# Decision Notice:
# Travelers' Rest State Park
# Proposed Land Donation, Acquisition and Trail Development

Montana State Parks – Region 2
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## Description of Proposed Project

Montana State Parks proposes to acquire via fee title a 24-acre, three-parcel, addition to Travelers' Rest State Park located near the town of Lolo, Montana from Bill and Ramona Holt. Included in the acquisition would be the park visitor center, museum, artifacts, and administrative office building, which are currently leased from the landowners. The community of Lolo is in Missoula County, about 8 miles south of Missoula. Travelers' Rest is located just west of the junction of US Highway 93 and US Highway 12.

If the acquisition were completed, Montana State Parks would also plan to expand the trail system within the park to connect to Lolo neighborhoods and existing non-motorized trails within the community. Trails would be constructed with gravel, no more than 5 feet in width and designed to meet accessibility standards. Where cultural resources could be impacted by ground disturbance, trail construction would involve placing a barrier on top of the existing surface, then adding and compacting gravel to complete the surface.

Travelers' Rest State Park was established in 2001 with a donation of 15 acres of land from The Conservation Fund. Additional acquisitions in 2002, 2004 and 2005 have increased the size of the park to approximately 41acres. Montana State Parks also holds a 10-acre conservation easement on one of the parcels (Parcel 3) of this proposed acquisition.

In 2001 and 2002, a unique research project identified and uncovered evidence of the use of the site by the Lewis and Clark Expedition during their stays here in 1805 and 1806. Based on this evidence, the U.S. Department of Interior relocated the Travelers' Rest National Historic Landmark (NHL) boundary to State Park lands and some private land on the south side of Lolo Creek.

The proposed acquisition includes the Holt Museum and Visitor Center at Travelers' Rest State Park, which is currently leased by Montana State Parks and houses exhibits related to the history of the area as well as the administrative offices for Travelers' Rest, Fort Owen and Painted Rocks State Parks.

This project would not only add the visitor center and museum to state ownership, but the additional lands would protect important riparian habitat along Lolo Creek; provide important and desired recreational access to the Lolo and western Montana community; and provide the opportunity to connect neighborhoods in the community as well as link existing non-motorized recreational trails along both US Highways. The three parcels are:

- Parcel 1, approximately 11 acres of open grazing land is between the existing park boundary and US Highway 12. The park entrance road passes through this parcel via a road easement granted to Montana State Parks by the landowners;
- Parcel 2 includes the visitor center and museum and affiliated parking lot. This is approximately 2.5 acres;
- Parcel 3 is south of parcel 2 and comprised primarily of riparian lands along Lolo Creek. This parcel is approximately 10 acres.

Threats to these parcels include the potential development of residential homes and/or commercial businesses in parcels 1 and 2 because of their close proximity to Lolo and the main travel corridors of the highways.

The proposed action would help meet many of the objectives of the 2003 Travelers' Rest State Park Management Direction, including:

1. Providing for a series of paths (and associated educational materials) to illustrate natural ecosystems.
2. More land for recreational access and opportunity.
3. Fish and wildlife habitat protection.
4. Access to existing non-motorized trails.
5. Buffer to the historic site.

**Alternatives Considered:**

**Alternative A - Proposed Action: Montana State Parks would acquire three parcels totaling 23.69 acres, the visitor center, museum, and artifacts, and expand the park trail system.**
Montana State Parks would acquire via fee title, approximately 24 acres in Lolo, Montana – including a visitor center, museum for the Park and an extensive collection of artifacts and exhibits related to the history of the area – for $700,000.

If the land is acquired, Montana State Parks would begin to further develop the trail system within the Park, connecting neighborhoods and existing non-motorized trails throughout the Park. This would be very important for Parcel 1. In the fall of 2011, Missoula County completed an extension of the non-motorized trail parallel to US Highway 12, which has already contributed to a significant increase in

pedestrian use along the Park entry road. For visitor safety, trail construction along the entry road would be a high priority.

**Alternative B - No Action: Montana State Parks would not purchase three Travelers' Rest State Park parcels and visitor center/museum.**

Montana State Parks would not purchase the three parcels including the visitor center and museum building from the Holts. It is assumed that the Holts would look for other buyers for the parcels, with the possibility of Parcel 1 being developed, most of which has been identified as suitable for 4 dwellings per acre by the Lolo Regional Plan. It is also possible that without Montana State Parks' long-term commitment that the Holts may sell or lease the visitor center and museum to an interested commercial interest, thereby leaving Travelers' Rest without the ability to provide essential services to the public or office space for park employees. This loss of the visitor center and museum could mean that staff would need to be re-assigned to alternative work stations. This could leave the park open to increased vandalism on existing lands. Or, Montana State Parks would need to request funding for a visitor center from which to manage this National Historic Landmark.

## Public Process

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess the potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information.

The legal notices for the Travelers' Rest State Park Land Acquisition and Trail Development were published in the *Missoulian, Ravalli Republic* (Hamilton) and *Independent Record* (Helena) newspapers on April 20 and 27, 2012. Montana State Parks issued a statewide press release on April 24, 2012. Montana State Parks distributed approximately 39 copies of the EA, and approximately 108 postcard and 9 email notifications of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and individual groups, individuals and agencies. The EA was available for public review on Montana State Parks' website from April 21 through May 21, 2012.

## Comment Summary

During the official comment period, Montana State Parks received 18 comments in the form of letters, emails and/or phone calls (hereafter "comments"). Fifteen comments were from individuals, two were from agencies (Missoula County Floodplain and Missoula County Commissioners) and one was from a local, non-profit organization (Travelers' Rest Preservation and Heritage Association).

From the comments, there was almost unanimous support or qualified support for the proposed action to acquire the three parcels, the building that houses the visitor center, museum, artifacts, and park offices, and to expand the parks trail system. Specific comments, concerns and recommendations are addressed below.

**1.**

- "The proposed purchase of the additional 24 acres, visitor center and museum will guarantee the future of this fine facility. I feel personally blessed to have this State Park in my backyard."
- "A great acquisition for the local community and all Montanans."
- "This purchase of Travelers' Rest is the best use of money by MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks that I am aware of in the last four decades."

**Montana State Parks Response:** *Thank you for the support. To be clear, however, no state revenues will be used in this acquisition. Monies will come from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the Missoula County Open Space Bond Fund, and private contributions.*

**2.**

- "most of that proposed parcel 3 is in the floodplain. Only comments from my end are that any proposed trails in the park need to remain at grade without fill."

**Montana State Parks Response:** *Thank you for the comment. All trails within the floodplain will be constructed at grade without fill. As mentioned in the draft EA, however, trails outside the floodplain will be constructed in a way that protects the cultural resources that are the reason for the park's creation and existence. This may be best accomplished by placing barriers on the soil at grade and adding fill to complete trail construction.*

**3.**

- "I feel very strongly that FWP should not go through with this land acquisition. I do agree it is an important historical site and would benefit the Lolo community to some extent. However, I think it is extremely irresponsible for our state or any to be accepting money from the federal government given the $16,000,000,000,000 debt. I have tremendous respect for FWP, but I think all government agencies should be looking at ways to cut spending instead of increasing it.

**Montana State Parks Response:** *Montana State Parks are an economic engine for Montana, with Travelers' Rest being a prime example. An Economic Impact Survey of Visitors to Montana State Parks conducted by the Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research in 2010 found that resident and non-resident visitors to state parks spend an estimated $289 million in Montana, creating more than 1,600 jobs statewide. Because no state revenues will be used in this acquisition and the relatively low amount of federal funds (LWCF funds, dedicated to outdoor recreation projects) compared to the overall value of the project ($300,000 LWCF to leverage up to approximately $2,000,000), Montana State Parks feels that the public will see its investment repaid many times over through the life of Travelers' Rest State Park.*

**4.**

- "This action will be a wonderful legacy for future generations and is a very appropriate use of LWCF funds."

- "The expansion would not only serve Lolo residents with greater access to Lolo Creek, but would also provide a greater corridor of protection for native plants, birds and animals."
- "The creation of a complete trail system made possible through this purchase will provide both recreational opportunities and a safe route for pedestrians, including children, who attend the nearby Lolo School."

**Montana State Parks Response:** *We agree that this acquisition is important to the future of the Lolo community and its residents. Future trail expansion will be dependent on funding, likely through Montana State Parks' Recreational Trails Program (RTP) and outside sources. Montana State Parks will make pursuing the necessary funding for trail expansion a priority for Travelers' Rest State Park.*

**Decision**

Based on the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that the proposed actions will not have significant negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with the proposed acquisition and trail development. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

By this notification, the draft EA is made the final EA with this Decision Notice, since very minimal changes (noted in the Montana State Parks responses above) are required to the draft document. It is my decision to recommend that the FWP Commission approve Montana State Parks' proposed action--to acquire the three parcels of land, the building that houses the visitor center, museum, artifacts, and park offices, and to expand the park's trail system--at its June 14th meeting. This action will also require the approval of the Montana Land Board at an upcoming meeting.

Lee Bastian

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| Lee Bastian<br>Montana State Parks Regional Park Manager | 6/5/2012<br>Date |