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Ravalli candidates debate costs of growth

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Ravalli County commissioner candidates are wrestling with words like "growth" "impact fees" and "zoning" as they enter the home stretch before next Tuesday's election.

But, navigating the hottest issue in this fall's election in the Bitterroot is a complicated journey.

From the Flat Iron project, to the move to repeal the Ravalli County growth policy, this year's county commissioner races are even more complex than last year, as various factions jockey for positions that will support their vision of what the Bitterroot should look like in the future.

But it's not as simple as just stating a position and letting the ballots fall where they may.

Incumbent Republican Commissioner Greg Chilcott may be working from the "inside" on the county commission, but he has to be cautious as campaign questions fall around active proposals.

During a candidate forum in Hamilton, Chilcott and challenger John Meakin were asked their opinions about the proposed Flatiron annexation, which has subsequently been rejected by the Hamilton city council. Meakin sees the project as a bad example of how urban sprawl could ruin the Bitterroot.

"You have a major subdivision located three miles away from the city of Hamilton," Meakin said. "All you're doing is extending a project that's going to increase the amount of sprawl in our county."

But, Chilcott told the audience he couldn't comment directly on Flatiron because it could come before the commissioners for a decision.

Ravalli candidates debate costs of growth



Incumbent Republican Commissioner Greg Chilcott



Challenger John Meakin

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He did point with concern at the other end of the county, in the eight-mile area, where Ravalli County is having to provide the roads and infrastructure to support development across the line in Missoula County.

"We can't charge an impact fee for a subdivision across the jurisdictional boundaries," Chilcott said. "Yet we provide those services necessary to accommodate those folks getting to and from their residences."

Chilcott argues voters should repeal the county's growth policy next week, but Meakin feels that would be a step backward - further proof of the differences showing up on the Bitterroot campaign trail this fall.



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