

# Keeping the civic conversation civil

By NED COONEY

In a time of rapid economic change such as the Flathead has experienced over the last decade, the community is affected in both positive and negative ways. Some folks feel as if the valley they know and love is being lost to them.

When loss is unacknowledged, and change feels uncontrollable, those affected are sometimes lost in a state of transition where traditional and familiar patterns of daily life are slipping away, and adjustments to the new environment have not been adopted yet. This "neutral zone" can produce fear, anger, and pain, causing some to lash out against others.

Public meetings in the Flathead Valley have, at times, been affected by people who did not always approach others with a divergent opinion in a civil manner. Sometimes in the past, heated tempers have led to threats of violence and retaliation against public officials and average citizens engaged in public discussions.

wording of the principles. Here are the principles we developed through this collaborative process:

1. We provide a safe environment where individual perspectives are respected, heard, and acknowledged.
2. We are responsible for respectful and courteous dialogue and participation.
3. We respect diverse opinions as a means to find solutions based on common ground.
4. We encourage and value broad community participation.
5. We encourage creative approaches to engage public participation.
6. We value informed decision-making and take personal responsibility to educate and be educated.
7. We believe that respectful public dialogue fosters healthy community relationships, understanding, and problem-solving.
8. We acknowledge, consider and respect the natural tensions created by collaboration, change, and transition.
9. We follow the rules and guidelines established for each meeting.

It might be tempting to say "Well, of course we practice those principles. It's common sense." That is an understandable attitude. Sometimes, though, it is

## Flathead on the Move

This letter was submitted by Project Director Cooney, of Bigfork, on behalf of the Flathead on the Move Steering Committee, which also includes Ruth Ackroyd, Susie Burch, Kim Crowley, Kate Downen, Gary Hall, Fred Hodgeboom, Pam Kennedy, Jen Mollay, Mary Riddle and Steve Thompson. Cooney can be reached at 212-7242, or by email to ncooney@montanasky.us

important to make a statement and explicitly state what values a group or community agrees to live by, rather than assuming everyone is coming from the same point of view. The need to "take a stand" and affirm common beliefs, in writing and out loud, was evident in the light of some of the tensions present in this valley over the last few years.

Being civil to each other does not mean we always agree — and sometimes we disagree with vehemence and frustration. Creating a "safe environment" doesn't mean that everyone feels happy and calm in public meetings, but instead that

we respect the rights of others to express their opinions and to disagree in a manner that doesn't leave people feeling threatened.

As suggested "ground rules" for communication, the principles represent a group agreement about the ways that we can communicate with each other, exchange ideas, and reach the best decisions possible. In the absence of a safe environment for communication, the loudest voice can dominate the discussion and silence other voices.

We are encouraging public agencies, nonprofit and community organizations, and other groups to adopt the principles voluntarily and read them at their meetings as a means to encourage dialogue. As the Flathead continues to grow, we are going through a time of transition that requires new ways of communicating with each other. Rather than stifling debate in a veil of false civility, it is the hope of Flathead on the Move's Steering Committee that these principles — if applied to a variety of public meetings — will lead to better communication and ownership of the democratic process we value as citizens of Montana and the United States.