

MONTANA HOUSING MARKET

COSTS OF LABOR, MATERIALS
WORSEN AFFORDABILITY CRISIS



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Homes under construction in Missoula are seen in this file photo from 2022.

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Rising costs of labor along with the price for everything from softwood lumber to construction permits have Montana’s homebuilders passing on those costs to buyers and renters, which is exacerbating the state’s housing affordability crisis.

Andy Shirtliff, the executive director of the Helena-based Montana Building Industry Association, said the price of lumber, steel and especially workers is factored into the costs that buyers pay for homes. And none of those have been going down.

“Montana is still one of the most unaffordable places to buy a home,” he said. “Rent has gone up, housing costs have gone up. And it’s not from one thing, it’s from multiple things. It’s the cost of land, the time it takes to develop that property, and everything from permitting, licensing, platting, all that stuff that goes into it.”

He said some cities in Montana have significantly raised the costs of getting construction permits over the last few years.

“And along with that, the price of lumber, the price of materials and tools have

gone up,” he said. “And it’s difficult to also find workforce, is another thing. That makes it a little difficult to build a home. It takes longer, and that drives up costs.”

The National Association of Home Builders has said that tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on Canadian imports of lumber and things like kitchen cabinets will make housing more expensive.

“These new tariffs will create additional headwinds for an already challenged housing market by further raising construction and renovation costs,” said NAHB chairman Buddy Hughes in a press release.

The tariffs went into effect on Oct. 14. The Trump administration is trying to catalyze the U.S. lumber industry, and other manufacturing industries, by making it more expensive to import products from foreign countries. Theoretically, that would make American producers more competitive and allow them to ramp up production.

But the U.S. imports roughly one-third of the lumber it consumes because America does not produce enough softwood lumber to meet domestic demand, according to the National Association of Home Builders.

Canada accounts for nearly 85% of all U.S. lumber imports, and the U.S. Department of Commerce has more than doubled the duties on Canadian lumber. Montana imports around \$100 million worth of Canadian softwood lumber every year directly from Canada, and it’s possible it uses quite a bit more than that by getting imported wood from other American suppliers who imported it first.

“These elevated trade barriers pose additional challenges for home builders who rely on Canadian lumber to meet construction demand,” said Jesse Wade of the NAHB in a press release.

Steven Girod, the owner of Wildcat Custom Homes in Libby, said he actually hasn’t seen big increases in the price of lumber but he has seen a big increase in the amount he has to pay his workers so they can afford to live close by.

“I track it really closely and softwood, framing material, has for the most part held very steady for the last year,” he said. “OSB (an engineered wood product) has come down from summer prices.”

However, he said, that may be because demand for construction has slowed down, from what he’s seen.

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Judge hears arguments in
hunting, trapping challenge

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Attorneys for Montana and a coalition of environmental groups sparred in court Friday over whether a judge should halt the state’s ongoing wolf hunting and trapping season.

Lewis and Clark District Judge Christopher Abbott didn’t indicate at the end of the hearing how soon he will rule on a request for a preliminary injunction to pause the killing of wolves in Montana while a larger challenge to state hunting and trapping policies plays out.

The Montana Wildlife Commission in August set quotas allowing up to 458 wolves to be killed in the current and up-

coming hunting and trapping seasons.

Jessica Blome, representing WildEarth Guardians, Project Coyote, the Gallatin Wildlife Association and Footloose Montana, argued that with the suite of wolf-killing methods approved by the state in recent years, hunters are more likely to reach that higher target.

“The state’s own population projections indicated Montana’s wolf population will plummet if defendants are permitted to implement their plan to kill 558 wolves this winter,” she said.

Since 2021, Republican lawmakers and the increasing GOP-dominated Fish and

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ASHTON HOOKER, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Montana’s wolf hunting season now extends across more than half the calendar year, from early September to mid-March.