

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Pathways to Community

By Keith Hammer

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As traffic in the Flathead soars, a network of safe bicycle and walking paths makes all the more sense. Lightly used roads that many of us grew up biking and playing on are now too busy with cars and trucks to provide safe passage for our kids to get to school or a friend's house on foot or bike. And, in this day of iPods and video games, children and adults alike need no further disincentives to getting outside for some healthy exercise.

Non-motorized pathways, sometimes located along the side of a road and sometimes in more pristine and natural settings, provide the extra margin of safety necessary for parents to feel good about their kids getting around the neighborhood under their own power, rather than relying on mom and dad to drive them. Better yet, these pathways encourage relaxed family outings that cost nothing while providing heart-healthy exercise and heart-healthy relationships.

Pathways also provide a safe and energy-efficient way for adults to commute to work. No need to stop by the gym after work when a person gets plenty of fresh air and exercise along the way! Wouldn't it be wonderful if families now relying on two cars for commuting to work and school could trim their needs and expenses back to just one?

While such ideas may seem far-fetched, families across the country have already realized them and efforts are underway to make such opportunities more available here in the Flathead. Flathead County is in the process of mapping out a network of bike and walking paths that would connect communities with one another, with public parks, and with other public lands. To its credit, the County is asking for everyone's suggestions on where to locate these trails and how best to move forward in making the pathways network a reality.

As this column is published, the county will be finishing a series of four workshops in Somers, Columbia Falls, Creston, and Kila, where preliminary maps will be discussed and ideas and opinions solicited. For those not able to attend the meetings, the county has invited folks to complete a quick and easy survey to present their thoughts. The survey takes just a few moments and can be completed on-line by visiting http://flathead.mt.gov/parks_rec and clicking on Trails Survey. A print copy of the survey is available at the Flathead County Parks and Recreation office at 309 FFA Drive, Kalispell, MT 59901 or by calling 406-758-5800.

It is exciting to see the county helping coordinate an overarching pathways plan that can help join together a number of individual initiatives and projects already underway or being contemplated. The Bigfork Rotary is using volunteers and donations to link the Wild Mile Trail upstream from Bigfork to the Echo Lake Trail, linking up over six miles of trail offering wonderful views of both the Swan River and Swan Range. Imagine extending the Echo Lake Trail northward along Foothill Road to link up with the Jewel Basin Road and trails on nearby state and federal forestlands!

An equally visionary project is well underway to provide a pathway from Foys Lake to Blacktail Mountain, and an effort has been launched by Lakeside residents to reestablish a hiking trail up Blacktail Mountain, linking Lakeside to the southern end of the Foys to Blacktail Trail. This would provide nearby hiking opportunities with outstanding views of Flathead Lake and its eastern scenic backdrop, the Swan Range.

The combined trails would not only link the Lakeside and Kalispell communities physically, the process of securing necessary easements and land purchases will help establish community through its essential underpinnings of coordination and cooperation. Let's not kid ourselves, the process of identifying, prioritizing and establishing a countywide network of pathways that link our communities will require generous amounts of funding, cooperation and volunteer effort.

If approached enthusiastically, however, the process can link our communities in ways only hinted at by the resulting strips of dirt, gravel and asphalt. The investment will be returned many times over in benefits to public health, safety and wellbeing as we pursue and use these pathways to community!

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org. This article was underwritten by Musicians United to Sustain the Environment (MUSE at www.musemusic.org).



Bike and walking paths, like this one along Idaho's Coeur d'Alene River, safely connect communities with each other and nature. Keith Hammer photo.