some of us were born and raised here. Others were drawn here by the unique natural and scenic qualities and by the small-town atmosphere. We all have deep ties to the area.

Problem Statement

As community growth has occurred and tourism has exploded, management of human waste in the valley has failed to keep up. Septic sewage systems, overwhelmed by the volume of inputs, leak contaminated effluent into the soil and ground water and threaten to contaminate nearby Soda Butte Creek, which flows into Yellowstone National Park (YNP). Several septic systems in the valley are likely not in compliance with state regulations. To complicate matters further, the USFS, which is currently leasing land along the south side of Hwy 212 in Cooke City and permitting the use of that land for septic systems, would like to stop doing so. It is only willing to allow the status quo as long as progress is being made toward a community solution. This situation adds a real sense of urgency to finding a sewage treatment solution for Cooke City.

Background Information

Since our organization's inception in the fall of 2022, we have been researching infrastructure solutions to address the challenge of the wastewater that is one of two components of sewage. The other component, solid waste, is dealt with in our communities primarily through septic tanks which allow solid waste to settle and later be removed by pumper trucks.

The waste problems currently identified are within Cooke City, and Cooke City is the focus for finding a solution to these problems. However, a long-term, fiscally and environmentally sound solution is critical for all residents and businesses of the valley. The area experiences a large influx of seasonal visitors (~250,000 yearly) due to its proximity to YNP. A solution to our waste problems is paramount to ensuring that our community is welcoming to these guests, who come to enjoy our unique landscapes, abundant wildlife, and recreational opportunities.

Fishing Soda Butte Creek is a high priority for visitors and residents alike, and the creek has been cleaned up and re-established as a native cutthroat trout stream after years of degradation. However, the Soda Butte drainage is a challenging geophysical setting due to earthquake potential, severe flooding potential (as was seen in June 2022), and steep mountainsides. The winter season is about 7 months long with deep snows and cold temperatures. This setting makes finding an appropriate sewage treatment solution especially challenging.

The Colter Pass/Cooke City/Silver Gate Sewer Board (Board) is the government agency responsible for developing such a solution. The Board receives taxpayer dollars, applies for grants and loans, and manages those monies, which will eventually amount to millions of dollars. The Board is required by Montana law and by their own bylaws to follow rules and procedures. For example, adequate public notice of meetings/meeting agendas, notice of hearings, and opportunities for public comment are required. Additionally, documents that inform decision making, such as engineering reports and maps and Board meeting notes, must be available for public review, ensuring that members of the community can fully participate in discussions. Unfortunately, these requirements have not been fully met.

We are concerned that the Board is proceeding with a proposed sewage treatment plan that is not fiscally or environmentally sound. That plan calls for a 3.1-mile-long pipeline to carry effluent from Cooke City to a large conventional drain field adjacent to Silver Gate and YNP.

Recent Concerned Citizens of the Valley Activities

To address these concerns, CCV sent the Board three letters requesting documents and information that are foundational to understanding the Board's decisions to date. We also requested additional site analyses of drain field locations that were eliminated from consideration by the Board. We requested a cost analysis of the 3.1-mile pipeline as well, as this infrastructure has the potential to hog-tie this small community to overwhelming debt.

Supporters of our organization have worked to provide constructive feedback to the Board and to work collaboratively with them to find a solution to the sewage treatment issue. We have suggested alternative sewage treatment approaches and locations which we believe to be more economical and which lack the risks intrinsic in long pipelines, are easier to build, and have a smaller environmental footprint than the solution currently under Board consideration. These alternative systems also have the benefit of being more scalable and of producing cleaner effluent.

Further, we have voiced concerns about property tax increases that will result from what we view as a poorly thought-out plan. Who will be taxed? And how much will they be taxed? Answers to these questions are essential to finding a fair and effective solution for all property owners.

Because there has been minimal response to our requests and suggestions, CCV made the difficult decision to hire legal counsel. With our input, our attorney alerted the Board to procedural and other shortcomings. We sent copies of his letter, along with the three previous letters authored by CCV, to a variety of partners, including the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Park County Commissioners, the US Forest Service, and the National Park Service. Our materials are posted to our web site: www.concernedcitizens838.org. You can also contact us at: concernedcitizens838@gmail.com and we will send them to you.

Now that legal notice regarding the lack of transparency of Board actions has been made, we will continue to press forward with a collaborative approach for an environmentally and fiscally sound solution that supports an economically healthy community. We invite you to participate with us!

Feb. 25, 2023