



June 21, 2019

Cascade County Planning Office
121 4th Street N, Suite 2 H/I
Great Falls, MT 59401

Re: Big Sky Cheese, LLC Written Testimony

TO: Cascade County Zoning Board of Adjustment

I wish that I could testify in person at the Zoning Board of Adjustment's hearing on June 27th, however, I will be out of state.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of the application to permit the proposed Big Sky Cheese plant in Cascade County.

The Great Falls Development Authority urges you to support the Big Sky Cheese application. We believe this is a worthwhile project that will benefit Cascade County residents by creating primary sector jobs, growing our commercial tax base, and expanding local markets for our agricultural producers.

We have carefully reviewed the materials submitted to the County by the applicant. We believe that the addition of Big Sky Cheese to our community will be entirely positive. We believe that the proposed project is appropriate for the agricultural zoning district and the particular location for the business.

We feel so strongly about the potential of this startup business that we have committed a significant amount of our loan capital to provide a bridge loan package to help make the business possible.

As with every proposed project, we look at the details of each proposal, considering its economic and community impact. Our mission is to grow and diversify the Great Falls regional economy, create higher wage career opportunities, and improve market competitiveness. We believe Big Sky Cheese is a positive step forward in achieving this mission for the benefit of all of Cascade County.

We do not believe the proposed Big Sky Cheese project will have any negative community affects in regard to transportation, water, sewer, odor, workforce or other issues.

The proposed project will be criticized for being too small to have much impact in improving our economy. We do not believe any project is too small. One good job is a step forward. One more commercial building adding to our tax base is a step forward. One new local Montana-branded food product is a step forward. One new unique retail store for residents and visitors to enjoy is a step forward.

The proposed project will be criticized for being the precursor of something too big. However, all that is before you today is this one proposed project. Land use decisions must be fairly made based on the application under consideration.

Creating Primary Sector Jobs

Despite progress in growing total wages and increasing the average wage relative to the national average in Cascade County in recent years, our county still has fewer jobs than the peak employment quarter of 2008Q4. The most recent data from Chmura Economics' JobsEQ system indicates total Cascade County employment in 2019Q1 was 37,768, less than peak employment of 38,519 in 2008Q4. The Montana Department of Labor reports that 1,125 residents in Cascade County were looking for work this April.

Economies grow and prosper by creating businesses that draw new dollars into the local market. Jobs created by these businesses are primary sector jobs. We need more primary sector jobs in Cascade County. Manufacturing jobs tend to offer higher wages, provide steady employment and offer benefits unavailable in many retail and service jobs.

At startup, Big Sky Cheese will create an estimated 5-10 jobs, too few some critics may say, except if you, a family member, neighbor or friend is one of the out of work residents looking for a job or one of the thousands of residents looking for a better job, then the significance is enormous.

Growing Our Commercial Tax Base

Cascade County taxpayers are burdened with paying for ever-increasing costs of providing basic government services funded by a property tax base over-dependent on homeowners. Commercial development helps to build our tax base, shifting the burden from homeowners.

The proposed Big Sky Cheese plant and retail store is a small step forward in our continued success in building a stronger commercial property tax base.

Expanding Local Markets for Agricultural Producers

The largest industry in Cascade County is serving as the retail, service and health care center of the Golden Triangle, a prized agricultural region. The economic health of this region is largely driven by the ability of farmers and ranchers to profitably operate. In its June 2019 newsletter, the Montana Farmers Union noted that Montana farm income is down nearly 30% since 2012. Quoting directly, "Net farm income this year is expected to be almost 50% less this year than in 2013, making it our sixth consecutive year of depressed farm income."

We believe it is imperative for Cascade County, indeed the entire region, to develop new local markets for value-added agriculture. Montana ships an estimated 85% of its agricultural production out of state without any value added, making us over-dependent on global commodity markets.

Value-added agriculture offers one of the best opportunities to create new primary sector jobs in Cascade County. We have been working to attract investment in this industry sector since GFDA was formed. These efforts were boosted with the County's administration of an in-depth study of agri-processing industry opportunities completed in 2009, funded by the Office of Economic Adjustment of the Department of Defense. Since the completion of that study, we have invested considerable efforts and research into an array of niches in food, agricultural and bio-processing. With the support of the Montana Department of Agriculture, almost two years ago we were able to create a regional Food & Ag Development Center to boost our efforts.

Canadian Entrepreneur

Some critics have attacked the Big Sky Cheese startup because the entrepreneur who is proposing the new business is a Canadian from Lethbridge. We should welcome, celebrate and thank entrepreneurs, businesses and developers from away who are attracted to invest and create jobs in our community. The nationality of the entrepreneur has absolutely nothing to do with the requested land use approval. Attacks on our Canadian friends, particularly in Alberta who spend so much of their money in our community, are beyond contempt.

Big Sky Cheese will be a step forward in creating a Montana-branded value-added local agricultural product.

I am honored to submit this testimony on behalf of the Great Falls Development Authority. We urge your favorable action to allow the proposed Big Sky Cheese start-up to move forward.

Thank you again for your consideration of the application before you, and for volunteering your time in service to Cascade County.



Brett Doney
President & CEO