

Flathead County Trails Plan

February 25, 2010

PATHS Advisory Committee
(People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety)



Acknowledgements

Parks Board Resolution

Planning Board Resolution

Commission Resolution

Executive Summary

Planning Process - The Flathead County Weed, Parks and Recreation Board (Parks Board), in compliance with the Flathead County Growth Policy, created an advisory committee in 2008 to develop a Trails Plan under guidance from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program of the National Park Service. Convening in February of that year, the PATHS Advisory Committee (People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety) met regularly for the next 18 months. Their planning process included: gathering public input through meetings, workshops and surveys; reviewing past trails efforts; developing goals and policies; creating base maps; meeting with a team of technical advisers; analyzing trail plans from other communities; developing a proposed trail network; recommending a strategy for administration and implementation of a new countywide trails program; and writing this Trails Plan.

Vision and Goals - The PATHS committee envisions a safe and convenient network of non-motorized trails connecting Flathead County communities, schools, parks and public lands for the benefit of our families, our economy and our environment.

The goals of the trails program are to:

- Create a continuous network of pathways and on-road facilities that connect residential areas, schools, parks, recreation areas, public lands, retail/business centers and community event centers.
- Implement trails to improve safety of students, pedestrians, and cyclists. New trail projects which help mitigate existing hazardous conditions and promote safety are a priority.
- Provide opportunities for people to be physically active using trails as close-to-home recreational amenities.
- Connect major population hubs with each other via direct arterial trails.
- Provide high-quality non-motorized recreational trails primarily on public lands. Ensure connectivity between new trails, existing trails in Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, and the rest of the county trail network.
- Increase the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking in the county, reduce the number of traffic injuries, and increase the number of non-motorized trail users.
- Promote multi-modal transportation in Flathead County through coordination of trails development with the public transportation system (bussing) in order to provide diverse transportation options for the general public, reducing personal reliance on motorized vehicles for transportation needs.
- Establish an effective administrative framework for the trail system.
- Ensure the trail network is safe and well-maintained.

- Improve non-motorized safety through pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist education and enforcement.
- Use a variety of strategies to acquire sufficient funding to construct and maintain the proposed trail system within the next 20 years.

Proposed Trail Network - In this plan, the term ‘trail’ is used in a broad sense, referring to a variety of types of facilities for non-motorized users, such as shared-use pathways, single-track trails, backcountry roads, and also routes along shared roadways, where bicyclists and pedestrians are directed and accommodated. Some shared roadways may need no special facilities other than signage as a bike route, due to low traffic volumes and slow speeds. For others, wider shoulders or bike lanes are needed to provide an acceptable margin of safety.

The proposed trail network is displayed by the trails map, appendix M. The trails map identifies proposed trails in terms of their primary function: arterial trail, connector trail, or recreational trail, rather than specifying particular trail facilities.

- Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between major communities.
- Connector trails provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking common destinations within and between communities, and serve as collectors for arterial trails.
- Recreational trails respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities as well as promoting tourism.

Priority Projects - Proposed trail construction and improvement projects are considered high priority based upon a defined set of criteria:

- Provides needed safety improvement
- Provides safe pedestrian and bicycle access to schools
- Provides safe connection between communities and parks/public lands
- Services large proportion of population and/or anticipated demand
- Connects existing trail segments (enhance utility through trail network continuity)
- Creates a grade-separated pathway
- Provides trailhead facilities
- Provides a high quality recreational experience

Chapter 4 contains a general list of priority arterial, connector, and recreational trails. The Trails Network Map may take a few decades to fully implement, depending on public demand and available funding. Based on observations, public concern, and perceived safety needs for students and pedestrians, the following list of priority trails emphasizes student safety over recreationist safety, to be implemented through CTEP and Safe Routes To Schools funding as soon as possible within a shorter 1-10 year timeframe:

- West Reserve Drive, from Hwy 93 to Glacier High School

- West Evergreen Drive between Highway 2 and Whitefish Stage Road
- Conrad Drive between Woodland Park Drive and Willow Glen Drive
- Stillwater/FVCC/Kidsport trail adjacent to Flathead Valley Community College
- Lake Blaine Road adjacent to Cayuse Prairie School

Shared roadway trail routes are relatively inexpensive and simple to implement as they typically involve delineation through striping and signage along existing paved roads. Benefits of establishing these routes outweigh the costs as expanded utility and safety is immediately provided for commuting bicyclists. "Bike route" signage should be installed along all shared roadway trail routes. The purpose is to attract bicyclists to preferred routes and alert motorists to the likely presence of bicycles. This will serve as an important interim measure for those routes where grade separated pathways are planned in the future. Routes signed as 'bike routes' shall be regularly maintained for safe riding.

Assuming limited funding, certain shared roadway trail routes shall receive priority for striping and/or signage as soon as possible. The following routes are prioritized for improvement because they currently receive substantial non-motorized use and are unsafe due to narrow width, steep shoulders, and/or high vehicular traffic speeds.

- Edgewood Road between Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- Airport Road/Foy's Lake/Hill loop
- Highway 93 between Kalispell and Whitefish
- Highway 2 between Kalispell and West Glacier
- Highway 82 between Highway 35 and Highway 93

Opportunistic Trail Development - Opportunities for trail development will arise as land is developed and road infrastructure is upgraded. This process will parallel active efforts to complete priority projects. While many of these trail segments at first may be isolated, connectivity will be established as momentum builds and the trail network grows. With a Trails Plan adopted by the county and incorporated into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents, future land development and transportation projects can contribute many new miles towards the envisioned Flathead County Trail Network.

Land development and the subdivision review process - Subdivision review must be conducted in compliance with this Trails Plan, as part of the growth policy. Land undergoing subdivision review is subject to transportation requirements, and proposals may include provisions for non-motorized pedestrian/bicycle access. When a new subdivision abuts a route identified in this plan, the county shall require the developer to dedicate appropriate pedestrian/bicycle easements along the route(s) to provide connectivity to the county trail network, and provide for pedestrian safety and public access to common facilities such as schools, parks, playgrounds, streams and lakes. When such a trail is proposed and built

by a subdivider, a maintenance plan should be required, and may be included in a Road User's Agreement for the subdivision.

Road construction and reconstruction projects - Non-motorized travel should be a consideration in every transportation project. Newly constructed roads should be designed to service all public use, not just motor vehicles. New arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads should be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.

Whenever existing roads serving as arterial trail routes, as identified in this plan, are reconstructed, pathways shall be included, and should be supplemented with bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. Whenever roads identified by this plan as connector trail routes are substantially reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc), the appropriate non-motorized facilities shall be included. Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved, the needs of non-motorized users should be considered and accommodated.

Trail Maintenance - Historically, the responsibility for trails maintenance has not been formally clarified, budgeted, and delegated to a specific County department, and trail maintenance has been undertaken in an ad-hoc manner. Trail maintenance requirements vary depending upon the type of trail and the source of funding. Typical trail maintenance includes debris sweeping, winter snow removal, mowing/weed control, and surface repair as needed.

For a well-planned and efficient County trails program to be actualized, a reasonable and effective maintenance plan should be developed with maintenance responsibilities clarified, budgeted, and delegated to a specific County department or a separately funded committee/organization. A comprehensive field assessment of the condition of all existing trails needs to be undertaken to identify and prioritize maintenance needs to bring aging trails up to this plan's specifications. Additional County trail development should not proceed without a reasonable maintenance plan established for the specific trail prior to formal acceptance by the Commission for its construction.

Priority maintenance responsibilities are:

- Perform regular winter snow removal along defined routes in the vicinity of schools.
- Perform regular routine maintenance of all signed "bike routes", including spring debris sweeping, winter snow removal and striping.

Recommendations for Trails Program Administration/ Implementation

Establish a Flathead County Trails Program using a public/private partnership consisting of County departments and boards, the PATHS Advisory Committee, and a private sector non-profit partner. The Parks Board shall take lead responsibility for program implementation in coordination with the Planning and Zoning Department, the Parks and Recreation Department, and the Roads and Bridges Department. The PATHS Advisory committee should become a standing advisory committee reporting to the Parks Board to actively aid the Board in administering the program. A non-profit partner may be recruited for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Developing sustainable, long-term funding mechanisms will contribute to the successful development and operation of the trails network.

Administrative activities for trails involving the use of CTEP funding shall continue to be carried out by the Planning and Zoning Department. Implementation of CTEP funded projects shall adhere to requirements of the CTEP program, administered by the Montana Department of Transportation.

This Trails Plan should be formally adopted as an addendum to the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan and incorporated as applicable into pertinent documents such as the County growth policy, neighborhood plans, transportation plan, and capital improvement plan. Subdivision review shall be conducted in compliance with this Trails Plan, as part of the growth policy. Pathways, roadway bike/pedestrian facilities, and community walkability should be considered relative to transportation infrastructure on equal footing with motor vehicle facilities. By integrating the trails program throughout the transportation planning and land development review processes, non-motorized transportation system connectivity can be accomplished as a routine element of capital improvement, maintenance, and development projects.

Develop a variety of programs, projects and policies that support non-motorized transportation, recreation, and a comprehensive multi-modal transportation system in Flathead County. Along with developing the trail infrastructure, greater use of the trails network should be encouraged. Promotional programs and trails events can spread information about the trail network and the benefits of using it, thereby encouraging more people to choose to travel without their automobiles. Convenience features like public bussing compatibility, trailheads, bike racks, benches, and signage can make a big difference. Bike safety programs targeted to children and adult bicyclists as well as motorists can teach users how to share the road safely. A policy of building “Complete Streets” (see appendix E) invites the full range of users onto county transportation facilities in safety and with confidence. More people will commute, exercise, and make short trips by bicycle or on foot if mixed-use development becomes more common, non-motorized commuting opportunities exist, and safe transportation facilities are available.

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Introduction

Surrounded by the towering mountains of Glacier National Park, Wilderness Areas and Flathead National Forest, and encompassing pristine lakes, rivers and fertile valleys, Flathead Valley is one of the most beautiful places on earth. The county is a favorite destination for outdoor enthusiasts and tourism comprises one of the largest sectors of the economy. The valley is supported by three regional centers that are located within 15 miles of each other.

Flathead County has strong roots in agriculture and forest products and is becoming increasingly more urban. Between 2000 and 2006, the county's population increased 15% to 85,300, the second fastest growing county in Montana. Traffic is increasing on county roads and state highways jeopardizing the safety of non-motorized users. Development activities often affect access to public lands, open space and recreational opportunities in the area.

Much of the area's growth has occurred as the three municipalities of Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls grew and expanded at a combined rate of 39%. These cities have made great strides in planning and developing municipal trail systems. Yet 68% of the county - 53,500 people - live in the rural areas of the county and don't have the benefit of a trails network connecting them to other parts of the county. Currently there are only about 33 miles of pathway in the county outside of the municipalities. Most of these were projects conceived and executed by citizen initiative and have little or no connectivity.

Trails provide myriad benefits to communities and individuals including transportation, recreation, health, social, economic, and quality-of-life. As an essential component of an integrated transportation system a countywide non-motorized trail network is needed to connect communities to each other and to the county's parks, forests, lakes, and rivers.

Public scoping has indicated strong support for a regional trail system. Proactive Trails Planning enables development of a regional trail system to more efficiently maximize unencumbered trail building opportunities while they're available and before rapid development forecloses any more opportunities. An intelligent, well thought out Trails Plan will provide county government, the development community, the general public, planners, landowners and developers with a framework for trails related land use planning and subdivision review. This will help ensure that trails are appropriately incorporated into future development decisions and help decision-makers set priorities for trail development.

Background

The 2009 Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan contains a description of the geographic and demographic characteristics of Flathead

County. The narrative in that document encompasses land area, natural features, public lands, open space, transportation, settlement patterns, population density, seasonal population, demographics, household characteristics, and population disabilities.

Relationship of Trails Plan to Other Planning Documents

Growth Policy - In 2007, the Flathead County Board of County Commissioners adopted a Growth Policy. A growth policy is an official statement of public policy to guide growth and manage change for the betterment of the community. The Growth Policy includes a Park and Recreation element, which recommended that a Parks and Recreation Master Plan be undertaken and adopted as an appendix to the Growth Policy. In addition, Policy 18.7 calls for the creation of a Flathead County Bicycle Transportation Advisory Committee. The PATHS Committee was created to comply with this policy by developing a comprehensive Trails Plan under the guidance of the Parks Board.

Parks and Recreation Master Plan - The Parks and Recreation Master Plan, adopted in 2009, expands the analysis that is contained within the Growth Policy and provides programmatic recommendations for park and recreation development, including substantial discussion on the topic of trails. The Trails Plan provides specific recommendations regarding a county trails network, as an element of the overall Parks and Recreation Program. The Trails Plan is intended to be adopted by reference into the Parks and Recreation Master Plan and therefore the Growth Policy.

Neighborhood Plans - Neighborhood Plans address an array of specific criteria at a localized 'neighborhood' scale in greater detail than the more generalized Growth Policy. The process of trail project selection and design should entail consultation of an adopted Neighborhood Plan when a proposed trail project occurs within a Neighborhood Plan area. When a trail project occurs within a Neighborhood Plan area for which a land use advisory council (LUAC) has been established, guidance from the applicable LUAC shall be solicited and considered in the project adoption and development process.

Other County Plans - To ensure effective implementation, it is recommended that the Trails Plan be incorporated by reference into all other pertinent county plans and documents; including the subdivision ordinance, the transportation plan, and the capital improvement plan.

Benefits of Trails - Trails provide multiple benefits to communities. Numerous studies have identified and quantified many ways in which trails benefit individuals and improve communities:

- Trails offer alternative modes of transportation to motorized vehicles, connecting homes with parks, offices and shopping areas, and providing children with safe routes to schools. As transportation corridors, trails

improve public safety and contribute to a healthier environment with cleaner air and less traffic congestion.

- Trails can serve a wide range of recreationists including bicyclists, walkers, joggers, equestrians, in-line skaters, bird-watchers, picnickers, people in wheelchairs, seniors, and parents with strollers.
- Trails can provide access to fishing, wildlife-watching, vista points, picnic areas for socializing, and areas for enjoying solitude in the natural environment.
- Trails promote health and fitness by providing an enjoyable and safe place for urban and rural residents to exercise regularly. Health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and obesity are all linked to a lack of exercise. Walking, bicycling and similar activities are excellent forms of exercise that nearly everyone can do yet many people do not because they have no safe, convenient place to go. Trails provide that place.
- Trails contribute to economic vitality and increases in regional tourism. Many studies have shown that trail development stimulates local economies, increases local tax revenue, attracts tourists seeking new recreational opportunities and revitalizes business districts.
- Trails contribute to increased property values. Access to trails is one of the most critical amenities that home buyers seek and the value of most properties is enhanced by being near a trail. Business seek attractive communities that offer trails and open space when choosing where to locate new plants and offices.
- Trails function as meeting places for the community, leading to greater interactions among residents and improved community cohesion.
- Trails provide opportunities to interpret the natural environment, history, and culture. Trails can serve as outdoor classrooms for schools.
- Parks and greenway trails (linear parks) protect natural resources, provide wildlife corridors and preserve open space by defining zones free of human habitation and development.

Planning Process - The Flathead County Parks Board, in compliance with the Flathead County Growth Policy, created an advisory committee in 2008 to develop a countywide non-motorized trails master plan under guidance from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program of the National Park Service. Convening in February, the PATHS Advisory Committee (People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety) met regularly for the next 18 months. Their planning process included gathering public input through meetings, workshops and surveys, reviewing the county's history of planning and building trails, developing goals and policies, creating base maps, meeting with technical advisers from local governments, state and federal agencies and the private sector, analyzing trail plans from other communities, developing a proposed trail network and working on an implementation and funding strategy. This Flathead County Trails Plan is the result.

Community Attitudes and Desires - Public attitudes and desires regarding a countywide trails system were solicited through a variety of mechanisms. Press releases, the county website, and an Internet list-serve were used to inform the public about the process. Monthly PATHS meetings were advertised and open to the public. Residents used these venues to ask questions and express their views. Outreach efforts piggybacked similar efforts by the concurrent parks and recreation master planning process. This was done for efficiency, to help clarify the distinction between the two plans and to identify possible synergies.

In addition to the five Parks Plan workshops, four community workshops were held in November of 2008 in Somers, Columbia Falls, Creston and Kila. Workshop attendees heard about the Trails Planning process and work accomplished to date. They viewed maps depicting proposed trail locations, exchanged ideas with PATHS members, expressed opinions, and filled out a trails survey.

The trails survey was also posted on the county website in two ways; as stand-alone trails survey and integrated into a larger park and recreation survey. The responses were very similar in character to those recorded in the 40 surveys from the 4 workshops. There were 125 online responses to the trails survey and over 430 responses to the online parks survey, which contained essentially the same trails questions.

- Very strong support was expressed for an expanded trails system; only a handful of respondents opposed more trails.
- A strong desire was expressed for countywide trail network connectivity; particularly connecting communities with parks and public lands, and connecting the major communities of the valley with each other via safe commuter trails.
- Many comments also were received calling for developing off-road pathways whenever possible and wider road shoulders with better maintenance to make roads safer for shared use.
- Many specific suggestions were made for trail priorities, as well. See appendix L for the survey and a compilation of responses.

Chapter 1: Mission, Vision, Goals and Policies

Mission

The Flathead County PATHS Advisory Committee will create a comprehensive non-motorized Trails Plan for Flathead County.

Vision

A safe and convenient network of non-motorized trails connects Flathead County communities, schools, parks and public lands for the benefit of our families, our economy and our environment.

Goals

- Create a continuous network of pathways and on-road facilities that connect residential areas, schools, parks, recreation areas, public lands, retail/business centers and community event centers.
- Implement trails to improve safety of students, pedestrians and cyclists.
- Provide opportunities for people to be physically active using trails as close-to-home recreational amenities.
- Connect major population hubs with each other via direct arterial trails.
- Provide high-quality non-motorized recreational trails primarily on public lands. Ensure connectivity between the county trail network and new/existing trails in the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park.
- Increase the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking in the county, reduce the number of traffic injuries, and increase the number of non-motorized trail users.
- Promote multi-modal transportation in Flathead County through coordination of trails development with the public transportation system (bussing) in order to provide diverse transportation options for the general public, reducing personal reliance on motorized vehicles for transportation needs.
- Establish an effective administrative framework for the trail system.
- Ensure the trail network is safe and well-maintained.
- Improve non-motorized safety through pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist education and enforcement.

- Use a variety of strategies to acquire sufficient funding to construct and maintain the proposed trail system within the next 20 years.

Policies

- Additional County trail development should not proceed without a reasonable maintenance plan established for the specific trail prior to formal acceptance by the Commission for its construction.
- Promote land use planning and development that expands and connects the county trail network, encourages pedestrian and bicycle travel, and reduces vehicle trip generation.
- New trail projects which help mitigate existing hazardous conditions and promote safety are a priority.
- Through the subdivision review process, ensure that new residential development contributes to and connects with the community trails system. Easements for trails identified in this plan shall be provided as a condition of subdivision approval, if appropriate.
- Consider pedestrian and bicycle facilities as a routine part of transportation system planning.
- Pathways are the preferred facility for arterial trail routes between community hubs. When adequate funding is available, pathways shall be included in all projects to reconstruct these roads and should be supplemented with on-road facilities such as bike lanes or shoulder bikeways to accommodate bicycle commuters who prefer to ride on the road surface.
- Whenever roads identified in this plan as connector trail routes are reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc.), appropriate non-motorized facilities should be included.
- Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved, the needs of non-motorized users should be considered and accommodated wherever possible.
- Newly constructed arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads shall be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.
- Consult with the entity responsible for the public transportation system when planning new trail projects. Implement new trail development in

coordination with existing and/or needed public transportation facilities (i.e. bus stops, transfer hubs, etc.) to promote non-motorized commuting between population centers, public facilities, services, and schools.

- Design and maintain trails to a high standard to ensure a successful trail system. Use AASHTO (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) guidance for the design of pathways and on-road facilities.
- Provide a wide spectrum of trail-related recreational opportunities for a variety of activities, skill levels, and types of experiences. Minimize conflict between users.
- Locate trails on public lands wherever possible.
- Ensure safe trail crossings of roads and highways.
- Provide ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessibility wherever possible, and as required per funding source.
- Ensure preservation of wildlife habitat and natural resources. Avoid unnecessary disturbance of environmentally sensitive areas.
- Respect and protect the rights of trail-side landowners.
- Plan 20 years into the future.

Chapter 2: Proposed Trail Network

Definition of “Trail” - In this plan, the term ‘trail’ is used in a broad sense referring to multi-use pathways, single-track trails and backcountry roads. It also is used to describe routes along shared roadways where bicyclists and pedestrians are directed and accommodated. While it may seem counter intuitive to refer to a wide shoulder along a busy highway as a ‘trail’, shared roadways provide the lion’s share of the county’s non-motorized transportation facilities and demand critical attention. Non-motorized facilities along roadways shall be an integral part of county transportation planning.

Types of Trails

Pathways - Pathways (also called “shared use pathways”, “multi-use pathways”, or “grade-separated pathways”) are physically separated from motorized vehicular traffic by boulevards, open space, and/or a barrier, and have minimal cross-traffic. They can be located either inside a road right-of-way or within an independent right-of-way or easement. Pathways offer opportunities not provided by the road system such as safe and direct commuter routes that preclude motor vehicles. They also may be designed to circumvent obstacles, provide recreation in a natural setting and provide for connection of community features. Linear open spaces such as linear parks, streams, rail corridors, and utility corridors can provide excellent locations for pathways.

Pathways provide a very attractive recreational amenity to a variety of non-motorized users. Pathways accommodate a wide range of users, including students, bicyclists, walkers, joggers, wildlife watchers, skateboarders, rollerbladers, wheelchair users, dog walkers, skiers, seniors, and young families with strollers. Equestrians often can be accommodated by including a natural surface trail parallel to the pathway within the trail right-of-way. Pathways providing access to schools shall be maintained (swept, plowed) year-round. Other pathways can be left snow-covered or even groomed in winter for use by skiers and snowshoers.

Pathway bicycle commuters interested in direct, high-speed travel may not be compatible with slower-moving recreational users. Bicycle commuters often prefer a shared roadway facility such as a bike lane or shoulder bikeway. Pathways should be thought of as a necessary extension of the roadway network, not as a reason to preclude on-road bicycle facilities.

Pathways along highways are appropriate in rural areas where road crossings are minimal. Pathways in urban areas can be challenging to design because of constraints posed by limited area within the easement/right-of-way and prevalence of utility conflicts. Motor vehicles and pathway users may frequently cross each other’s paths due to numerous intersections of cross streets and

driveways. In areas of dense traffic and numerous crossings pathways should be built on both sides of the road.

Recommended pathway widths and surfaces will vary depending on the type of user and volume of use expected, and the experience desired. Pathway design guidance is given in the Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, 1999¹. AASHTO guidelines call for paved pathways 8-12' wide in situations of high use with multiple types of users although path widths may be reduced as necessary in constrained previously built locations. Wide, paved pathways are especially suitable in alignments parallel to major roads where the pathway is serving a strong transportation function. In natural settings compacted gravel trails 5-6' wide can be more appropriate, considerably less expensive to build and yet still be handicapped accessible.

All pathways should ideally be sited within a trail corridor with a minimum width of 25 feet to ensure adequate room for trail construction, maintenance and use. Trail corridors may either be a public dedicated right-of-way or a public easement. Pathways within road easements or rights-of-way shall be located so that road maintenance activities such as sweeping and snow plowing do not adversely impact the pathway and pathway maintenance activities do not adversely affect the road.

Shared Roadways - Most bicycle travel in the United States occurs on roads shared with motor vehicles. Montana statutes (MCA 61-8-602 through 608) make bicyclists legitimate road users and define requirements of bicyclists using roadways. To a varying extent bicycles will be used on most county roads and state highways. Pedestrians also will walk along roads, particularly near residential areas, when sidewalks or pathways have not been provided. Rural roads with little traffic may also be attractive to equestrians.

It would be impractical in terms of expense and unnecessary in terms of adequate safety and user demand to rely exclusively on pathways to satisfy the county's non-motorized transportation needs. Pathways along roads are recommended to separate motorized and non-motorized users in high-demand corridors or to provide a more enjoyable recreational experience in specific situations. But many county roads are capable of safely accommodating non-motorized use, either in their current condition or with minor roadway modifications. While the presence of bicyclists and pedestrians should be

¹ The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' (AASHTO) "Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities", revised in 1999, is the principal resource for bicycle facility design in the United States and has been adopted by many state and local governments. The guide discusses general design characteristics of roadway improvements for bicycles and identifies design standards for pathways used by bicyclists. Minimum design standards are provided only where further deviation would result in unacceptable safety compromises.

expected along all county roads this plan designates certain county roads as trails, meaning they are preferred corridors for bicycle traffic.

These designated routes are attractive to bicyclists because they provide efficient, safe travel corridors that connect common destination areas across the county. The varying experience level of bicyclists must be taken into account however. Experienced bicycle commuters are using their bicycles as they would a motor vehicle. They are riding for convenience and speed and want direct access to destinations with a minimum of detour or delay. They typically are comfortable riding with motor vehicles but need their own operating space. Less confident adult bicyclists riding for transportation or recreation prefer to avoid busy roads unless there is an ample shoulder. Children going to school need routes offering maximum safety.

Preferred bicycle routes are either 'signed shared roadways', 'shoulder bikeways' or 'bike lanes'. All three shall be signed as "bike routes" to guide bicyclists and to alert motorists. Signage shall be in accordance with the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and shall include information on direction and destination to encourage use.

Roadway width is the most important variable affecting the ability of a roadway to safely accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians alongside motorists. Other factors include gradient, alignment, pavement condition, traffic volume and traffic speed. Bike routes shall be constructed or improved to standards that allow for safe non-motorized use.

Signed Shared Roadways - Some of the roadways designated as trails in this plan will need no special facilities other than signage as bike routes due to low traffic volumes and slow speeds. This situation may change as the area grows and traffic conflicts increase. Non-motorized transportation safety should be periodically assessed and improvements made as needed.

Other routes designated as trails in this plan have higher traffic volumes and speeds. For safety purposes adequate width in a dedicated corridor for bicycles (shoulder bikeways or bike lanes) is essential. Many of these routes are currently unsafe or will become so as traffic increases and roadway modifications such as additional width and/or striping are warranted.

Shoulder Bikeways - Paved road shoulders delineated by a lane stripe (fog line) provide a measure of safety for bicyclists and pedestrians along more heavily traveled and higher-speed county roads. Other conditions that could warrant the addition of paved shoulders include narrow road widths, steep gradients and/or poor sight distances. Very heavy traffic and/or high speeds will make shoulder use uncomfortable for less experienced bicyclists and most pedestrians, and a pathway will be more appropriate.

Paved shoulders have benefits beyond the safety and comfort of non-motorized users. According to Montana Department of Transportation's Road Design Manual, road shoulders can:

- extend the service life of the road surface by significantly reducing edge deterioration;
- provide space for emergency and discretionary stops;
- increase road capacity;
- encourage uniform travel speeds;
- improve safety by providing more recovery area for run-off-the-road vehicles;
- provide a sense of openness;
- improve sight distance around horizontal curves;
- enhance highway aesthetics;
- facilitate maintenance operations;
- provide additional lateral clearance to roadside appurtenances (e.g., guardrail, traffic signals); and
- facilitate pavement drainage.

Paved shoulders should be at least 4' wide outside of the lane stripe. Wider shoulders are desirable where higher bicycle usage is expected, where motor vehicle speeds exceed 50 mph or where the percentage of trucks, buses and recreational vehicles is high. However, if this isn't possible, any additional width of paved shoulder is an improvement. Where funding is limited, adding or improving shoulders on uphill sections will decrease conflicts.

Bike Lanes - Bike lanes are portions of roadways designated for the preferential or exclusive use of bicyclists. They provide for more predictable movements by both bicyclists and motorists, and are utilized primarily by experienced, commuting cyclists who desire a convenient, direct route to their destinations. Bike lanes are generally established on urban arterials or collector streets where there is significant bicycle demand and where motor vehicle speeds are relatively high. While most suitable on major thoroughfares through the municipalities, there may be appropriate circumstances for continuing a bike lane along roads extending into the county as they provide an additional measure of safety over shoulder bikeways due to their heightened visibility.

Bike lanes are delineated with striping, signing and pavement markings². Road shoulders can be marked to become bike lanes. Bike lanes are one-way facilities, optimally 4-5' wide, with a bike lane on each side of the road. They can increase the total capacity of roads carrying mixed bicycle and motor vehicle traffic. Bike lanes often are established where insufficient space currently exists for safe and comfortable bicycling on existing streets. Bike lanes may be created without widening the paved surface by reducing existing travel lane widths or by

² A thermoplastic material is commonly used. While more expensive than paint, it is far more durable.

prohibiting parking. Vegetated boulevards (the area between the street and sidewalk) sometimes can be reconfigured to provide pocket parking to make more room for on-street travel.

Sidewalks - Sidewalks are usually found in city street cross-sections along with concrete curbs and gutters. Some rural roads that pass through community commercial districts have sidewalks and larger county residential areas developed in the future may include sidewalks for internal pedestrian use. These shall connect with the county's trail network.

While sidewalks can be built to widths sufficient to support shared use generally sidewalks are appropriate only for pedestrians. Improved pedestrian facilities, including road crossings, should be provided near schools, community centers, trailheads and other significant points.

Backcountry Trails - Backcountry trails are recreational facilities usually located on public lands and often traversing forested terrain. Commonly constructed as 24–42" wide natural-surface trails, these routes are attractive to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians.

There are numerous existing backcountry trails in the county located on federal and state lands. Glacier National Park features a system of premier hiking trails and Flathead National Forest has an established system of singletrack trails. The National Forest also has many backcountry roads which are attractive to non-motorized recreationists, motorcycles, ATVs, and 4WD vehicles. Forest Service travel management planning should provide equitable opportunities for high-quality recreation throughout the forest.

Opportunities exist to construct additional singletrack trails on state and federal lands connecting the county's natural amenities with its communities. One ongoing effort, called "A Trail Runs Through It", seeks to build trail in the vicinity of the City of Whitefish, largely on lands owned by Montana DNRC.

Several excellent design and construction manuals are available to assist in development of new singletrack trails (see appendix G).

Trail Network Components

This plan proposes an interconnected network of trails throughout the county for safety, transportation, recreation, health and other purposes. Rather than describing the proposed trail system in terms of specific facilities (pathway, shoulder bikeway, bike lane, signed shared roadway or singletrack trail) this plan describes proposed trails in terms of their primary function: arterial trail, connector trail or recreational trail.

Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between major communities. *Connector trails* provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking

common destinations within and between communities and serve as collectors for arterial trails. *Recreational trails* respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities.

Specific trail types have not been proposed (in most cases) because such a recommendation is dependent on circumstances that change over time such as traffic congestion, bicycle/pedestrian demand, site constraints and available funding, including the contributed resources of future trail proponents. The most appropriate and feasible trail type for different locations and situations will be determined based upon specific site evaluation and planning. This statement is particularly pertinent to arterial trail routes located along roads. While it is a policy of this Trails Plan to construct pathways along all arterial trail routes wherever feasible, circumstances may dictate that a shoulder bikeway will have to suffice for many years until demand and funding allow road reconstruction and/or pathway development.

Arterial Trails - Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between Flathead County's major communities, Glacier National Park and Flathead Lake. They feed non-motorized traffic to, and collect it from, the rest of the countywide trail network and shall be constructed to a high standard. Ideally, these trails will be located along a separate easement(s) such as along a watercourse, rail line, ridgeline, or utility right-of-way. However, given limited opportunity, most will be located on or along county roads and state highways. For safety and optimal user experience, grade-separated pathways are the preferred facility for arterial trails, particularly alongside high-speed, high volume motorized traffic. Bike lanes or shoulder bikeways may be provided in addition to pathways to accommodate experienced bicycle commuters who may find roadway facilities more convenient and faster. Separation also avoids conflict with slower moving or more recreationally-oriented pathway users.

Continuity of arterial trails shall be ensured. If a pathway cannot be sited along the entire route, some other type of shared roadway facility must be provided to fill the gap and the entire route shall be clearly signed. Ideally, changes between types of trail facilities should be minimized.

Connector Trails - Connector trails provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking common destinations within and between communities and serve as collectors for arterial trails. These trails should provide routes between higher density residential areas and schools, business and commercial centers, parks, cultural attractions and public lands. When a proposed trail is located within an adopted Neighborhood Plan area this Trail Plan's recommendations should be augmented by more-detailed Neighborhood Plan recommendations based upon identified needs for local trail connections between residential areas, existing connector and/or arterial trails, and community facilities.

Most connector trails will be located on roadways, either as shoulder bikeways, bike lanes or signed shared roadways; depending on traffic volume and speed. Near communities, and/or where there is local demand for an enhanced user experience and available right-of-way, shared-use pathways may be preferred. Pathways also may be indicated to resolve unsafe situations.

Recreational Trails - Recreational trails primarily provide recreation destinations rather than transportation corridors. Recreational trails respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities.

Recreational trails may be located on private, municipal, county, state, and/or federal lands. These trails may be aligned through parks, forests and open lands, along streams, along the Flathead, Stillwater and Whitefish Rivers, along the perimeter of Flathead Lake and other lakes within the county as appropriate. While pathways may be appropriate in places, singletrack trails may also be used in backcountry situations. For purposes of continuity and/or expediency, proposed recreational trail routes may make use of existing backcountry roads or old logging roads. A prime example of this is the proposed Foys-to-Blacktail Trail linking Foys Lake and Heron Park with the Blacktail ski resort via a series of existing backcountry roads and trails primarily on the National Forest and lands currently owned by Plum Creek and F.H. Stoltze. Effected private landowners restrict this trail to non-motorized users.

The distinction between recreational and commuter trails, of course, is not absolute. Recreational trails may serve a transportation function for some users, just as there will be a recreational component to the use of arterial and connector trails.

Canoe Trails - Public desire was expressed for development of canoe trails where the rivers in the county are viewed as water based trails already in public ownership. The idea of a linked system of access points, picnic sites and camping areas connecting the parks, lakes, rivers and streams of the county has much appeal. Formal establishment of canoe trails will likely require shared interest and cooperative efforts between the county and other state and federal agencies.

Destination Trails - The public has expressed interest in developing a high-profile destination trail or trails that could draw national attention, with attendant economic benefits from tourism generated revenue and events like tours or races. Suggestions include an intra-county efforts to develop a continuous trail circumnavigating Flathead Lake, a trail system on the old rail bed between Kalispell and Libby, and a trail connecting the Flathead Valley with Glacier National Park.

Proposed Trail Network Map

The trails map accompanying this plan (appendix M) depicts the proposed routes for the major network components – arterial, connector and recreational trails. For the reasons discussed above, specific trail types are not depicted on the map for these routes. The county's existing pathways are shown as are some of the existing trails and roads in the National Forest and Glacier National Park. For additional information on trails and roads on public lands contact the USDA Forest Service, Montana DNRC and Glacier National Park.

Consistent with goals and policies of this Trails Plan, the map depicts a long-term vision for an integrated countywide trail network. Its realization will occur incrementally as trail user demographics and their demands change, roads are constructed or rebuilt, land is developed, and trails projects are prioritized and funded. It is hoped that this visual display of a functional countywide non-motorized transportation system will help energize trails proponents from all sectors of society to work with the county trails program in realizing the vision.

Chapter 3: Administration

The trail network envisioned by this plan can be effectively implemented only if some county-sanctioned entity takes lead responsibility for directing a program of planning, advocacy, fund raising, acquisition, construction, maintenance and monitoring. Dedicated staff and a dependable budget are needed for consistent focus and steady program implementation, to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, to maintain assets, and to ensure trails are considered as a routine part of county planning and administration.

Partners in Trail Program Administration

While some communities have experienced a certain level of success with trail development efforts led by the private sector this method may be haphazard, unreliable, and insufficient for a successful county-wide program. County government must take an active lead role in development and administration of a trails program. Given the breadth of challenges presented by such an undertaking it is advantageous to maintain existing departmental cooperation and establish new partnerships that can capitalize on the strengths and capacity of other entities.

County Departments - In addition to the Board of Commissioners the current administrative contributors to Flathead County's trails program include three Flathead County departments: Planning and Zoning, Parks and Recreation, and Roads and Bridges.

Planning and Zoning Department - The primary responsibilities of the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Department include assisting in all facets of current and long range community and neighborhood planning, zoning administration and subdivision review. The Office administers the county's lakeshore protection program and floodplain program, as well as the CTEP (Community Transportation Enhancement Program). Staff is involved with education and coordination, and uses other tools and strategies to protect and maintain property values, public investment, the built and natural environment, and the general quality of life and community character for residents and visitors.

Parks and Recreation Department - The department is divided into four sub-departments: Parks, Recreation, Weeds and Building Maintenance. The Parks and Recreation Department has an inventory of over 70 parks, with 32 parks that are regularly maintained, some with pathways as amenities. Other parks receive brushing and thinning to aid in fire prevention. The Parks and Recreation Department has enjoyed a strong partnership with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for many years on numerous projects and will continue to do so. The Parks and Recreation Department also partners with the Flathead National Forest and the Northshore Nordic Club in maintaining the Blacktail Cross Country Ski Trails, by brushing, thinning and mowing the site in late fall

and plowing the parking lots in the winter. Other partnerships with private non-profits include: Foys to Blacktail Inc. which helps to manage, improve and expand Herron Park by securing grants, developing a site specific trail plan, rebuilding existing trails and building new trails. Rails to Trails of NW Montana has worked for almost three decades in building and maintaining over ten miles of trail from Kalispell to beyond Kila. Around Whitefish, The Whitefish Trailis working to plan and build over 75 miles of hiking trails in partnership with Montana DNRC, the City of Whitefish, Flathead National Forest, Flathead County Parks and private interests.

The Recreation Department manages the county's recreational activities for youth, adults and various supporting organizations in the Flathead Valley, such as softball, basketball, flag football, volleyball, and t-ball. It is recognized as the best county operated recreation program in the state. The department recently applied for a grant to help improve amenities at the Conrad Sports Complex; replacing fencing, dugouts, adding bleachers and improving bathrooms. Kalispell's Daybreak Rotary is an important partner, supporting the Conrad Complex for many years.

The Weed Department operates and performs over \$150,000 in annual contract work with the Montana Department of Transportation, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glacier National Park, Flathead National Forest, Bonneville Power Administration and the Flathead Conservation District. The Weed program uses an integrated approach to weed control with roadside mowing, revegetation, biocontrol releases, herbicide applications and a fine-tuned education and compliance program. This program has been in contact with over 3,500 landowners, educating and initiating weed management plans to comply with the State Noxious Weed Law. Flathead County's weed program is used as a model for other Montana counties.

The Building Maintenance Department is responsible for keeping public facilities safe and clean, performing building upgrades, improving facility energy efficiency, and assessing/remediating health issues (e.g. asbestos). The department also maintains the grounds of the courthouse complex and removes snow from parking lots and sidewalks.

Roads and Bridges Department - The department is divided into three sub-departments: Roads, Bridges, and the County Shop. The Road Department conducts snow plowing in the winter months and general road maintenance and major construction projects in the non-winter months. Monitoring traffic safety is a major concern. Some other areas of responsibility are encroachments for utility installations, approach encroachments and road reviews for subdivisions. The Bridge Department maintains approximately 100 bridges and approximately 700 culverts, cattle passes and cattle guards. They install and maintain all guardrails and maintain the county's several dikes. The County Shop maintains

approximately 290 county-owned vehicles and pieces of equipment which are operated by Road, Bridge, Shop, Sheriff, Commissioners, Animal Control, Eagle Transit, Health/Sanitation, Juvenile Detention, County Attorney, and the Disaster and Emergency Services Departments. All aspects of vehicle maintenance and repairs are performed.

PATHS Advisory Committee - The PATHS Advisory Committee was originally convened to develop a Trails Plan under guidance from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, Conservation Assistance with a committee lifetime limited to a couple of years. It may be beneficial to expand the scope of PATHS by establishing it as a long-term trails advisory committee to the Parks Board staffed by volunteers and a county department employee(s). PATHS could be charged with various trails-related tasks such as assisting in prioritization of trail development; actively networking with members of the public and private sectors to establish trail development opportunities; actively networking with members of the general public to raise money for maintenance purposes and 'matching funds' for grants; providing trails related comment as applicable in the subdivision review process to promote implementation of the Trails Plan; encouraging county planning and capital improvement efforts appropriately consider trails; assisting with fundraising efforts by writing or reviewing grants; and generally advocating for development of the trails system.

Non-Profit Organizations - Private sector organizations have been instrumental in implementing the county's trails program to date. In Flathead County and other Montana communities, land trusts, service organizations and recreation clubs have spearheaded efforts to develop trails and to organize volunteers to adopt trail segments, hold clean-up events, and rebuild degraded sections. These organizations can provide the necessary passion to build community support, raise money, develop momentum, and lead projects.

In the event a private sector organization or individual wishes to contribute to the trails program through volunteer trail construction within public easements/right-of-ways, the organization shall discuss the scope and methods of the anticipated efforts with the PATHS Committee and obtain formal written consent from the Parks Board prior to commencing proposed activities. Trail construction is expected to meet applicable AASHTO and ADA technical specifications where appropriate. Certain activities involve various permitting requirements and all applicable permits shall be obtained prior to commencing proposed activities.

Recommended Administrative Structure

Historically, county trail development has not been pursued in an organized manner regarding administration, implementation and maintenance. Existing county trails have generally been developed in response to pressure from local interest groups, funding source and departmental interests. Public opinion surveys conducted for this plan and the Parks and Recreation Master Plan clearly indicate the public's interest in an effective and expanded trails network;

implying the need to expand and improve the county's trail program. It is recommended the Commission clearly delegate and fund one county board or department to administer the county's trail program to ensure efficient, proactive progress towards trails program administration and implementation.

The Parks Board appears best situated for the role of primary administrator and implementer of the county's trails program in terms of mission compatibility and customers served, as the Board oversees both the Parks and Recreation Department and PATHS Advisory Committee. Administration of the Trails Plan by the Parks Board appears appropriate as the Board and the Parks and Recreation Department have recently completed a Parks and Recreation Master Plan which anticipates adoption of this Trails Plan as an addendum to that plan. The Parks and Recreation Department is conversant with the multiple recreation needs of a diverse constituency and has undertaken planning, outreach and education efforts on behalf of parks. Park management is the department's forte, and trails are basically linear parks. Furthermore, management of trails by the Parks Board is implicitly implied by the Growth Policy.

If delegated by the Commission, the Parks Board should generally coordinate all aspects of the trails program, oversee the PATHS advisory committee and act as liaison with associated county departments, private and public partners, and volunteers. Adequate funding resources should be appropriately directed to involved departments based commensurately upon actual work efforts resulting from additional Trails Program responsibilities. Departmental requests for funding shall be based upon annual trails project prioritization by the Parks Board and clearly addressed in the annual budgets of the involved departments.

The Planning Department will ensure subdivision review that includes compliance with the Trails Plan and will continue administrative responsibility for the CTEP program, with assistance from the Parks Board and PATHS Advisory Committee in prioritizing applications and projects. The Roads and Bridges Department will perform or oversee certain construction and maintenance tasks, likely including all facets of trail routes on shared roadways, and heavy maintenance such as asphalt repair.

The PATHS advisory committee is recommended to be made a long-term advisory committee to the Parks Board, appropriately staffed by volunteers appointed by the Board and involved county department employees. PATHS would be charged with the tasks described above and any others deemed necessary by the Parks Board in implementing the trails program.

A private sector partner or partners shall be sought to work in cooperation with the county. The specific role(s) of this entity deserves careful thought. Its most useful functions might be to develop constituencies, advocate for trails and raise funds. Developing a dues-paying membership, holding fund-raising events, writing grants, soliciting philanthropy and developing educational programs will all

be useful contributions to the trails program. A non-profit Parks and Trails Foundation could serve this function for trails as well as for parks. Neighborhood groups advocating for specific trails projects also can be very useful and their assistance should be welcomed.

Maintenance

The directors of the Planning and Zoning, Parks and Recreation, and Roads and Bridges Departments met in April of 2009 to discuss responsibilities for improved maintenance of existing trails. Their memorandum to the county commissioners recognizes the county's substantial investment in trails, citizens concerns about maintenance and the need to address potential liabilities. They agreed a maintenance plan is needed to address basic tasks such as: snow removal, weed control, mowing, sign/stripe installation and repair, sweeping of debris, pot hole and asphalt repairs, parking, and tree trimming and removal. The discussion resulted in a limited plan/agreement for snow-plowing of certain portions of CTEP trails adjacent to five area schools. Certain issues regarding trail maintenance remained unresolved:

- Which county department is responsible for performing maintenance?
- The departments can't perform adequate maintenance of the trail network without appropriate funding.
- What are reasonable sources of maintenance funding?
- Is there a mechanism by which long-term maintenance funds for specific trails can be secured prior to the trails development? Is such a thing practical?

Poorly maintained trails discourage use, undermine support for a trails program, create a safety hazard and shorten the life of facilities. Prior to acceptance of new trail projects by the Parks Board, a reasonable maintenance plan should be required that identifies how maintenance will be accomplished and funded. Maintenance tasks may include mowing, sweeping, trash removal, tree/brush trimming, weed control, snow-plowing, snow-grooming, routine maintenance of bridges, benches, signage, bike racks and fencing; and minor/routine repairs such as re-striping and seal coating. Standard industry practice for protecting infrastructure investments is to allocate a percentage of the initial investment for annual upkeep. A conservative estimate for annual maintenance costs might be 3% of initial investment.

Potential Sources of Labor and Equipment - The Flathead County Trails Program shall develop a multi-pronged approach to maintenance, drawing on a variety of sources for labor and funding. Funding is addressed in the following section. Potential sources of labor and equipment include:

County Departments – Most trail maintenance responsibilities shall be handled by county departments. On-road connector trails such as bike lanes, shoulder bikeways and shared roadways can be maintained by the county Roads and Bridges Department at little to no additional cost, once these facilities are in

place. The Roads and Bridges Department and Parks and Recreation Department can provide maintenance services for pathways. County departments and/or contracted engineers could provide contract document preparation, bidding, and construction administration services.

Volunteers – Under the direction of the Parks and Recreation Department, volunteers could donate their time and equipment to accomplish periodic maintenance on specific trail segments such as plowing snow, trimming vegetation, picking up trash, rejuvenating degraded trails and reporting trail problems. Common sources for volunteer efforts include home owners associations, civic organizations, conservation/recreation organizations, law enforcement community service programs and adopt-a-trail programs, as well as individuals. The county should either modify its insurance coverage to indemnify volunteer laborers or accept the existing liability risk.

Funding

Providing at least a basic level of funding for county departments charged with implementing and maintaining the trails program is necessary in order for the work to be prioritized and accomplished. Recruiting a private non-profit partner to assist with fundraising holds excellent promise. Competitive grants shall be actively sought. Pending widespread public support for the trails program, taxpayer funding may be a future option.

Potential sources of funding

County departments – The Parks and Recreation Department and Roads and Bridges Department, and Planning and Zoning Department should receive base funding for carrying out their various responsibilities to administer the trails program.

Fundraising by non-profit partner - A non-profit partner may take responsibility for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Tools could include selling memberships, holding fund-raising events, writing grants, and soliciting donors for a maintenance endowment fund.

Grants and Reimbursement Programs – Appendix G lists many public and private sources of grants for trail development. Two commonly used funding sources in Montana are the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) and Community Transportation Enhancement Program (CTEP), both part of the federal aid highway program and both administered by the state. Reimbursement programs and most grants are appropriate for trail development projects but not for annual program expenses such as maintenance.

Sale of excess park land - Under certain circumstances, and if the Parks Board so decides, these properties may be sold and the proceeds used to fund elements of the trails program.

Cash-in-lieu funds – In accordance with 76-3-621 MCA, it may be more advantageous in some situations to accept cash-in-lieu funds rather than land due from parkland dedication requirements.

In-kind donations – Individuals, organizations and businesses sometimes are willing to donate land, labor, equipment or materials to community projects such as trail construction. These donations often can be used as part of the required match for grants or reimbursement programs.

Taxes – A property mill tax levy could be used to create a long-term funding source for maintenance and operations. Since the county has reached its mill levy ceiling a general election vote would be necessary to approve an increase in property taxes. A special improvement district or park maintenance district could be established to tax residents in defined neighborhoods serviced by trails. Under certain circumstances these districts can be established and activated as taxing entities when trail maintenance funding is needed. Other types of taxes that have been used elsewhere for this purpose include impact fees, real estate transfer taxes, resort taxes and local option taxes on vehicle registration.

Bond initiative - County commissioners can ask electors to approve a bond for trail development, if the ceiling on bonded indebtedness has not been reached. Bonds allow communities to borrow money which they often pay back over time through property taxes. Bond money can be used only to acquire lands and construct projects not to maintain or manage them.

Chapter 4: Implementation

Trail Development

Priority Projects - A two-section evaluation form has been developed for specific project prioritization purposes (see appendix C). The form allows reviewers to rate trail proposals on each criteria and weights the various criteria depending on their significance. This affords a level of objectivity in determining the relative importance of each particular trail proposal to the trail network as a whole.

The first section of the form calls for an evaluation of the real world parameters relevant to constructing the project, such as cost, dedicated funding and in-kind donations, whether easements or rights-of-way have been secured, whether a commitment has been made to maintain the trail, expressed local support or opposition, and other factors. These “administrative considerations” are not rated but provide a mechanism for understanding the available resources and constraints associated with each specific trail proposal that is presented to the county. The evaluation form is intended to be used as a decision tool by the Parks Board and PATHS to compare the merits of various potential trail projects when prioritizing new projects to be accepted and programmed by the county.

Within the second section of the evaluation form proposed trail construction and improvement projects are evaluated based upon how well they address the following weighted criteria:

- Provides needed safety improvement
- Provides safe pedestrian and bicycle access to schools
- Provides safe connection between communities and parks/public lands
- Services large proportion of population and/or anticipated demand
- Connects existing trail segments (enhance functionality through trail network continuity)
- Creates a grade-separated pathway
- Provides connection between communities
- Provides trailhead facilities
- Provides a high quality recreational experience

Certain trail routes proposed in this plan are considered high priority to the county’s trail network, and their development should be actively pursued. Priority trails (non-ordered) for each of the three major network components are:

Arterial routes

- Somers to Lakeside (shared roadway)
- Whitefish Stage Road from Reserve Street in Kalispell to Whitefish (pathway)
- Hwy 40 from Whitefish to Columbia Falls (pathway)

- Highway 82 between Highway 35 and Highway 93 (pathway or shoulder bikeway) with emphasis on Flathead River crossing.

Connector routes

- West Reserve Drive, from Hwy 93 to Glacier High School (pathway)
- West Evergreen Drive between Highway 2 and Whitefish Stage Road
- Willow Glen Drive to Conrad Drive (pathway- Sam Bibler project continued)
- Conrad Drive west to Woodland Park and east to the New Steel Bridge (pathway)
- Stillwater River/FVCC/Kidsport Trail connecting the Evergreen Trail to the Alternate Truck Route. (pathway)
- Echo Lake/Swan River Road connecting the existing Swan River pathway segments with the Bigfork Wild Mile trail
- Lateral connections to Montana Department of Transportation Alternate Truck Route trail system (pathway or shoulder bikeway)
- Red Bridge Project in Columbia Falls
- Kila to Marion rail-trail (pathway)
- Airport Road/Foys Lake loop (pathway or shoulder bikeway)

Recreational routes

- Foys-to-Blacktail system, includes Lakeside and Kila to Blacktail trails (backcountry trails and roads)
- The Whitefish Trail (backcountry trails)

Priority arterial routes shall be constructed as grade-separated pathways wherever possible and supplemented with either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways to accommodate commuting bicyclists. Montana Department of Transportation shall be notified of the county's desire for pathways along state routes and highways so these facilities can be included in the state's plans for highway reconstruction and improvement. Many connector routes identified in this plan likely will be improved with shared roadway facilities rather than pathways. These improvements shall be made as roads are reconstructed.

Understanding that proposed pathway construction may take years to accomplish, interim measures shall be undertaken to improve safety as opportunities arise. This could mean moving a fog line to slow traffic and widen a shoulder, improving shoulder snow removal or gravel sweeping, and similar measures.

"Bike route" signage shall be installed along all shared roadway trail routes. The purpose is to attract bicyclists to preferred routes and alert motorists to the likely presence of bicycles. This will serve as an important interim measure for those routes where grade separated pathways are planned in the future. Routes signed as 'bike routes' shall be regularly maintained for safe riding.

The following routes are considered priorities for signage and/or striping because they currently receive substantial use but pose safety concerns. Assuming limited funding, these routes shall receive priority for signage and/or striping:

Bike routes

- Edgewood Road between Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- Airport Road/Foy's Lake loop
- Highway 93 between Kalispell and Whitefish
- Highway 2 between Kalispell and West Glacier

Opportunistic Trail Development - Opportunities for trail development will arise as land is developed and road infrastructure is upgraded. This process will parallel active efforts to complete priority projects listed in the previous section. While many of these trail segments at first may be isolated, connectivity will be established as momentum builds and the trail network grows. With a Trails Plan adopted by the county and incorporated into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents, future land development and transportation projects can contribute many new miles towards the envisioned Flathead County Trail Network.

Land development and the subdivision review process - Subdivision review must be conducted in compliance with this Trails Plan, as part of the growth policy. Land undergoing subdivision review is subject to transportation requirements and proposals may include provisions for non-motorized pedestrian/bicycle access. When a new subdivision abuts an arterial route as identified in this plan, the county shall require developers to dedicate a 25 foot pedestrian/bicycle easement along the route(s), to provide connectivity to the county trail network, and provide for pedestrian safety and public access to common facilities such as schools, parks, playgrounds, streams and lakes. While applicable 2009 subdivision regulations require a minimum 10 foot easement for pedestrian/bicycle paths, a wider easement is preferable to provide adequate separation from adjacent roads, accommodate construction, accommodate snow removal, minimize utility conflicts, and provide an appealing corridor to situate the trail. Trail corridors need not be sited immediately adjacent to the road. Developers often provide trail connections even when not required as a matter of good business practice since pathways through residential developments are an amenity sought by buyers these days³.

Subdivisions are also subject to parkland dedication requirements which direct developers to set aside a portion of their development for parks (see appendix I). This requirement can be used to create greenways as linear parks which are more desirable than a pathway adjacent to a road. Land encompassing the trail easement can be used to satisfy parkland dedication requirements if said trail is

³ A 2002 survey of recent home buyers conducted by the National Association of Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders showed that trails ranked as the 2nd most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices.

determined by the Parks Board to be a linear park. Developers should be required to produce a maintenance plan for their trails which may be included in a Road User's Agreement for the subdivision.

Road construction and reconstruction projects - Non-motorized travel should be a routine element to be considered in every transportation project. Newly constructed roads should be designed to service all public use, not just motor vehicles. New arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads should be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.

Whenever existing roads serving as arterial trail routes, as identified in this plan, are reconstructed, pathways shall be included and should be supplemented with bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. Whenever roads identified by this plan as connector trail routes are substantially reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc), the appropriate non-motorized facilities shall be included. Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved the needs of non-motorized users should be considered and accommodated wherever possible.

The Flathead County Road and Bridge Department's 'Minimum Standards for Design and Construction' currently calls for 11-foot lanes on local roads and 12-foot or greater lanes on collector and arterial roads; these widths include minimal paved shoulders. Most of this plan's proposed arterial and connector trail routes are on arterial and collector roads as identified in the Flathead County Transportation Plan and implementation of much of this plan's trail network would likely involve the widening of shoulder areas to accommodate 'shoulder bikeways' or construction of 'grade-separated pathways'.

Many communities are narrowing the commonly accepted standard 12' travel lane widths for several reasons: to encourage slower speeds, increase safety, and provide wider shoulders for non-motorized travel. Studies have documented that "road diets", when combined with other changes in the transportation system, are effective in actually improving traffic flow, lessening travel times, improving safety, and serving the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists. The Montana Department of Transportation Road Design Manual states that travel lane widths on non-State highways can vary between 10' and 12', depending upon traffic volumes, functional class and design speed. Flathead County's transportation plan addresses appropriate lane widths and bicycle-pedestrian facilities to serve the needs of both motorized and non-motorized users of the transportation system.

Current Trail Development Efforts

Many trail development efforts in Flathead County have been led by local trails advocates. Several such efforts are currently ongoing along with a major Montana Department of Transportation highway project.

Great Northern Rail-Trail - Rails to Trails of Northwest Montana has developed 16 miles of paved pathway along the old rail line from Somers north along US 93 to Ashley Creek south of Kalispell and from Meridian Road in Kalispell west along state Highway 2 through Kila. The two segments will be connected by a trail along the Alternate Truck Route. Plans call for the trail to be extended through Marion, past Bitterroot Lake and on to Libby.
(www.railstotrailsofnwmt.com)

The Whitefish Trail - Montana DNRC, Flathead Gateway Partners, the City of Whitefish, USDA Forest Service, and private landowners have been working for the past 5 years on an innovative plan to establish approximately 75 miles of singletrack recreational trail around the City of Whitefish as part of a larger land protection effort. The first 10 miles is currently under construction.
<http://www.trailrunsthroughit.org>

Foys-to-Blacktail Trail - The non-profit organization Foys to Blacktail Trails, Inc. has been working since 2001 to protect traditional non-motorized access from Herron Park, near Kalispell, to a 47,000 acre Forest Service unit at Blacktail Mountain. The 20 mile proposed trail traverses county, federal and private timber lands. The project has inspired other groups to create a Lakeside to Blacktail Trail and a Kila to Blacktail Trail. If successful, these trails will form a backcountry non-motorized recreation system for these communities and create connection loops with the existing county trails network. In addition, Foys to Blacktail is working to add 320 acres to Herron Park. A professionally developed trail plan for an expanded Herron Park is near completion and will create 15 miles of hiking trail within the park with an emphasis on ADA compatibility.
<http://www.foystoblacktailtrails.org/>

Kalispell Alternate Truck Route - Phase 1 of this major infrastructure project is under construction and scheduled for completion by fall 2010. A 10' asphalt pathway and masonry sound barrier is planned along this road. This arterial trail will provide a key non-motorized transportation route around the city, connect the two existing sections of Rails to Trails and will include numerous lateral connection points for future trails.
<http://www.kalispellbypass.com/>

Swan River Road near Bigfork - The Bigfork Rotary Club has been working to connect the pathway along Swan River Road Road with the existing pathway along the Swan River and the town of Bigfork.

Sam Bibler Trail - The Sam Bibler Commemorative Trails Project has been working to establish pathways along roads near the Flathead River and Owen Sowerwine Natural Area. The pathways will parallel Willow Glen Drive, Conrad Road, Woodland Avenue and Shady Lane, connecting to Woodland Park and

potentially the 'New Steel Bridge' area. This is a joint project with the private non-profit, the City of Kalispell and Flathead County.

Stillwater/FVCC/Kidsport Trail and Bridge - The Flathead Valley Community College, in partnership with a citizens group, is spearheading this effort to create a pathway from Reserve Street in Kalispell south along the Stillwater River to connect with the existing pathway in Lawrence Park. Part of the Old Steel Bridge has been purchased and is intended for use on this project to provide a crossing over the Stillwater. The bridge will allow connection to the Evergreen Trail and the Whitefish Stage Road Trail to the east. Montana Department of Transportation is considering a tunnel under Highway 93 at Grandview Drive to connect the College Trail to Kidsport and Glacier High School. If completed, this trail system will serve as a primary east-west connector between the Flathead River, the Alternate Truck Route and West Valley, serving numerous schools and the valley's primary shopping district.

Red Bridge restoration in Columbia Falls - The historic Red Bridge was built in 1911 and served for decades as a critical crossing point to the southeast. In 1989 it was taken out of service. The First Best Place Task Force in Columbia Falls intends to return this bridge to use as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing. It will be the hub of a system of trails along the Flathead River and within the City of Columbia Falls.

<http://firstbestplace.org>

Future Opportunities - National trends in trail partnerships hold promise for the Flathead County Trails Program in terms of potential allies and possible funding.

Coordinate trails development with the health community - Close-to-home physical activity, especially when incorporated into people's everyday activities, can have a dramatically positive effect on health. Much research has linked the nation's obesity epidemic to a lack of physical exercise. Health care practitioners, clinics, and insurance providers have become actively involved around the country as partners in developing trails as a health initiative.

Coordinate trails development with the school districts - Opportunities may exist to jointly plan and develop trails used by children walking or biking to school and to improve the safety, efficiency and convenience of school drop-off zones. School district participation could include direct funding contributions, use of school district lands or trail maintenance on segments near schools. Montana's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program can assist the city and county in conducting planning workshops for safe routes to schools.

Trail Maintenance - Many of Flathead County's existing pathways are ten years old and in need of remedial maintenance as well as signage. A comprehensive field assessment of the condition of all existing trails needs to be undertaken to identify and prioritize maintenance needs to bring aging trails up to

this plan's specification. Trail maintenance requirements vary depending upon the type of trail and the source of funding. Specific maintenance tasks shall be considered high priority if they are needed to correct an unsafe situation, address a problem on a high use trail, or take advantage of a timely opportunity.

Typical trail maintenance includes debris sweeping, winter snow removal, mowing/weed control and asphalt repair as needed. In order to minimize trail degradation and financial difficulties related to expanding maintenance needs responsibility for trails maintenance should be delegated and budgeted to a specific County department(s) and future trail development should require a reasonable maintenance plan be established for the specific trail prior to formal acceptance for its construction.

Priorities for routine annual maintenance

- Perform regular winter snow removal along defined portions of pathways in the vicinity of schools.
- Perform winter snow removal and spring debris sweeping of all signed “bike routes” on shared roadways.

Recommendations for Trails Program Implementation

Establish a Flathead County Trails Program using a public/private partnership consisting of County departments and boards, the PATHS Advisory Committee, and a private sector non-profit partner. The Parks Board shall take lead responsibility for program implementation in coordination with the Planning and Zoning Department, the Parks and Recreation Department and the Roads and Bridges Department. The PATHS Advisory committee should become a standing advisory committee to the Parks Board to actively aid the Board in steering the program. A non-profit partner may be recruited for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Developing sustainable, long-term funding mechanisms will contribute to the successful development and operation of the trails network.

Administrative activities for trails involving the use of CTEP funding shall continue to be carried out by the Planning and Zoning Department. Implementation of CTEP funded projects shall adhere to requirements of the CTEP program, administered by the Montana Department of Transportation.

This Trails Plan should be formally adopted as an addendum to the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan and incorporated as applicable into pertinent documents such as the County growth policy, neighborhood plans, transportation plan, and capital improvement plan. Subdivision review shall be conducted in compliance with this Trails Plan as part of the growth policy. Pathways, roadway bike/pedestrian facilities and community walkability should be considered relative to transportation infrastructure on equal footing with motor vehicle facilities. By integrating the trails program throughout the transportation planning and land development review processes, non-motorized transportation

system connectivity can be accomplished as a routine element of capital improvement, maintenance and development projects.

Flathead County and private interests should develop a variety of programs, projects, and policies that support non-motorized transportation, recreation, and a comprehensive multi-modal transportation system in Flathead County. Along with developing the trail infrastructure, greater use of the trails network should be encouraged. Promotional programs and trails events can spread information about the trail network and the benefits of using it thereby encouraging more people to choose to travel without their automobiles. Convenience features like public bussing compatibility, trailheads, bike racks, benches and signage can make a big difference. Bike safety programs targeted to children and adult bicyclists as well as motorists can teach users how to share the road safely. A policy of building “Complete Streets” (see appendix E) invites the full range of users onto county transportation facilities in safety and with confidence. More people will commute, exercise and make short trips by bicycle or on foot if mixed-use development becomes more common, non-motorized commuting opportunities exist and safe transportation facilities are available.