

Corridor of Discovery

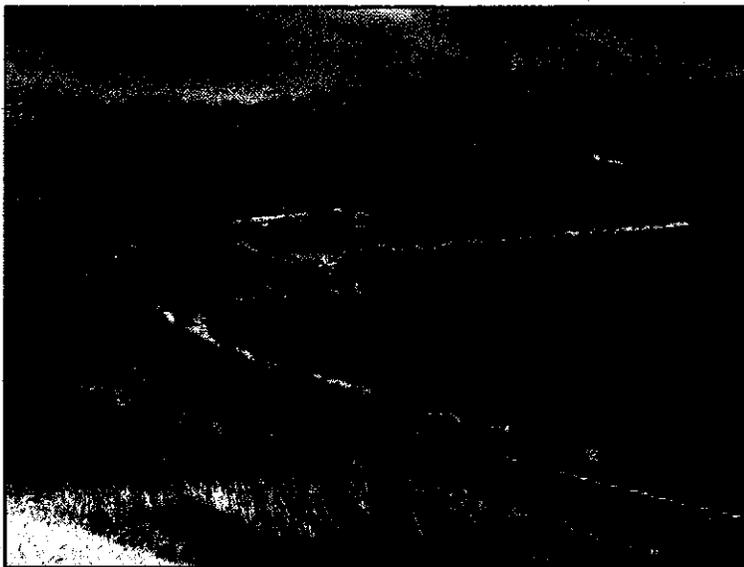
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Section I. Introduction

The preservation of the railbed corridor extending from Helena to Great Falls, presents a dynamic opportunity for the state of Montana. This preservation will allow Montanans and future generations to experience the spectacular natural and historic features of a traditional trade route extending from the plains to the continental divide. Notable features include the Missouri River itself, the route of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery (6 camp sites), Native American sites and a variety of geologic features. The corridor parallels numerous state parks and fishing access sites. The Ulm Pishkun State Park is located several miles west of Ulm and is the site of a historic buffalo jump. Tower Rock is a geologic feature in the area that is mentioned in the journals of Lewis & Clark and has recently been preserved. The proposed preservation would provide a unique opportunity to showcase Montana's natural resources and rich history as well as connect a variety of existing recreational sites and two of Montana's largest communities. This exciting proposal would result in one of the longer railbed projects within the United States and create a major tourist destination for Montana.

Section II. Rail Line Features



The Burlington Northern branch line is located in west-central Montana within Lewis & Clark County and Cascade County. The line passes through unincorporated rural residential areas, farm and ranch lands, and scenic/natural areas. There has been no traffic on this line in the past four years because of riverbank stability problems near Ulm. The southern terminus of the line is in Helena, Montana's capital city and extends 95.4 miles to the northern terminus in Great Falls with 48 bridges along the way. En route, the line passes through the rural communities of Wolf Creek, Craig, Cascade, and Ulm.

As the line leaves the Helena city limits, it crosses Tenmile Creek and travels northward along the west edge of the Helena Valley at the base of the Scratchgravel Hills. This valley is an alluvial intermontane basin which has witnessed a significant displacement of agricultural uses by residential development. The Scratchgravel Hills are a small cluster of peaks held mostly in public ownership (US Bureau of Land Management). The line then reaches Silver Creek and turns westward, following the drainage upstream through agricultural lands to Silver City, where it again turns northward, crossing a low drainage divide, following the Little Prickly Pear Creek drainage downstream to the northeast. The line passes through a small scenic canyon, exiting into a large open agricultural valley near Sieben. Geologically significant, this valley is the result of several periods of tectonic activity. The rail line now turns northward, following the creek as it enters Wolf Creek Canyon. The canyon is a

prominent feature created when the stream cut through the colorful rocks. These sandstones and siltstones are some of the oldest sedimentary rocks in Montana. The canyon also accommodates Interstate 15 and a frontage road. Wolf Creek Canyon is included in the Scenic Drives of Montana guidebook. At the community of Wolf Creek (an old RR center), the drainage and the rail line turn eastward and extend through the town and past agricultural lands to the Missouri River, a resource with historic, prehistoric, biological, geological, and recreational significance. It is at this point the line joins the route of Lewis and Clark and retraces their footsteps all the way to the Great Falls of the Missouri.

III. Recreation Benefits

The Helena to Great Falls corridor would provide for walking, family-oriented cycling, destination cycling, fishing, access to water fowl hunting, bird-watching, and horseback riding. The corridor would offer an unparalleled opportunity to recreate in a safe, fun environment.

Along the Missouri river, the recreational user will enjoy the benefits of lodging and restaurants and procurement of provisions in the communities of Wolf Creek, Craig, Cascade, and Ulm.

It is worth noting the Missouri River corridor between these small communities contains relatively dense recreational and residential sections. The proposed project would allow residents of these areas a non-motorized opportunity to access adjoining communities. In addition, both Great Falls and Helena currently have well-developed pathways which would easily connect to the proposed project.

IV. Economic Considerations

There is no question that the development of a recreational corridor between Helena and Great Falls would have a significant economic impact to communities along the route. Comparable examples would be the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes spanning the panhandle of Idaho and the Route of the Hiawatha near Wallace, Idaho. Although there have not been formal economic studies on the impacts of these trails, a random canvassing of businesses and others involved in the establishment of that pathway estimated approximately 80,000 annual users. According to a 2003 report completed by the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation

Research (ITRR), the average daily expenditure of tourists visiting Montana is \$116. If a similar Montana corridor attracted even half of those that visit Northern Idaho, the direct economic impact to communities along the proposed trail could be well over \$4 million per year. ITRR also notes that 79 percent of visitors to Montana are repeat visitors. Fifty percent of those have been to Montana six times or more. It was noted these visitors are primarily attracted to parks, rivers, mountains and open space. These are all major attractions of this project.



The obvious direct beneficiaries of a trail project between Helena and Great Falls would be local businesses along the route including lodging establishments, restaurants, convenience stores, bike shops, shuttle services and outfitters. It is also reasonable to assume that new businesses would develop to offer recreational services, i.e. outfitters and rental operations.

V. Landowner Considerations



Landowners adjacent to a proposed trail typically have concerns related to liability, noise, privacy, littering, property damage, trespass, property values and property rights. During the past 30 years, across America, thousands of rail lines have been converted to recreational and non-motorized transportation pathways. From that vast experience, some basic tools have emerged to minimize these concerns including recreational use statutes, open communication, careful planning and cooperation.

To protect landowners from liability, 49 states including Montana, have recreational use statutes. Montana's statute is Section 70-16-302, MCA Rights and Obligations Incidental to Ownership in Real Property. It states, "A person who uses property...for recreational purposes, with or without permission, does so without any assurance from the landowner that the property is safe for any purpose if the person does not give a valuable consideration to the landowner in exchange for the recreational use of the property".

The issues of noise, privacy and trespass can be addressed through careful planning and design, cooperation and communication. Noise is seldom an issue because most projects are non-motorized and careful vegetative screening can minimize sound near residences. Vegetative screening also addresses privacy to nearby residences. Trespass, property damage and littering are addressed through careful design, management and information/education to recreational users. Careful and appropriate signing, fencing and other barriers have resulted in minimal trespass and property damage throughout the United States. Finally, public use discourages vandals from damaging or destroying features on and near the corridor.

There have been numerous studies noting the positive impacts of recreational corridors on property values. The 1992 National Park Service Study, The Burke Gilman Study and the Colorado State Parks Survey all found that property values either increased or remained constant. Real estate agents list proximity to the corridors in advertisements and homeowners report that the presence of the corridor made their home easier to sell.

Abandoning a railbed and developing a new use should be conducted in conjunction with input from adjoining landowners. Many proposed conversions face opposition from landowners living alongside or near the corridors. Once initial fears are addressed, these landowners often end up among the project's strongest supporters. In the past few years, more than 300 new projects have opened. Managers who work directly with these recreational corridors on a daily basis, are the first to say that many of the anticipated problems do not occur.



VII. Conclusion

Montana is faced with an opportunity. Changing the corridor to a quiet path for recreation, enrichment of healthy lifestyles, nature study and historical interpretation will further protect upland, riparian and river habitats. Fire risk and spread of noxious weeds will be reduced. This will protect adjoining habitat and water quality of nearby wetlands, streams and rivers. The proposed pathway will connect communities and small businesses, give citizens and tourists a safe, healthy way to travel through and between towns and provide information and education about the areas rich historic and resource heritage.