

Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan Update

January 2020

General Information - Background and Trails

- The Helena Open Lands (HOL) system is comprised of 46 parcels of land totaling nearly 2,000 acres which have been acquired over the past 115 years.
- Located primarily on the southern flank of Helena, the HOL system is interspersed with roughly 40 miles of designated, multi-use recreational trails.
- These open lands are comprised of two major recreational systems, one dominated by Mount Helena, and the other by Mount Ascension.
- The City of Helena provides: hiking/running, biking, dog exercising, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, fauna and flora observation, and geological /cultural resource exploration.
 - Also, within Helena's open lands system, more formalized open air activities can be found at the South Hills Disc Golf Course, the Dry Gulch Archery Range, Mount Helena Rock Climbing routes, Upper Davis Bike Skills Course, and Mt Ascension Directional Trail.

Current situation

Growing community pressures

- As Montana gains in reputation as a destination location for recreationalists, retirees, and people who seek to live and work close to nature, Helena is similarly experiencing pressures related to growth and increased demand for access to the great outdoors.
- Over the past few years, Helena open lands have experienced increased demand by recreationalists who seek to bike, hike, climb and otherwise use the community's open lands.
- Increased interest from Helenans as well as visitors has led to a need to update the Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan to address management needs and community concerns.
- Concerns include **how to balance the demand for recreational opportunities with the core stewardship values and responsibilities in public land management; how to ensure adequate access and safety; how to continue the long-standing tradition of respect and etiquette; and how to provide meaningful public involvement and engagement in the City's decision making processes.**
- The Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan provides policy guidance for current and future opportunities and provides a policy framework to systematically and uniformly address pressures on these public lands.

Current HOL Management Plan

- Adopted in 2004
- Chapter 1 – Introduction
- Chapter 2 - Overall Management Goals
- Chapter 3 – Forest and Riparian Management
- Chapter 4 – Wildfire Mitigation
- Chapter 5 – Noxious Weed Control
- Chapter 6 - Protection of Native Plant Species
- **Chapter 7 – Recreation Plan**
- Chapter 8 – Wildlife Protection
- Chapter 9 – Boundary Identification and Mapping
- Chapter 10 - Historical Resources and Interpretive Opportunities
- Chapter 11 – Urban Interface
- Chapter 12 - Implementation and Funding

Community input process

- Spring 2019 - City of Helena engaged CDR Associates to lead the Helena Open Lands Recreation Plan update.
 - The CDR team interviewed 50 individuals from 23 organizations or affiliations, and reached out to nearly 80 individuals from 38 organizations or affiliations.
 - Groups interviewed include: City of Helena Commissioners and Staff, Lewis and Clark Public Health, Bike Walk Montana, Blackfoot Brewing, Carroll College Outdoors, Girls Thrive, Great Divide Cyclery, Helena Citizens' Council, Helena Climbers Coalition, Helena Disc Golf Alliance, Helena High Outdoor Club, Helena Hikes, Helena Trails Alliance, Helena United Cycling, Helena Open Lands Management Committee (HOLMAC), Last Chance Nordic Ski Club, Montana Audubon, Montana Bicycle Guild, Montana Conservation Corps, Narrate Church, Native Plant Society, Prickly Pear Land Trust and the U.S. Forest Service. In addition, several community members were interviewed.
- From these interviews key themes emerged
- Fall 2019 - CDR engaged Halliday & Associates to design and facilitate three community workshops to gather input on key themes. More than 100 people participated in the workshops. In addition, an on-line survey generated more than 150 responses.
- Fall 2019 – Draft Plan went out for public comment

Intent of plan

The intent of the Helena Open Land Recreation Plan is to be an accessible, usable guide for current and future decision making.

- **Guide (Policy) not prescribe** The City of Helena envisions this plan to serve as a guide for current and future decisions. The City recognizes that uses and demands will continue to change over time. This plan sets out broad guidance and a collaborative process to equip the community's stewardship of HOL.
- **Useful and adaptable** The City of Helena envisions this plan as a policy framework, a working document, with guiding principles and key approaches. It is assumed that policies will continue to evolve as new and unanticipated opportunities and challenges arise.

Goals of the Plan

- **GOAL 1: COMMUNITY ACCESS AND USE**

Provide safe and accessible recreational opportunities for all users.

- **GOAL 2: STEWARDSHIP**

Using stewardship as the guiding principle, manage Helena's Open Lands to balance conservation and recreational use.

- **GOAL 3: FUTURE NEEDS AND GROWTH**

Develop a proactive approach to meeting future open lands needs, adapting to environmental and social changes, and conserving the space for future generations.

- **GOAL 4: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION**

Provide a process for public input in management and recreation decision-making to inform and engage the Helena community.

- **GOAL 5: EDUCATION**

Develop a comprehensive approach to educating and informing users of rules and expectations while enjoying Helena Open Lands.

Comments on the draft plan

- Lack of detail in the plan, specific deliverables, objectives and timeframes, specifics on public process:
 - **Guide not prescribe.** The City of Helena envisions this plan to serve as a guide for current and future decisions. The City recognizes that uses and demands will continue to change over time. This plan sets out broad guidance and a collaborative process to equip the community's stewardship of HOL.
 - For example, this plan guides broad goals and principles that will help HOL managers prioritize projects and work according to accessibility, connectivity, stewardship, and future needs and growth. It also sets-out a public process that all future major projects will undergo.
 - Goal 4.3 in the plan has been updated with following additional information: *4.3e: For major projects, the public input and impact disclosure process will consider similar state and federal processes that include input mechanisms such as public meetings, online comment opportunities, and public notices; the City will strive to adopt a more detailed public input and impact disclosure process by June 2020*

Comments on the draft plan

- Several comments noted that themes and goals related to “stewardship” and “conservation” were not appropriate in this chapter.
 - **Response:** While we recognize this is the chapter specific to recreation direction for HOL, stewardship is a guiding principle that informs our decisions and actions and helps to balance the environment and recreational use. We also recognize that it was challenging to update just one chapter of the HOL management plan because all of the chapters, and all management of HOL lands, are interconnected.
- Several comments noted that bike speed was specifically called out and identified as an issue and that this was inconsistent as other issues were not specifically called out.
 - **Response:** Section 5.2c has been updated: *In instances of user conflict, develop mechanisms to report and remediate, such as increased HOL staff presence, signage and trail reroutes*

Next Steps – Guidance from Commission

- Adopt as we go (chapter 7) – future chapters as we are able
 - Comments received expressed a need to update the entire plan
 - We recognized throughout the process that updating one piece of this plan was challenging because all management of these lands are interconnected.
 - More than 5 years - Use chapter 7 as a framework
 - Additional staff resources needed
- Adopt and direct an entire update of the HOL Management Plan
 - Use chapter 7 as a framework
 - 3-4 years (in sections, revised chapters)
 - 1-2 years (entirety – complete at once)
 - Additional staff (2)
 - Additional staff and consultant/contracted services
- Other direction and guidance