



Seeley Lake Trails Project

Talks Begin, User Groups Convene

by Andi Bourne
Pathfinder

From mountain bikers to backcountry horsemen, skiers to snowmobile and ATV riders, discussions have begun to form a collaborative effort to develop a comprehensive multipurpose trail system throughout the Clearwater watershed and beyond. Although there is no project yet, discussions have begun and an advisory board has been created to begin the organizational process and pursue funding. Once funding is secured, the trail plan will be developed with input from the community.

The Seeley Lake Trails Project is a new joint project among local nonprofit organizations, recreational user groups of all types and other interested individuals. Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) will lead the project with the Seeley Lake Community Foundation being a partner assisting with financial arrangements. Ecosystem Management Research Institute (EMRI) will provide technical support including GIS development and mapping.

“CRC can bring [to the project as the lead organization] a landscape approach, utilize tools and technology, recognize environmental issues while simultaneously understanding landowner and interest group constraints and issues,” said Bill Wall, president of CRC.

The Trails Project advisory board had its first meeting in November. The board represents diverse recreational user groups such as the Driftriders Snowmobile Club, Seeley Swan ATV Club, Seeley Lake Regional Outdoor Center for Kinetic Sports (SL ROCKS), Seeley Lake Community Foundation,

Wilderness Sportsman’s Club and the Backcountry Horsemen. Kurt’s Polaris is on the board representing the local business community. Other interest groups include outfitters, mountain bikers, trail runners, schools, elderly and handicapped.

“Historically these groups have not been the best of friends,” said CRC’s Executive Director Cathy Kahnle. “There are a lot of misconceptions about trails, who uses them and what they use them for. If we can learn to communicate what the issues are and recognize them, we can develop a process to solve them.”

“Most everyone cares about Seeley Lake,” said Project Manager and owner of Rocky Mountain Adventure Gear Mike Kahnle. “As a singular group, no one has made a lot of progress. There is strength in numbers.”

Not only are there currently 14 groups represented on the advisory board, but Five Valleys Land Trust in Missoula, Northwest Connections in the Swan, the ATV and snowmobile group in Lincoln, Mont. and the Blackfoot Challenge in Ovando, Mont. Have all expressed an interest in the trails plan. The advisory board has also begun conversations with The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service to understand how to work within their land use plans and regulations.

Mike Kahnle highlighted that once the trails project is implemented it will provide economic benefits to the communities that are ecologically sound and provide an educational component through interpretive signs and programming. “We want to bring communities together to have a positive

solution,” he said. “The idea is to create synergy. All for one and one for all.”

“This is the right thing at the right time for our community,” said advisory board member and owner of Kurt’s Polaris Curtis Friede. “We can continue to fight or we can come together and make this good for all parties. It’s only going to work if all parties get something out of it.”

“It brings everyone together and we can learn how to interact [with each other on the trails],” said 2011 Seeley-Swan High School graduate Locke Hassett who is on the advisory board representing mountain bikers.

Hassett highlighted the current conflict between ATV users, horseback riders and mountain bikers. He feels that education will resolve a lot of the tension because the different users will understand how to better share the trail with each other. “Everyone working towards the same goal will make this a better place to live and recreate,” he said.

Wall emphasized that the project will not go forward without adequate funding, estimated at \$80,000. The initial funding will provide project oversight, meeting facilitation to gather public input and technical support from EMRI for GIS mapping. Only after this funding is secured will public discussions begin about location of trails and their uses to be included in the plan.

Mike Kahnle said that the advisory board wants to have the project focused well enough to present it effectively to the public and then they will gather data and develop a trail plan for multipurpose use. Part of the funding will be used to hire a professional facilitator from outside of Seeley Lake to focus the community meetings in a constructive way.

Currently the project consists of three phases: phase one is developing the trails plan for which the group is currently seeking funding; phase two is implementation of the plan including interpretation on the trails; phase three is maintenance of the trails.

“This is a conceptual process with a lot of interest and a lot of support but we do not have a project yet because we need the full funding before we launch,” said Wall. “Right now we are a communitybased group of organizations and individuals trying to develop a collaborative project to put trails on the ground at a landscape scale.”

Mike Kahnle added, “It is our hope to bring a trail system to this valley that will encourage a wider range of family activities, improved general health, better recreational opportunities and drive healthy economic development as well as providing connectivity to the larger region around us.”

For more information or questions email Cathy Kahnle at cathy@crc.mt.org.