

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION
July 20, 2010

City Commission Work Session

Mayor Winters presiding

CALL TO ORDER: 5:45 p.m.

ROLL CALL: City Commissioners present: Michael J. Winters, Robert Jones, Bill Bronson, and Mary Jolley. Commissioner Burow was excused. Also present were the City Manager, City Attorney, Directors of Park and Recreation, Public Works, Fiscal Services, Library, and Planning and Community Development, Police Chief, Fire Chief and the Administrative Secretary.

1. RIVER'S EDGE TRAIL

Planning and Community Development Director Mike Haynes presented a PowerPoint presentation of the River's Edge Trail (RET). He reported RET currently comprises about 45 miles of linear recreational trails along both the north and south shores of the river. In Great Falls, there are urban, mixed-use paved trails; other trails are gravel and dirt going east and are perfect for hiking and biking off-road. RET extends from Odd Fellows Park on the west to Morony Dam and beyond to the east. From a planning perspective, RET ties together physical, cultural and historical landmarks of the City. RET provides opportunities to recreate and encourages active living for people and dogs of all ages. RET is great for residents, but also encourages a lot of visitors to the City.

Mr. Haynes reported that, from a planning perspective, RET is not just recreational, but also part of the City's multi-mobile transportation system; people can use it to walk or bike to work. RET is an alternative to using a car. He noted the trail system is a prime example of what can be accomplished through intergovernmental cooperation and public/private partnerships. The City's Planning and Community Development, Park and Recreation, and Public Works departments are all involved. Also, Cascade County, Recreational Trails, Inc. (RTI), PPL, FWP and MDT are involved. There has been an RET interagency group working together since 1990, composed of almost all of the previously mentioned RET partners. That group meets monthly to discuss development of RET, the status of construction, future projects, etc.

Mr. Haynes reported RET has won the prestigious National Award for Excellence from the American Planning Association and has been featured in several national journals, bringing a lot of good publicity to the City. He noted RET came out of the 1989 Vision 2000 community planning process and is a prime example of a shared community goal that has been realized and implemented, even beyond what most people could have envisioned twenty years ago.

Mr. Haynes stated the City has leveraged investments of State and Federal dollars for the trail system, and that has been good for the local economy. He reviewed RET construction projects over the last five years and presented a chart showing the vast majority of the funds used for RET were State and Federal funds. A small amount of City funds were used during that time, and most of those funds were used for infrastructure improvements during the trail construction.

Mr. Haynes noted that to turn a vision into reality, a champion is needed, and the RET champion for the last 20 years has been Doug Wicks. Mr. Wicks received the Paris Gibson Award recently. Mr. Haynes added that Mr. Wicks has great powers of persuasion; and along with his dedication and commitment, he has brought the public agencies, private property owners, private donors, and trail users together for a common purpose – and 45 miles of trail have resulted. Mr. Wicks receives a monthly stipend out of PL funds (funds limited to transportation planning efforts only), and Mr. Haynes stated the return on that investment over the years has been incredible.

Mr. Wicks handed out the latest version of the trail map, sponsored by PPL Montana, and noted the maps are available at the Park and Recreation Department, visitor centers, bike and outdoor shops, the Chamber of Commerce, Public Library, and some motels. He explained 4,000 - 5,000 maps are distributed each year to people in Great Falls and visitors from all over the country. He added a map is used to recruit new staff to Great Falls. RET is a trail visitors enjoy.

Mr. Wicks noted locals like RET also. Over 870 Great Falls residents filled out a Park and Recreation Department survey in January, 2009. The top five City facilities used by people surveyed were: paved trails, 69.4%; Civic Center, 64.8%; playgrounds, 45.8%; water park, 42.3%; and unpaved trails, 37.6%.

Mr. Wicks reported the April, 2009, Pinnacle Research released its 2008 Missouri-Madison Visitor Study Results that showed a minimum of 50,000 people use RET during the summer. As many as 100,000 people use RET during the year. About one in every seven people using the trail is not from the Great Falls area. In terms of satisfaction with the site, RET received the highest rating from visitors.

Mr. Wicks noted almost everyone in Montana knows about RET in Great Falls. It has grown to be one of the signature attractions of our City. RET won a national American Planning Association award in 1996, and one of five national Trails for Tomorrow Awards from the American Hiking Society in 1994. When Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks started an annual "Trail of the Year Award" in 2004, RET received the first one. The City of Great Falls awarded a Community Livability Award to RET in 1995. RET has been featured in *American Trails* and *Rails to Trails Conservancy* publications, *Via Magazine*, *Better Homes & Gardens* and a number of regional publications.

Mr. Wicks reported that twenty years ago there wasn't much public access to the river – Broadwater Bay, West Bank, Elks Riverside and Giant Springs State Park. Most of the riverfront in the Great Falls area was private property belonging to the railroad, the power companies and the Smelter; no public access was allowed. At that time Great Falls was going through some tough times, with industrial closures, job losses and a stagnant economy.

Mr. Wicks reported that in 1990 a community visioning process included the goal of developing a bike and pedestrian trail. Transportation Planner Ben Rangel created a conceptual plan for a riverfront recreational corridor utilizing some abandoned road and railroad rights-of-way. A recreational trails committee was formed to work with the City to promote the idea and help search for resources to build the first segments.

Mr. Wicks explained that while the City's contractors were removing the steel rails, ties and roadway overpass from a stretch of recently acquired Burlington Northern line, committee members found the original steel spans of the missing Sixth Street bridge stockpiled east of town, and located volunteers to move it, reinstall it and add a concrete deck and railings, filling the first gap in the fledgling trail. Using timbers from an old railroad overpass, and a boom truck from the Wastewater Treatment Plant, volunteers built a solid deck on a 120' long bridge near Black Eagle Falls, filling in the next gap. By the end of the year, the first stretches of RET were on the ground. The committee and the community were energized by this success and ready for more. Mr. Wicks stated that was the start of a very productive public/private partnership that has worked patiently to create over 45 miles of interconnected public trail in the Great Falls area, including 11 bridges, 5 tunnels and 8 underpasses.

Mr. Wicks reported that in 1990, the City Manager created the Trails Working Group to direct the development and maintenance of RET. The group continues to meet each month to discuss the status of ongoing projects and coordinate trail planning, maintenance and funding efforts. The group includes representatives from City of Great Falls Planning and Community Development, Engineering, and Park and Recreation Departments, Region 4 Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Montana Department of Transportation, and RET's 501(c)(3) non-profit group.

Mr. Wicks stated the Trails Working Group has worked with RET's corporate partner, PPL Montana, to develop a recreation plan as part of their hydro-licensing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The Group helped implement the initial Great Falls area recreation projects and continues to work with them and other private sector partners to improve and extend RET.

Mr. Wicks noted RET's nonprofit, RTI, has helped public agencies that own and manage RET. Over 20 successful applications for State and Federal trail grants have been written, as well as applications to private and corporate foundations. He added that snaking an urban trail over and under major vehicular traffic is costly and wouldn't be possible without those grants. Most grants require a public match and some of the projects are very complicated and costly, so providing a 14-20% match is a continuing challenge. He noted \$40,000-\$50,000 were raised each year from the annual year-end appeal to community trail supporters and from the annual "Blues & Brews" fundraiser. That fundraiser has helped promote RET and has raised over \$350,000 to use for matching grants and special projects.

Mr. Wicks reported that even before the tracks came off the first sections of RET, it could be seen that volunteers could accelerate the transformation of the riverfront by just cleaning debris. Over the years, MAFB, local service clubs, the Pre-Release Center, youth group homes, scouts, and others have removed tons of trash and debris from the river corridor. He noted they have worked with Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) and the Youth Transition Program group home for two seasons cleaning up decades of downed trees and debris from the former Smelter executive housing area. Cascade County donated containers and dumping fees, and the City donated a loader and operators – 230,000 pounds of materials were removed. The area now features an improved vehicular access road to the powerhouse and Black Eagle Memorial Island, as well as a single-track trail and the paved RET along the reservoir.

Mr. Wicks added assistance was given to PPL Montana in its efforts to cap and revegetate the tailrace island below Black Eagle Dam and develop road and trail access. PPL was able to acquire dirt from a nearby ARCO borrow site to cover the cinder surface of the man-made island with an 18" topsoil cap. The island was then seeded and a gravel trail and two viewing plazas were added. The historic bridge over the tailrace was restored and picnic tables and interpretive panels were added. Today the island is one of the great public destinations along RET. It is a classic partnership project – a County owned and maintained road, a City owned and maintained trail, and PPL Montana lands managed by Region 4 Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Mr. Wicks stated that for many years trash, construction debris, car parts and shot-up major home appliances were hauled out of the coulees. The 12,000 pounds of steel pulled out last year almost finishes the effort. Over the years crane operators volunteered to hoist cars and trucks that had been pushed off cliffs. He noted they worked with donors, local nurseries, scouts, volunteers and the City Forester to plant hundreds of trees and to include trees and landscaping components in all RET construction projects, in addition to coordinating volunteers to water them until they became established – many of those volunteer-planted trees are now 20-30 feet tall.

Mr. Wicks reported volunteers and donated materials were used to complete two bridges in Giant Springs State Park using timbers from the former Ninth Street Bridge. They worked with MCC crews for three seasons to rebuild and transform the donated 1,000-foot former Milwaukee Railroad bridge downtown into the Weissman Trail Bridge that links trails on both sides of the river. The entire project was funded with community donations. Also, MCC crews were used to build dozens of trailside picnic table shelters and information kiosks, with materials from local donors, and Falls Construction volunteered to install most of them.

Mr. Wicks stated RTI solicits and coordinates memorial donations that add trailside amenities such as trees, benches, tables, kiosks, drinking fountains and vault toilets. Also, the funding and placement of more than 100 concrete benches and tables has been coordinated. He commented they have been fortunate to work with artists and donors to add the whirling trout kinetic sculpture, an amazing, steel grizzly bear in West Bank Park.

Mr. Wicks reported the 2009-2010 Leadership Great Falls class donated steel sculptures of Lewis, Clark and Sacagawea earlier this summer, installed by Park and Recreation Department crews. The project included generating ideas and additional funds for other trailside art in the future. He stated they are excited to be placing "Rainboffalo" by Chris Miller, donated by Tina Schott and Peter Horst, in the flowerbed east of the Weissman Bridge, and a Mike Hollern sculpture along the trail in the coming weeks.

Mr. Wicks reported that in 2009, Great Falls completed about \$1,000,000 of new trail, including two underpasses, a tunnel, a button-actuated at-grade crossing, and the first big dose of concrete trail. MDT and contractors Shumaker Construction and United Materials completed new trail segments between Odd Fellows Park and Upper River Road.

Using Montana Air Congestion Initiative (MACI) funds, Mr. Wicks stated MDT designed and

built new trail connections from the main trail to east side neighborhoods. The projects include new trail along North 38th Street, River Drive North and Giant Springs Road. MDT also built a new trail underpass at Sixth Street S.W. along the Sun River. Also, in early November, United Materials crews were making great progress on Phase 1 of the Bay Drive Trail which sweeps through Garden Home Park and passes under the BNSF railroad bridge. In late November, the trail segment was completed near the Central Montana Electric Cooperatives building along Bay Drive.

Mr. Wicks noted that last year the Park and Recreation Department traded fill dirt for the construction of a wonderful new trail segment between Upper River Road and up through Warden Park to 13th Avenue South. The main trail and a loop through the upper park were graveled, and the area was reseeded; RTI submitted a State trail grant to pave the trail with asphalt in 2010.

Mr. Wicks reported Montana Refining Company (MRC) completed a generous landscaping upgrade along the trail between the refinery and the river, including a new irrigation system, trees and a vault toilet. MCC crews and Great Falls Bicycle Club volunteers completed a series of expert mountain bike trails, known as Mayhem, along the south shore between Crooked Falls and Cochrane Dam. RTI donations funded the acquisition of a public trail easement along the south shore between the City's 300 acres at Cochrane Dam and Ryan Dam and a south shore trail view of the Great Falls of the Missouri. Also, the Engineering Department completed an extensive repair of storm water systems in West Bank Park, including setting the trail bridge on new concrete piers.

Mr. Wicks reported that 2009 was a great year, and it looks like 2010 is going to be very good also. A \$50,000 gift by Zander Blewett to purchase a south shore trail easement between Ryan Dam and Box Elder Creek kicked off the year. Mr. Wicks thanked the City Commission for accepting the easement. He added closing and recording took place in the spring.

Mr. Wicks stated Thomas, Dean & Hoskins completed an exciting design for the Phase 2 Bay Drive Trail that will connect to West Bank Park, and James Talcott Construction was awarded the construction contract. He added the south end of the project is looking good as crews work on new retaining walls further downstream. Mr. Wicks showed a week-old photo of footings for some of the retaining walls that will carry the trail along the steep bank. He noted that it will be exciting to see the Bay Drive 2 trail pass safely under the busy First Avenue North bridge in a few short months.

Mr. Wicks reported the State Trail Grant to pave Warden Park trail was received, and United Materials is set to begin that project soon. Also, RTI is working with the Park and Recreation Department, some memorial donors, and Habitat for Humanity to place a 20-foot gazebo along RET for people to enjoy the awesome views.

Mr. Wicks noted RTI is helping with trail maintenance three days a week again this summer using youth from Opportunities, Inc. He added that last week graffiti in tunnels and underpasses was painted and monster knapweed was pulled. In recent months the trailside information kiosks and the RET website were updated. In the coming months, upgrading the distance and

destination signage along the trail, and work on a CTEP grant to sign priority Bike Routes in the City will begin.

Mr. Wicks reported RTI is proud to be partner with the City of Great Falls to make RET a positive feature for the community.

City Manager Greg Doyon asked if Box Elder Creek will probably be an end point for some time because of crossing, maintenance and expansion issues. Mr. Wicks responded that somewhere down the line there is a possibility of building a suspension bridge over that deep gorge and continuing RET further downstream, and the landowner is in agreement. He added that, in the long term, there is a potential for RET to continue all the way to Widow Coulee, a FWP trail head.

Mr. Doyon noted that when people talk about Great Falls, the trail system is one of the first things mentioned. Mr. Wicks commented that when planning a trip, people seek a place to work out or plan a trip because there is a good place to bike or run.

Mr. Doyon commented on the RET east neighborhood extension. He believes that neighborhood access will be great. Mr. Wicks reported people from various neighborhoods are requesting access, and there are plans to seek design grants. He stated that little steps at a time add up, and he expressed appreciation to the Commission for continued support over all the years.

2. DOWNTOWN PLAN

Planning and Community Development Director Mike Haynes presented a PowerPoint presentation on the proposed Downtown Master Plan (DMP). He explained that a DMP is a great community tool for a shared vision of growth and development of the downtown. There are no great cities anywhere that do not have great downtowns. Mr. Haynes stated there is hope a DMP will bring people, activity and investment back into downtown – a mix of commercial, retail, office, and residential properties that create synergy. A DMP is a proven planning tool to guide growth, to guide development, to help existing property owners, to help potential future property owners, as well as businesses and residents.

Mr. Haynes explained work has been done over the past couple months on the boundaries and the process for a DMP. The proposed area is over 100 blocks and includes transitional areas, near-in neighborhoods, and major public and cultural facilities. He noted sub-areas can be considered during the planning process.

Mr. Haynes reported the DMP plan structure is a four-stage process: (1) pre-planning, including developing the process, identifying stakeholders, and forming working groups and a steering committee; (2) data collection and analysis, including reviewing existing plans, doing a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, and developing themes to guide the planning process; (3) plan development, including goals, objectives, and strategies to bridge the gap between where the downtown is now and where we want it to be; and, (4) plan review, adoption by the City Commission, and implementation. Mr. Haynes noted the first stage will soon begin, and the public and interest groups will be engaged. He hopes in later years that City

representatives will note the DMP was a community vision 20 years earlier and report on how that vision was realized, as Mr. Wicks has reported on RET.

Mr. Haynes reported on proposed plan elements of downtown that will be considered: (1) livability (housing, neighborhoods, human services, public health and safety, recreation and open space, and natural environment; (2) downtown character (historic preservation, streetscapes, gateways, and wayfinding, and design guidelines; (3) accessibility (streets and roadways, bicycle network, pedestrian network, parking and public transportation; and (4) downtown vitality (commercial, retail, office land uses, arts and culture, marketing and growing downtown).

The proposed timeline is 12 to 18 months to complete the design process and data collection through the formulation of the plan, strategies to implement the plan, and final plan review and adoption by the City Commission. When proposed projects are considered, they will be reviewed for consistency with the DMP. The plan will be a blueprint for development and growth.

Commissioner Jolley commented she was happy Mr. Haynes has been involved with many similar projects. Mayor Winters wished Mr. Haynes well with the project.

ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Winters adjourned the work session of July 20, 2010, at 6:22 p.m.