

EVERGREEN READY TO EMBRACE TRAILS FOR SAFETY, REGIONAL BENEFITS

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A student walks along a pedestrian path in Evergreen on Thursday afternoon. The community is looking into ways to improve its pedestrian trail system and connect to other trails in Kalispell and Columbia Falls. (Kianna Gardner/Daily Inter Lake)

A key vision for the role trails can play in Evergreen focuses on children getting to school unscathed in a town with a dearth of sidewalks and scarcity of bike and pedestrian paths.

“Obviously, it’s safety for the kids,” said T. J. Wendt, a member of the board of directors for the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce.

Yet Wendt and others in Evergreen also enthusiastically embrace the overarching vision that imagines the day when regional trails link up and provide an opportunity to bike or walk from the north shore of Flathead Lake to West Glacier. Or vice versa.

For example, the Great Northern Historical Trail that has a trailhead in Somers could someday connect to the Gateway to Glacier Trail that travels now between Hungry Horse and West Glacier.

One vital link in this chain of trails could pass through Evergreen.

On Oct. 18, the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce met with planning officials from Flathead County and with Mark Crowley, president of Rails to Trails of Northwest Montana, to consider how the town might host trails.

“Obviously, there’s a lot of work to be done,” Wendt said, noting that he believes there is an appetite to establish the connector and arterial trails that could serve Evergreen and also the region.

Meanwhile, plans tied to development of the Glacier Rail Park provide for eventually replacing railroad tracks through downtown Kalispell with a multi-use trail. That is set to happen once the two remaining businesses served by the downtown rail line are established in the new rail park. Construction is underway to facilitate those relocations.

One terminus of the Kalispell Trail will be in the vicinity of what is now a railroad overpass crossing U.S. 2 just west of the Evergreen town limits.

“That’s a logical spot to pick up and head north from there,” Crowley said.

Kalispell Planning Director Tom Jentz referenced that terminus.

“It is our hope to bring the trail to the intersection of Flathead Drive and U.S. 2 at the new traffic light,” Jentz said. “The devil is in the details, but we do need to begin working on a route through Evergreen.”

Jentz added, “Unfortunately, with all of the reconstruction projects conducted along U.S. 2 in Evergreen, no effort or accommodation has been made along U.S. 2 for pedestrians.”

A Flathead Valley Trails Map published by Rails to Trails of Northwest Montana shows a “proposed trail” as a red dotted line that would pass through Evergreen parallel to U.S. 2.

But there’s been no real work done yet to identify the route for such a trail and how it might also connect to schools and other recreational assets.

The process of identifying a route alignment can be slow, but worthwhile, Crowley said.

“I think people are really seeing the value trails add,” he said.

Jeff Brown, owner of The Hardware Store along U.S. 2 and first vice president of the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce, said he believes trails offer a host of potential benefits for Evergreen.

Brown talked about spending time with his granddaughter on an existing trail in the Flathead Valley and how that experience was decidedly superior to sitting with her in front of the TV.

He, too, noted that Evergreen is hurting for sidewalks.

"It breaks my heart to see kids walking to and from school and they're walking in mud," Brown said.

Crowley said a trail often moves forward after a coalition forms to shepherd the project through quests for funding and support, through identifying and adjusting routes and through gaining buy-in from adjacent landowners — who often become a trail's biggest fans.

Wendt agreed. Both he and Brown said the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce will certainly support such an effort but does not, by itself, have the resources to make trails happen.

Studies have shown that trails can enhance property values.

Flathead County's draft Trails Plan notes that homes near trails "generally are worth between 5 and 10 percent more than otherwise identical homes without trails nearby."

The draft Trails Plan notes also that a survey in the county "found that 45 percent of residents use trails at least once a week."

The community of Evergreen would welcome some measure of the economic benefits attributed to two other trails in Montana, including the South Hills Trail System in Helena and the Whitefish Trail.

According to figures cited in the draft Trails Plan, "the Whitefish trail is associated with \$3.2 million in new consumer spending annually, supporting 68 jobs."

The draft plan reports that a survey found that "a significant" number of community members would like to see paved bike paths connecting the three cities: Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls.

The draft plan is now being reviewed by the Flathead County Weed/Parks/Recreation Board. Mary Ruby is a member.

She acknowledged that one concern for county leaders can be finding a funding source for maintaining trails once they're established.

"Maintenance is a tough thing," Ruby said. "There are a variety of ways to pay for it."

She said she anticipates additional attention will be paid to this concern once the broad-brush Trails Plan is approved.

Meanwhile, Crowley said the opportunity to bicycle from Flathead Lake to West Glacier, accompanied by glorious scenery, would have national and international appeal.

"I'd bet my mortgage that people would come from all over the world to ride that trip," Crowley said.

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