

PART TWO: VALIER PROFILE

This section provides a summary of the existing characteristics and projected future trends of Valier. More detailed information is included in the separate “Inventory of Existing Characteristics for Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier.”

OVERVIEW

The Town of Valier is located in central Pondera County, on the north shore of Lake Frances, at the intersection of Highway 44 and 358. The town encompasses approximately 525 acres with a population of 454 persons, according to 2008 estimates. Although Valier sits on the northern shore of Lake Frances, surface drainage flows both south to the lake and north to unnamed tributaries of the Marias River which eventually flows into the Missouri River to the southeast.

Like many rural communities on the eastern side of the Continental Divide in Montana, Valier faces challenges of declining population numbers and increasing proportion of elderly. The Town attracts visitors and second-homeowners with the recreational facilities of Lake Frances, safe environment of a small town, and proximity to Glacier National Park and Great Falls International Airport. Unlike other communities of its size, Valier has a full-time public library, civic center/senior center, part-time medical clinic, grocery store, and other retail establishments.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The town of Valier celebrated its 100 year anniversary in 2009. The area now encompassed by Valier was part of territory claimed by the Blackfeet Confederacy from the 1700s. The following is a brief timeline of major events up to the time that Pondera County was incorporated.

1700s	Tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy – Piegan, Bloods, and Siksika (Blackfeet) – claim the area known today in Montana as the Hi-Line and including Pondera County
	Old North Trail – which runs roughly parallel to U.S. Highway 89 was a trail of conquest that Confederacy Indians used to travel as far north as Calgary, Alberta and as far south as New Mexico.
1806	Meriwether Lewis and his men travel up the Marias and Missouri Rivers on their way back from the coast.
1835	Government sends exploring parties to determine a practical railroad route.
1837	Small pox epidemic kills 6,000 Blackfeet, two-thirds of the population
1855	Treaty with the Blackfoot Nation signed. Boundaries of the reservation were eventually pushed back from the Musselshell to the Sun river and then to Birch Creek and Marias

1868	Brothers Charles E. and William E. Conrad begin building a business empire. Working as clerks for I. G. Baker, owner of trading companies, they eventually became partners with Baker and then in 1874 they bought the company. Were involved in overland trade, banking, ranching, mining, real estate to name a few. Ended up buying much of the land that is known as Pondera county.
1886	Conrad brothers purchase 11 sections and begin building what will become the Conrad Investment Company holdings of more than 312 sections (200,000 acres) by 1898. The land is named the Seven Block Ranch and eventually runs 10,000 head of cattle.
1908-09	Cargill family from Wisconsin purchases the Seven Block Ranch. W.S. Cargill and other investors developed the irrigation project that includes Lake Frances.
1909	Valier Townsite Company established and town of Valier laid out for 3,000 people. Within five months, 600 people lived in Valier.
1910	Valier is incorporated
1912	Valier Library constructed.
1919	Pondera County established

PHYSICAL SETTING

Valier is located on the banks of Lake Frances, and is surrounded on two sides by the lake. The town site is on a gentle, nearly level slope that declines toward the lake. The Blackfeet Indian Reservation is less than two air-miles north of Valier along the meandering border formed by Birch Creek. Valier is the northernmost community in Pondera County, approximately 40 minutes from the county seat of Conrad.

LAND USE

Land uses within the municipal boundary include residential areas, commercial-retail along the Valier Highway and on Montana Avenue, and industrial uses along the railroad tracks on the northern edge of town. The airport is located on the south edge of town. There is a fishing access, boat ramp and campground area at the southwest corner of town. Vacant lots are nearly as common as lots used for residential purposes.

Valier has a simple zoning ordinance that divides the town into commercial, industrial, and several residential zoning categories, however only two residential zoning categories are applied within the town. The multiple family and trailer zones are included in the text of the zoning ordinance but no land in the town is zoned for multiple family or trailer districts. A substantial area (approximately 100 acres) is not zoned, and consists mostly of the county-owned airport lands.

POPULATION

Total population in Valier was estimated at 454 persons in 2008, down nearly nine percent from the 2000 census total of 498. The town's population has been declining since 1960, when the population totaled 794 persons.

The population of Valier is also becoming preponderantly older. In 2000, the median age in Valier was 42.7, compared to 37.5 for the state of Montana. Approximately one in five persons in Valier was 65 years or older in 2000. Nearly one in five households in Valier is a person aged 65 or older living alone. The trend for increasing proportions of older persons is dramatic for Montana, by 2015 the state will be the fourth "grayest" in the nation.

The town of Valier also has a much higher rate of persons with disabilities, compared to the state and the nation. In Valier in 2000, 84.6% of persons age 65 or older had some kind of disability (compared to around 40% for the state and the nation).

Population projections provided by the State of Montana for Pondera County indicate continued decline in population for the next two decades. Valier's population will decline to 410 persons by 2030, based on the county's population projection rate. Dealing with increased proportion of elderly within the context of an overall declining population base will likely pose major challenges for Valier (and other locations throughout Montana with similar issues).

HOUSING TRENDS

There were about 250 housing single family and mobile homes in Valier in 2005. Housing numbers have remained basically static in Valier over the past two decades. Although the population has declined, more households consist of single individuals, mostly older persons. In addition, some housing units may now be unoccupied because they are in bad shape. In 2005, 15% of all single family houses and mobiles were in barely usable or worse condition. Another 26% were markedly deteriorated and in need of much repair. Nearly half of the mobile homes in Valier were built before 1976 and do not meet health and safety standards established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Vacant residential lots in poor shape (e.g., overgrown with weeds) detract from otherwise healthy residential neighborhoods.

Valier has a much higher proportion of owner-occupied housing and less rental housing than the rest of the county and the state overall. About 20% of all occupied units in Valier in 2000 were rentals, compared to about 30% in Pondera County and the state of Montana.

As the population ages, more elderly residents will become single person households and may need assistance with basic household upkeep such as painting, shoveling sidewalks, yard maintenance, etc. Those on fixed incomes may have less available to keep the houses in good functioning condition. There is currently no assisted living facility in Valier so persons needing additional care must move out of town.

The town has higher rates of second home owners (who use the property occasionally or seasonally) than other locations in Pondera County.

Future housing challenges for Valier include senior needs and improving overall housing condition.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The private sector economy in Valier is primarily service-based industries that serve local residents, the surrounding agricultural landowners, and visitors. Businesses include the grocery store, motel, gas station-automotive businesses, and commercial retail and some agriculture-related entities. Swank Enterprises, a regional engineering and construction firm that began in Valier, has offices in Valier and Kalispell. The grocery store and Swank Enterprises are the largest private sector employers in Valier. The largest public sector employer is the school.

Per capita personal income in Valier was nearly one-third below the national rate in 2000. Overall per capita personal income in Pondera County has lagged behind Montana's income growth for the last three decades.

A strong economy supports population growth and quality of life. Conversely, it is difficult to maintain a strong economy with a declining population that increasingly consists of retirees on a fixed income and others with low per capita income. To sustain and build the economy, Valier will need to attract more persons of working age. Unless new families move in to town, the school population will dwindle, and in the long-term could be faced with closure, resulting in considerable job loss for Valier.

Property values in Valier are low compared to other locations in Montana and the nation, which can be attractive to new residents, but which do not generate much income for town government to provide basic services. The municipality of Valier has been working to replace and upgrade basic infrastructure (such as water and sewer), but without outside grants the work would not be possible.

LOCAL SERVICES

Local public services include law enforcement, fire and emergency services, medical, education-schools, transportation services, library, solid waste collection, and senior and other services.

The town of Valier is a non-charter commission-executive form of government with general governing powers, which means that it has only those powers granted to municipalities through state law.

Valier contracts with the county for law enforcement, and there are two resident deputy officers in Valier. The Pondera County Rural Fire District has a department stationed in Valier. There is also an ambulance service in Valier. Marias Healthcare-Valier Clinic is a part-time medical clinic in Valier. The closest major medical facility is in Great Falls. The Valier School District manages the public schools in Valier (Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12) and the Kingsbury School Attendance Center in the Kingsbury Hutterite Colony. The Valier School had approximately 200 students in 2009 and there were eight students at the Kingsbury site. Valier has a public library. The Valier Civic Center also functions as the senior center and serves mid-day meals. There is no public transit in Valier or between Valier and other

communities. The Northern Transit Inter-local Bus runs from Shelby to Great Falls, with a stop in Conrad, on Mondays and Thursdays.

PUBLIC FACILITIES (PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE)

Public facilities include water, sewer, storm sewer, streets, sidewalks, municipal buildings, and street lighting. Valier has a Capital Improvements Plan (CIP), adopted in 2008, that addresses public facilities. The town is implementing the actions outlined in the CIP.

The State of Montana maintains State Highways 44 (Teton Ave.) and 358 (Teton St.) in town. The remaining streets in Valier are maintained by the town. Most of these are gravel and those that are paved are deteriorating; sidewalks in town are also in poor condition or are absent.

Valier is the terminus of a rail-line (primarily for shipping agricultural products).

Pondera County owns the Valier Airport which consists of three turf landing strips. There are no fixed-base operators at the Valier airport.

The town's water system consists of four groundwater wells that are all located within town. The Valier CIP identified several system needs including installation of water meters, back-up power supplies, water main and valve improvements/replacements, a new water tank, and implementation of source water protection practices. The town is presently undertaking a \$2.7 million project to add meters, construct a 250,000 elevated storage tank, drill a new well, rehabilitate one of the current wells, and add controls to the system. This work should be completed in 2011.

The town's waste water treatment system, originally constructed in 1908-1910 has recently undergone significant improvements. The 2007 sewer rehabilitation project improved about 5,000 feet of sewer lines, several manholes, and several connections. The existing system has capacity to serve less than 100 additional persons.

The town is generally lacking storm water facilities as most streets do not have curb and gutter.

The town of Valier contracts with a private business to collect solid waste in town.

The town of Valier owns and maintains the Town Hall/Civic Center and Town Shop. The town has two parks—Miller Park and Town Tennis Courts, and the Town Park on Highway 44. Valier also operates the 50-unit campground on Lake Frances and associated fish-cleaning station.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Valier is surrounded on two sides by Lake Frances. Lake Frances has walleye, northern pike, and perch.

SUMMARY

The town of Valier faces issues resulting from decades of population loss. This plan is an attempt to solidify a strategic approach to positive change.