



# **METRAPARK MASTER PLAN**







## METRAPARK MASTER PLAN

In Summer 2020, MetraPark unveiled three proposed Master Plan concept designs to the public, beginning a countywide conversation on the future of MetraPark. The goal for 2021 is to move from concept to a final Master Plan document, including a strategy to fund the investment identified in the plan. Accordingly, significant public engagement is necessary to ensure community support. As a county facility, the County Commissioners and MetraPark leadership are inviting public input into finalizing the MetraPark Master Plan.

This report reflects preliminary input into the Master Plan from identified stakeholders and community leaders. A targeted group of more than 50 individuals were interviewed, including current facility users, MetraPark staff, business and civic leaders, public school leadership and elected officials. These stakeholder interviews were designed to identify major trends, experiences and interests throughout the county. They are a first step in meaningful public engagement, but these interviews are not fully representative of all residents in Yellowstone County. Thus, throughout the report, comments and input are attributed to “participants,” rather than “the public”. This is to indicate that the feedback comes from a selected group of individuals that, while diverse and inclusive, are not a substitute for robust public engagement.

Three clear themes emerged from the participant interviews: **1)** a desire for a Master Plan that fully embraces the potential of MetraPark to define our community and be an **iconic** draw to the area; **2)** a belief that MetraPark should be the place where the entire **community** gathers, such that amenities and programming respond to a wider number of users; **3)** and that the process for finalizing the Master Plan is as important as the plan itself, with calls for rigorous transparency and **leadership** from the County Commission in bringing people together. **Underlying these themes is an important message: everyone wants to see MetraPark continue operations, grow and do better. No one advocated for a “no change” or status quo decision.**

Beyond those themes, participants varied widely in their preferred amenities and improvements. An outdoor, mid-size amphitheater generally rose to the top in terms of preferred amenities, with caution expressed over a facility that could perhaps only be used a few months each year. Participants would like to see more intentional connection to the Rims and the Yellowstone River, through facility design and recreational amenities. Participants want to see existing uses preserved and new opportunities opened up through multi-purpose facilities, even if that means a little more risk-taking in programming and events. Flexible, multi-use facilities may also help position MetraPark to embrace changing opportunities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also expect to see attention given to the aesthetics and small touches that elevate MetraPark to become a first-class facility. The inclusion of greenspace, public art, culture and history and recreation were all priorities. Participants want to see an inspirational facility plan that is supported with a strong business plan and maintenance strategy. Participants want to see public-private partnerships and local industry expertise included in the planning effort. Inter-government cooperation should be a goal as well, so that MetraPark can truly define the county for decades to come. Finally, participants want the facility to be designed for use outside of events and to have foot traffic 365 days a year.

## THREE CLEAR THEMES

- 1) ICONIC
- 2) COMMUNITY SPACE
- 3) UNIFYING LEADERSHIP



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## PRESENT DAY

This portion of the report focuses on participant perspectives on MetraPark today — what is the facility’s reputation in the community, what is its impact, what does it do well, what could improve and what participants desire to see for the future of MetraPark. Participants generally asked to take 2020 out of the equation when talking about “present day” value of MetraPark.

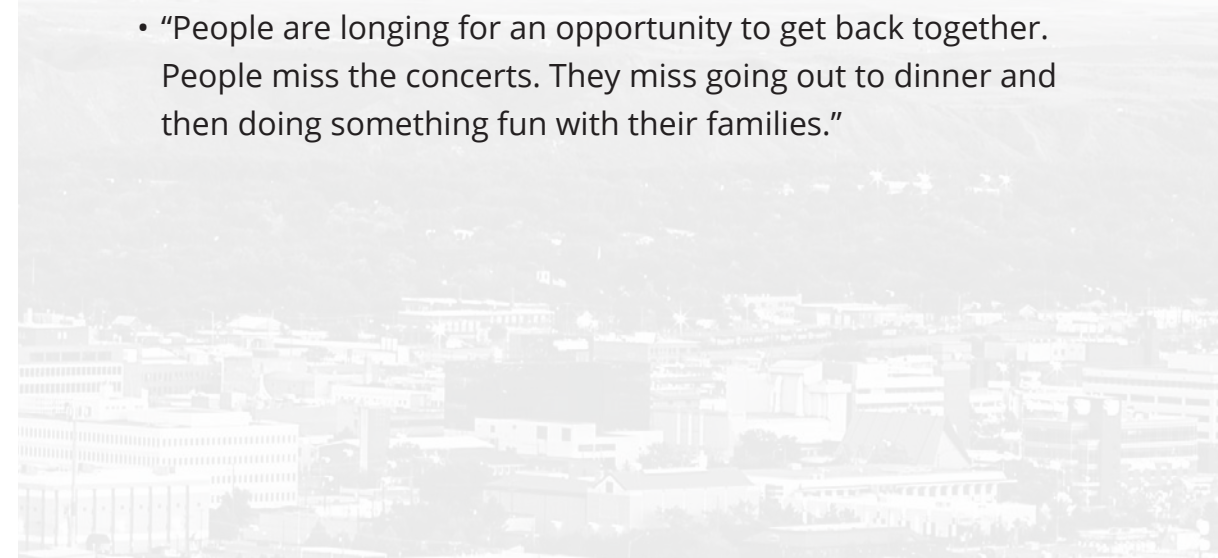
## THEME: METRAPARK IS WHERE THE COMMUNITY GATHERS (OR SHOULD GATHER)

When asked to describe MetraPark, many participants identified it as the one location where most of the county residents get together at some point, whether for concerts, MontanaFair, or large trade shows. Some participants noted that a community gathering space was one of the original rationales for constructing MetraPark and that original rationale has been proven to be true over time. Some also noted that **MetraPark's location makes it an ideal gathering spot – close to the airport and the highway, centrally located but not inherently belonging to any particular Billings neighborhood** and clearly identified and branded as a county facility belonging to all of Yellowstone County.

Participants recognize the overwhelming economic impact of MetraPark as well. As the community gathering place, MetraPark is perceived to be one of the largest economic drivers in the county. As discussed in the upcoming Master Plan section, many participants desire to see MetraPark do more to enhance its image as a community gathering space, both in infrastructure and programming decisions. This, in turn, would increase the economic impact of the facility.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “The Metra is a hub, a center, so to speak, for gatherings that bring industry and community together.”
- “It’s just kind of this tapestry. We all engage with Metra for different reasons.”
- “The Metra is a huge staple and backbone within the community.”
- “Metra is largely viewed as the place to go for the community to gather around music and entertainment.”
- “People are longing for an opportunity to get back together. People miss the concerts. They miss going out to dinner and then doing something fun with their families.”





## THEME: METRAPARK DOES GOOD, BUT IT COULD BE GREAT

Many participants expressed satisfaction with the quality and variety of events at MetraPark, with some believing that the diversity of event types has improved over time. Some participants indicated a desire for concert events other than country and classic rock, while others believed that MetraPark is trying to bring in more variety of music. Some participants indicated that they saw MetraPark as most known for MontanaFair and rodeo, but were themselves not fans of those events, and therefore, did not feel well served by MetraPark.

As discussed more fully in the Master Plan section below, nearly all participants believe that programming is an area of tremendous potential for MetraPark. In general, people want to see more programming overall, more variety in programming, the capacity to handle multiple events at once and unique or innovative events that attract people from across the region. **Overwhelmingly, participants recommended that MetraPark and County leadership make clear to the public that new facility investments will lead to a wider variety of new events that appeal to a larger number of people, both locally and regionally.**

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “Metra has been an island that people come to and leave from. There is no reason to be there unless you are participating in an event.”
- “Would I like to see better concerts? Yeah. How about someone from this decade, you know?”
- “I’ve spent way more money in Bozeman for concerts than I have here.”
- “We are the most populous county in the state. Metra is an asset that could and should be used to be a leader in the state.”
- “People don’t realize how large those grounds are, and there’s a large chunk of those grounds that really aren’t truly being utilized.
- “I think that the Metra could do more if the worked with some of the smaller business owners within the community to have events that are affordable for them.”
- “I really think there is a love-hate relationship going on for the Metra. There is some perception, some frustration, that the Metra is afraid to try new things.”



## THEME: METRAPARK NEEDS A FACELIFT

A common perception expressed by participants was that MetraPark often looks dated and rundown. Participants noted crumbling buildings, wide expanses of pavement, chainlink fences and a general lack of greenspace and landscaping as contributing to a perception that the MetraPark campus is not a modern venue. Many noted that the County Commission did a good job in responding to the Father's Day tornado, taking advantage of the insurance coverage to make vital investments in modernizing the facility. In addition, many praised the pond area as a pleasant outdoor space they enjoyed using and would like to see more of on the grounds.

Notably, most participants expressed uncertainty about the overall size of MetraPark, **indicating that the campus itself may not be sufficiently defined to the community.** While all participants discussed the arena, Expo Center, fairgrounds, barns and parking lots, many were unclear about the actual perimeter of the facility. Interestingly, participants more often named the Expo Center than the Pavilion, and many people use the word "Metra" to refer to the arena only. Some commenters shared the belief that the MetraPark campus lacks brand identity, that buildings are largely indistinguishable and that navigating the full campus is an impossibility without internal landmarks and wayfinding.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- "It should feel like you are walking into a pretty cool space, not just a parking lot."
- "If I never go to a concert or set foot on the grounds, I want to be proud of it. I'm paying for it, as a taxpayer. Driving by and seeing old fences and barns and dirt – just nothing like nobody cares – that doesn't make me proud."
- "There is a desperate need for landscaping in the North parking lot. That's probably the worst example of an asphalt sea in the city of Billings."
- "It's not a place that I feel particularly inspired or excited to visit. There's not any cool greenspace. It's just not that aesthetically pleasing."

## THEME: MANAGE METRAPARK BETTER

Participants frequently indicated a desire for MetraPark to improve operations, while still noting a belief that the facility has improved over time. Marketing and maintenance were two weaknesses cited by a variety of participants. Many people expressed a concern that MetraPark does not do enough to communicate what is happening on campus, outside of major events. Similarly, participants expressed a concern that MetraPark only publicizes events, rather than **marketing itself as a facility and community asset. Some respondents recommend a focused effort to help people understand more about the MetraPark campus itself, rather than only hearing about specific events.**

Similarly, some participants indicated a desire to see maintenance improved at MetraPark. Participants who had worked with MetraPark staff in the past to put on events uniformly praised the staff for being helpful, cooperative and easy to work with. However, most noted that buildings often feel dirty (e.g., dust in the arena from dirt floors, manure inside buildings after animal events) and that the grounds often seem neglected. Participant comments noted a lack of landscaping, rusted fences and garbage on the grounds.

Opinions on the recent demolition of facilities varied. Some participants expressed sadness at the loss of memorable amenities and the lack of historic preservation, while others saw new opportunities unfolding on a clean slate campus. Some participants were disappointed that facilities had been allowed to fall into such disrepair that demolition was the only option. As discussed below, many participants want to see a plan or strategy in conjunction with the master plan that ensures facility maintenance is a priority, so that new infrastructure will not face a similar fate.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “There’s no better staff than Metra. Working with them has been awesome. The beautification and attention to detail – that’s the biggest thing that needs to change.”
- “There’s some reputation of the Metra management, Board and Commissioners that has left a bad taste in people’s mouths. With the Commissioners, there’s got to be a bit more of an open mind.”
- “Metra has to update itself and promote itself too. It has to be a promotable facility.”
- “Metra needs more proactivity. It needs to do longer-term planning beyond election cycles.”
- “There are so many more uses [at the Metra]. The way it is titled and the way it is marketed are very self-limiting.”
- “While I agree that we need a lot of these things, the Metra probably needs to work on marketing to the community and the surrounding areas.”



## **FUTURE: MASTER PLAN**

This portion of the report focuses on participant responses to questions specific to the Master Plan. Participants were asked what they liked about the master plan, what they didn't like, what might be missing, what was important to them and what gaps could MetraPark fill in the County.

## THEME: MAKE METRAPARK THE CROWN JEWEL OF THE COUNTY

Overwhelmingly, participants want to see MetraPark become a defining aspect of Yellowstone County. Participants variously referred to MetraPark as a facility that should be the defining visual of the county, an iconic facility that draws visitors to the area, an experience independent of specific events and the “crown jewel” of the county. Participants repeatedly discussed their desire to see the Master Plan include some kind of “wow factor” that catapults MetraPark to the forefront of regional event facilities.

Participants frequently praised the foresight and vision of previous county leaders in acquiring the MetraPark campus, noting its unique, centralized location – proximate to both the airport and highway, in the middle of Billings but with a large enough footprint to accommodate a significant number of new amenities, close enough to downtown to create a corridor and physically connected to both the Rims and the river. These assets should be harnessed to **create a MetraPark campus that is both visually eye-popping and sufficiently branded as an experience to visit, regardless of programming.** The challenge presented is that nearly all people want MetraPark to be unlike anything that is available in the region – but few have a clear vision on what that should be. Participants urged the MetraPark Board and Commissioners to invite visionary thinkers to the table to build a MetraPark vision that defines the county and draws visitors from across the region.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “The one thing that would be on my list is finding a way to create the Wow Factor.”
- “Metra should be the cornerstone of the community.”
- “We should be creating experiences. Going to Metra should feel like a branded experience.”
- “I would bet you that 9 out of every 10 cities would kill to have a venue like Metra in a location like that, with all the potential that place has. You have to applaud the commissioners and whomever else is behind the idea of turning this into the economic engine that it should be.”
- “Focus on building memories at the venue.”
- “We want to be a destination, but you don’t become a destination unless you’ve got a reason why people come to your community. Metra is one of the very most important reasons to come to Billings.”
- “Metra doesn’t have that one big thing that provides a memorable trademark for the facility and for the community.”
- “Billings needs to define itself. We are constantly comparing ourselves. Let’s define ourselves, know what we love, and promote those things at the Metra.”



## ICONIC EXAMPLES

When citing a desire to see MetraPark transformed into an extraordinary venue, participants most often cited either Red Rocks in Denver or the KettleHouse in Bonner as examples of facilities that have truly branded themselves as a unique, destination experiences – apart from any particular event at the site.



## RED ROCKS

The Red Rocks amphitheater is a facility owned by the City and County of Denver. The amphitheater sits within a 738-acre park and is itself a naturally occurring, geologic amphitheater. Original development of the amphitheater took place during the Great Depression, as CCC and WPA projects. The facility opened in 1941 and was designated a national historic landmark in 2015. The Red Rocks area has significant Native American history associated with it and is also the site of various paleontology discoveries. The amphitheater has just over 9500 seats and has hosted concerts from the Beatles to Willie Nelson to U2. On the Red Rocks footprint is a visitor center, gift shop, public art displays, and hall of fame museum commemorating some of the famous events that have taken place over time. Information is provided on recreational opportunities at the site, as well as instructions on using the amphitheater for exercise when events are not scheduled. The website includes recommendations on visiting the facility, nearby hotels with shuttles to Red Rock, places to eat and shop, and other attractions in the area. The website also tells the history of the park, details sustainability initiatives, and offers a live cam that allows people to see the facility in real time. Branded Red Rocks merchandise is available for purchase, including proprietary CDs with compilations of some of the best musical events at the venue. The social media assets for Red Rocks promote both events as well as the beauty of the facility.

## ICONIC EXAMPLES

### CONTINUED



## THE KETTLEHOUSE

The KettleHouse Amphitheater is located along the Blackfoot River near Bonner, MT. It is one of six Montana facilities privately owned by the concert promoter Logjam Presents. Logjam bills itself as not just a successful music enterprise, but also a socially conscious company that invests in nonprofits, environmental preservation, and voter engagement. The amphitheater is located next to KettleHouse Brewery and has a capacity of 4,250 (seated and standing). In addition to paid parking, shuttle service from Missoula is offered. Website and social media platforms offer photo galleries of events as well as interviews with musical artists. The facility notes its ranking among the best amphitheaters in the world.



## THEME: MULTIPURPOSE, MULTI-USE, MULTI-FUNCTIONAL

A strong and consistent theme from the interviews was a desire to see MetraPark be flexible and dynamic, able to capitalize on multiple opportunities and serve a wide variety of community needs. Accordingly, many participants expressed a desire to see any new facilities on the MetraPark campus be multi-use facilities that can cater to a variety of needs. At the same time, some participants noted that too much flexibility can sometimes result in no need getting adequately met.

Participants noted the need for venues able to affordably accommodate events of multiple sizes – not just at MetraPark, but in the community itself. Thus, participants recommended that the county undertake a brief analysis of all venues in the community and identify gaps that could reasonably be met by new facilities at MetraPark. In particular, the need for a space to accommodate events with 3,000-5,000 attendees was a frequently identified need.

An outdoor amphitheater was often cited by participants as a favorite new amenity in the Master Plan concepts. At the same time, many noted the limited timeframe for outdoor events, as well as the belief that even an amphitheater should be **designed and equipped for purposes other than just concerts**. Those with experience in the music/event industry expressed a desire for a mid-sized venue in the range of 3,000-5,000 capacity, noting that anything larger could be accommodated in the arena without the arena feeling empty and anything smaller could be handled at existing venues in the county.

Participants also split on the need for or value of a permanent dirt floor facility. Many people desired to see an end to dirt floor events in the arena, so that it can be kept cleaner. Some favored a dedicated facility for events that use a dirt floor, while others argued for a smaller venue to have a concrete pad with dirt to be hauled in as needed.

A number of participants raised concerns related to Dehler Park; namely, that Cobb Field was positioned to the taxpayers in Billings as a multi-use facility, but immediately became a single-use facility. Participants are concerned that similar promises of multi-use venues at MetraPark could be met with skepticism.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “If any large component of this design is just for one use, we’ve lost. If we are just going to shuffle people around inside the city, we’ll lose our ability to bring in outside dollars to spend in our community.”
- “We need a broader spectrum of uses that provide revenue streams to our community on a more regular basis.”
- “This could be so much more of a community space if they didn’t price out the smaller events.”
- “I think the commissioners should sit down with everybody who sees an opportunity and just see where all the synergies are and how you can make things as multi-purpose as possible.”
- “I think it needs to support ag into the future, but I also think it needs to support the entire community. I think sometimes we get tunnel vision and believe that we have to promote just this ag building.”
- “It opens up our opportunities, as leasers of the facility, to do more things. And I think it allows us to brainstorm more things to do.”

## THEME: MODERNIZE THE AMENITIES AND AESTHETICS OF METRAPARK

In addition to desiring to see MetraPark become the crown jewel of the county, participants want to see MetraPark become a state-of-the-art facility, with world class amenities on the campus. Participants recommended that the county confer with industry leaders when designing or improving amenities to ensure that design standards, technology, equipment and finishes are all cutting edge. **Attention to small details and overall aesthetics is important, and participants want that to be a priority.**

Participants want to see the campus get an overall facelift, so that the grounds and exteriors of buildings look modern and contemporary. Participants also want MetraPark to be cohesive, both in the aesthetics and the layout of the campus. One participant likened MetraPark to the size of a small town in Montana and suggested that the Commissioners think of the campus as such – with internal navigation, zones of like amenities/activities, safety and communications, lighting and infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Walkability was an important ability for many, including access to onsite and nearby amenities.

Many participants praised the more recent upgrades to Wi-Fi services in the arena and urged that similar connectivity be available across the campus.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “It sounds really minimal, but you can have the most beautiful building, but if it is surrounded by a bunch of concrete and never cleaned, it gets dilapidated.”
- “What you’ve got now is asphalt and concrete that is not appealing for anything other than parking.”
- “There is a real identity problem with the large buildings, which is indicative of an inability to maneuver in the facility and find people, find activities, find community.
- “It definitely could stand to have some updated systems and convention services in place.”
- “I would really love to see a focus on the ability to effectively and efficiently move people.”
- “It is going to be really important that the fences are nice, that it is kept clean, the sidewalks are swept, the windows are clean and it doesn’t feel dusty.”

<sup>1</sup> In point of fact, this appears not to be true. Ismay, the smallest town in Montana, measures a respectable 269 acres in size.



## THEME: ACTIVATE METRAPARK EVERY DAY

Participants were asked if they believed that MetraPark should focus on doing large events very well and perhaps more often (1-2 times per month), or if the new Master Plan should enable the campus to be activated more frequently, even daily. Participants generally trended toward a mixture of both, preferring to see MetraPark specialize in the kinds of large-scale events that can only be held at MetraPark, while also much more robustly using the full campus. **Participants expressed a desire to have a reason to go to MetraPark event when there are no events programmed, including opportunities for recreation, gathering, or even light retail.** Participants would like to have a reason to take out-of-town visitors to MetraPark, regardless of concerts or other events. However, most would also like to see more concerts and large events that attract tourists and add to the local quality of life.

Many participants noted the **unique linkage between the Rims and the river** as offering vast potential for recreation access through MetraPark, whether as bike trails or more innovative concepts like a zip line. Some participants expressed a desire to see more cultural events and representation at MetraPark, including hosting large, inter-tribal pow-wows and focusing on the local history. Others indicated a desire to see some permanent amenities, including possibly an open-air market (e.g., Pike's Place in Seattle, Eastern Market in Washington D.C.), a museum or cultural center, large public art displays, walkable gardens, or restaurants. Many participants suggested that the economic viability of private sector development adjacent to MetraPark (across Expo Drive or Main Street) depends on Metra being a near-daily destination for a sizable number of people.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- "You've got this great campus. Let's not put a barbed wire fence around it again and keep people away. Let's make it something we can engage with."
- "Sacrifice Cliffs is a legendary story that is right there. That should be told."
- "Metra is uniquely located and potentially equipped to become a hub, a trailhead, a jumping off point for access to recreational facilities and commercial facilities."
- "Utilizing the space for difference opportunities more throughout the year makes sense, rather than several big key events."
- "Every Friday and Saturday there should be something. It doesn't have to be a headlining act."

## THEME: AG STILL MATTERS. A LOT.

Regardless of personal background, nearly all participants volunteered that the MetraPark campus should not lose its connection to agriculture. To the extent that participants want MetraPark to be a defining aspect of the community, agriculture is seen as an inherent part of who Yellowstone County residents are and the history of the area. Thus, most participants want to see rodeo, fair and 4H events continue and grow. Some participants mentioned the significant interconnection of increased attention to career education and MetraPark facilities as a foundation for education in ag career options.

Importantly, many participants **want to see ag-related events at MetraPark continue, but they do not want the MetraPark campus to feel like an agricultural event center.** As noted previously, some participants expressed frustration that the arena never seems fully clean after a dirt floor event and that the Expo/Pavilion buildings often feel like ag buildings as well.

Representatives from the ag industry who participated in this research indicated significant potential for growth in ag-related events of varying sizes at MetraPark, including different classes of rodeo, horse and animal shows and educational activities. Ensuring that smaller buildings and venues are available for rental at a manageable cost is a priority for this class of events. In addition, the inclusion of an on-site RV park was viewed as a benefit for agriculture events and consistent with the practice of the industry. Participants noted the need for updated facilities for stabling and stressed the need for water and electricity at the barns.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “I think farming and ranching still has to be a major part of what we do. You have to have 4-H and the facilities to host rodeo.”
- “You can’t move away from agriculture. That would be dumb.”
- “Having the county fair there is a big deal and ag is a big deal too. We can’t ignore that.”
- “I would hate to seem them build a facility that prices ag out of using it.”
- “It’s still Montana. It’s a big industry for our local economy. I think the systems in there are just a little outdated. They could update them into some nicer stuff that would make it look good and improve the agricultural side of it.
- “I’m not a cowboy, but the NFR is one of the most fun events that I go to every year.”
- “I think we need to keep our kids tied into those values, that history of farming and ranching.”



## THEME: METRAPARK & DOWNTOWN BILLINGS – MIXED

Participants generally split in their views on creating linkages between the MetraPark campus and Downtown Billings. For some, the development of a corridor between MetraPark and downtown – particularly with transportation included – was seen as vital. Those participants believe that MetraPark events can be a part of a broader downtown revitalization strategy, while also encouraging development in the East Billings Urban Renewal District. The idea of transportation, in the form of a shuttle or light rail, was perceived to be innovative and exciting, opening up opportunities for gathering, recreating and shopping that do not presently exist in the community.

For others, the idea of a light rail or public transit corridor between MetraPark and downtown seemed unrealistic. For those participants, the largest concern was demand. Some participants worried that a public transit service would inevitably fall into disrepair if it wasn't robustly used daily. Others expressed concern that the types of transit corridors that are successfully generally have high outdoor use, meaning that winter weather could be problematic.

Some participants simply favored more development directly adjacent to MetraPark, noting that the properties across Expo Drive could be developed into hotels, restaurants and shopping that would thrive with more aggressive use of the MetraPark campus and create value for the county as a whole. For this group, the planned pedestrian connection over Expo Drive is considered essential. A few participants also encouraged improved pedestrian/bike access across Main Street, allowing easier access to the Boothill Inn/Applebee's/Swords Park areas.

**Ultimately, most participants concluded that a more vibrant and active MetraPark campus should stimulate proximate development as well as increase foot traffic in Downtown Billings, simply by attracting more tourism to the area.**

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “The Metra needs to be uniquely connected to our downtown core with infrastructure, with partnership and with relationship building.”
- “The 5th Street Corridor is a waste of energy.”
- “The light rail from downtown would be so cool because a vibrant downtown is huge to maintaining and just growing Billings.”
- “I don’t see the rail system that was in the plans really being effective.”
- “One thing I love about the Master Plan that it does mention the 5th Street Corridor. I think having some sort of linkability not just to downtown but also a way to connect to the Heights would be awesome.”

## THEME: PLAN FOR CHILDREN

Many participants expressed a desire to see the Master Plan focus on the needs of children. In addition to the focus on student athletics discussed in the next section, participants want to see more uses for young children, as well as middle school and high school students. This desire was reflected in discussions of both programming and infrastructure.

Participants hoped to see more family-friendly programming at MetraPark, both in the arena and smaller venues. People noted that kids enjoy the opportunity to go to NAIA basketball or other big sporting events, as well as the occasional child-oriented show. However, many participants see an opportunity to increase these types of events, particularly in a smaller venue that may be more cost-effective.

In addition, some participants expressed a desire for **more passive opportunities – a small park or playground area, amenities where middle or high school students could congregate with friends, green spaces, youth recreational facilities, or similar amenities.** Many participants believe that voters are more likely to support MetraPark when they believe their children will benefit and also believe that parents are likely to spend more at events (e.g., concessions) for their children, making those events more lucrative.

A smaller number of participants raised the wishes of “pet parents,” hoping to see some amenities like a dog park, pet-friendly walking paths, or areas where pet recreation was allowed. This class of amenities, along with some type of public park or playground, were seen as particularly important to the RV park, as RV travelers would want those amenities to be close and walkable.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “They could do much better for the youth. There is not a lot to do in this area for teenagers. A lot more offered for them – that would be helpful.”
- “It’s hard to say no to your kids when they love doing an activity.”
- “Metra now is virtually an adult-only facility. There are some fun events for kids, but the facility itself is not child-friendly. If there were play sets, play equipment, essentially an urban park – that would be great.”
- “I think Billings needs more activities for kids, teenagers specifically. I truly feel like there is something missing for them.”
- “We need more stuff for animals.”
- “People will pay anything for their kids. You want to definitely make things kid friendly.”



## THEME: ATHLETICS ARE VITAL

Nearly all participants could relate a fond member of youth athletics at MetraPark – either they played in a tournament in the arena, competed in a track meet, or have watched their own child in a sporting event at MetraPark. Most commonly, people discussed the all-class state wrestling tournament as a particularly memorable event. For some, collegiate or semi-pro athletic events were enjoyable memories. In general, athletics was the area where the largest number of participants felt some emotional connection to MetraPark.

**Most participants mentioned a desire to see athletic events continue and grow at MetraPark.** In addition to youth sports, many participants discussed opportunities for youth and adult rec events, including basketball, soccer, indoor or outdoor volleyball, lacrosse, hockey and swimming. Most advocates for hockey recognize the challenges associated with ice, but nonetheless regretted the lack of facilities in the area to support youth or adult hockey. A few participants expressed a desire to see facilities that allow hosting of more collegiate tournaments on the campus, as well as some interest in adult semi-pro sports. Some participants felt that adjacent private development (across Expo Drive) was important to support more state or regional tournaments, while others felt that the availability of hotels in Downtown Billings or the West End was sufficient.

Many participants expressed an opinion about the recent discussion over SD2 athletic facilities on the MetraPark campus. Generally, these opinions broke down geographically. Rural participants felt strongly that the conversation with Billings Public Schools should have never even taken place, while most Billings residents saw the decision as unfortunate and not well-handled. Some hoped that the issue could be revisited, with more flexibility around the control and funding of the facility. Others felt that organized youth athletics at MetraPark should be confined to large events – state or regional tournaments – rather than local regular season games. Few people expressed support for the idea of Amend Park as a preferable alternative. Very few participants expressed any sort of opinion relative to the hosting of the Big Sky State Games in Billings; those who did believe that more athletic facilities at MetraPark are optimal to allow Billings to host the Games.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “As a high school kid, the Metra felt like big time. It felt like you were playing in an NBA arena.”
- “Sports are a major economic driver. Metra has already proven its capability and those events have huge potential for our economic well-being. There is a need for a track facility, for swimming, for more basketball courts, and for ice.”
- “We are in desperate need in this state of a swimming facility.”
- “Why not take the opportunity to bring people to Metra, instead of being in competition with a sports facility elsewhere in town?”
- “I was disappointed that there wasn’t more coordination with a school athletics facility.”
- “They should stay away from any type of athletic facility because they have state-of-the-art facilities in Laurel and Lockwood that meet the needs of the region. It would be ill-advised to have the taxpayers fund something that is already in place. If School District 2 wants to develop something, they can sell it to the folks within the school district.”
- “If a deal could be struck with the school district, that makes a lot of sense to me.”

## THEME: CONVENTION CENTER . . . MAYBE

When asked about the possibility of MetraPark adding or modifying facilities to serve as a convention center for the area, participants were mixed and generally lukewarm. Many participants expressed the opinion that the existing facilities lack the basic amenities necessary for high quality conferences, including upscale interior finishes, breakout rooms with climate control, adequate restroom and networking spaces, AV equipment and sufficient hotel rooms in walking distance.

**Participants were generally split in their belief that existing facilities could be affordably renovated to meet that conference need**, with some concern expressed that the scope of modifications necessary would take over the building and eliminate the present-day uses. Some favored a stand-alone, large convention center on the MetraPark campus, so long as hotels are safely and reasonably walkable. Others suggested that MetraPark is perhaps best suited to serve mid-size (500-1,000) conferences, and that a mid-size conference center has more potential for flexibility and multi-use than a large convention center. Some participants favored a conference or convention center at MetraPark because it is already tax-exempt property, while others suggested that Billings would benefit more from a convention center downtown.

Most opinions on a convention or conference center were moderate, but a few participants expressed very strong opinions. Some were strong advocates for a convention center, suggesting it to be a necessary component of the Master Plan. Others were fierce opponents, generally believing that a conference center is unnecessary, unfairly competes with the private sector and not likely to generate revenue.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “The idea of building a convention center is crazy.”
- “There is huge demand for a convention center.”
- “Ideally, I would rather have it downtown, but something is better than nothing. There would have to be a much higher quality area with a higher quality finish.”
- “Metra has so much potential to be something like a bigger convention center.”
- “I see it more as a place for RV shows and tractors. It’s not a carpet and chandeliers kind of place and I don’t think it should become one.”



## THEME: EVERYONE HAS AN OPINION ABOUT PARKING

Unsurprisingly, parking was an issue that many participants brought up without prompting. Many thoughts were shared about parking, but no clear trends emerged. Some participants, particularly those who are current event sponsors at MetraPark, were opposed to paid parking and worried that it would harm their events. Others saw paid parking as a necessary evil that most people are accustomed to paying when they travel anywhere else in the country. Some were most concerned that parking fees be easy to pay – either included in a ticket price, payable in advance, or payable through an app. Still others suggested that a mix of some paid and some free parking may be the best option.

In addition, some participants felt that additional parking at MetraPark would be helpful, so long as additional ways in and out of MetraPark were added. **Others believe there is already far too much pavement at MetraPark and opposed additional parking on campus.** A few participants urged the planning process to consider how traffic flows might be altered by the Billings Bypass and make improvements that directed some traffic up Main Street. Some participants felt that MetraPark was not accommodating to shuttles or ride-sharing services and should improve that amenity in the Master Plan. Likewise, some participants hoped MetraPark would do more to accommodate bike and pedestrian traffic.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “I think they should start charging for anything that doesn’t involve high school athletics. I would charge for parking and use that to support part of this vision.”
- “I think our economy is so much different than cities like Houston, Denver, San Antonio, Phoenix, where they are used to \$20 parking and an event ticket. It adds up fairly quickly and it leaves a bad taste with people.”
- “I think it is better if the parking price almost gets absorbed into the ticket and people just think they are paying to go to the event.”
- “Something I would really work adamantly against is paid parking.”



## PUBLIC SUPPORT

This section discusses participant responses related to funding, including the possibility of a bond question on an upcoming ballot. Participants were asked whether this project (MetraPark renovations) is likely to unify or divide voters, how they would respond to a ballot question on bonding authority, what the community response might be and what would be important to gain support with the general public.



## THEME: GO BIG. UNIFY THE COUNTY.

As noted above, the single largest takeaway from these preliminary interviews was a desire to be inspired by the vision in a Master Plan. **Participants want an innovative, forward-looking approach that positions MetraPark to be the premiere venue in the region for the next 20 to 40 years.** Participants repeatedly affirmed the belief that there is nothing quite like MetraPark in the state of Montana, but that the campus has not yet fully claimed that distinction. They hope to see a Master Plan that sets MetraPark apart from other venues in the region. They want a facility that defines Billings or Yellowstone County as a community, draws people to the area and meaningfully adds to the quality of life for Yellowstone County residents.

Participants also see the MetraPark project as a unifying opportunity. The value of MetraPark crosses the rural-urban divide, avoids the neighborhood battles that are common in the city and as a county facility, it belongs to all of us. Accordingly, participants believe that the Master Plan should demonstrate, clearly, a benefit to all. The amenities and improvements should serve a wide variety of uses and users, be available for small and large events and be open to the community a majority of the year.

Participants also expressed a strong desire to see intergovernmental cooperation as a core component of the process. Participants want to see – visually – the county working with and engaging municipal governments and school districts throughout the county. They want to see elected officials supporting this project, having input and perhaps even investing in the project. They also want to see the county showing leadership – producing a Master Plan that connects with clearly defined needs in the county, engaging in a process that is genuinely open and collaborative and avoiding competition for public or private resources. Participants want to be inspired by the vision of MetraPark, but they also want to be inspired by the quality and transparency of the process.

Accordingly, most participants were comfortable with a large price tag for the Master Plan and a large bond question, so long as the vision is relevant to the county, inspirational and clearly able to benefit a wide variety of people.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “The argument for the bond should focus heavily on community – wider cultural events, everybody participates. It isn’t enough to do a bond just to fund existing uses.”
- “I love the conversation the Commissioners are having right now. They are saying ‘what should the future of MetraPark be?’ That is powerful.”
- “I don’t want a small vision and I don’t want more asphalt.”
- “I think we need to look at what our community wants to portray culturally and see how many of those segments the Metra can hit in some way.”
- “It is essential, I think, to market it as a facility for the community. I have no problem helping fund a bond locally that I believe is all-encompassing.”
- “Just pass a bond that gives you what you need and quit nickel-and-diming us. I’d rather do one big one, get it done and be able to eyeball the benefits.”

## THEME: TAKE MORE RISKS . . . CAREFULLY

Participants were asked about risk – whether MetraPark should focus more on ensuring that events at least break even or ideally generate revenue, or if MetraPark should be willing to take more risk of loss on a particular event so long as the local economy clearly benefits through increased hotel occupancy, shopping, eating in restaurants, or visiting other community attractions. Most participants felt that MetraPark could and should do both. Generally, participants want MetraPark run like a smart business with a focus on revenue generation and wise use of resources. They also understand that, as a governmental entity, the county is likely to be, and perhaps should be, more risk averse. At the same time, **MetraPark is seen as a significant economic driver for the community and, as such, some participants would like to see MetraPark be a little more willing to risk a loss for events that are truly unique or special.** Some participants suggested that MetraPark should make more use of public-private partnerships to manage risk and bring more business expertise to the operations. Partnerships were recommended both for infrastructure and amenities, as well as in the underwriting and execution of major events at MetraPark.

Participants felt strongly that MetraPark's biggest value to the community is in attracting tourism to the area, particularly within a 500-mile driving radius. While most want to have improved amenities for residents to enjoy, the overriding focus for participants was the boost to local economies from MetraPark-related tourism. This is connected to the desire to see MetraPark be defined as an iconic facility – something that people might drive to Billings just to visit. Some participants noted that a number of football stadiums around the country have achieved this – attracting tourism with amenities that function regardless of whether a game is being played at the venue. Participants indicated they would be disappointed with a Master Plan that was more focused on just increasing local attendance at events, rather than bringing new revenue to town.

In the same vein, some participants expressed frustration that there is no taxing mechanism (i.e., sales tax or local option tax) to get the full benefit of tourism. While the boost to the private sector from tourism was praised, the inability to capture public revenue to improve transportation and safety (investments seen as beneficial to tourism) was a frustration.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “Metra needs more independence in management. It needs to be insulated from political winds.”
- “People need to be open-minded and creative, not stuck in the old ways.”
- “A lot of times when we grow big, we want to have control. But in order to grow, you have to let go.”
- “It is easier to say that than do that for the budget. If there were a true public private partnership for bringing in events, you could share that risk through contract. Let's experiment. You never know until you try stuff for a couple of years.”
- “What do I want at Metra? More events. Take some more risks when it comes to the people you're bringing to Billings.”
- “Metra needs to be a loss leader for the community. They need to recognize that their job is to enhance the economic wellbeing of Yellowstone County and improve the quality of life for everyone living in Yellowstone County and the region.”



## THEME: DON'T MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY

Participants generally supported the timing of the discussion. After a year of pandemic quarantine and economic shutdown, participants expressed a desire to reconnect with the community. They believe people want to be together again, even if that needs to be outdoors for a while to feel safe. At the same time, some participants expressed caution that the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed behaviors in ways that are not yet fully understood. Participants also see a major renovation/construction project as a signal to the community that the economy is on the rebound, noting that the project itself will drive economic activity. The current demolition at MetraPark is also building a sense of excitement, an anticipation that something is happening soon. Thus, most participants think this is a special moment, the right time for the community to be having a conversation about something big to restart and reconnect.

However, participants residing in Billings noted the possible conflict between a bond question this year and a possible public safety mill levy (PSML) at roughly the same time. When asked to prioritize, nearly all participants residing in Billings ranked a PSML as a higher priority than a MetraPark bond. A few participants indicated they would support both at the same time, but also noted that for some Billings residents, a large property tax increase would be unmanageable whether those voters liked the project or not. Other participants noted that public safety and a reimagined MetraPark go hand in hand – a safe community is essential to tourism. Still others suggested that a public safety mill levy is unnecessary and unlikely to succeed this year, and as such, hoped for widespread support of a bond for MetraPark.

Regardless, **many participants expressed hope that the County and City of Billings could work closely together on these two initiatives, avoiding a competition for public attention and resources.** Participants hoped to see a shared vision for the future of Billings and surrounding areas, so that voters can have confidence that elected officials are working toward aligned goals.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “I think the whole community and MetraPark staff have realized what a role they play...not having events is absolutely detrimental. I think people realize now more than ever how important it is to have MetraPark as a major facility in the region.”
- “I would beg the commissioners not to be blind to the other decision the community is going to have to make about public safety.”
- “I’m all in favor [of a bond], subject to the problem of competition with other needs.”
- “I would hope it could be kind of a symbiotic relationship where doing these things was actually going to benefit all. For me, I would shell out that extra money to do all of those things because it’s worth it. But if I was retired or on a fixed income, that’s harder.”

## THEME: SHOW YOUR WORK

While nearly all participants desire grand vision for major changes at MetraPark, most participants also expect a high level of planning and detail to accompany any ask for public dollars. Participants want to see details on how the Master Plan, when fully built, will generate revenue, bring tourism and new money to the area and provide enhanced value to the county. Further, participants strongly recommend that any type of revenue projections, economic analysis, or business plan be influenced by actual industry experience. Participants who work in event management, tourism-related businesses, music and arts, or similar industries want a chance to share their expertise for the benefit of this project. Other participants expressed a similar desire to see the business case for the Master Plan shaped and informed by local industry experts with experience in the areas where MetraPark could generate increased revenue. Some participants also expressed a desire to see MetraPark staffed with deeper experience in concert promotion, event planning, marketing and maintenance.

Many participants **praised MetraPark leadership and County Commissioners for investing resources in this stakeholder research, saying that it indicates a real desire to hear what the public has to say about the future of MetraPark.** They urged leadership to continue that effort, with a very transparent public planning process, lots of opportunity for members of the public to weigh in at various points in the process and open communication about opportunities and challenges related to the Master Plan. Participants want transparency in the process of developing the final Master Plan and in understanding the costs, benefits and risks of the proposal. In addition, many participants expressed a desire to see a process that is connected to other planning efforts in the county – using data and studies that have already been completed as a basis for making decisions, learning about investments other public and private entities are planning and creating a holistic rationale for the final Master Plan in the context of the broader county.

In addition to seeing details on the business plan and the planning process, participants want to see a thoughtful discussion on the ongoing maintenance of MetraPark. While there is some anticipation growing as buildings come down on the campus, many people also noted that the buildings were in a state of genuine disrepair. If a significant public investment is to be made, participants recommended that there be some plan to maintain the facility at a higher level of quality.

## COMMENTS FROM INTERVIEWS

- “Build it up, make it nice, keep it clean. I think that’s one of the biggest things – if you’re going to build it, you have to have money in the budget to keep the upkeep up.”
- “Break it down into simple numbers and then explain what you are going to get for your money. Not just a big, fancy building but what the future can look like with that. It all comes down to education.”
- “If we are going to have the money to put up these beautiful buildings, we also need to have the money to keep the grass green and provide those outdoor settings.”
- “Partnerships are huge. We have to look at a lot of public-private partnerships if we are going to get bigger and better. We have to make use of that expertise.”
- “The vision really needs to be fleshed out and offered to the public. Your argument needs to be completely transparent.”



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Listen to the public.** There is very limited public awareness at this time of the work that has been done on developing Master Plan concepts, nor how those concepts are connected to the demolition projects or other planning efforts in the community. Much more work needs to be done to share the concepts and give the public meaningful opportunities to react. Public engagement needs to be done intentionally – proactive outreach, rather than poorly noticed public hearings with few attendees. Design charettes around major amenities, targeted focus groups, presentations with Q&A at civic and business organization meetings, surveys/polls and public comment forms on websites are all needed prior to the Master Plan concept being finalized. This public education and engagement should only be done if it is sincere and if input will truly be considered. Further, all of the engagement opportunities should be documented and shared, so that the public can have confidence that the process was truly open.
2. **Set a goal of creating the most innovative venue in the region and work backwards.** The County Commissioners and MetraPark leadership should ask: if we were to be the best in a 500-mile radius, what would the MetraPark campus look like? Ask the same question of the public – what would truly distinguish us? How would we want to be defined as a community? Push hard on the idea of innovation and excellence, of an iconic representation of the area. Don't settle for ordinary.
3. **Create opportunities to welcome other public entities into joint planning.** MetraPark offers a unique platform for many public priorities to come together. For example, the Commissioners should consider a joint planning session with municipal governments, to identify shared goals and needs. Given the public interest in seeing improved landscaping and greenspaces at MetraPark, leadership could invite the county extension office, the city forestry staff, local master gardeners and public health to a joint planning session around use of green space at MetraPark and how that aligns with their organizational priorities. A planning session with superintendents and athletic directors in the county could identify mutual interests and needs for youth athletics. Think across jurisdictional boundaries and focus on how to maximize the benefit to residents of Yellowstone County.
4. **Establish stakeholder groups to steer core portions of the concept.** Similarly, intentionally include community leaders in building out portions of the vision and business case for the Master Plan. A single steering committee could be implemented and/or multiple stakeholder groups charged with defining particular aspects of the Master Plan. Ensure that the vision is supported by real-world experience and expertise, including the input and participation of MetraPark staff. In particular, the framework for revenue generation should include targeted public-private partnerships that serve the public interest. This stakeholder work should be open and transparent, to ensure that public goals are the priority.
5. **Plan to share more information than usual.** MetraPark leadership and the Commissioners should plan to adopt a final Master Plan supported not only by a significant public record, but also a clear economic rationale, identification of public benefit and a strategy for high quality operations and maintenance. The support for the Master Plan should reflect the history of studies and data related to MetraPark, as well as other relevant local planning studies. A brief analysis of similar capital investments or major projects in the community should be conducted, with lessons learned incorporated into this project. Risks and worst-case scenarios should be considered and discussed openly, along with mitigation strategies. To the extent feasible, identify the types of events MetraPark expects to host with new facilities.
6. **Debate funding opportunities openly, with public input.** Like the Master Plan itself, the process of funding the vision should be an open dialogue. Hold public sessions that explain possible funding options (e.g., general obligation bonds, revenue bonds, partnerships) and invite public comment. After the final Master Plan is adopted, the County should welcome the public into a discussion about how we, as taxpayers, fund that vision.





**METRAPARK**  
**THANK YOU!**