

## On target: Billings entrepreneur sets sights on building indoor shooting range



Wade Fredrickson stands in the corner of the parking lot where his indoor shooting range will be built on the corner of Moore Lane and Central Avenue in Billings.

In Big Sky Country, any shooting enthusiast need only drive a short distance to fire a handgun or rifle. So, why would a city like Billings need a state-of-the-art indoor shooting range?

Wade Fredrickson, one of two local men investing \$2 million to build the indoor range at the corner of Central Avenue and Moore Lane, said those times have changed.

“Used to be when you wanted to shoot, you could. That’s not the case anymore, unless you know somebody who has some land,” Fredrickson said.

Billings has half a dozen shooting clubs, many open to the public. One of the nearest free public practice ranges sits on land owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management 17 miles north of Billings on the Roundup Road.

### **Hunting by the numbers**

- In 2009, at least 6,500 people received a hunter's education certificate in Montana. This certification is required to purchase a hunting license if you were born after 1984. Another 3,000 students take bow hunter's education.
- Last year, more than 200,000 residents and about 50,000 nonresidents purchased Montana hunting licenses.
- Each year, hunters in Montana spend about \$292 million at private businesses for guide fees, food, lodging and transportation.
- Alaska and Montana appear to have the highest levels of resident participation in hunting in the U.S. In Montana, roughly one out of five residents age 16 or older hunt or at least buy a license.

*Source: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Department*

Fredrickson and his partner, who did not want to be identified, are starting construction by the end of this month or in early June on the Three Sights Indoor Shooting Range.

When the 8,600-square-foot building opens in late December or early January, shooters will have 10 25-yard indoor shooting lanes to use. The indoor range, designed by Collaborative Design of Billings, will have a classroom, a retail shop to buy guns, ammo and equipment, an armory for gunsmithing, and shop where customers can rent handguns.

This is Fredrickson's second business. Fifteen years ago, he hawked his electric guitar to buy a business license and started Fredrickson Wall Systems, a company that installs exterior wall covering. That business has been successful, he said, so he spent the past year pursuing his dream of opening a shooting range.

The range will be open to the public 12 hours a day for six days a week. A shooter can rent a lane for two hours for \$17 or buy a membership, the price of which is still being determined, Fredrickson said.

"My goal is to open a shooting range where the public can go and teach them to shoot firearms safely," he said. "I think a lot of people would take up this sport if they had a safe, clean, comfortable place to use."

### **The whole shooting match**

The range will have baffles above the lanes to deflect stray bullets, electronically controlled targets, and an expensive ventilation system required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and rubber bullet traps at the end of the lanes.

"I designed this a lot with law enforcement in mind," Fredrickson said. "I went with rubber, so the lead itself will be captured. It can't fragment."

Rubber traps allow law officers to practice shooting close to the targets without worrying about their bullets ricocheting off the standard steel bullet traps.

No hard numbers exist about the number of people who own and shoot handguns and rifles in Montana. However, heavy attendance at gun shows, more than 200,000 residents who buy hunting licenses and long waiting lists at the shooting clubs all point to plenty of demand.

Bob Gibson, information officer for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 5 in Billings, said he hears daily from people who don't belong to shooting clubs, but just go out and practice.

And in order to get a permit to carry a concealed weapon, a shooter must complete a course in hunter's education or handgun training. Each week, FWP gets half a dozen requests from people wanting to take hunter's ed and those are overwhelmingly new shooters, Gibson said.

"And anybody who's hunted in Montana for the past 40 years already has the card. These are new people moving to Montana," he said.

Women make up one of the fastest growing segments of novice shooters, according to Jim Bailey, owner of Billings' newest range, the Blue Creek Sport Shooting Complex and Preserve, which has attracted 1,400 members in its first year.

Bernie Hash has been shooting guns for more than four decades and has been teaching firearms safety training for the last 25 years. She currently is teaching a women-only hunter's education class for FWP. Billings has a need for an indoor range, especially one where people can try before they buy, she said.

"Whether or not you can shoot a handgun effectively and accurately depends in large part on the recoil because if you're afraid of the gun, you can't shoot accurately," Hash said.

### **The law crowd**

In addition to nonprofessional shooters, the range will be open off-hours to law enforcement agencies.

A pool of about 350 city, county, state and federal law enforcement officials in the Billings area are a potential source of customers for Three Sights. But Fredrickson said he used conservative numbers in his 150-page business plan and can earn a profit even if none of these agencies signs a contract.

Law enforcement officials contacted for this story welcomed an indoor range that individual officers can use. But they said their departments were generally locked into using two existing shooting ranges for general training and certification.

Yellowstone County Undersheriff Seth Weston said his officers and about nine federal law enforcement agencies train nine months out of the year at the Michael Schafer Training Facility eight miles north on the Roundup Road.

“If he holds something special and creative applicable to our purposes, we’d sure look at it,” Weston said. “But we’ve got a range with pretty much all the bells and whistles, just not inside. And you get a suntan at ours.”

Acting U.S. Marshall Rod Ostermiller also said his officers are compelled to use the county’s range, and, if the weather is really bad, they can use the small, two-lane indoor range run by the Billings Police Department.

“We try to train as much as we can regardless of the weather. We don’t get to pick and choose when we run into incidents on the street,” he said.

But Ostermiller said his agents can individually shoot where they like to on their off time.

“I hope it works out. There are lots of citizens that would be interested in this,” he said.

Billings Police Sgt. Jay Berry, who was training and certifying police officers last week, also said his department probably can’t officially use the Three Sights indoor range, but individuals can.

“Our limitations are budgeting,” Berry said. “But we’re getting to be that little big city and now we’re getting a little bit bigger. I personally think it’s a good idea.”

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