

Brad Wright
Feb. 4, 2025

Re: 2016 Missoula Library bond election analysis

Hello Trustees,

Recommendation

Using data from Missoula County 2016 Detailed Precinct Level Results, which I can provide if requested, I have done a demographic analysis of the 2016 Missoula Library bond election. I recommend a phased approach for the new Flathead Library and establishing a new Kalispell area library district.

Background

I managed a number of election campaigns going back to the 90s. The campaigns I managed were nonpartisan. I learned how important local precinct level demographics are, so that's where I concentrated my efforts. I think the most consequential voting preference factor is, by far, political party affiliation, followed by age and gender. Once I understood that, my campaigns were very focused and successful, and less expensive, since I didn't spend as much time on other factors.

I've spent my adult life in the Flathead, but I was born and raised in Missoula, so I'm familiar with the neighborhoods. To state the obvious, Missoula County is very Democratic (D) and Flathead County is very Republican (R). For this Missoula election analysis, I chose the Governor's race between Gianforte and Bullock, which was on the same ballot, to gauge party affiliation. Fig. 1 shows the political inclinations visually of Missoula and Flathead voters for the 2020 Governor's race between Gianforte and Cooney, which was very similar to the 2016 race. Fig. 2 shows the 2024 Senate race between Tester and Sheehy zoomed in closer to Missoula and Kalispell, and it is clear the dominance of each party in the county's precincts.

As different as Missoula is from the Flathead, the precinct results show there are areas of Missoula that are less D and are worthy of analysis. On the 2016 Missoula Bond Election Precinct Map (file attached), which shows approximately the D and R percentage of voters and yes or no approval of the library bond, I have separated the county into three areas. The black line on the closeup city urban map divides Area 1 from Area 2. Some of these precincts are in city limits, others, especially west, surround city limits. The Missoula bond passed 59% to 41%. I think this data very clearly shows the preference of Ds voting for capital bond campaigns and of Rs voting against them. In most of Flathead County, the percentage of Ds and Rs are reversed from Missoula's. In addition, the cities surrounding Kalispell have their own libraries and these factors suggest a countywide Flathead library bond would undoubtedly fail, probably by a large margin, and it probably doesn't matter how small the bond is, most Rs will likely vote against it.

Area 1 - Missoula's Core Urban Area

This is the oldest part of Missoula that is nearest to the U of M campus and is where their new library is located. It includes high-density residential and commercial areas north and south of the river, and there is very little new construction. I analyzed 21 precincts in this area. On average, there were roughly 76% Ds and 20% Rs. The Missoula library bond passed overwhelmingly in this area, 69% to 31%. I think proximity to the site was a factor, but not as much because the university students have their own library. There are quite a few older folks in this area and many of them may have opposed approval of the bond. There is only one precinct in the Flathead even close to as much D dominance as Area 1, Precinct 12 in Whitefish, which is the downtown urban area that includes the schools.

Area 2 - Surrounding Neighborhoods

By far the most growth in Missoula in recent decades, both residential and commercial, is in Area 2. I analyzed 22 districts in this area and, on average, there were roughly 55% Ds and 41% Rs. Despite a fairly high percentage of Ds, the bond barely passed in this area 51% to 49%. Of note is that there is indication of distance away from the library affecting voter's decisions negatively, in some cases, significantly. But there are areas that have higher percentages of Rs that supported the bond, particularly newer subdivisions where the residents are younger and have families. This indicates opportunities for approval of a Flathead library bond in the newer subdivisions surrounding Kalispell.

Area 3 - Distant Precincts

These are five precincts the furthest away from the city. The residents would very infrequently visit the library, so it's not surprising they opposed the library bond, despite political affiliation, but they are likely to be more R. It's apparent to me that outlying areas in the Flathead would be even more likely to oppose a library bond than Missoula.

Flathead Voting Precincts

While Missoula's voting precincts are fairly homogeneous, the Flathead's are not, particularly around Kalispell. What is evident is an overwhelming R advantage outside the city's core urban area. Even within Kalispell, two wards that adjoin each other have vastly different political preferences, both current councilors in Ward 2 ran as Rs while both current councilors in Ward 3 ran as Ds. Ward 3 is the downtown urban core of Kalispell south of Center Street.

An interesting area is the U.S. Senate race in House District 8, which is the Evergreen and Edgerton School areas, in which Sheehy won over Tester, roughly 64% to 33%. Sheehy won significantly more percentage-wise east of the Whitefish River in Evergreen, 68% to 28%, but not as much west of the river, 61% to 36%. It's apparent there are more Rs percentage-wise in Evergreen than Edgerton, but another factor to consider is the younger families in Edgerton are more likely to support capital bond projects.

With those considerations, in looking at the precincts surrounding Kalispell, it appears to me there is a good chance of support for a library bond in a very limited area that would involve a library district not aligned with the precincts. In order to spread the burden of a bond to some county taxpayers, I see an opportunity with a library district aligning with the Kalispell Growth Planning Area west of the Whitefish River, excluding Evergreen (see Fig. 3). This would include the fastest growing areas surrounding Kalispell, especially the areas west and north of Glacier High School, and the areas north of Reserve Drive and along Whitefish Stage Road. I think that including those areas, much of which are outside city limits, may add many thousand voters to the library pool. I also think those areas will double or more in population over the next decade. In addition, these areas will have the greatest commercial growth which further increases the tax base. A new Costco, Safeway, two hotels and a variety of other commercial projects are in the process of being built. There is a lot of growth in apartments and new houses. This will add many millions of dollars to this tax base. The consequences to funding library improvements are obvious, particularly over time.

Suggestions

I have consistently suggested going bold with the design, because it generates public interest, and this analysis doesn't change my opinion, only the timing. That's why I'm recommending a phased approach to the library. You've done an excellent job getting us to this point. We have an ideal site of roughly two acres of undeveloped land that could accommodate a 40,000 sq ft library facility. Unfortunately, even with a targeted voter base most likely to approve a library bond, and considering the mandatory near-term funding of schools and jails, I don't think that large of bond will pass. Also, I think most voters prioritize schools and jails over libraries. What I would not do is reduce the size of the library site to save money. Try to retain the full two acres.

I would have the architect design a library of roughly 25,000 sq ft that could be expanded in the future and provide drawings showing the projected future 40,000 sq ft concept. Belgrade's new library, which they are opening this week, is roughly 20,000 sq ft. Their library has a coffee bar and multiple community meeting rooms. Belgrade has similar demographics to us in the Flathead. I checked the Governor's race in 2024 for the Belgrade precincts that voted for the library bond in 2021. Gianforte defeated Busse by roughly 58% to 37%, but it should be noted that it appears the library targeted voting areas with a higher percentage of younger voters. This is a link to Belgrade's handsome new library which also describes their campaign -

<https://bclf.squarespace.com/the-bond-campaign>

Belgrade's library service population is somewhat less than Kalispell's service population, which is the Kalispell Branch Library District I am proposing, that I estimate to be about 35,000 permanent residents. A study conducted by the American Planning Association concluded that, for a service population of 35,000 people, the recommended total sq ft per capita factor for library construction was roughly .70, which calculates to 24,500 sq ft. This study also determined a library of that approximate size should accommodate over 100,000 books with an efficient design.

In the future, there are a number of reasons I think your architect will suggest adding another floor rather than spreading out. Two major reasons are building cost and parking. Parking garages are expensive. The Missoula library has four floors and doesn't have any trouble accommodating the public. The top floor was designed with a combination of conference rooms and gathering spaces, and that could be the vision for your overall future 40,000 sq ft facility that would be completed over time when we have more resources.

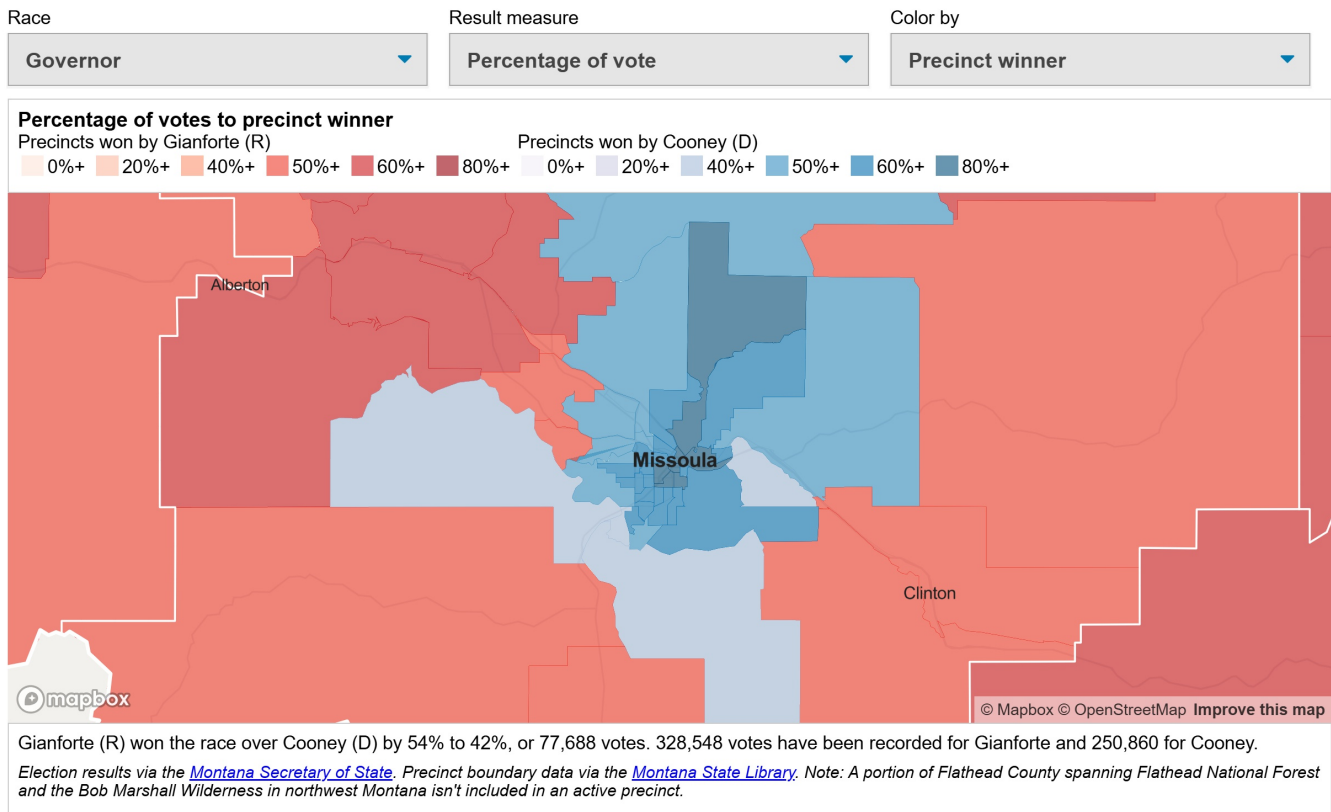
I understand there is hesitation about forming a library district, but I think a county wide bond is not achievable. With this information, I hope you revisit that concept as there is a lot of flexibility, including that the City of Kalispell could provide you with city sponsored grants and other resources - it gives them some skin in the game. As we saw in Missoula, city residents are the primary beneficiaries and supporters of the library. Plus, you are using the city's growth policy for considering future needs. You have library staff in Helena that are very knowledgeable, particularly the Lead Statewide Consulting Librarian, who seems to be very encouraging of library districts. I suggest you start by contacting the city manager and the county administrator, who could then report to their respective legal departments and elected officials. Let them partner together to do the grunt work of setting up the library district.

Once you've signed your buy-sell agreement and have chosen your architect, I recommend contacting a public relations firm to promote your concept and let the public know that you share their concerns about the cost. I would do that as soon as possible. Your bold concept, which you carefully scrutinized to eliminate unnecessary embellishments, but with an eye to the future, is something the Flathead Valley residents could be proud of.

Thank you,
Brad

Fig. 1 - 2020 Governor's Race Gianforte Cooney

Missoula County



Flathead County

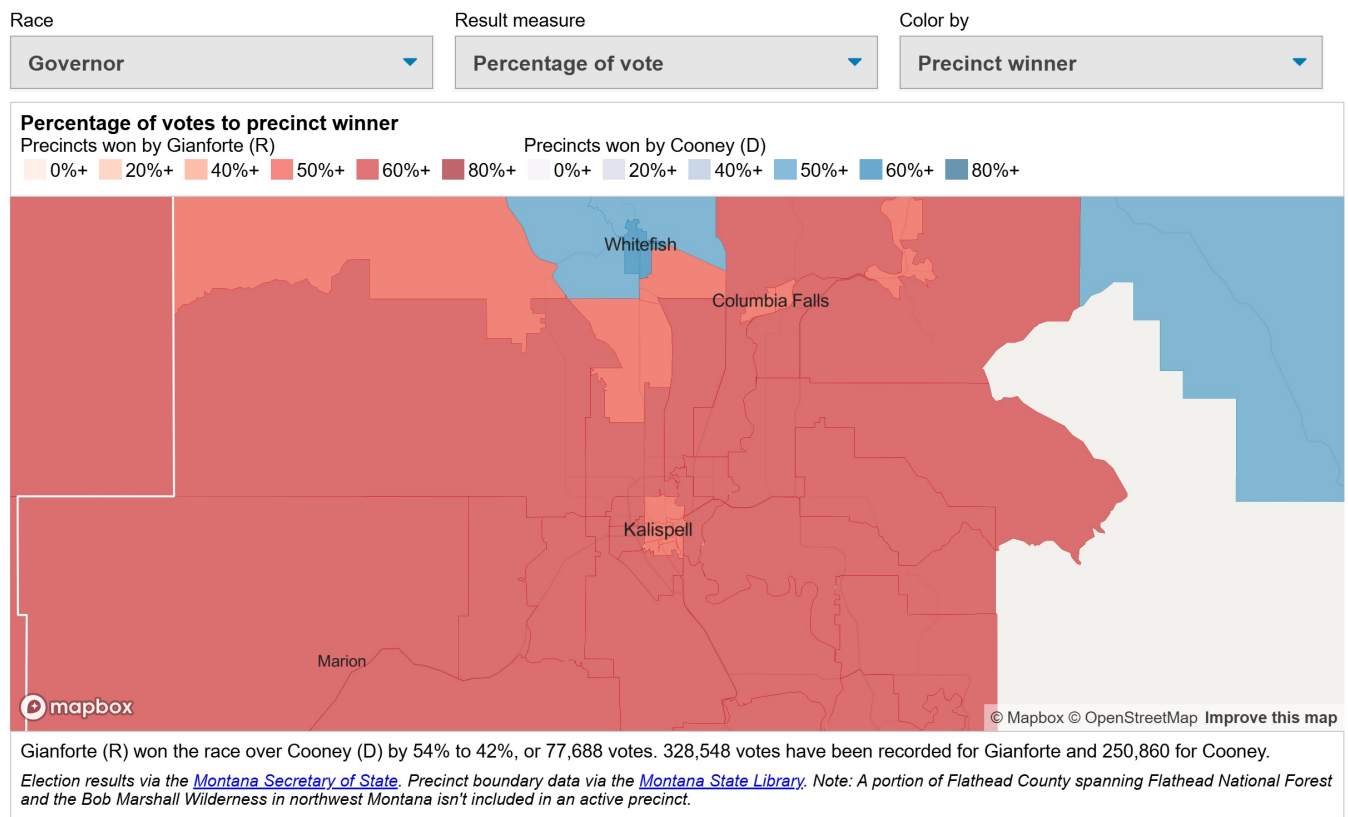


Fig. 2 - 2024 Senator's Race Sheehy Tester

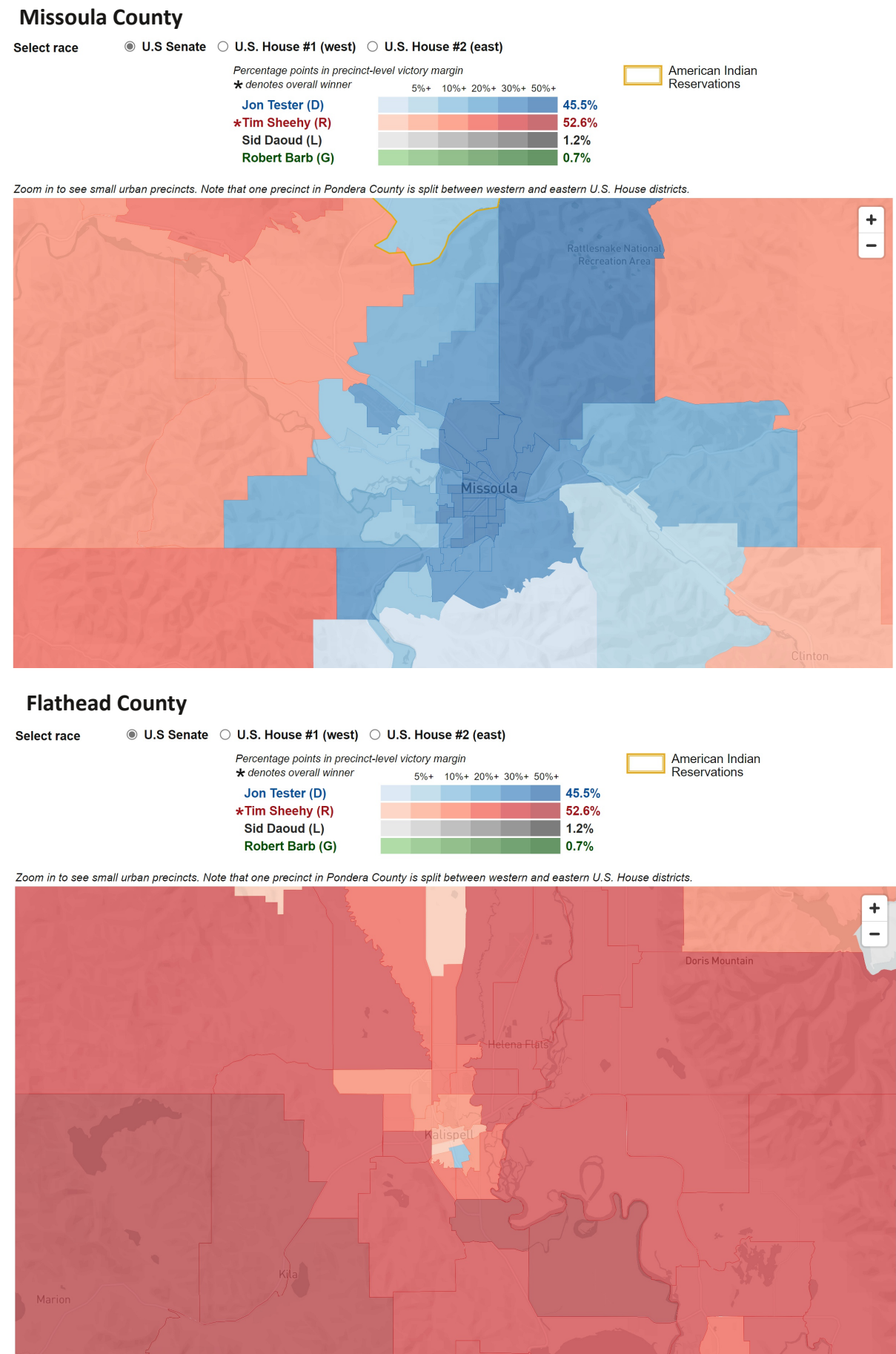


Fig. 3 - Suggested Kalispell Voting District - Growth Planning Area West of Whitefish River

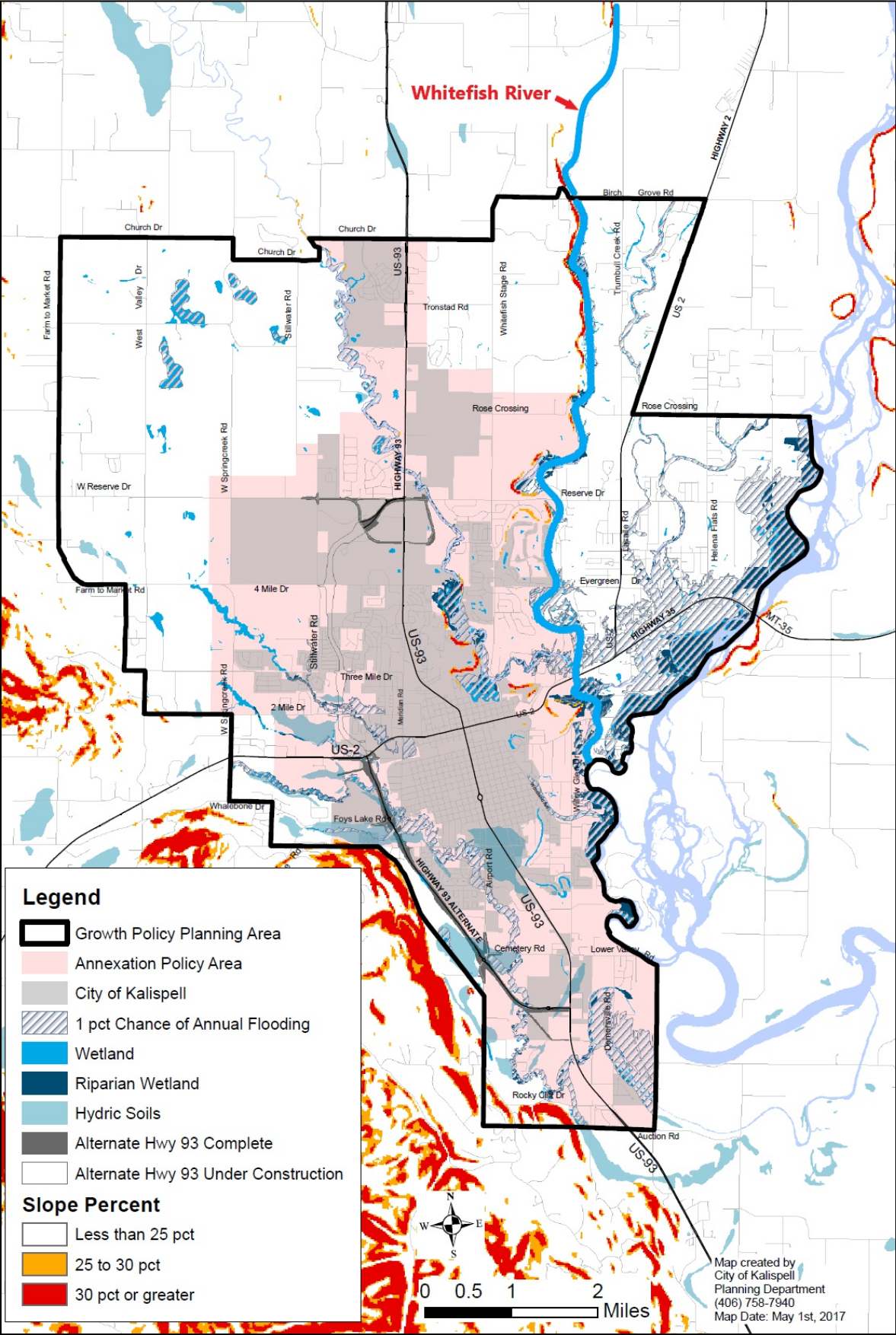


Fig. 4 - Initial Floor Plan for Proposed Belgrade Library - 23,500 sq ft
Final Floor Plan Reduced in Size Because of Costs

