



Helena Citizens' Council
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To: The Helena City Commission, Mayor Wilmot Collins & City Manager Burton
From: The Helena Citizens' Council
Date: July 24, 2024

Greetings Mayor Collins, Commissioners Dean, Logan, Reed, Shirliff, and City Manager Burton:

Let it be known that the Helena Citizens' Council, at its regular full board meeting on July 24, 2024, voted and passed the following recommendation for your consideration:

Recommendation: The HCC recognizes that the road dust created by traffic on South Davis Street/Davis Gulch Road negatively impacts the safety and health of area residents as well as the recreating public. HCC recommends that the City reinstate its past practice of dust abatement (magnesium chloride or similar) once or twice per year on South Davis/Davis Gulch Road and expand its treatment from the end of pavement to at least the City Limits (1.3 miles) or ideally to the end of the road (0.2 miles further or 1.5 miles total). HCC additionally recommends the speed limit be lowered to the historic 15MPH with appropriate notification such as Driver Feedback signage.

Background:

South Davis Street turns from pavement to a dirt surface approximately a half mile south of Broadway; at this point the road is often referred to as Davis Gulch Road. The length of Davis Gulch Road to the City Limits is 1.3 miles; the total length of Davis Gulch Road (to the fork of Dry and Tucker Gulches = 0.2 miles further, or 1.5 miles total).

The City of Helena encourages the public to recreate along Davis Gulch Road and has made significant investments in recreational amenities along and parallel to the road including renovated Trailheads, the Archery Range, two Bike Skills Parks, a Universal Access Trail, and a variety of popular hiking, running, and mountain biking trails.

Davis Gulch Road and its two trailheads, Deford and the Old Shooting Range, are the primary access to the Mt. Ascension and Rodney Ridge Trail Systems. Combined they are the second most popular access point to Helena's renowned South Hills Trail System (second only to the Mt. Helena Trailhead) (Data: 2017 University of Montana Study).

Of the top five South Hills Trailheads, Davis Gulch Road is the only access via a dirt road. All others are paved and therefore, not negatively impacted by road dust.

From 2012 to 2020, traffic levels on Davis Gulch Road were steady at approximately 550 average annual daily vehicles. In 2021 and 2022, the traffic level increased 52% ballooning to 845 average annual daily vehicles, primarily due to an increase in recreational usage. For reference, this is similar to the levels of traffic found on the paved Oro Fino Gulch Road to Unionville. (Data: MDT) Some of the traffic increase on Davis Gulch Road can be attributed to an increase in new residential development south of Davis Gulch Road in the Tucker and Dry Gulch areas (including Cox Lake). Montana cadastral data provided by the Montana State Library indicates only a handful of new homes constructed over the past six years, suggesting this has only minimally increased traffic on Davis Gulch Road.

The City of Helena abandoned a tradition of routine (once or sometimes twice a year) dust abatement treatment on the first 0.5 miles of Davis Gulch Road for well over a decade in 2021. It has now been 25 months since this stretch of Davis Gulch Road has been treated for dust.

The City provides additional encouragement for recreation along Davis Gulch Road by permitting competitive running and cycling events along with permits for commercial recreational endeavors (ex. biking camps and trail shuttle services).

Due to the lack of dust abatement, the high amount of traffic and its steep topography on either side of the road, dust tends to be dense and get trapped along Davis Gulch Road, directly impacting the safety and health of recreationalist and downstream residences year around.

A study was completed in 2017 by the University of Montana on the economic impact of recreation on Helena's economy. Between May and September 2017, there were 11,142 trail users who recreated from the South Davis Trailheads, or nearly 18% of all trail users in the South Hills System, second only to the Mount Helena Trailhead in popularity. The authors of the study highlight the significance of these findings in attracting businesses and employees to the community. Visitors who used the trail system spent about \$4 million between May and September. This supports 60 jobs annually, \$1.5 million in income, and \$185,211 in local taxes.

South Davis Gulch Road has become a significant entry point for tourists and visitors to experience the natural beauty of our city. However, the unsightly cloud of dust obscuring the scenery tarnishes the overall appeal of the area. This could potentially deter tourists from visiting, resulting in a negative impact on local businesses and revenue.

The motion passed – 15 members in favor, 0 opposed.

Helena Citizens' Council Members



Ben Kuiper, HCC Chair