

CHAPTER 6 TRANSPORTATION

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades the manner in which Americans live, work, shop and recreate has changed significantly. Changes in energy supplies, household composition, age of the population, and employment opportunities have all had a major influence on the way the City of Helena and the region have grown and

developed. These trends are expected to continue into the foreseeable future. Although the City of Helena Growth Policy does not directly address the region outside the City, transportation and mobility issues cross jurisdictional boundaries, including county lines, so trends and emerging issues for transportation affect the entire region. The cost of long-term operation and maintenance should be evaluated for budget implications as new facilities are planned.

This chapter discusses transportation system trends and issues affecting the City of Helena and relies heavily on a review of regional transportation trends and issues identified by the Greater Helena Area Transportation Plan - 2004 Update for the City of Helena and the Helena Area Transit Development Plan Update 2007-2011.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Transportation plans, engineering standards, and current adopted subdivision regulations are used in land use planning decisions when evaluating new and existing developments, annexations, and subdivisions. These documents were developed with citizen participation. Citizen involvement in the planning and implementation of transportation plans and projects is encouraged with future updates.

The impacts on street systems, including the need for reservation of right-of-way, and highway and interstate access are identified to create and extend the street network systematically, logically, and efficiently. Additionally, the impacts new construction have on established neighborhoods, cultural resources, sightlines and skylines, and the environment are also considerations when addressing cut-and-fills on slopes, street design, and location.

Main sections of this Chapter:

Introduction.....	6-1
General Overview.....	6-1
Motorized Transportation.....	6-2
Non-Motorized Transportation	6-4
Public Transportation System	6-5
Other Transportation Services	6-8
Goals and Objectives	6-11

Typically funding mechanisms for street improvements, extensions, and new construction are the responsibility of the owners or developers of new subdivisions. Some funding options include Special Improvement Districts, Street Maintenance Districts, and private funding

Recently, the City of Helena has been involved in the South Hills Interchange, expansion of Benton Avenue and Henderson Street, and reconstruction of Washington Street. Projects currently under construction or pending include improvements to Laurel Street, Cedar Street, and the Custer Avenue Interchange.

One area of emphasis of this Growth Policy is for Multimodal transportation. It involves the energy efficient use of many different types of transportation. It can include automobiles, bicycles, pedestrian travel for persons of all ages and abilities and various other types of motorized and non motorized travel. Pedestrian traffic can be emphasized in this type of a transportation concept, including a complete streets concept.

MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION

The private automobile provides a high degree of independence, flexibility, and freedom of choice relative to schedule and destination. Private vehicles are the primary mode of

transportation in and around the greater Helena area, and most current roadway development has been designed primarily for the automobile. However, principal arterials with large intersections create barriers for pedestrians and the installation of pedestrian facilities.

The number and concentration of vehicle trips within Lewis and Clark County are directly linked to land use and are affected by the type, size, intensity, and distribution of the land-use activity throughout the area. Population and employment are key variables in estimating vehicle trips. (A vehicle trip is considered a one-way trip to a destination from a point of origin.)

Population: According to the population histories and forecasts in the [POPULATION](#) and [ECONOMIC CONDITIONS](#) Chapters, Lewis and Clark County's population grew 86% from 1970 - 2009 and is expected to grow another 31% by 2030; approximately 63% of the population is expected to be located in the City of Helena. If population growth in outlying areas continues to outpace employment growth in these same areas, and if



employment growth in City of Helena continues to grow faster than its labor force, commuting into the City will likely continue to increase. This trend will translate into increased traffic volumes on the roadway system unless other transportation choices are made available and incentives are provided to encourage their use.

Employment: Comparing the forecasted employment in major economic sectors with the population histories and forecasts in the [POPULATION](#) and [ECONOMIC CONDITIONS](#) Chapters indicates that the amount of growth in employment will outpace the growth in the resident labor force in Helena. The resident labor force from the surrounding area and nearby counties fills this gap by commuting to and from Helena every day.

STREET AND TRAFFIC MAINTENANCE

The Streets and Traffic Division is responsible for pavement and curb markings, traffic signal installation, signal repair and maintenance, sign installation and repairs, and traffic data collection. The Street Division also conducts annual Fog Seal and Chip Seal Programs to repair and seal coat asphalt. Other activities include street sweeping, maintenance and repair of all paved streets, maintenance of unimproved streets and alleys, snow plowing of select streets after snow storms, and placement of downtown banners and traffic control for special events.

The State of Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) has jurisdiction over all proposed improvements and construction elements for State roadways within the City of Helena. The City of Helena coordinates with MDT on all proposed construction projects and signalization along the major transportation corridors, such as North Montana Avenue, Lyndale/Euclid Avenues, and Highway 12 East and West.

MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

The following transportation issues have been developed as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during the Growth Policy development process. The need to address these issues form the basis for the development of Growth Policy objectives and policies

The issues related to streets and roadways are complex and have many factors including, increasing population, commuting, road congestion, local street traffic patterns, and road deterioration. Additionally, the input indicated the need to encourage traveling at off peak hours, expanding some major roadways to alleviate congestion and add connectivity, and the use and expansion of public transit. There is also a need to create a transportation funding system that will divide the cost of providing infrastructure and protecting the environment between the public and those developing land in proportion to the benefit received. The reservation of new rights of way as development occurs is also an important issue identified in not only the Transportation Plan, but also the general public.

NON-MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION

The City of Helena envisions bicycling, walking routes, and paths to be designed connecting destinations and neighborhoods with: schools, stores, places of employment, places to live, and places to recreate. Pedestrian movements and facilities are often overlooked in transportation planning, yet walking is an essential part of most trips, for example that includes: walking from the transit stop to work, from the parking lot to the store or workplace, or from home to the school bus stop. Safe and convenient pedestrian facilities are essential for children and persons with a mobility limitation or without access to a motor vehicle.

Pedestrians face obstacles and conflicts with motorists when roadways and developments are designed primarily for automobiles. Non-motorized transportation is considered in the decision-making process as part of city land use reviews. Even if pedestrian facilities are provided, principal arterials (streets carrying between 10,000 and 35,000 vehicle trips per day at speeds of 25 to 70 miles per hour) and large intersections create barriers for pedestrians. The City has utilized “traffic calming” devices such as traffic circles, bulb-outs, and speed dips on local streets to reduce motor vehicle traffic speeds and traffic cutting through neighborhoods. In addition, Helena’s network of pedestrian/bicycle paths has been expanded significantly in the past ten years.



The City of Helena now has an adopted Complete Streets policy. The concept of “complete streets” includes a transportation network that accommodates non-motorized and motorized facilities. An all inclusive transportation system such as “complete streets” could save money, promote a more physically active community (which has health benefits), save or reduce direct and indirect costs associated with transportation, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and make a more livable community. This concept is also discussed in the [LAND USE](#) chapter of this document.

Bicycling is an important mode of transportation and recreational activity in the Helena area and throughout the county, and is available to people of all ages and socioeconomic levels. Bicycling is a particularly efficient and convenient form of transportation in urban areas when seasonally appropriate. Bicycling is much more popular during the warmer months, the same months automobile traffic volume is

higher; thus it could play a role in reducing congestion. Like automobiles, bicycles provide a high degree of independence, flexibility, and freedom of choice relative to schedule and destination.

The relatively small number of bicyclists compared to those using other transportation modes makes small-scale surveys difficult. Transportation studies (e.g., origin-destination surveys) either omit bicycle trips or group them together with walking trips. Most available data on bicycling is for work trips; however these make up a small percentage of all bicycle trips.

NON-MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

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A large number of public comments received during the Growth Policy development process have indicated a strong need for better pedestrian connectivity throughout the city, “complete streets,” and elimination of major pedestrian barriers. The need to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment (with amenities, traffic calming, and safer intersections) also has been extensively noted by the public.

Other issues related to non motorized transportation include pedestrian and bicyclist related law enforcement, and public outreach and education. Additionally, the input indicated the need to install more sidewalks, incorporating “accessible design,” maintenance of existing infrastructure and seasonal maintenance to ensure that all facilities are useable throughout the year. This maintenance is especially important for mobility for the elderly and persons with a disability.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM SERVICES

The public transportation bus system in the Helena area is known as the Helena Area Transit Service (HATS). HATS was established in November 1979 and is owned by the City of Helena. The fleet consists of buses and trolleys. The entire fleet is equipped with wheel chair lifts and 2-way radios, all vehicles meet ADA regulations. HATS offers a checkpoint bus, an East Valley bus, and a Curb-to-Curb bus. HATS operates Monday through Friday excluding holidays. The HATS service will be operated out of a new facility recently under construction and opening in 2011. Since the adoption of the Helena Area Transit Development Plan in 1996 and subsequent updates, varying trends in ridership, employment, and housing have complicated public transit, and the automobile continues as the dominant mode of transportation.



Helena Transit Facility

One major challenge for HATS is effectively serving the developing activity and employment centers and neighborhoods on the urban fringe. Most of the growing activity and employment centers were not designed for efficient transit service, and car parking is generally plentiful. Public transit travel times from peripheral

neighborhoods to the downtown area are long relative to driving. Funding is another major challenge, with the lack of a dedicated funding source for transit and a very tight budget at the state and local levels.

In 2010 a Greater Helena Area Transit district petition drive failed to secure enough signatures to be placed on the ballot for the November general election. The district was proposed to provide public transit to a larger area of the Helena community including areas north and east of the City of Helena.

Checkpoint Bus Service

The Check Point Bus is a set-route bus that runs every hour with various checkpoint stops along the route. No call in is required for service, but the system does allow minor deviations to meet passenger demand.

Curb-To-Curb Bus Service

The Curb-to-Curb bus runs weekdays every hour and half hour within the Helena city limits. Passengers with special needs or riders not near a checkpoint bus stop are picked up at the closest curb to their location and delivered to the closest curb location. Rides are arranged by calling and scheduling service at least 24—but no more than 48—hours in advance. Some urgent requests are handled on a same-day basis.

East Valley Bus Service

The East Valley bus service functions as a commuter bus service from East Valley, Eastgate, East Helena, Capitol Hill Mall, and downtown Helena. The service began operating in early 2006.

Rocky Mountain Development Council (RMDC)

Rocky Mountain Development Council, Inc. (RMDC), a Community Action Agency created under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, has been providing transportation

services for their senior program clientele since 1986. The RMDC buses pick up clients Monday through Friday at their homes and take them to and from various functions. RMDC also operates the Head Start Bus program, with buses and drivers hired by the City of Helena, to transport pre-school children Monday through Thursday during the school year.

Spring Meadow Resources

Spring Meadow Resources, an agency that serves adults with developmental disabilities, provides client transportation to the Spring Meadow Resources Day Center and Helena Industries as well as to shopping, recreation, social activities, and medical providers.

West Mont Habilitation Services, INC.

West Mont Habilitation Services, an agency of West Mont, provides transportation for persons with developmental disabilities who live in one of seven group homes or who attending day-training workshops. The transportation services also provide West Mont's clients access to work, social, medical, and recreational/shopping opportunities in the community. Transportation is available on demand, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. West Mont Habilitation Services also utilizes HATS buses.

Taxi Service

Capitol Taxi (formerly Old Trapper Taxi) is the sole taxi company operating in the Helena Valley. Capitol Taxi provides door-to-door service on demand, 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. Its service area is within a 50-mile road radius from the Federal Building in downtown Helena. Capitol Taxi reports approximately 160 to 175 trips per day, including work trips, trips for elderly/disabled, and service to the airport.

Bus Services

Rimrock Trailways is an intercity and interstate bus transportation provider headquartered out of Billings, Montana. There are two northbound, two southbound, one eastbound, and one westbound departure per day in Helena. Rimrock Trailways shares office/operations space with HATS. There is a limited waiting area for passengers at the HATS office. HATS will perform some administrative functions for Rimrock.

Treasure State Transit (TST) is the contracted school bus service for Helena School Districts Numbers 1 and 2. TST's public utilities commission rights limit it to providing school-contracted services only within the State of Montana. Outside the state borders, it has rights to provide interstate charters.

G & L Transit is a charter bus company based out of Helena/Lewis and Clark County and Butte. G & L serves the continental United States from the two base locations. Its major clients are the U.S. Government (military personnel in particular) and the State of Montana. Other than a fixed schedule service for local government adult special needs clients, its service is available 24 hours per day and 7 days per week.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

The following transportation issues have been developed as a result of input and analysis by City staff and from comments received at several public outreach forums during the Growth Policy development process. The need to address these issues form, the basis for the development of Growth Policy objectives and policies.

Issues related to Public Transportation include a possible increase in demand for public transit as people look for alternatives for getting to work; particularly in the areas of downtown and at the Capitol complex. There is also a need to create a better east west bus route system, and park and ride facilities to help access the transit system. Additionally, the input indicated the use and expansion of public transit and pedestrian/bicyclist access to those services. It is also recognized that the primary choice of travel is the individual automobile.

OTHER TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

RAIL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES



MRL/BNSF Train Depot

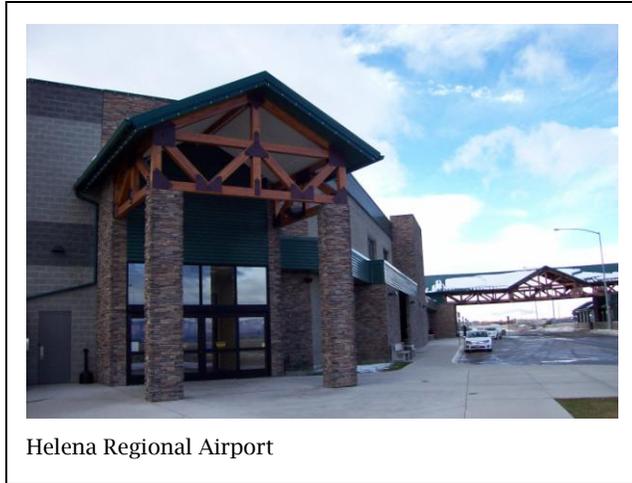
Rail service to Lewis and Clark County has been available for more than 125 years, and, at one time, was a principal mode of transportation for both people and goods. Through the years, the automobile, truck, and airplane have partially displaced rail service.

Two railroad lines are located in the greater Helena area—one traveling east-west and the second traveling north-south.

The east-west line roughly parallels Highway 12 (but crosses the Continental Divide at the Mullan Tunnel) and is operated by Montana Rail Link (MRL), providing freight services, but no regular passenger services, to the Helena area. Helena is under consideration to be included on a route for Amtrak service if a southern route is re-established. The north-south line extends north to Great Falls and is operated by Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF). As a result of flooding and wash-out in 1998, the north-south line is not operational, and is used only to store rail cars. According to MRL, an average of 25-30 trains a day travel through Helena on the east-west line, but that number can fluctuate depending upon the economy. Installing a railroad underpass or overpass on Montana Avenue has been discussed for many years and has been included as a non-prioritized major network improvement in the Transportation Plan.

AIR TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

The Helena Area Regional Airport is located within the City of Helena; however some lands owned by the airport are located in Lewis & Clark County. Passenger service is provided by regional airlines services such as Horizon/Alaska Airlines, Skywest/Delta and United Express with approximately 424 seats available for departing air traffic each day. Air passenger and air freight traffic have been steady for several years. The airport property also contains a National Guard helicopter battalion, and general aviation facilities. The airport is governed by the Airport Authority Board, made up of members appointed by the City of Helena and Lewis and Clark County commissioners.



Fuel prices and passenger bookings affect airport operations. To remain competitive, the airport is looking for the best mix of uses compatible with airport operations, such as possible tenants for some of its property, to provide additional revenues and offset expenses.

TRUCKING AND FREIGHT TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Several trucking and freight companies provide freight services in and out of the Helena area. The trucking and freight companies also deliver products to area merchants, supporting the community's various retail shops and services and serving private residents and commercial operations.

PARKING

The parking in Helena is affected by on-street, off-street, and parking facility capacities as well as physical limitations imposed by topography. As travel and parking needs have increased, there is a corresponding need to better manage transportation and parking facilities (both auto and bicycle parking), to minimize the amount of valuable land used for travel and parking purposes, and to minimize the public investment needed for transportation purposes. This has led to the development of parking ramps to conserve valuable land and the encouragement of public transit system usage to meet travel needs.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

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The issues related to other transportation services include rail, air, trucking/freight, and parking services. There is no passenger rail service to Helena, but there is potential for such service maintaining the current freight rail corridor is also an important rail service issue. Air Service in Helena faces challenges in staying competitive with other larger airports and cities nearby, which has spurred the non aeronautical uses of some airport property. The trucking and freight services face aging highway and Interstate infrastructures and the up and down swing of economic impacts to major industries. Parking services in Helena should balance a need for resident and commercial parking, particularly in the mixed use areas. Attendees at the open houses have also indicated that there is a shortage of long term parking, and some have a perception that there is a lack of available short term parking in the downtown areas.

TRANSPORTATION AND TRANSIT PLANS

The City regularly prepares Transportation and Transit Plans which become a core element of comprehensive planning for the City. Additionally, the City of Helena's Transportation Plan and Transit Development Plan coordinate with the land use element of the City of Helena Growth Policy by planning for the provision of transportation facilities that are required for land use development. These plans also depict expected links required to support future development to prevent future right-of-way problems, identify improvements based on anticipated traffic, and supports the development of a multi-modal transportation system to provide a functional and safe alternative to automobile dependence.

TRANSPORTATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goal:

A multimodal transportation system that:

- A. meets the current and future transportation needs of the greater Helena area including, but not limited to, travel by automobile;
- B. minimizes demand for petroleum products and emissions of green-house gases by promoting transportation choices and efficient land use patterns;
- C. promotes public health by facilitating non-motorized transportation;
- D. meets the unique transportation needs of the area's elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged populations;
- E. respects the area's natural and historic context and minimizes adverse impacts to the environment and existing neighborhoods;
- F. provides for transportation choices in the community to allow safe and efficient travel;
- G. minimizes vehicle miles traveled;
- H. promotes a development pattern that is more compact and less dispersed;
- I. connects to regional transit.

Objectives:

1. Plan a logical, long-range arterial system, including interstate access, that promotes a compact, highly interconnected urban land use pattern and can be systematically implemented by right-of-way reservations and advance acquisition procedures.
2. Implement policies and decisions to ensure that bicyclists and pedestrians can use and cross major roadways and highways leading to the surrounding area.
3. Include appropriate facilities that are safe, comfortable, integrated and convenient for travel by persons of all ages and abilities, automobile, foot, bicycle, and public transit in major street improvement projects and developing areas.
4. Prefer transportation improvements that preserve the natural panorama of skylines and sightlines and that are compatible with historic resources, and minimize cut-and-fill on slopes resulting from construction.