

On the Path

Safer, Healthier, More Natural!

By Keith Hammer

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Last fall, Flathead County Parks and Recreation held public meetings and conducted a survey to learn what residents use and want in terms of county parks and recreation facilities. A Parks and Recreation Master Plan was written and a draft is now being reviewed by the County Planning Board. It is also available for review by the public at http://flathead.mt.gov/parks_rec/master_plan.php.

The draft Master Plan's Appendix E includes results from last fall's survey. There's a lot of good news regarding public attitudes towards parks and non-motorized pathways that contribute to public health and the appreciation of nature. When asked what types of parks are most needed in Flathead County, the top three choices among respondents were pathways, natural areas, and parks with river or creek frontage. When asked which benefits of parks and open space are most important, respondents chose the enjoyment and protection of the natural environment, water or public land access, and improvement of health and wellness as the top three benefits.

These results are in line with the way folks reported they prefer to recreate and why. Over two-thirds said they use parks to enjoy the outdoors and nature. Nearly half said they use parks to walk or bike for exercise. Most reported that family members walk for pleasure (98%), bicycle for pleasure (84%), exercise for fitness (86%) take nature walks (87%), watch wildlife (81%), picnic (74%), or cross-country ski (70%).

It is not surprising then that 60% of the respondents said protecting natural areas such as wetlands, floodplain and wildlife areas is a very important aspect of park planning. Other areas of major agreement among respondents were that Flathead County should develop a countywide non-motorized trail and pathway system that also connects the parks themselves, and that protecting access to rivers, lakes and public lands should be a priority.

Indeed, 71% of respondents said their households would use new non-motorized pathways to access parks and recreation areas, while 53% said they would also use the new pathways as recreation destinations in themselves. Sizeable numbers said they would use new pathways to access downtown areas (32%), local shopping areas (20%), work (20%), schools (23%), and adjacent communities (31%). Only 7% said they would not use new pathways.

The interest in expanding the pathway system can perhaps be explained, at least in part, by responses to the question of what keeps folks from using park and recreation facilities or from using them more often. The largest impediment to use was the distance of the facilities from home (41%) and the least mentioned impediment cited was physical disability (3%).

What emerges from this survey is a sizeable desire on the part of Flathead County residents to see more non-motorized pathways in their neighborhoods that link them with other neighborhoods and parks. What also emerges is a vision of parks and

pathways that provide for healthy exercise, safe commutes and recreation, and the appreciation and protection of nature. Not a bad vision during a time when one may be prone to believe folks are too busy watching TV in the house or the DVD in the SUV to even care!

The next step of course is for folks to join the 429 that responded to the Parks and Recreation Survey in reviewing the draft Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which is currently being reviewed by the County Planning Board. Comments can be submitted by email to Parks and Recreation Director Jed Fisher at jedfisher@flathead.mt.gov or by mail to 309 FFA Drive, Kalispell, MT 59901. One can also subscribe to Parks and Recreation's e-newsletter by emailing a request to Project Consultant Kate McMahon at kate@appcom.net. The e-newsletter will keep you abreast of the Master Plan process and announce any hearings in the matter that may be scheduled by the Planning Board.

There is a collective vision emerging for safe and healthy commuting and recreation in Flathead County. Now is the time to get involved to see it become a reality!

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.



Trails offer opportunities for folks of all ages to appreciate nature while getting healthy exercise – here along the Sprunger-Whitney Nature Trail. Keith Hammer photo.