

Libby lobbies for fast track for mine

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**By Steve Kadel,
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Dozens of Libby and Troy residents met with Gov. Brian Schweitzer on Tuesday to seek fast-track permitting of the proposed Montanore Mine.

They gave Schweitzer a resolution from the Lincoln County Board of Commissioners calling on the state to speed the process because of ³the compelling need for new industry and jobs² in Lincoln County and statewide.

Mines Management Inc. of Spokane wants to renew exploration for silver and copper where Libby Creek exits the Cabinet Mountains. The mine was originally proposed by Noranda Minerals but declining metal prices caused the Canadian firm to abandon work in the early 1990s.

Mines Management is interested because prices have rebounded. Company officials anticipate creating up to 250 jobs initially, with a \$10 million payroll.

The commissioners¹ resolution notes the project was completely permitted by state and federal agencies as recently as 2002.

³The economics of Montana and Lincoln County will benefit substantially by an expeditious re-permitting and construction of the Montanore mining project,² according to the resolution.

Sixty-five local residents made the trek to Helena this week. Forty-nine rode a bus chartered by Mines Management. Mayor Tony Berget said one city car was allocated and other people drove their personal vehicles. About two dozen written letters of support also were given to the governor.

The visitors met with Schweitzer for slightly more than a half-hour at the capitol. Libby High School sophomore Cherie Windom was the youngest person to make a plea for support.

³We love our town,² she told Schweitzer. ³This is a great place to grow up, but it is a hard place to be a grown-up in. Too many of us will have to go away from here and away from Montana because there aren't good jobs for us to find.²

The governor gave his audience a sympathetic ear, saying he supported the Montanore project even before being elected.

³It's a great opportunity,² he said. ³This is a project I've moved to the top of the list, and the bulk of the jobs will be created in Libby. I'm a governor who would like to see natural resources developed in Montana.

³We need to do it right. Over the years we have made some mistakes. You in Libby know that. There are challenges -- it is below a wilderness area.²

On the project's plus side, Schweitzer said the ore body's pH, or acidity level, is such that possible contamination from runoff is lessened near Little Cherry Creek where the tailings will be piled.

³The pH in Rock Creek is neutral,² Schweitzer said. ³This is good. This is very good.²

However, Schweitzer emphasized the state's role is limited.

³This is not up to the state of Montana,² he said. ³We need to bring (federal agencies) in as partners. They must sign off on anything we do.²

He added, ³It means a lot to see a community come together like you have, to come here and say this is something you want.²

The governor, a Democrat, pleased several people in the Libby contingent with what one man called sincere, articulate comments. Schweitzer also won points for appearing in blue jeans and boots, accompanied by his 10-month-old border collie Jag.

Libby elementary school student Lilyan Feedback gave Schweitzer a T-shirt that read, ³Montanore -- a mine is a terrible thing to waste.² Susan Feedback, the girl's mother, said she got the shirt in 1991 while working for Noranda.

Libby Mayor Tony Berget and Lincoln County Commission member Rita Windom read the commission's proclamation to Schweitzer. The document mentions the loss of resource-based industry suffered throughout Montana.

³Lincoln County and its subdivisions have struggled for years under a level of unemployment constituting the highest in the nation,² it read. ³Montana, a state founded and built on development of its bountiful natural resources, remains a state rich in natural resources.²

The resolution adds that Mines Management would spend about \$250 million on the Montanore project. The document calls on Schweitzer and the Legislature to urge federal agencies to speed the re-permitting process.

State Department of Environmental Quality director Richard Opper also was on hand for the get-together. He assured everyone that Montanore will get his department's full attention with regular progress reports issued.

³We want to stay in close touch with the community on this,² Opper said.

When the Lincoln County residents boarded the bus to head home, Berget thanked everyone for making the long trip even though the meeting was relatively brief.

³I know it was a short time,² he said. ³But it's got to make a difference to see 65 people come all this way.²