

# Flathead County Trails Plan



**Resolution 2015-V**  
Adopted (insert date)

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September 11, 2019

The inaugural Flathead County Trails Plan was adopted in 2010, and became a part of the Flathead County Growth Plan. Subsequently, between July 2017 and February 2019, interested parties gathered together on a monthly basis to revise the 2010 Trails Plan. We wish to acknowledge this prodigious effort and thank these citizens for their time and effort.

Since that time, in order to honor the fiduciary obligation to the taxpayers of Flathead County, it was determined that a complete inventory of trails that the County is responsible to maintain needed to be finalized, and reasonable maintenance costs needed to be established. Until this research is complete, a moratorium on new trail construction is in place.

The attached plan has been condensed and is substantially complete. Although investigation is ongoing, it identifies approximately 32 miles of paved trails that the County has responsibility to maintain, and includes maintenance costs that have been reviewed by the Finance Department.

Sincerely,  
Flathead County Weed/Parks Board



Pete Woll  
Board President

## **INTRODUCTION**

Trails bring a wide range of benefits to the communities and individuals in Flathead County by providing safe transportation routes and recreation opportunities, promoting tourism, contributing to the economic vitality of our area, increasing property values, promoting health and fitness, and improving the general quality-of-life. Trails serve as lineal parks for our communities. A study of the true economic benefits of trails specific to Flathead County has not been completed.

Trails however, cannot be rented and are not revenue producing for the managing department, yet they are expensive to maintain. This Trail Plan establishes a funding plan for existing trail maintenance and guides future development to ensure new trails are developed in a well thought out, sustainable manner.

In 2010, the Board of County Commissioners designated the Parks and Recreation Department as having primary responsibility over trail development and maintenance for Flathead County trails. The Parks and Recreation Department is overseen by a Board of Directors.

This Trail Plan serves to replace the outdated Flathead County Trails Plan, Resolution 2015-O, that was adopted October 12, 2010. This revised plan, includes information from the 2010 version as well as suggestions submitted in February 2019 by the local trails coalition group.

This plan is a working document and does not dictate policy. It may be updated, as needed, at the discretion of the Flathead County Commissioners with input from the Parks and Recreation Board of Directors. This Trail Plan may also be updated, as needed, if additional documentation is provided to Flathead County showing the County is responsible for maintaining additional trails.

This Trails Plan only addresses trails that Flathead County is responsible for maintaining. There are hundreds of miles of additional trails located throughout the county that other entities, nonprofits, and organizations developed and/or maintain. Further work needs to be done to develop and finalize collaborative agreements with Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) to clearly outline and define the responsibilities of MDT and Flathead County for the long term maintenance of trails developed by MDT in MDT right-of-way.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

There are approximately 15 miles of unpaved/natural trails that Flathead County is currently responsible for maintaining. These natural trails are all located throughout Herron Park, a 440 acre park located near Foy's Lake in Kalispell, MT. Another 17 miles of unpaved/natural trails, known as the Foy's to Blacktail Trail, connects the Herron Park trail system to the Blacktail

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Mountain ski area. Flathead County holds the trail easements but the community group, Foy's to Blacktail Trails Inc. is responsible for all trail maintenance per a MOU.

Flathead County is currently responsible for maintaining approximately 33.6 miles of paved paths throughout the County. The two longest path segments are known as Rails to Trails and Gateway to Glacier. Rails to Trails is a paved path trail network that is approximately 21 miles long, connecting Somers to Kila. It was built in segments from 2001 through 2008. The Rails to Trails community group has historically provided trail maintenance. Gateway to Glacier is another paved path system, approximately 10.5 miles long, north of Columbia Falls, connecting Hungry Horse to West Glacier. The most recent segment of path was constructed in 2017. Flathead County is only responsible for maintaining the section of trail from Coram to West Glacier. The Gateway to Glacier community group provided \$58,494 to Flathead County to contribute to a maintenance fund for this trail segment specifically. Most of the other paved paths Flathead County is responsible for maintaining are located around public schools in the valley.

Paved County trails were primarily developed with funding provided through MDT's Community Transportation Enhancement Program (CTEP). CTEP funding was allocated to the County annually for transportation enhancement projects. In 2012, the CTEP program was eliminated and replaced by the Transportation Alternatives (TA) program. The TA program is now a competitive process and funding is not available every year. The TA program also will not fund routine maintenance.

Historically, when trails were developed throughout the County there was no funding mechanism set up to pay for routine annual maintenance or larger pavement preservation projects. The County parks and weed departments have provided some routine maintenance including trail sweeping, weed spraying, fence and sign repairs, and litter cleanup using funding from their departments' annual budgets. The road department has coordinated snow plowing on paths located near schools in the winter. This funding came out of the road department's annual budget. Up until this point, the County has not completed any larger pavement preservation projects on existing trails because funding was not saved/set aside for these larger expenses. As a result, several existing paved trails are in need of complete overlays or substantial pavement repairs and maintenance.

Flathead County will only maintain trails that the County has contractually committed to maintain. The Commissioners acknowledge the current trail maintenance constraints countywide. There already are more trails than there is funding available to maintain, therefore, Flathead County will not take on the maintenance of any additional trails until a more secure, long term funding mechanism is in place.

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## MISSION / VISION / GOALS

### Mission

Provide an updated trails plan that identifies all trails Flathead County owns or has contractually committed to maintain. Develop an adequate funding plan to provide long term maintenance for Flathead County trails.

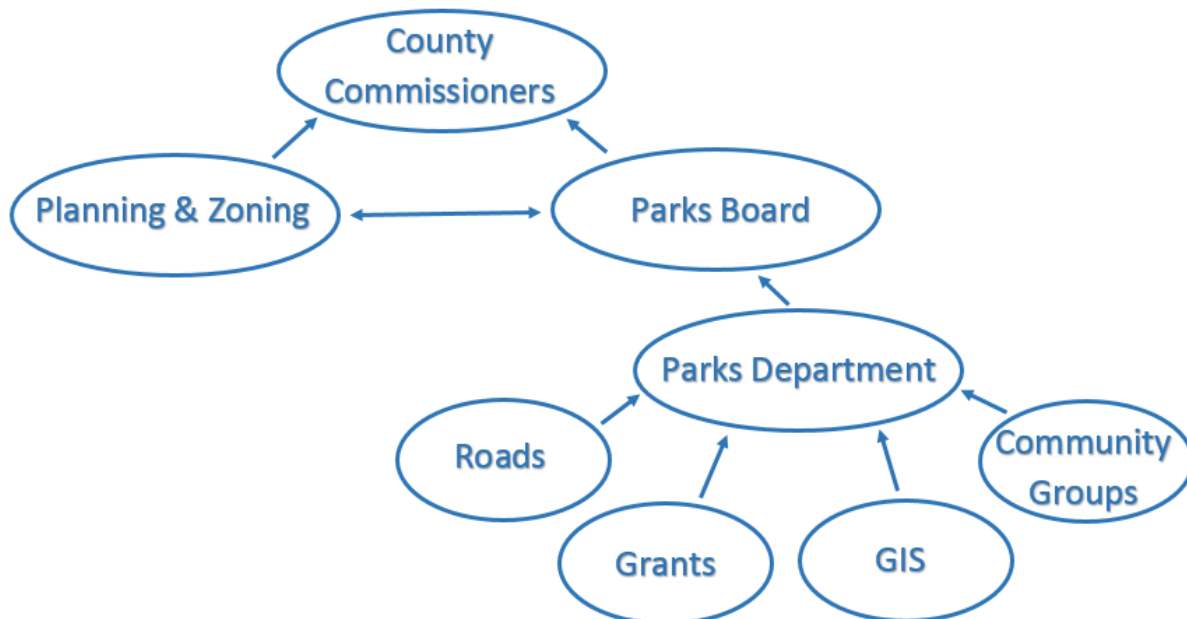
### Vision

Provide appropriate maintenance for trails Flathead County owns or has contractually committed to maintain. Guide present maintenance and future development and maintenance of Flathead County trails.

### Goals

1. Finalize inventory of existing Flathead County trails and verify contracts, easements and maintenance responsibilities.
2. Evaluate the existing condition and required maintenance of all Flathead County trails.
3. Set up a mechanism to cover annual maintenance costs and long-term capital improvement needs.
4. Set requirements for future trail construction and maintenance.

## ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE / FLOW CHART



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**County Commissioners** – The County Commissioners have governing authority and oversight for all County departments. The Commissioners make all final decisions regarding County maintained trails but rely on input from the Parks and Recreation department and their Board of Directors, the Road department, Planning and Zoning, community organizations and citizens. The Commissioners are responsible for setting the annual budgets for all County departments and set the annual maintenance and CIP budgets for County maintained trails.

**Parks and Recreation Department / Board of Directors** – The Parks and Recreation department has primary responsibility for the trails the County has committed to maintain. The Parks and Recreation department is overseen by a Board of Directors. With limited funding for associated tasks in their annual budget, the Parks department is responsible for all routine trail maintenance including: sweeping, mowing, weed control, vandalism concerns, fence repair, litter clean-up, and complaint follow-up. Parks and Recreation needs to be notified of all trail decisions. The Parks and Recreation Board of Directors will advise Planning and Zoning and the County Commissioners on all trail decisions.

**Road Department** – The Road department coordinates snow plowing and oversees asphalt maintenance contracts and bridge inspection contracts. These items are budgeted through the Road department’s annual budget.

**Planning and Zoning Department** – The Planning and Zoning department administers subdivision regulations relating to easement acquisitions for trails. Planning and Zoning will notify the Parks and Recreation Board of any trail easement obtained through the subdivision review process. Prior to the development or construction of any new trail, Planning and Zoning must receive written approval from the Commissioners and the Parks Board if the County/Parks Department is going to be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of that trail. If prior written approval is not obtained, the subdivision or right-of-way owner will be responsible for all future maintenance.

**GIS** – GIS is responsible for publishing trail data and maps upon direction from the Parks and Recreation Board or County Commissioners.

**Grant Administrator** – The Grant Administrator will assist with grant applications and grant management upon direction from the County Commissioners.

**Community Groups** – All citizens are encouraged to attend the Parks Board of Directors meetings to provide input and ideas for trails. Citizens are also encouraged to attend the Flathead County sponsored volunteer training so they are able to help with the maintenance of our community’s trails.

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## **TRAIL MAINTENANCE IMPLEMENTATION/PLAN**

Since there had been no formal funding mechanism established for major trail maintenance expenses, there is now a backlog of larger pavement preservation projects on the trails Flathead County has committed to maintain. Flathead County has established the following plan to address the backlog of maintenance, set an annual maintenance schedule for both routine maintenance and pavement preservation, and financially plan for ongoing future maintenance.

**Finalize Flathead County Maintained Trail List** – Flathead County staff will continue to verify contract documents, maintenance agreements and easement records to finalize a list of all trails that are the responsibility of Flathead County.

**Conduct Trail Evaluations** – Flathead County will complete a detailed trail evaluation. Each trail Flathead County is contractually responsible for maintaining will be evaluated. The exact length will be verified and the condition of the trail will be documented. A recommended maintenance schedule for each trail, based on its current condition, will also be provided. Cost estimates will be provided for the required maintenance on each trail.

**Prioritize Trails and Set Ten Year Funding Plan** – Based on the trail evaluations and current budget constraints, the Commissioners, with recommendations from the Parks Board and Finance, will determine an annual trail funding amount and set a ten year funding plan. Trails will be prioritized based on their existing condition. Larger trail maintenance expenses, such as pavement overlays will be included in the County’s annual CIP, funding dependent.

**Establish Annual Maintenance Schedule** – An annual maintenance schedule will be set for all existing trails that Flathead County is responsible for maintaining. The following maintenance will be provided annually as needed, funding dependent.

### Winter Season

1. Snow removal for trails adjacent to schools.  
6 miles total. One mile adjacent to each school:  
Kila, East Evergreen, West Valley, Helena Flats,  
Smith Valley, and Glacier High  
**No other trails will be maintained for snow removal.**

### Spring Season (all FC maintained trails)

1. Sweeping of gravel and debris
2. Sign installation and replacement
3. Tree trimming/clearing
4. Litter cleanup
5. Respond to complaints

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Summer and Fall Season (all FC maintained trails)

1. Weed control/spraying
2. Trail side mowing
3. Parking area up-keep
4. Asphalt repairs and replacement
5. Respond to complaints

**COSTS**

Flathead County will only maintain trails that the County has previously contractually agreed to maintain. Currently, the County and the Parks and Recreation Department is responsible for maintaining approximately 33.6 miles of paved trails, and 15 miles of other unpaved gravel and natural trails throughout Flathead County. Trail maintenance costs have been estimated on a per mile cost. Cost estimates should be adjusted annually to account for inflation.

Estimated Annual Operating Maintenance Costs:

- \$2,100 / mile for paved paths – includes sweeping, mowing, weed control, litter cleanup, sign and fencing repair/replacement, complaint investigation
- \$300 / mile for gravel/natural trails – includes mowing, weed control, hazard tree removal, litter cleanup, sign and fencing repair, complaint investigation, and winter grooming at Herron Park
- \$1,925 / mile for snow plowing – includes snow plowing for 1 mile around Kila, East Evergreen, West Valley, Helena Flats, Smith Valley, and Glacier High Schools. The snow plowing expense can vary substantially from year to year depending on the snowfall. Over the past three seasons, the snow plow contract averaged \$11,553 for the six miles of trails plowed around these schools but can be as high as \$25,000 on heavy snowfall years.

Estimated Long-term CIP Maintenance Costs:

- \$32,200 / mile for pavement preservation – includes minor crack sealing every 5 years, fog sealing every 8 years, and pavement surface overlay every 25 years
- \$10,000 annually for CIP equipment replacement – includes \$3,000 annually to replace the mower every 5 years and \$7,000 annually to replace the Toolcat every 10 years
- \$50,000 / mile for pavement replacement – Without proper maintenance, trails may deteriorate to a point where they need to be replaced. The trail evaluation will determine if there are any sections of existing Flathead County trails that need to be replaced.

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The Parks and Recreation Department provides all equipment needed for the routine annual maintenance including sweeping and weed spraying. Large equipment can be utilized on occasion from the Road Department but generally all pavement preservation projects and snow removal is contracted out. Equipment replacement will be addressed annually through the CIP planning process.

In FY 2020, Flathead County contributed \$58,494 as match funds into a maintenance account specifically for the Gateway to Glacier Trail between Coram and West Glacier. In FY 2020, Flathead County also allocated \$291,252 as seed funding for a trails maintenance account to begin addressing the backlog of maintenance required on Flathead County trails.

### **FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS**

A moratorium is recommended on construction of any new trails until a sustainable funding mechanism is in place to maintain all existing trails and new proposed trails in perpetuity.

#### **Annual Operating Maintenance Costs**

Funding should continue to be allocated to the Parks Department and Road Department through the annual budget process to cover the costs of routine trail maintenance including sweeping, mowing, weed control, snow removal, etc. Funding amounts should reflect the miles of trails Flathead County is contractually responsible for maintaining.

#### **CIP Pavement Preservation Costs**

In addition to the routine annual maintenance costs, the County will consider including larger pavement preservation projects in the CIP to help get caught up on the backlog of maintenance projects required on existing Flathead County trails. The following CIP items are recommended, funding dependent:

##### **FY 2021 CIP – Flathead County Trail Evaluation and 10 Year Funding Plan**

Complete the trail evaluation, estimate costs, and set priorities to develop a 10 year funding plan that can be included in the CIP

##### **FY 2022 – FY 2031 CIPs – Trail Pavement Preservation Projects**

Include pavement preservation projects in the CIP annually. The amount to include annually will be calculated based on the trail evaluation.

#### **Community Support**

The Gateway to Glacier community group provided \$58,494 to Flathead County in 2014 as seed money for a Gateway to Glacier trail maintenance account. This is the only community group that has previously provided funding to the County to cover maintenance expenses for the current trail system.

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Going forward, community groups will be required to show monetary commitment for new trail development and the maintenance of those trails in perpetuity before the County approves the development of any new County trails.

Community groups and individuals are always encouraged to volunteer their time to help with trail maintenance. Individuals wanting to volunteer, must attend the County sponsored volunteer training annually and track hours worked for duties approved by the Parks and Recreation Department. The more volunteers hours utilized for trail maintenance, the further the limited County budget can go.

The County is also relying on community groups to pursue other funding sources for trail maintenance including grants, donations, and fundraising events. If interested, community groups will be responsible for initiating the creation of a special improvement district or a ballot measure to put a trails levy on the ballot for a countywide vote.

Community members are encouraged to be active participants in the County trail program by attending and providing input at the Parks and Recreation Board of Director meetings.

#### **SAFETY**

All Flathead County safety policies and procedures shall apply to this document.

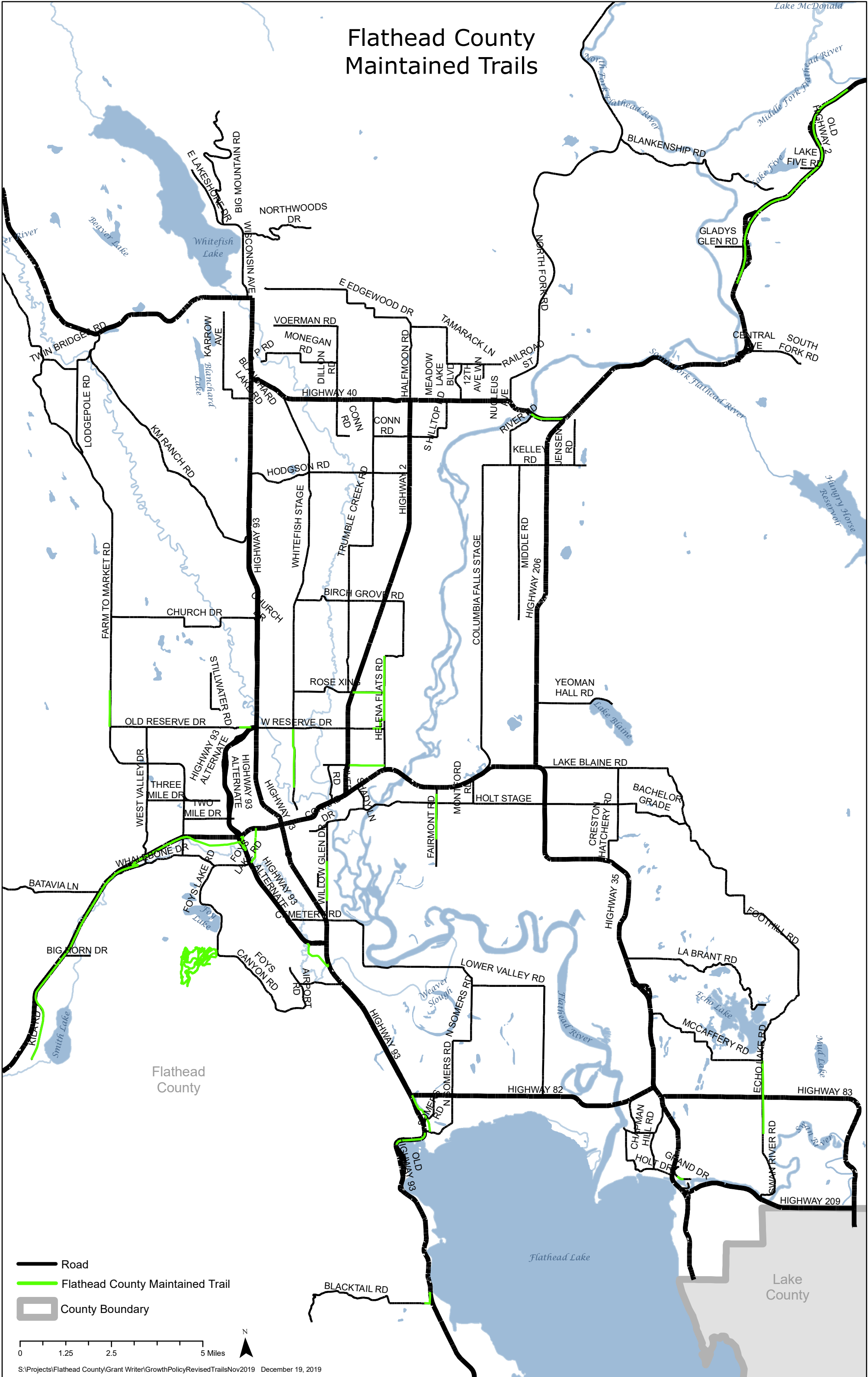
If the condition of a trail worsens to the point that it becomes a safety hazard to the public, Flathead County may close the trail until the required maintenance and or repairs are completed.

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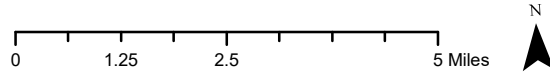
<b>FLATHEAD COUNTY MAINTAINED TRAILS</b>		
<b>TRAIL NAME</b>	<b>LENGTH</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>
Blacktail Road	0.5 miles	Along Blacktail Rd. to Ben Williams Park
East Evergreen	1.1 miles	Along East Evergreen from Hwy 2 to Helena Flats
Fairmont Egan Rd.	1.2 miles	Along Fairmont Egan Rd. from Homestead Rd. to Jauquette Rd.
Farm to Market Rd.	1.0 miles	Along Farm to Market Rd from Mcmannamy Draw to Rhodes Draw
Gateway to Glacier – North Section	6.8 miles	Along Hwy 2 from Coram to West Glacier
Glacier High School	0.4 miles	Along Reserve Place from Glacier High to Hwy 93
Grand Ave Walkway	0.3 miles	Along Grand Ave. from Bigfork Bay public dock to Bigfork Elementary
Helena Flats	3.1 miles	Along Helena Flats from Camelot Park & along Rose Crossing to Hwy 2
Highway 2 – Columbia Falls	0.8 miles	Along Hwy 2 from the Flathead River to Hwy 206
Rails to Trails – Kila / 93 Bypass	10.2 miles	Along Hwy 2 from Kila to 93 Bypass/Ashley Crk. bridge
Rails to Trails – 93 Bypass Connector	1.3 miles	Along 93 Bypass from Hwy 2 to Foys Lake Rd. & from 93 Bypass to Meridian
Rails to Trails – 93 Bypass Cutoff	0.9 miles	Along Ashley Crk. from 93 Bypass to Hwy 93
Rails to Trails - Somers	1.1 miles	From Hwy 82 to Somers
Somers Beach	1.0 miles	Along Hwy 93 from Somers Rd. to Somers Beach Park
Swan River Rd.	2.3 miles	Along Swan River Rd. from Mud Lake Rd. to Riverbend Rd., breaks and then another 0.3 miles
Whitefish Stage Rd.	1.6 miles	Along Whitefish Stage from Reserve to start of path down to Lawrence Park
Willow Glen – Limited Maintenance	1.1 miles	Along Willow Glen from north of Woodland Ave to FFA Dr. – Flathead County only provides sweeping
Herron Park Trails - Unpaved	15 miles approx.	Multiple connecting trails throughout Herron Park

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# Flathead County Maintained Trails



- Road
- Flathead County Maintained Trail
- County Boundary



# Existing and Proposed Trails in Flathead County

