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News release

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**Butte-Silver Bow Board of Health sanctions new committee that would focus
on health studies, including a recently released study on brain cancer**

The Butte-Silver Bow Board of Health has sanctioned the creation of a new committee that would focus on various studies about the health of Butte-Silver Bow residents.

The board's sanction came at its Jan. 8, 2020 regular meeting. The issue now moves to the county's Council of Commissioners for its prospective sanction. The request for commissioners' sanction will occur at the council's next regular meeting, Jan. 22.

The new health study committee, which would be an advisory subcommittee to the Board of Health, would focus on studies such as the community health needs assessments conducted every three years in Butte, air quality studies, and cancer studies conducted by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services and others, such as Suzanne McDermott, PhD, of the University of South Carolina, who has recently published two cancer studies on Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge.

The committee would be chaired by Butte-Silver Bow Health Officer Karen Sullivan. Should the Council of Commissioners sanction the committee, the county's chief executive would appoint its members, representing the Board of Health, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Technological University, and St. James Healthcare. Members could also include ex-officio representatives from private industry. Once the committee is prospective formulated, Sullivan said it would create a charter and bylaws as it begins to discuss the various health studies focused on Butte.

Meetings of the committee would be publicly noticed and abide by Montana open meetings laws.

Included at the top of the committee's priorities would be review and discussion of McDermott's most recent study, titled "High Incidence of Brain and Other Nervous System Cancer Identified in Two Mining Counties, 2001-2015." The study was published Jan. 6 in *Spatial and Spatio-temporal Epidemiology*. The study looked at brain cancer rates in Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge and found higher incidence rates of brain cancer in two age groups, when compared to the rest of Montana.



Sullivan said she and McDermott spoke by telephone about the study's findings Jan. 9, and in that conversation, McDermott reiterated her call initially outlined in the study document for additional research and public health action.

Sullivan said she works closely with staff at Montana DPHHS, and both she and DPHHS staff take all reports of high levels of adverse health effects, such as cancer, and calls for public health action very seriously. But based on a thorough review of the public health and environmental data available, DPHHS and Sullivan do not agree with the conclusions of McDermott and her co-authors.

Sullivan said DPHHS investigated the cases of brain cancer included in McDermott's study in greater detail, and found that the specific types of brain cancers of the patients in the two age groups cited by McDermott – ages 0-5 and 30-34 – do not point toward an environmental cause or other common cause to all the cases.

Based on the information available to DPHHS, "it is not possible to determine the cause or causes of brain cancer in these patients," Sullivan said, adding that DPHHS is coordinating with her department and DEQ to review current environmental data. DPHHS also continues to monitor brain cancer incidence in Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge counties, stays abreast of the latest research on the causes of brain cancer causes, and works with local cancer stakeholders to provide education on cancer.

"Quite simply, the cause of brain cancer is not known," Sullivan said. "There is no evidence to conclude that brain cancers among Butte-Silver Bow and Anaconda-Deer Lodge residents were caused by heavy metal exposure."

Sullivan said more information about McDermott's brain cancer study is available on the Butte-Silver Bow website at <https://www.co.silverbow.mt.us/DocumentCenter/View/17246/Brain-Cancer-Frequently-Asked-Questions> and on the DPHHS website at <https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/Cancer/TumorRegistry>.

"The new health study committee, in my view, will be able to look at the abundance of studies conducted on the Butte-Silver Bow population, such as Dr. McDermott's most recent study, discuss that information, and if needed, make recommendations to the Board of Health and Health Department staff on calls to public health action."

A health study work group that looks every five years at outcomes from blood lead medical monitoring in the community and the effectiveness of the Butte-Silver Bow Residential Metals Abatement Program would continue. That work, Sullivan said, is driven by the Record of Decision related to the Butte Priority Soils Operable Unit.

The new committee could discuss that five-year study, but would be more encompassing in regard to the myriad health studies being conducted on the Butte-Silver Bow population.