

7. RECREATION PLAN – GENERAL INFORMATION

Landscape and trails

The Helena Open Lands (HOL) system is comprised of 46 parcels of land totaling nearly 2,000 acres which have been acquired over the past 115 years. Located primarily on the southern flank of Helena, the HOL system is interspersed with roughly 40 miles of designated, multi-use recreational trails. These open lands are comprised of two major recreational systems, one dominated by Mount Helena, and the other by Mount Ascension. Elevations of the HOL system range from 4,127 feet at the Saddle Drive Disc Golf Course to 5,365 feet at the top of Mount Ascension and 5,460 feet at the summit of Mount Helena (the highest point in the HOL).

The City of Helena provides outdoor enthusiasts with a wide variety of recreational^a opportunities and activities, including: hiking/running, biking, dog exercising, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, fauna and flora observation, and geological /cultural resource exploration. Also, within Helena’s open lands system, more formalized open air activities can be found at the South Hills Disc Golf Course, the Dry Gulch Archery Range, Mount Helena Rock Climbing routes, Upper Davis Bike Skills Course, and Mt Ascension Directional Trail. Specifically prohibited on HOL are motorized and equestrian use.

7.1 BACKGROUND / HISTORY

The City of Helena and its open lands have a history that goes back more than 150 years. In the early years, Helena’s south hills provided timber, grazing, and building stone for a growing community. Eventually, these extractive activities and several wildfires had degraded Helena’s surrounding foothills to the point that the community decided to focus its attention on restoring their treasured Mount Helena by initiating tree planting and property purchase efforts in the late 1800 to early 1900 era. Over the next quarter of a century, Mount Helena Park witnessed periods of attention followed by complacency as America navigated through two world wars and two foreign conflicts. During the final quarter of the 20th Century, Helena’s citizenry once again began to focus their attention on their open lands by ending livestock grazing, reconstructing trails, acquiring Bureau of Management inholdings, developing management plans, creating natural park resolutions, and passing open land acquisition bonds. Through the efforts of many visionary individuals and organizations, Helena was able to preserve trail user corridors that connect recreationalists to thousands of acres of adjacent USFS lands, thereby creating one of the nation’s largest backyards for all to enjoy.

7.2 Current Situation

Growing community pressures

As Montana gains in reputation as a destination location for recreationalists, retirees, and people who seek to live and work close to nature, Helena is similarly experiencing pressures related to growth and increased demand for access to the great outdoors. Over the past few years, Helena open lands have experienced increased demand by recreationalists who seek to bike, hike, climb and otherwise use the community’s open lands.

This increased interest from Helenans as well as visitors has led to a need to update the Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan to address management needs and community concerns. These concerns include how to balance the demand for recreational opportunities with the core stewardship^b values and responsibilities in public land management; how to ensure adequate access and safety; how to continue

^a recreation is defined as: *activity done for enjoyment when one is not working*

^b Stewardship is defined as: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care

the long-standing tradition of respect and etiquette; and how to provide meaningful public involvement and engagement in the City's decision-making processes.

The Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan update provides guidance for current and future opportunities and pressures on our public lands.

Community input process

Starting in Spring 2019, the City of Helena engaged CDR Associates to lead the Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan update. The CDR team interviewed 50 individuals from 23 organizations or affiliations, and reached out to nearly 80 individuals from 38 organizations or affiliations. The list of stakeholders began with the City and continued to grow until no new organizations were identified through stakeholder interviews.

Groups interviewed include: City of Helena Commissioners and Staff, Lewis and Clark Public Health, Bike Walk Montana, Blackfoot Brewing, Carroll College Outdoors, Girls Thrive, Great Divide Cyclery, Helena Citizens' Council, Helena Climbers Coalition, Helena Disc Golf Alliance, Helena High Outdoor Club, Helena Hikes, Helena Trails Alliance, Helena United Cycling, Helena Open Lands Management Committee (HOLMAC), Last Chance Nordic Ski Club, Montana Audubon, Montana Bicycle Guild, Montana Conservation Corps, Narrate Church, Native Plant Society, Prickly Pear Land Trust and the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, several community members were interviewed.

From these interviews key themes emerged. In Fall 2019, CDR engaged Halliday & Associates to design and facilitate three community workshops to gather input on key themes. More than 100 people participated in the workshops. In addition, an on-line survey generated more than 150 responses. The community input helped guide the City of Helena's Open Lands Recreation Plan update.

Intent of plan

The intent of the Helena Open Land Recreation Plan is to be an accessible, usable guide for current and future decision making.

- **Guide not prescribe** The City of Helena envisions this plan to serve as a guide for current and future decisions. The City recognizes that uses and demands will continue to change over time. This plan sets out broad guidance and a collaborative process to equip the community's stewardship of HOL.
- **Useful and adaptable** The City of Helena envisions this plan as a basic framework, a working document, with guiding principles and key approaches. It is assumed that key approaches will continue to evolve as new and unanticipated opportunities and challenges arise.

Coordination with other aspects of HOL plan

The Helena Open Land Recreation Plan update replaces Chapter 7 of the current HOL plan. The City of Helena anticipates updating the other chapters of the HOL plan. As new chapters are updated, the updated Recreation Plan will be referenced where appropriate.

In addition, several topics emerged from the update process that are more relevant to other chapters, such as weed control, tourism, wildlife management and HOLMAC. Notes and comments concerning these areas are recorded and will be reviewed to help inform the HOL update process.

7.3 Vision

As stewards of Helena Open Lands, we strive to conserve our open lands and provide quality recreation opportunities for current and future generations.

7.4 Goals

The Helena Open Land Recreation Plan is organized into five core goals, with guiding principles assigned to each goal, and key approaches that the City can undertake to advance each principle.

GOAL 1: COMMUNITY ACCESS AND USE

Provide safe and accessible recreational opportunities for all users.

GOAL 2: STEWARDSHIP

Using stewardship as the guiding principle, manage Helena’s Open Lands to balance conservation and recreational use.

GOAL 3: FUTURE NEEDS AND GROWTH

Develop a proactive approach to meeting future open land’s needs, adapting to environmental and social changes, and conserving the space for future generations.

GOAL 4: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Provide a process for public input in management and recreation decision-making to inform and engage the Helena community.

GOAL 5: EDUCATION

Develop a comprehensive approach to educating and informing users of rules and expectations while enjoying Helena Open Lands.

GOAL 1: COMMUNITY ACCESS AND USE	
Provide safe and accessible recreational opportunities for all users.	
Guiding principles	Key approaches
<i>1.1: Ensure opportunities for all users to access HOL</i>	<i>1.1a: Maintain current levels of trail access and look for opportunities to expand access – in sections of existing trails as well as in new trail construction</i> <i>1.1b: Strive for a balance of providing multiple access points with concentrating access in specific areas to reduce public resource and user impacts</i> <i>1.1c: Expand ADA access across the Helena open lands and meet ADA access requirements in all new infrastructure</i> <i>1.1d: Inventory current social trails and develop plan to adopt or remediate priority trails</i>
<i>1.2: Coordinate with other land managers/management agencies (PPLT, County, BLM, USFS and private owners) to enhance HOL user access</i>	<i>1.2a: Analyze current trail system to identify opportunities to connect trails to maximize accessibility, physical activity opportunities, and recreation experience</i> <i>1.2b: Continually look for opportunities to increase trail connectivity, including connectivity to urban transit systems</i> <i>1.2c: Increase trail management coordination to</i>

	<p><i>relieve HOL user pressures</i></p> <p><i>1.2d: Work with other land management agencies to develop consistent or complementary policies on e-bikes and other future user demands</i></p>
<p><i>1.3: Ensure the permitting process for HOL special events is consistent and well-managed.</i></p>	<p><i>1.3a: Update special event permitting process, including revising the fee structure and addressing extenuating circumstances such as weather conditions and other considerations</i></p> <p><i>1.3b: Require event applicants to properly notice their events to the public</i></p>
<p>GOAL 2: STEWARDSHIP</p> <p>Using stewardship as the guiding principle, manage Helena’s Open Lands to balance the environment and recreational use.</p>	
Guiding principles	Key approaches
<p><i>2.1: Stewardship is a guiding principle that informs our decisions and actions</i></p>	<p><i>2.1a: Maintain a long-term view of how we manage HOL to honor the stewardship role while ensuring recreational opportunities</i></p> <p><i>2.1b: Ensure that decisions, policies and practices are informed by a commitment to stewardship</i></p>
<p><i>2.2: Encourage community partnerships to increase stewardship volunteerism</i></p>	<p><i>2.2a: Continue to work with key community partners to promote volunteerism</i></p> <p><i>2.2b: Increase City of Helena capacity for outreach, engagement and coordination of volunteers</i></p> <p><i>2.2c: Conduct specific outreach to interested groups, clubs, etc to expand volunteerism</i></p>
<p><i>2.3: Expand HOL opportunities for youth participation, stewardship and education</i></p>	<p><i>2.3a: Continue to work with key community partners that encourage youth to be active on HOL</i></p> <p><i>2.3b: Increase outreach efforts with schools to provide stewardship opportunities to youth</i></p> <p><i>2.3c: Expand opportunities for youth education on stewardship</i></p>
<p>GOAL 3: FUTURE NEEDS and GROWTH</p> <p>Develop a proactive approach to meeting future open land’s needs, adapting to environmental and social changes, and conserving the space for future generations.</p>	
Guiding principles	Key approaches
<p><i>3.1: Maintain a leadership role in defining appropriate uses of HOL with stakeholders regarding the evolving use and promotion of HOL</i></p>	<p><i>3.1a: Stay in regular communications with public and private sector stakeholders regarding the way in which HOL is represented</i></p> <p><i>3.1b: Continue to invite public participation in visioning HOL as community needs evolve</i></p>
<p><i>3.2: Learn from other communities with similar growth and use pressures</i></p>	<p><i>3.2a: Stay current on activities and approaches of communities with similar growth and use pressures through associations and partnerships</i></p>
<p><i>3.3: Use data to inform decision making</i></p>	<p><i>3.3a: Where feasible, strive to use data and fact-finding to help guide future planning and predict future trends for HOL recreation</i></p>
<p>GOAL 4: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION</p> <p>Provide a process for public input in management and recreation decision-making to inform and engage the Helena community.</p>	
Guiding principles	Key approaches

<p>4.1: Expand participation, representation outreach efforts</p>	<p>4.1a: Strive to solicit more input from the community for major projects 4.1b: Invite in subject matter experts when needed and feasible</p>
<p>4.2: Ensure the City provides accurate and timely information regarding HOL issues</p>	<p>4.2a: Working with the City public information officials, keep City website up to date; utilize social media channels; post notices at trailheads and parking lots, provide public reporting and feedback mechanisms, etc 4.2b: Encourage partner organizations to communicate accurate and timely information about HOL issues to their members</p>
<p>4.3: Ensure the process for decision making is clear and participatory</p>	<p>4.3a: Ensure decisions are rooted in the vision and goals of the HOL recreation plan 4.3b: Adopt a decision making process that differentiates minor projects from major projects, and considers public interest 4.3c: For minor projects (eg, trail maintenance, signage, erosion control, maintenance at existing trailheads and parking lots, minor reroutes), the City will develop an annual workplan for internal use 4.3d: For major projects (eg, new trails, trailhead expansion, new facilities, change of use, major trail realignment/removal/reroute) the City will engage in a public input process and provide a general disclosure of the potential impacts to wildlife habitat, landscape and adjacent properties; with final approval by City Commission 4.3e: For major projects, the public input and impact disclosure process will consider similar state and federal processes that include input mechanisms such as public meetings, online comment opportunities, and public notices; the City will strive to adopt a more detailed public input and impact disclosure process by June 2020</p>
<p>GOAL 5: EDUCATION Develop a comprehensive approach to educating and informing users of rules and expectations while enjoying Helena Open Lands.</p>	
<p>Guiding principles</p>	<p>Key approaches</p>
<p>5.1: Ensure ample signage to inform users of trail etiquette</p>	<p>5.1a: Ensure appropriate and ADA accessible signage, including maintaining inventory of current HOL signage and recommending priority areas for additional signage 5.1b: Coordinate with other land managers/management agencies and community partners to address evolving signage needs</p>
<p>5.2: Monitor trail safety, user conflicts and other user concerns</p>	<p>5.2a: Increase signage, such as blind corners, and education to inform users that HOL is a multiple use trail system</p>

	<p><i>5.2b: Monitor progress through annual surveys and inspection</i></p> <p><i>5.2c: In instances of user conflict, develop mechanisms to report and remediate, such as increased HOL staff presence, signage and trail reroutes</i></p>
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7.5 Other Needs/Outside of Scope

Outside of scope

Several topics were identified during the public process that are outside the scope of the Helena Open Land Recreation Plan update. All public comments were recorded; where appropriate, future HOL chapter updates will review these areas. Areas include:

- Weed control
- Tourism and promotion
- HOLMAC membership to ensure diverse stakeholder representation
- Wildlife management/impact

Recommended areas of future study

In addition, the public process revealed community interest in further study areas.

- The top two priority data needs identified by the community are (1) trail usage (type and frequency); and (2) the economic benefits of Helena's trail system
- Updated inventory of HOL lands, including wildlife and habitat

7.6 APPENDICES

Appendix P
Proposed Helena Open Lands Public Involvement Process for Recreation
Adopted June 8, 2020

Appendix P accompanies Chapter 7 as amended in 2020. This applies specifically to major recreation projects and is a calendar year annual process.

Step 1: Fall Open Lands major projects listening session

- 1.1. The City Open Lands and Recreation Department (City) and Helena Open Lands Management Advisory Committee (HOLMAC) hosts a public listening session in **mid-September** each year to:
 - 1.1.1. City presents City proposed major projects
 - 1.1.2. City present a list of project suggestions submitted to the City during the current calendar year by members of the public
 - 1.1.3. City and HOLMAC solicit additional project suggestions
 - 1.1.4. City and HOLMAC accept feedback on proposed projects
- 1.2. The public has the opportunity to submit additional project ideas and comments to the City and HOLMAC for 15 calendar days following the listening session.
- 1.3. The City will notify the public of this listening session at least 10 calendar days prior using the following notification methods: major trailheads posting, email to stakeholder list maintained by the City, posting on City website, news release, City social media.

Step 2: Development of Draft Major Projects for upcoming calendar year

- 2.1 The City conducts preliminary evaluation of proposed major projects and project suggestions received as of October 1. Projects are evaluated based on alignment with the goals identified in Chapter 7, public feedback received to date, Helena Open Lands (HOL) needs, available resources and guidance from HOLMAC. The City prepares the following documents:
 - 2.1.1 a draft list of major projects under consideration for implementation in the upcoming calendar year
- 2.2 At HOLMAC's regularly scheduled **mid-October** meeting, the City:
 - 2.2.1 presents a draft list of major projects under consideration for implementation in the upcoming calendar year
 - 2.2.2 accepts public feedback on proposed projects
 - 2.2.3 solicits guidance from HOLMAC

- 2.3** The City will notify the public of this HOLMAC meeting at least 10 calendar days prior, using the following notification methods: major trailheads posting, email to stakeholder list maintained by the City, posting on City website, news release, City social media.
- 2.4** Following the mid-October HOLMAC meeting, the City will:
- 2.4.1** refine the draft list of major projects (if necessary) based on public feedback received at the HOLMAC meeting and guidance from HOLMAC
 - 2.4.2** complete a project analysis form* (see project analysis form) for each major project under consideration for implementation in the upcoming calendar, or future, calendar years
 - 2.4.3** As part of the project analysis, the City will determine initial technical feasibility for design and implementation of the project. This will include financial, environmental and technical feasibility of achieving the project.
 - 2.4.4** finalize the draft list of Major Projects
- 2.5** When City staff identify significant public interest, or if requested by stakeholders, City staff may meet with interested stakeholders at the earliest opportunity about a specific project. If a meeting is scheduled, the City shall provide notice at least 10 days prior to the project meeting in the same fashion as described above.

Step 3: Major Projects Open House

- 3.1** The City will release all major projects with project analysis reviews for public review at least 10 days in advance of the Major Projects Open House by posting on the City website, City social media, an email to stakeholder list maintained by the City, and via hard copy at the Helena Parks, Recreation & Open Lands office.
- 3.2** The City will host an Open House in **mid-November** each year to:
- 3.2.1** present Major Projects with project analysis reviews
 - 3.2.2** accept public comment on major projects and project analysis review
- 3.3** The public has the opportunity to provide comments to the City for 15 calendar days following the Open House.
- 3.4** The City will notify the public of this Open House at least 10 calendar days prior, using the following notification methods: major trailheads posting, email to stakeholder list maintained by the City, posting on City website, news release, City social media. This notification will include information on the release of the Draft Major Projects (see Step 3.1).

Step 4: Final annual open lands proposed major projects presented to City Commission

- 4.1** The City will present Major Open Lands projects to the City Commission at the regularly scheduled Commission meeting in the **first half of December**.

- 4.2 Major Open Lands projects will be posted on the City Commission meeting agenda per commission public notice requirements

Step 5: Approval of Pending Projects

- 5.1 Any project that has been previously approved by the Commission in prior years, but has not been initiated or completed, will continue to proceed without further Commission action.
- 5.2 Some major project analysis for projects having gone through this public involvement process may extend beyond the annual timeline. In that case, City staff will present the project to the City Commission for action to approve or amend when it has been completed. Upon approval, the project will be appended to the Major Projects list.

Step 6: Implimentation

- 6.1 Major projects that necessitate a design will undergo at least a 65% design that will be shared publicly on the City's website
- 6.2 The City will communicate progress on construction, throughout construction, in the form of on-site signage and electronic public service announcements
- 6.3 Project modifications or changes that are considered substantial must be approved by the City Manager and shared publicly on the City's website. Modifications that are considered substantial are based on meeting one or more of the following criteria:
- Change in the purpose of the project
 - Change in location of the project such as a different drainage or draw, different trailhead, or different area of open lands
 - Changes to length of the project more than ½ mile
 - Changes that are not acceptable to the project proponent (if not the City)
 - Changes that negatively impact the environmental/wildlife/visual character of the trail or project
 - Changes that increase the infrastructure impact/construction
 - Changes that increase the cost or duration of the construction of the project more than \$25,000 or more than one year

Notes:

- It is assumed that all major projects proposed for the HOL will go through the public involvement process. However, it is acknowledged that the Helena City Commission has the authority to alter aspects of this process to accommodate unforeseen circumstances, or complexities involved with a specific project. In these cases, the City will strive to keep the public informed and involved in all HOL decision-making.
- Nothing in this process will prohibit the City from notifying the public of a potential major project under consideration and initiating project analysis prior to the September Listening Session (Step 1).

- This process does not impede the public's ability to submit to the City a project at any time.

Proposed 'Minor' and 'Major' Projects Definitions for HOL

Projects Considered Minor

- Routine trail maintenance
- Signage replacement or updates
- Routine facilities maintenance (e.g., existing trailheads and parking lots)
- Erosion control
- Trail re-routes that improve sustainability and/or safety without changing the fundamental character of the trail.
- Obliteration of social trails

Potential to be Major

- New trail, or trailhead construction (includes extension of existing trails)
- New or changed trail usage rules (i.e., limiting or changing use on an existing trail, allowing new uses on a trail)
- Trail removal and/or reroute
- Potential for significant public interest
- Substantial project cost (i.e., in excess of \$25,000)