

Transportation

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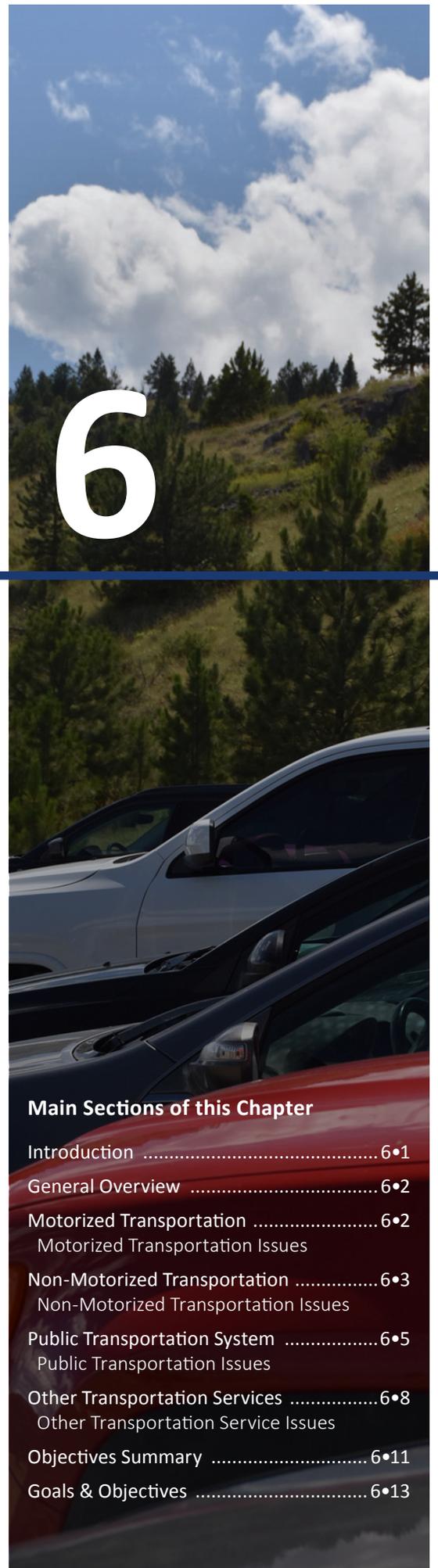
Introduction

Over the past three decades the manner in which Americans live, work, shop and recreate has changed significantly. Changes in energy supplies, household composition, age of the population, and employment opportunities have all had a major influence on the way the City of Helena and the region have grown and developed. These trends are expected to continue into the foreseeable future. Although the City of Helena Growth Policy does not directly address the region outside the City, transportation and mobility issues cross jurisdictional boundaries, including county lines, so trends and emerging issues for transportation affect the entire region. The cost of long-term operation and maintenance should be evaluated for budget implications as new facilities are planned.

This chapter discusses transportation system trends and issues affecting the City of Helena and relies heavily on a review of regional transportation trends and issues identified by the Greater Helena Area Long-Range Transportation Plan – 2014 Update, the Greater Helena Community Transportation Safety Plan (2013), and the Helena Area Transit Development Plan Update (2007-2011). These and other transportation-related plans have extensive influence in the development of the City’s transportation objectives. Additionally, these plans inform a wide range of other, related objectives

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through consideration of transportation facilities necessary for land use development, right-of-way needs, traffic management, and multi-modal system needs.

General Overview

Transportation plans, engineering standards, and current adopted subdivision regulations are used in land use planning decisions when evaluating new and existing developments, annexations, and subdivisions. These documents were developed with citizen participation. Citizen involvement in the planning and implementation of transportation plans and projects is encouraged with future updates.

The impacts on street systems, including the need for reservation of right-of-way, and highway and interstate access are identified to create and extend the street network systematically, logically, and efficiently. Additionally, the impacts new construction has on established neighborhoods, cultural resources, sightlines and skylines, and the environment are also considerations when addressing cut-and-fills on slopes, street design, and location.

Typically, funding mechanisms for street improvements, extensions and new construction are the responsibility of the owners or developers of new subdivisions. Other funding options include Special Improvement Districts, Street Maintenance Districts, and private funding. In recent years, the City has been involved in the development of the South Hills Interchange, extension of Benton Avenue, the reconstruction of Washington Street, improvements to Laurel Street, Cedar Street, and the Custer Avenue Interchange.

One area of emphasis of this Growth Policy is for multimodal transportation, supporting safe and efficient movement of automobiles, bicycles, and pedestrians throughout the city. Helena's "Complete Streets" policy present a key means for implementing multimodal transportation.¹

Motorized Transportation

Private vehicles are the primary mode of transportation in and around the greater Helena area, and most current roadway development has been designed primarily for the automobile. However, major streets with large intersections create barriers for pedestrians and the installation of pedestrian facilities.

The number and concentration of vehicle trips within Lewis and Clark County are directly linked to land use and are affected by the type, size, intensity, and distribution of the land-use activity throughout the area.

¹ Per City of Helena Resolution 19799, a "'Complete Street' is a street that has appropriate street features to accommodate and coordinate all modes of transportation, both motorized and non-motorized, and people of all ages and abilities, with special consideration to optimize safety, interconnectivity, compatibility, and convenience."

Population and employment are key variables in estimating vehicle trips (a vehicle trip is considered a one-way trip to a destination from a point of origin).

Motorized Transportation Issues

The following transportation issues were developed as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during development of the 2011 Growth Policy, as well as in this update. Future actions as may be required are reflected and supported in the objectives framework. Input indicated need for:

- Re-shaping some major roadways to alleviate congestion and improve connectivity;
- Improving the transportation funding system in ways that help share the cost of providing infrastructure between the public and developers, balanced in proportion to benefits and long-term costs;
- Reservation of rights of way at through development processes, preserving capacity for future urban infrastructure and connectivity.

Non-Motorized Transportation

The City of Helena envisions bicycling, walking routes, and paths to be designed connecting destinations and neighborhoods with schools, stores, places of employment, places to live, and places to recreate. Pedestrian movements and facilities are often overlooked in transportation planning, yet walking is an essential part of most trips, including, for example, walking from the transit stop to work, from the parking lot to the store or workplace, or from home to the school bus stop. Safe and convenient pedestrian facilities are essential for children and persons with a mobility limitation or without access to a motor vehicle.

Pedestrians face obstacles and conflicts with motorists when roadways and developments are designed primarily for automobiles. Non-motorized transportation is considered in the decision-making process as part of city land use reviews. Even if pedestrian facilities are provided, major streets with large intersections create barriers for pedestrians. The City has utilized traffic calming devices such as traffic circles, bulb-outs, and speed dips on local streets to reduce motor vehicle traffic speeds and traffic cutting through neighborhoods. In addition, the City works continually to expand local bike and pedestrian routes. For example, City efforts have facilitated expansion of the Centennial Trail from Spring Meadow Lake to East Helena, with only a few gaps left.

In 2010, the City of Helena adopted a “Complete Streets” ordinance. The concept of complete streets includes a transportation network



Figure 6.01 – Growth Policy objectives seek to improve safe, comfortable non-motorized mobility in all areas of Helena. (Image: SCJ Alliance, Inc.)

that accommodates non-motorized and motorized facilities. An all-inclusive transportation system such as complete streets could save money, promote a more physically active community (with associated health benefits), save or reduce direct and indirect costs associated with transportation, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and make a more livable community. This concept is also discussed in the Land Use chapter of this document.

Bicycling is an important mode of transportation and recreational activity in Helena and across the county, and is available to people of all ages and socioeconomic levels. Bicycling is a particularly efficient and convenient form of transportation in urban areas. Because bicycling is more practical and popular during the warmer months – the same months automobile traffic volume is higher – it may play a role in reducing congestion. Like automobiles, bicycles provide a high degree of independence, flexibility, and freedom of choice relative to schedule and destination.

The relatively small number of bicyclists compared to those using other transportation modes makes small-scale surveys difficult. Transportation studies (e.g., origin-destination surveys) either omit bicycle trips or group them together with walking trips. Most available data on bicycling is for work trips, though these make up a small percentage of all bicycle trips.

Non-Motorized Transportation Issues

Multiple non-motorized transportation issues were identified as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during the Growth Policy development and update process. The need to address the following issues, coupled with community support, advised development of many Growth Policy goals and objectives:

- Better pedestrian connectivity throughout the city;
- A need for more full-featured streets network (“complete streets” features);
- Elimination of major barriers to pedestrian travel, including provision of basic amenities, traffic calming, and safer intersections.

Other identified issues related to non-motorized transportation include pedestrian and bicyclist-related law enforcement, and public outreach and education. Additionally, the input indicated the need to install more sidewalks, incorporating accessible design, maintenance of existing infrastructure and seasonal maintenance to ensure that all facilities are useable throughout the year. This maintenance is especially important for mobility for the elderly and persons with disabilities.

Public Transportation System

Capital Transit (formally known as Helena area Transit Service or “HATS”), was established in November 1979 and is owned and operated by the City of Helena. As Capital Transit, the service has a new distinctive look, affordable rates for riders, and two main routes – Red and Blue – providing point-to-point travel to many key locations in Helena including:

- Target store;
- Carroll College;
- Downtown Helena;
- The State Capitol building and campus;
- St. Peter’s Hospital;
- Wal-Mart;
- Transit Center.

The entire fleet is equipped with wheelchair lifts and two-way radios, and all vehicles meet ADA regulations. Capital Transit operates Monday through Friday excluding holidays.

Capital Transit sees success and challenge in its operations. Successes include basic provision – an important “safety-net” service that is highly valued by the community; construction of a new transit center; and willingness to try new things such as the “Capital Commuter” service. Challenges for Capital Transit include low commuter usage rates; a relatively high cost-per-ride; on-time performance struggles, and limited service availability. Another key challenge for Capital Transit is effectively serving areas on the urban fringe – especially as many of these areas were not designed for transit service, and car parking is generally plentiful. As a result, transit travel times from peripheral neighborhoods to the downtown area are relatively long (compared to driving). Funding is

another major challenge, with the lack of a dedicated funding source and a very tight budgets at state and local levels.

In 2010, a petition drive to create Greater Helena Area Transit district failed to secure enough signatures for ballot placement. The district was proposed to provide public transit to a larger area of the Helena community including areas north and east of the City of Helena.

The following lists and provides brief descriptions regarding Capital Transit and various other public transportation system services currently available in the greater Helena area.

Capital Transit – Fixed Route Service

As described above, Capital Transit operates a fixed route service offering hourly bus travel along two fixed routes with pre-determined stops along the way. No call in is required for service.

ADA Paratransit - Curb-to-Curb Service

The ADA Paratransit Curb-to-Curb service compliments Capital Transit’s fixed route buses, and is required to be in operation concurrent with fixed route services. Passengers are generally those with a qualified disability restricting access to nearby fixed-route stops, and are instead picked up at the closest curb to their origin and delivered to the closest curb at their destination. Rides are arranged by calling and scheduling service at least 24 hours in advance, although urgent requests or available vehicles may allow service on a same-day basis.

East Valley Bus Service

The East Valley bus service functions as a deviated fixed route bus service from the East Valley area and City of East Helena, to call-in stops within the City of Helena. The service began operating in early 2006.

Rocky Mountain Development Council

Rocky Mountain Development Council, Inc. (RMDC), a Community Action Agency created under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, has been providing transportation services for their senior program clientele since 1986. RMDC buses pick up clients Monday through Friday at their homes and take them to and from various functions.

Spring Meadow Resources

Spring Meadow Resources, an agency that serves adults with developmental disabilities, provides client transportation to the Spring Meadow Resources Day Center and Helena Industries as well as to shopping, recreation, social activities, and medical providers.

West Mont Habilitation Services

West Mont Habilitation Services, an agency of West Mont, provides transportation for persons with developmental disabilities who live in one of seven group homes or who attending day-training workshops. The transportation services also provide West Mont's clients access to work, social, medical, recreational and shopping opportunities in the community. Services are available on-demand, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. West Mont Habilitation Services also utilizes Capital Transit buses.

Taxi Service & Montana Independent Living Project

Capitol Taxi (formerly Old Trapper Taxi) is the sole taxi company operating in the Helena Valley. Capitol Taxi provides door-to-door service on demand, 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. Its service area is within a 50-mile road radius from the Federal Building in downtown Helena. Capitol Taxi reports approximately 160 to 175 trips per day, including work trips, trips for elderly/disabled, and service to the airport.

In 2018, the Montana Independent Living Project (MILP) partnered with Capitol Taxi and launched the Helena Area Evening & Weekend Accessible, Affordable, and Integrated Taxi Voucher Program. This filled an unmet need in the area due to the City of Helena's public transit service not operating after 6:00 pm on weekdays with no service on weekends. MILP began providing 120 rides a month, and currently provide over 300 rides per month.

Ridesharing / Ride-Hailing Services

Uber Ride-hailing services utilizing smart-phone software provide additional transportation options for Helena-area residents. Currently, both Uber and Lyft operate such services, with Uber in local operation since 2016 and Lyft since 2017.

Bus Services

Salt Lake Express currently provides intercity and interstate bus transportation in Helena. Salt Lake Express, based in Rexburg Idaho, offers routes and stops focused along the I-15 corridor, including cities in Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, Nevada and Arizona.

First Student Transportation is the contracted school bus service for Helena School Districts 1 and 2. TST's public utilities commission rights limit it to providing school-contracted services only within the State of Montana. Outside state borders, it has rights to provide interstate charters.

G & L Transit is a charter bus company based out of Helena/Lewis and Clark County and Butte. G & L serves the continental United States from its two base locations. Major clients include the U.S. Government (military personnel in particular) and the State of Montana. Other than fixed-schedule service for local government adult special needs clients, G & L's



Figure 6.02 – Multi-modal options are seen as important for economic and quality of life matters, as well as a means to support land use patterns the community envisions. (Image: SCJ Alliance, Inc.)

service is available 24 hours per day and seven days per week.

Public Transportation Issues

Multiple public transportation issues were identified as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during the Growth Policy development and update process. The need to address the following issues, coupled with community support, advised development of many Growth Policy goals and objectives:

- Evaluation of, and support for, increased demand for public transit as people look for alternatives for getting to work; particularly in the areas of downtown and at the Capitol complex;

- Improvements to the east west bus route system;

- Park & Ride facilities to help access the transit system.

Additionally, input indicated the use and expansion of public transit and pedestrian/bicyclist access to those services. It is also recognized that the primary choice of travel remains the automobile.

Other Transportation Services

Rail Transportation Services

Rail service to Lewis and Clark County has been available for more than 125 years, and, at one time, was a principal mode of transportation for both people and goods. Through the years, the automobile, truck, and airplane have partially displaced rail service.

Two railroad lines are located in the greater Helena area – one traveling east-west and the second traveling north-south. The east-west line roughly

parallels Highway 12 (but crosses the Continental Divide at the Mullan Tunnel) and is operated by Montana Rail Link (MRL), providing freight services, but no regular passenger services, to the Helena area. Helena is under consideration to be included on a route for Amtrak service if a southern route is re-established. The north-south line extends north to Great Falls and is operated by Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF). As a result of flooding and wash-out in 1998, the north-south line is not operational, and is used only to store rail cars. According to MRL, an average of 25-30 trains a day travel through Helena on the east-west line, but that number can fluctuate depending upon the economy. Installing a railroad underpass or overpass on Montana Avenue has been discussed for many years and has been included as a non-prioritized major network improvement in the Transportation Plan.

In 2015, the City adopted the Greater Helena Area Long Range Transportation Plan which makes recommendations for Helena, Helena Valley, and Lewis and Clark County. According to the Plan, heavy trucks account for nearly five percent of the traffic stream along major routes. In addition to large trucks, the rail line traversing the area has 16 active at-grade crossings, some of which cross roadways with over 4,000 Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT). Traffic and freight volumes are expected to increase in the coming years, so it will be important that freight traffic – both trucks and rail – be taken into consideration with any possible changes to the transportation network. Potential improvements could include:

- *Providing grade-separated crossings;*
- *Reinforcing at-grade crossing infrastructures;*
- *Ensuring adequate lane width for trucks;*
- *Ensuring adequate turning radii for trucks at intersections.*

Air Transportation Services

The Helena Area Regional Airport is located within the City of Helena, with some lands owned by the airport located adjacent to City boundaries. Passenger service is provided by regional airline services such as Horizon/Alaska Airlines, Skywest/Delta and United Express, with approximately 424 seats available for departing air traffic each day. Air passenger and air freight traffic have seen steady increases for several years, with passenger ridership growing at an average of pace of 4% each year since 2008, with a bump of 11.5% occurring between 2017 and 2018.

The airport property also contains a National Guard helicopter battalion and other, general aviation facilities. The airport is governed by the Airport Authority Board, made up of members appointed by the City of Helena and Lewis and Clark County.

Recently, the Airport completed Phase 1 of a terminal expansion, including restrooms, a snack bar and other amenities. Phase 2 kicks off in 2019 and is expected to be completed in the spring of 2020. The expansion project is funded by airport user fees and is not funded with any local taxes or levies.

Fuel prices and passenger bookings affect airport operations. To remain competitive, the airport is looking for the best mix of uses compatible with airport operations, such as possible tenants for some of its property, to provide additional revenues and offset expenses.

Trucking & Freight Transportation Services

Helena is located along local, regional, and international trade routes. On a local level, many businesses rely on timely freight delivery in order to provide products to their customers. It is important that delivery vehicles are able to travel through the area in a safe and effective manner. Regionally, Helena sits along routes connecting the cities of Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, and Missoula. Two major roadways serve as these connections; US Highway 12 runs east-west, and Interstate 15 runs north-south. At international scales, Helena is situated along the Canamex Corridor, a freight corridor connecting Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

Parking

Parking in Helena is affected by on-street, off-street, and parking facility capacities as well as physical limitations imposed by topography. As travel and parking needs have increased, there is a corresponding need to better manage transportation and parking facilities (both auto and bicycle parking), to minimize the amount of valuable land used for travel and parking purposes, and to minimize the public investment needed for transportation purposes. Parking requirements also have a significant impact on the development of affordable housing and commercial development. The latest Downtown Helena Master Plan (2018) notes the need to:

- *Improve parking management, helping improve convenience for visitors and aiding implementation of desired retail and residential growth;*
- *Revisit off-street parking requirements in downtown zoning districts, considering elimination of off-street parking requirements, revising requirements to more accurately reflect actual use patterns (“Right Size Parking”), improved design standards for off-street parking, or a combination of all three.*

Other Transportation Service Issues

Related to transportation services referenced above, several issues were identified as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during the Growth Policy update process. The need to address the following issues, coupled with community support, advised development of many Growth Policy goals and objectives:

- There is no passenger rail service to Helena, but examination and work to realize such services is desired;

- Parking services in Helena should balance a need for resident and commercial parking, particularly in the mixed-use areas;
- Many in the community feel there is a shortage of long-term parking, and perceptions exist that a shortage of short-term parking exists in the downtown area.

Objectives Summary

As stated in one of its key goals, Helena intends to establish and maintain a strong multi-modal transportation system, providing opportunity for all to travel safely and efficiently, on-pace and in concert with demand and overall Growth Policy objectives. The City understands the tight relationship transportation function and design plays in the overall efficiency, beauty and value of the community, setting the stage for and supporting desired land use patterns. As such, this plan's objectives encourage ongoing coordination between transportation systems planning and investment and Growth Policy aims, playing a key role in community growth.

Transportation-oriented objectives include support for a system design that:

- Promotes efficient movement of goods and services, helping reduce the number of individual trips and vehicle miles traveled;
- Improves connectivity, giving travelers multiple route options and boosting network resiliency;
- Supports compact land use patterns;
- Supports multiple modes of travel, allowing residents to get around safely and efficiently with or without the use of a motor vehicle;
- Highlights and supports development of neighborhood centers;
- Is coordinated with parks system and open space planning, helping facilitate and activate existing and future trail networks;
- Supports and proceeds on-pace with desired growth;
- Is developed in concert with local and statewide partner agencies;
- Supports transit system growth;
- Complements and protects neighborhood character.

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■ Transportation Goals & Objectives

Goals

[G.03] Provide high-quality, affordable and efficient public facilities and services in Helena that also prioritize the protection of public health, including residents and visitors.

Discussion: Municipalities exist to provide infrastructure and services that would be impossible for individuals to provide. While pooled resources make services achievable, they also require strong levels of coordination and management to assure accountability and efficiency. This goal anchors the need for the City of Helena to consider the long-term cost implications and benefits of facility choices impacting land use, transportation investments, parks and recreational services, as well as other types of infrastructure – maintaining efficiency and the overall well-being of the community it serves.

[G.05] Establish and maintain a strong multi-modal transportation system for Helena, providing opportunity for all to travel safely and efficiently, on-pace and in concert with demand and overall Growth Policy objectives.

Discussion: All cities require functional, resilient transportation networks providing for the flow of people and materials. In assisting with this Growth Policy, residents urged improvements to the existing fabric and criteria that provide a full-featured street network for Helena, improving the efficiency, function and value of the City. Residents also recognize the importance of coordinating design of facilities with surrounding land uses, using transportation systems to complement existing patterns.

[G.11] Coordinate with adjacent jurisdictions and agencies, including East Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Jefferson County, and Broadwater County on issues that have regional impacts.

Discussion: In the past, Helena was a more centralized, independent place. Today, the City's fortunes and that of its residents depends on a set of dynamic, inter-dependent relationships between East Helena, Lewis and Clark, Jefferson and Broadwater Counties, and other agencies and forces that shape the region. Over the course of this plan's life cycle, it is expected that inter-agency collaboration will become even more important. Accordingly, this plan's goal and objectives framework supports actions building the economic health and resilience of the region as a whole, especially as it relates strategically to the unique qualities Helena residents enjoy.

Objectives

- [O.14] Support the development of housing located in proximity to necessary services and quality of life assets, including generalized physical, technological, social and economic infrastructure.
- [O.20] Maintain public health and public safety as high priorities, providing necessary services and addressing potential hazards within and adjacent to City limits.
- [O.27] Promote efficient use of community infrastructure, services and resources, including efforts to:
- Increase energy efficiency;
 - Reduce vehicle trips;
 - Maintain air quality;
 - Minimize noise pollution.
- [O.33] Foster open-space connectivity in and around Helena, helping link parks, open spaces and water bodies, and providing opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle trails.
- [O.34] Coordinate parks system planning with land use and transportation planning, recognizing the public health and recreational value of features that support walking and cycling.
- [O.37] Work towards compliance with accessibility requirements in accordance with Americans with Disability Act (ADA).
- [O.39] Develop and enhance a transportation system in Helena that:
- Facilitates the safe, efficient movement of people, goods and services;
 - Supports non-motorized and recreational needs;
 - Promotes livable neighborhoods;
 - Supports the needs of Helena’s elderly, disabled and disadvantaged populations;
 - Improves safe pedestrian and bike routes;
 - Respects the area’s natural and historic context;
 - Improves and connects to regional transit systems.
- [O.40] With Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), plan a logical, long-range arterial system for Helena, including interstate access that promotes compact, highly- connected land use patterns and that may be systematically implemented through right-of- way reservations.
- [O.41] Coordinate transportation investment with efficient land use patterns, making cycling and walking a practical transportation alternative.
- [O.42] Promote transportation facilities and land use patterns that support resource efficiency and reduce the output of greenhouse gasses.

- [O.43] Require street development or improvement projects to include facilities allowing persons of all ages and abilities to travel by automobile, foot, bicycle, and public transit.
- [O.44] Prefer transportation designs that:
- Preserve natural viewsheds;
 - Are compatible with historic resources;
 - Minimize construction cut-and-fill on slopes.
- [O.45] With local and regional jurisdictions, identify key transportation corridors and work to differentiate arterial roadway design, emphasizing neighborhood centers as points of community importance and focus.
- [O.46] Require that subdivisions and other developments provide a transportation system that:
- Promotes connectivity where adjacent to developed areas;
 - Provides for future connectivity with anticipated development;
 - Incorporates ‘traffic calming’ measures where appropriate;
 - Supports non-motorized transportation.
- [O.47] Maintain and improve the continuity of sidewalks, trails, and bicycle paths in Helena, improving conditions for non-motorized transportation across the city and between future neighborhood centers.
- [O.48] Work to improve street connectivity in all areas of Helena, improving walkability, public health and safety, and transportation efficiency.
- [O.49] Encourage new development to provide multi-modal access to nearby parks, trails and green spaces.
- [O.61] Promote landscaping guidelines that:
- Maintain or restore native trees and vegetative cover;
 - Support locally-compatible species diversity;
 - Re-vegetate disturbed areas;
 - Beautify streets, entry corridors, roadways and parking lots;
 - Help calm traffic;
 - Help treat and address stormwater issues.
- [O.77] Apply or revise zoning designations with careful consideration of factors including:
- Future land use mapping;
 - Compatibility with surrounding land uses;
 - Infrastructure and service plans;
 - Development of vacant and under-utilized buildings;
 - Existing and future traffic patterns;
 - Goals and objectives of the growth policy, related master plan and/or facility plans.

- [O.78] Encourage infill development on vacant and under-utilized land within the city, directing growth to areas currently served by, or in close proximity to, existing infrastructure and that harmonizes with the character of existing neighborhoods.
- [O.80] Promote development of varied and compatible types of mixed-use neighborhood centers in Helena, serving to enhance neighborhood identity, address community need, and support more compact land use patterns.
- [O.83] Encourage development patterns that provide suitably-scaled, daily needs services within walking distance of residential areas, allowing a measure of independence for those who cannot or choose not to drive.
- [O.84] Promote small block development patterns, promoting connectivity and reduced multi-modal travel distances between residences and schools, parks, and services.
- [O.85] Reduce functional and visual impacts of entry corridors and commercial development on abutting residential neighborhoods, considering buffering uses, design standards and other methods.
- [O.87] With the school district, prioritize location of schools in areas with:
 - Access to arterial and collector streets;
 - Ample sidewalks and pedestrian access;
 - Proximity to residential areas being served;
 - Proximity to designated neighborhood centers;
 - Cost-effective access to necessary utilities and services.