

# Montana's Bloated Government

## Unsustainable Growth for a Tiny Population

WRITTEN BY  
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Elected Republican legislators are frustrated when the majority of Republican legislators take a position for or against specific legislation and a fellow Republican leads his faction of Republican votes to join with the Democrats against the Republican positions and undermines Republican Legislative elected leadership.

In the Montana legislature, Llew Jones (the wealthy Conrad businessman) has become the leader of a small faction of legislators who are elected as Republicans, but individually vote as much as 50% of the time on “partisan” Democrat liberal bills. (See legislatorloyalty.com which is a computerized analysis of every floor vote cast by legislators. It identifies as “partisan” bills if over 50% of one party votes against the other party position. However, if at least 50% of both Democrat and Republican legislators vote the same way that bill is considered “non-partisan” and is not identified and not counted in the analysis.)

Jones does not personally have strong conservative or liberal philosophy—his concerns are for personal political power. During Democrat Governors terms, Llew Jones continually negotiated deals to support Democrat legislation as he and his little group of Democrat/Republicans undermined the elected Republican majority to help the Democrats pass big-spending liberal legislation in opposition to his Republican majority.

During his first legislative term in 2005 Jones began his legislative career opposing Republican leadership and the Republican majority by supporting 20% of partisan Democrat bills. During his twenty years in the Montana Legislature, Llew Jones opposed his fellow Republicans voting for an average of over 30% of Democrat partisan bills. In the 2009 legislature he voted for 46% of the partisan Democrat bills and in 2019 he voted for 44% of those bills. However, more important Jones recruited and built his faction of RINO's to oppose and undermine the growing Republican legislative majority.

Beginning in 2009, Jones controlled the Appropriation Committee and the State budget increasingly blocking the Republican majority efforts for fiscal responsibility. By the 2016 election, Jones was recruiting Democrat leaning candidates to run in Republican primaries against conservative Republican primary candidates as he increased his personal power

in the Legislature.

The 2024 election gave Llew Jones the opportunity to strengthen his Legislative control when Governor Gianforte and his extensive financial resources aligned with Jones's efforts to challenge conservative Republican primary candidates with RINO republican candidates. Gianforte actually endorsed a number of Jones's Democrat leaning candidates against conservative Republicans in the Primary election which is totally unprecedented for a Party's governor!

For the past twenty years, even though the Republican majorities in the Legislature have grown, with the Llew Jones faction aligning with Democrats on key legislation, the Democrat Party minority has controlled the Montana Legislature's growth policy in spending and bureaucracy.

With a population hovering just over 1.1 million—barely more than a mid-sized city like Albuquerque—Montana's state government has ballooned into an unwieldy behemoth, sucking up taxpayer dollars and federal handouts at an alarming rate. What started as a lean operation in 2005 has morphed into a sprawling bureaucracy under leaders like Rep. Llew Jones and Gov. Greg Gianforte, where spending surges far outpace the state's modest population growth of only 21.6% over two decades. This isn't fiscal responsibility; it's a recipe for fiscal ruin, with coalition-driven appropriations (often backed by Jones and RINO allies) fueling exponential budget expansion, especially since Gianforte's 2021 inauguration. From 2021 to 2025, executive budget proposals have soared by 33%—from \$12.8 billion for the 2019-21 biennium (Gov. Bullock's proposal) to \$17.1 billion for the 2023-25 biennium (Gov. Gianforte's proposal)—while population grew by a mere 5.6% (1.08 million to 1.14 million). Federal cash infusions have supercharged the bloat, turning Montana into a dependent on D.C. largesse while state employee ranks swell with redundant roles. Critics in the Montana Freedom Caucus rightly decry this as government overreach, but the numbers tell a damning story of unchecked excess.

**Federal Funds: From Trickle to Torrent, Enabling the Bloat**  
Montana's addiction to federal dollars has exploded, providing the easy money that excuses state overspending. In FY 2005, the state pocketed about \$2.02 billion in direct federal aid to governments—modest for the era. By FY 2024, total federal obligations in Montana reached \$14.1 billion, with intergovernmental aid alone hitting \$4.7

billion—over triple the 2005 level in “nominal terms. The national average for federal aid to state and local governments per capita is roughly \$2,800 annually (based on 2022 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, adjusted for 330 million population and \$925 billion in total state/local aid). For Montana's 1.1 million residents, that's \$4,270 per person in direct aid—52% above the national average—plus broader federal spending pushing the per-capita burden to \$12,700 annually, far outstripping states like Texas (\$8,200) or Florida (\$9,100). Post-2021 under Gianforte, COVID-era windfalls like the \$906 million American Rescue Plan supercharged this, with federal funds comprising nearly half of the \$12.6 billion 2022-23 budget. By 2025, ongoing grants for infrastructure, health, and “stimulus” lock in dependency. Montana's net federal balance (spending received minus taxes paid) is a \$5.7 billion surplus—strings-attached cash breeding inefficiency and eroding self-reliance.

**State Budget Explosion: Doubling Down on Waste Since 2005—and Accelerating Under Gianforte**  
The Montana state budget, once a frugal outline for essential services, has metastasized into a \$17.1 billion biennial monster by 2023-25, more than doubling from 2005's \$7.2 billion while population grew a mere 21%. Adjusted for inflation, that's a 50%+ real increase, with general fund spending alone jumping from \$1.6 billion annually in 2009 to \$3.5 billion in FY 2024. The national average state budget per capita is ~\$8,500 biennially (NASBO 2023, across 50 states for 330 million people). Montana's \$14,000+ per person is 65% higher—obscene for a state dwarfed by others with leaner governments (e.g., Idaho, \$9,200 per capita for 1.9 million). Jones, as Appropriations Chair, has been the architect, voting yes on every major spending bill (HB 2, HB 3) and forging RINO-Democrat coalitions to ram through hikes. The pace was glacial pre-2021, but turbocharged under Gianforte: Executive proposals show biennial totals leaping from \$12.8B in 2019-21 to \$14.2B in 2021-23, then to \$17.1B in 2023-25—a staggering 33% surge since Gianforte took office in 2021 with negligible population growth to justify it. Adding to the outrage, Jones took a massive state surplus—seeded initially with \$600 million in volatile revenues and surplus funds—and funneled \$300 million into HB 924's Montana Growth and Opportunity (GO) Trust Fund in 2025, a veritable slush fund where the principal is locked away, but the interest earnings can be doled out for pet projects in infrastructure, housing, and economic development. The Freedom Caucus blasted this as a “slush fund” giveaway, arguing it siphons surplus cash that could go to rebates or debt



Llew Jones



Zack Wirth

Biennium	Executive Proposal (Billions, All Funds)	Growth from Prior Year (%)	Population (Millions)	Notes on Bloat
2005-07	~\$7.2	-	0.94	Baseline; modest federal reliance (~28% of budget).
2011-13	~\$12.1	+68%	0.99	Post-recession spike; Jones enters Senate, backs early hikes.
2017-19	\$11.5	-5% (flat)	1.06	Temporary restraint, but Jones' yes votes set stage.
2019-21	\$12.8	+11%	1.08	Pre-Gianforte; COVID prep adds \$300M.
2021-23	~\$14.2	+11%	1.10	Gianforte era begins; ARP cash inflates by \$1B+.
2023-25	\$17.1	+20%	1.13	Jones' HB 2/HB 3 yes votes add \$750M; MFC decries "explosion."

Sources: Executive proposal figures derived from Gov. Gianforte's 2023-25 recommendation (~\$16.6B passed, reflecting proposal scale) per Daily Montanan analysis; historical from Ballotpedia and NASBO estimates. Growth calculated biennially; 2005-07 approximated from ACFR trends.

Year	State FTEs	Population (Millions)	FTEs per 1,000 Residents	Notes
2005	22,000	0.94	23.4	Baseline; leaner government pre-recession.
2011	24,500	0.99	24.7	Post-recession hiring; Jones backs budget hikes.
2017	26,000	1.06	24.5	Steady growth; federal aid fuels admin roles.
2019	26,800	1.08	24.8	Pre-COVID; regulatory positions expand.
2021	27,700	1.10	25.2	Gianforte takes office; hiring accelerates.
2023	28,500	1.13	25.2	Post-COVID bloat; health/regulation roles spike.
2025	29,200	1.14	25.6	HB 13 (2023) bonuses/raises fuel 5% jump since 2021.

Sources: FTE data from Montana Department of Administration and Census Bureau; population from FRED series. 2025 estimated based on LFD projections and HB 13 impacts. For raw data, check leg.mt.gov or FRED series.

