

Upper Missouri River Heritage Area Community Conversations and Updates: January 30 and 31, 2019

What:

Public gatherings to discuss the heritage area designation effort in central Montana

When and where:

Jan. 30 at the **Black Eagle Community Center** from 6 to 8 p.m.; free admission, light refreshments

Jan. 31 at the **Montana Agricultural Center in Fort Benton** from 6 to 8 p.m.; free admission, light refreshments.

Purpose:

To discuss progress on the feasibility study for National Heritage Area designation and share ideas on the region's future.

For more information:

Call Jane Weber at 406-454-6814 or email her at jweber@cascadecountymt.gov

Or visit the website of the Upper Missouri River Heritage Area Planning Corp. at:

www.uppermissouririverheritage.org

NEWS RELEASE:

Supporters of a heritage area in northcentral Montana are ramping up their efforts, with a pair of meetings set to take place in Black Eagle and Fort Benton late this month.

"We could be the first (heritage area) in Montana, which is very exciting," said Mary Willmarth of Great Falls, a backer of the plan. "We haven't had this opportunity before."

The country's nearly 50 heritage areas have been highly successful in boosting tourism, attracting economic development and helping area communities work more closely together, Willmarth said. She is a member of the board of directors of the Upper Missouri River Heritage Area Planning Corp.

In late January, supporters of a heritage area for northcentral Montana will hold a pair of meetings in Black Eagle and Fort Benton to discuss where the area would be located, its reasons for being and the status of a feasibility study examining the proposal.

The feasibility study is well underway, and supporters say reactions to the idea have been encouraging.

Jane Weber, a Cascade County commissioner and chairman of the group's board of directors said, "we look forward to sharing our progress and hope to see a great turnout at both meetings."

One meeting will happen Wednesday, Jan. 30, at the Black Eagle Community Center; and a second meeting will take place Thursday, Jan. 31, at the Montana Agricultural Center in Fort Benton. Both meetings are scheduled to run from 6 to 8 p.m. and include light refreshments.

The public is encouraged to attend, ask questions and offer comments. Supporters say the honorary heritage area designation can increase tourism to the area, encourage investment in the region, attract grants to support historical and cultural projects, encourage cooperation among disparate groups and foster pride in communities and regions.

"Our story is so deserving of national attention," Willmarth said. A heritage area also would help communities such as Great Falls, Fort Benton and Cascade work more closely together on projects of historic and cultural importance.

Two consultants who play a key role in preparing the feasibility study are August Carlino of Pittsburgh, Pa., who oversees the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, and Nancy Morgan, who once directed the Cane River National Heritage Area in Natchitoches, La. Heritage areas must be formally approved by the U.S. Congress before taking effect.

The heritage area group in northcentral Montana has already begun working with other organizations to assist them with projects demonstrating the area's varied culture and rich history. Tourism is the second-largest industry in the region, behind only agriculture, and backers say a heritage area label could help boost the number of visitors as well as give newcomers a more complete and satisfying view of an area.

This plan is poised to become the first heritage area in Montana, if approved.

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