

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

I. Background

For generations, community members and visitors have enjoyed recreating on 13,000 acres of State Trust Land in the Whitefish area. For hikers, bicyclists, cross-country skiers and other outdoor enthusiasts, this forested land offers stunning views, premier wildlife habitat and challenging terrain. With the rapid urbanization that is occurring nationwide and in Flathead County, opportunities to enjoy nature just minutes from town are becoming increasingly rare.

To ensure this privilege will be available for future generations, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and the Whitefish community formed an unprecedented partnership to plan for these lands. After two years of meetings, the State Land Board adopted the Whitefish Area Schools Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan. This plan established a framework for making decisions regarding the management and conservation of the State Trust Lands. One recommendation was to establish a recreational trail system that will connect the various State Trust Land parcels and create a main trail corridor encircling the greater Whitefish area.

In the fall of 2005, the City of Whitefish and Flathead Gateway Partners (a local non-profit group), signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that created a partnership to implement the recommendation for a recreational loop trail. In January 2006, an 18-member planning committee began working on this Master Plan.

Elements of the trail system include a main corridor, secondary trails, trailheads, links to other trail networks and trail amenities. This Master Plan describes each of these components and how they will interface with one another. It contains design standards, management strategies and an action plan to make the trail vision a reality. This Master Plan was developed with input from a wide range of stakeholders. Accomplishing the vision will require their on-going involvement, as well as continued reliance on partnerships with public, private sector and non-profit entities that have been leaders in developing this plan.



View of Boyle Lake



Trail in KM Subarea

Insert Trust Lands Ownership Map

II. Planning Process

In December 2006 the “A Trail Runs Through It” Steering Committee appointed an 18-member citizen committee to develop the trail Master Plan. Committee members represented various user groups and neighborhoods in the vicinity of the trail system.

The planning committee met twice a month beginning in January 2006. The planning process has emphasized public involvement throughout the process. Following are major milestones in this process.

- The Planning Committee held a public meeting in February, 2006 that was attended by approximately 130 people.
- In February/March 2006 an on-line survey received 260 responses.
- Property owners adjacent to State Trust Lands as well as every postal customer in the Whitefish zip code received a postcard inviting residents to participate.
- A media campaign has included routine press releases, newspaper articles, web site updates, and radio/television coverage. A monthly e-newsletter is being sent to an e-mail list of over 300 people.
- The Planning Committee conducted an all-day design charette in March 2006 to determine the preferred trail alignment. The Committee conducted field trips throughout May and June as part of the planning process.
- In August 2006 there will be a public meeting on the Master Plan. The Whitefish City Council is scheduled to adopt the Master Plan soon thereafter.
- The DNRC and State Land Board are scheduled to review the Master Plan and proposed management agreement in fall 2006.



February public meeting



Viewing maps at the public meeting

III. Public Input

The public survey provided information on current usage and preferences that was helpful in identifying the desired components of the trail system and in determining guiding principles for design and management of the trail. Following is a summary of the key findings from the survey.

- Spencer Mountain and Big Mountain are the most heavily used areas. Skyles Lake and Happy Valley subareas receive the least recreational use.
- The most popular activities for recreation in these areas include:
 - Hiking (88%)
 - X-Country Skiing (76%)
 - Mountain Biking (66%)
 - Walking with Dogs (57%)
 - Nature Walks (52%)
 - Running or Jogging (43%)
 - Snow Showing (42.1%)
- Policies that received the strongest support include:
 - Limit or prohibit motorized uses
 - Connect trail to other recreation areas and trails
 - Keep dogs on leashes near roads and congested areas
 - Control litter and vandalism
 - Mitigate environmental impacts
- Trail amenities that received the strongest support include:
 - Trail rules posted at trailhead
 - Trail map posted at trailhead
 - Native – natural surface
 - Garbage disposal
 - Directional signs

Sample Survey Comments

“I would like to see the trail system as a multiple use trail. Many people have different perspectives of the trail use and we need as many people as possible interested in such a project to make it a success.”

“The trails project is a fantastic opportunity for our community. Let’s make it happen.”

“Trail maintenance must be addressed on an annual basis. Many of these areas don’t receive much maintenance except from users. Erosion and creation of side trails are two problems that can be seen throughout the area.”

“The trail system should connect developed trail systems such as Spencer Mountain. Multiple vista points add to trail enjoyment. If possible, connect trail loops or spurs to offer varied trails and difficulty levels.”