

## **CHAPTER 2: Framework for Action**

## I. Vision Statement



A Trail Runs Through It will be a recreational trail network that includes a continuous corridor encircling the greater Whitefish area. This network will enhance access to public lands and other trail systems while respecting traditional uses and promoting public interest in forest health. Primary goals of this trail network will be to provide opportunities for relaxation and outdoor recreation close to town, promote open space, increase revenues for the School Trust Lands, and support the local economy.

- This is a community-driven project implementing a strategy of the Whitefish Area School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan to conserve access to nearby recreation areas and to create partnerships to achieve this vision.
- This trail will contribute to the conservation values of wildlife habitat, water quality, and forest health.
- This trail will include a safe, integrated, well managed system of trailheads that will offer a variety of trail segments accommodating a wide array of abilities and recreationists.
- This trail will be designed to avoid user conflicts and will use existing management practices to guide policy decisions.

**GUIDING  
PRINCIPLES**

*Guiding principles provide a framework for developing the master plan and establishing policies for trail management. The detailed guiding principles are in the appendix. Following are the topics they address.*

*Trail Siting/Location/  
Access*

*Trail Conflicts*

*Maximizing Visitor  
Experience*

*Trail Design*

*Ecological  
Considerations*

*Management &  
Maintenance*

## II. Conservation Values

The 13,000-plus acres of State Trust Lands near Whitefish have tremendous natural resource value. These lands provide open space, wildlife habitat, water resources, and scenic and recreational opportunities to people in adjacent neighborhoods, residents of the county, and visitors. Conserving these resources was a primary objective of the Whitefish Area School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan and is a primary objective of the trail system. Trail design, management policies, and user education materials will emphasize these conservation values. As noted in the Neighborhood Plan:

“Firebreaks, trail maintenance, forestry practices, and wildlife-habitat management are not just DNRC issues, but issues that could be constructively addressed by partnerships between the community, businesses, users, neighborhoods, and DNRC.”

Trail design, construction and management practices will protect and enhance the following natural resource assets:

### 1. Open Space

Open space provides public access to natural and recreation areas. Open space is a key aspect of the scenic quality that makes an area desirable. Open space and forested areas contribute to improved air quality and improved water quality by reducing urban run-off. It provides wildlife habitat and migration corridors. The trail system offers an opportunity for the community to enjoy this open space and learn about the natural resources on these lands.

### 2. Wildlife

Much of the State Trust Land is habitat for mule deer, whitetail deer, moose, and elk. There is also mountain lion, black bear, and grizzly bear habitat on part of the lands where the trail system will be located. Swift Creek and Lazy Creek harbor westslope cutthroat trout and Swift Creek is occupied by bull trout. It will be important to disturb as little habitat as possible and to educate trail users to respect wildlife. Controlling dogs and possible seasonal closures of some trails may be necessary to avoid conflicts with wildlife.



*Forest land*



*Black bear*

### 3. Water Resources

The State Trust Lands around Whitefish have numerous lakes that provide significant fishery and recreation resources. There are six lakes in the Beaver Lakes subarea and Spencer Lake and Skyles Lake are visible from US 93. Streams such as Lazy Creek and Swift Creek are tributaries to Whitefish Lake. Water quality for these creeks, lakes, and associated wetland areas is an important consideration. Unless designed properly, a trail system might have negative impacts on these water resources. Erosion control is one of the most important aspects of protecting water quality.



*Lazy Creek*

### 4. Forestry

DNRC manages most of the State Trust Lands for forestry. This traditional use will continue and the trail manager will coordinate with foresters on trail design and operation. This may require seasonal closures of some trails and locating logging operations so as not to interfere with heavily used trail areas. Agencies may need to develop joint policies on trail usage. The trail system will also be coordinated with fire mitigation strategies.

### 5. Vegetation

The State Lands around Whitefish are characterized by mature forest with mixed conifer stands. Much of the land has been managed for timber harvesting and, depending on the amount of time that has elapsed since the last harvest, the appearance may be that of a mature forest or recently logged area. Wetland areas are characterized by aquatic plants. There are some small meadows where the trail system may traverse.

Common noxious weeds are one of the biggest concerns in maintaining the diversity of native plant species. Non-native plants out-compete most native plants, including species that wildlife rely on for food. Noxious weeds can have deep taproots that rob native vegetation of moisture and nutrients. Weed control will rely on educating users to contain the spread of weeds and assist with their removal.



*Wildflowers in KM subarea.*

### III. Users

It is necessary to define the characteristics of users and the types of recreation activities in order to develop appropriate design standards and management practices for the trail. This trail system is primarily in wooded areas with hilly terrain. People enjoy these areas because of their natural environment and want to maintain those features. These areas currently attract outdoor enthusiasts with a range of physical abilities from families and seniors seeking less strenuous hikes to competitive athletes seeking challenging terrain.

*“I would like to see some of the trails be designated as family friendly – where I could go with my family and have it be usable for biking or walking with my children.”*

*(Survey Comment)*

Public input indicated strong support for allowing a variety of non-motorized activities on the trail. Currently, the DNRC policies for recreation on State Trust Lands provide for multiple recreational uses but prohibit motorized vehicles, except for snowmobiles. Trail design will accommodate multiple uses and policies will promote management practices to minimize conflicts among activities. Community education regarding trail etiquette will be a critical strategy to maximize user experience.

*“As long as everyone is aware that the trail is multi-use, and respectful of other users, there should be very little conflict.”*

*(Survey Comment)*

Specific types of activities on the trail include:

#### 1) Hikers/Walkers

According to the community survey, hiking and walking were the most popular activities on the State Trust Lands. Almost nine of ten people responded that they had hiked on these lands in the past year. Spencer Mountain was the most popular area for hikers followed by the Haskill and Beaver Lakes subareas. Hikers and walkers may also include activities such as walking with dogs, nature walks, bird watching, and wildlife viewing.

*“I go to places to get exercise, fresh air, and enjoy nature and a quiet place. Please don’t pave it. Keep it natural”*

*(Survey Comment)*

#### 2) Mountain Bikers

Of the non-winter sports, mountain biking was the second most popular activity with 68% of respondents engaging in this sport in the past year. Mountain bikers tended to be a slightly younger demographic than the general respondent to the survey. Spencer Mountain and Haskill subareas were the two most popular areas for the mountain bikers.

### 3) Runners

Runners accounted for 43% of the respondents to the survey. This group also represented a younger demographic than the general trail users. The Haskill area was the most popular spot for runners, followed closely by the Spencer Mountain subarea.

### 4) Equestrians

Only 17% of respondents to the survey indicated that they currently use the trail for horseback riding. This group represented an older demographic than the average trail user. The Spencer Mountain and Beaver Lakes subareas were most popular with this group.

### 5) Cross Country Skiers

Cross country skiing was the second most popular activity on the trails with 75% of respondents indicating that they had participated in this sport on State Trust Lands within the last year. Haskill Basin, Spencer Mountain and Beaver Lakes subareas were the most popular places for this activity. Beaver Lakes subarea offered groomed trails for cross country skiers.



*Cross country skiing in  
Beaver Lakes subarea*

### 6) Snowmobilers

Thirteen percent of respondents indicated they had been snowmobiling on State Trust Lands within the last year. This demographic was more likely to be male and more likely to have children under 18 living at home. Typically this group prefers groomed trails and consequently, the Swift Creek area is the most popular. The Beaver Lakes and Spencer Mountain areas also received use from this group.

### 7) Visitors & Commercial Outfitters

In addition to the local population and Montana residents, out-of-state visitors will use trail. Trail information for visitors will be at convenient locations. A commercial horseback operation is currently licensed in the Spencer Mountain subarea. Commercial outfitters for horseback riding and bicycle tours can significantly add to traffic on the trail and potential degradation of heavily used areas. The licensing procedures for commercial operations will address these management concerns.



*The trail may attract bicycle  
touring groups*

## IV. Partnerships

### 1. Lead Agencies

In October 2005 the City of Whitefish and Flathead Gateway Partners (FGP) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to establish a recreational loop trail as generally described in the Whitefish Area School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan. The parties agreed to work together to oversee development of the Master Plan and to process proposals through the DNRC and the State Land Board.

In order to make joint decisions during the project and provide oversight to the planning process, the City of Whitefish and FGP each agreed to contribute two members to a four-member Steering Committee and one alternate member each. The Committee meets monthly and coordinates with public agencies that will be partners in implementing the Master Plan. The city will be the trail manager.

### 2. Project Partners

Partnerships will be the key to realizing the trail vision. The Master Plan anticipates that multiple agencies will be involved in management, design, construction, and funding for the trail. Partnerships are necessary to create linkages with other trail networks in the area, to coordinate with other projects, and to create cost efficiencies. Following are partners that will be involved in implementing the Master Plan.

- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)
- United States Forest Service Tally Lake Ranger District - Flathead National Forest
- Whitefish Fish Trails
- Flathead County – Planning Department, Parks, Road
- Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Big Mountain Resort
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service
- Private Land Owners
- Commercial Outfitters



### 3. Coordination with Area Planning Efforts

- Whitefish Growth Policy Plan

In June 2005 the Whitefish City Council adopted an amendment to the existing 2020 Master Plan to include the Whitefish Area School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan. The city is currently developing a Growth Policy to be completed in early 2007. The neighborhood plan and trail Master Plan will be incorporated into this update.

- Whitefish Pedestrian and Bicycle Trails Master Plan

The City of Whitefish has a Pedestrian and Bicycle Trails Master Plan that envisions construction of 14.85 miles of asphalt and concrete paths within the general vicinity of the Whitefish community. "A Trail Runs Through It" trail system will interconnect with the Whitefish pedestrian and bicycle trail system.

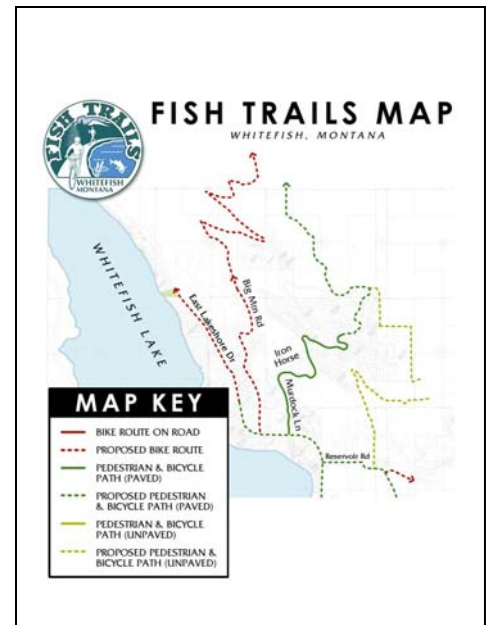
- Flathead County Growth Policy Plan

In June 2005 the Flathead County Commissioners adopted the Whitefish Area Schools Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan as a revision to the Flathead County Master Plan. The county is currently developing a Growth Policy that is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2006. Once the growth policy is adopted, the Neighborhood Plan will be reviewed relative to the new growth policy. As part of the growth policy, the county is engaging in county-wide trail planning. "A Trail Runs Through It" project is being coordinated with this planning.

- Montana Department of Transportation

The proposed trail alignment indicates that the trail will connect with the proposed pedestrian and bicycle trail being planned as part of the improvements to US 93 from Baker Avenue to west of Spencer Lake. A member of the Steering Committee is on the Citizen Working Group and will assist in coordinating the US 93 improvements with the "A Trail Runs Through It" project.

The State of Montana is also completing a road reconstruction project on Big Mountain Road. The new road will be wider, have bigger shoulders and fewer curves. "A Trail Runs



Through It" system is anticipated to interconnect with the Big Mountain Resort trail system through this road.

- Existing Easements & Licenses

The DNRC manages a variety of leases, commercial licenses, and easements in the subareas that are included in the Whitefish School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan. The trail system will be managed so as not to interfere with the operation of these existing uses and measures will be taken to minimize any potential conflicts. Examples of the existing uses include the following:

- Access and right-of-way easements
  - Utility easements
  - Grazing leases
  - Timber leases
  - Cabin leases
  - Recreation licenses (horseback riding, snowmobiling, cross country skiing and dog sledding)
  - Trapping License
  - Firearm range and buffer zone
- 
- USFS Flathead Forest

The main trail corridor that surrounds the greater Whitefish area includes a segment of Flathead National Forest. A portion of the proposed main trail corridor will link the valley floor, State Trust Lands and the Flathead National Forest using the Taylor Creek Road, FS #9790. The Taylor Creek Road is a year-round open road that provides an access route to the Big Mountain Resort permit boundary. This portion of the trail will be subject to the United States Forest Service NEPA review process.

## V. Opportunities

- The planning process and Master Plan will be a model for other communities in the state.
- Developing the trail system will offer many opportunities to partner with other government agencies, non-profit, and private entities to form partnership for this project as well as future related projects.
- The trail system will create an outstanding recreational amenity for the community that will have economic spin-off effects through increased property values and increased tourism.
- The trail will offer an opportunity for community education on conservation values.
- The trail system will promote the recommendations of the Whitefish Area School Trust Lands Neighborhood Plan.
- Through the trail management agreement, there will be increased revenue for the state from better administration of recreational permits.
- Existing trails will be better managed to mitigate environmental impacts.
- The trail system will connect with other trail networks in the county to be part of a comprehensive county-wide trail system.
- The trail system will promote fitness and a healthy lifestyle.
- The trail will have a variety of segments that can appeal to users with varying physical abilities.
- The trail will offer an opportunity to provide long term public access to the State Trust Lands.
- The trail system will offer opportunities to leverage resources and funds for other conservation efforts.
- Trail management will involve the various user groups as volunteers inspiring a sense of ownership of the trail.

## VI. Challenges

- Increased activity in the area from trail users might have negative impacts on the natural resources in the area.
- To reduce potential conflicts between different activities on the trail, there will need to be user education, coordinated enforcement with participating agencies, and a well developed set of policies and rules.
- Garbage disposal is a major concern for trail users.
- Parts of the trail system may cross private land and will require easements negotiations.
- Private land owners adjoining the trail have concerns regarding vandalism, litter, theft, erosion, and trespassing.
- Potential conflicts between user groups are more likely to occur at congested areas such as trailheads and popular trails close to town. Parking areas should be designed to minimize such conflicts.
- There should be better enforcement to curtail unauthorized motorized use and partying on the State Trust Lands.
- Recent logging activity in the Happy Valley area has diminished the aesthetic value of this area. This should be avoided in other areas where the trail is located.
- There will need to be coordination with the Montana Department of Transportation and Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railway on pedestrian crossings.
- There are a number of recreation and transportation projects competing for the same funding sources. These efforts will need to be coordinated.
- Design standards and informational materials should incorporate safety concerns.
- Noxious weeds need to be controlled.