

On the Path

County Trails Plan Approved!

By Keith Hammer

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America does not compare well with other countries in health and exercise, but Flathead County Commissioners recently approved a County Trail Plan that can help turn the trend around. The proposed trail network would connect Flathead municipalities with one another, as well as with Flathead Lake and Glacier National Park, providing safe pathways for folks to commute and exercise on foot and bicycle!

How many times have you wanted to walk or bike to a nearby park or social function, but didn't want to risk walking or riding on the narrow shoulder of a busy highway? How many times have you wanted to take a calming stroll, run or ride, but find relaxation impossible while dodging traffic?

These impediments to everyday exercise exacerbate lifestyle choices that have landed the United States at the top of the list of nations in terms of obesity. Two-thirds of Americans are currently overweight or obese and that proportion is expected to reach three-fourths by 2020!

Other studies have found Americans walk half as many steps daily than either Australians or Swiss, largely as a result of fewer errands being conducted on foot. "The health benefits of walking are underappreciated. Even modest amounts of walking, if performed on a daily basis, can help to maintain a healthy body weight," according to Dr. David R. Bassett, Jr., of the University of Tennessee Obesity Research Center in Knoxville.

The County Trail Plan provides a blueprint and a mechanism by which to increase the opportunities for folks to commute, run errands, and have good clean family fun without competing with automobiles for a strip of the asphalt. The proposed trails are un-funded, however, and therein lie both a challenge and a great impetus for community organizing.

The PATHS Committee (People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety) took 2 1/2 years to gather public input on developing the plan for "a safe and convenient network of non-motorized trails connecting Flathead County communities, schools, parks and public lands for the benefit of our families, our economy and our environment." With overwhelming public support and the recent incorporation of the resulting plan as a part of the Flathead County Growth Policy, PATHS now becomes a standing advisory committee to the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Board.

Folks wanting to help establish a stretch of trail through their neighborhood will be able to contact PATHS to learn how best to champion their community project through the process set forth in the County Trails Plan. This sets the stage for marvelous community-building endeavors as neighbors set about the common goal of establishing trails that provide safe pathways for their children traveling to and from school and for the whole family to enjoy as a recreational resource.

Indeed, the networking and fund-raising efforts required to implement the County Trails Plan will serve to unite communities in spirit and common effort every bit as

much as the resulting trails will unite them physically. While Community Transportation Enhancement Program funds are allocated annually by the county to the most worthy trail projects, the local community must provide a matching 17% of those funds awarded. Examples of CTEP funds awarded in the Flathead are the Sam Bibler Memorial Trail in Kalispell, the Red Bridge project in Columbia Falls, Lakeside trails, and the trail championed by Bigfork Rotary that will connect the “Wild Mile” and Swan River School trails near Bigfork.

And so the friendly games should begin as communities organize to implement the County Trails Plan in their neighborhood. What a wonderful opportunity for walking clubs, hiking groups, runners, and bicyclists to hold appropriate events to highlight trails in need of funding, construction or maintenance – and to help raise the necessary funds! Might a road run or bike be a good way to highlight an area in need of a trail to get an alternative, non-motorized pathway established there? Might a hiking or cross-country skiing group want to champion a stretch of front-country trail proposed to link together backcountry trailheads on public lands?

A blueprint and mechanism has been approved for a wonderful trail network in Flathead County. Now it’s time to put our imaginations, legs and backs to work making it a reality. The County Trail Plan and maps can be found at http://flathead.mt.gov/parks_rec and information on how to contact the PATHS committee should be found there in the not too distant future.

Happy trails and keep smiling!

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.



Construction of a walking and bike path along the entrance to Waterton Lakes National Park. Keith Hammer Photo.