



Helena

FORWARD

History • Opportunity • Legacy

DRAFT | May 29, 2025

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Helena is a city that draws on its past and its environment to shape its future. It is a community where neighbors greet each other on the trail, shovel snow off each other's sidewalks, and where kids walk to school together. Its attractive historic buildings and neighborhoods are complemented by a lively arts scene, unique local businesses, and cultural offerings, all set against the backdrop of thousands of acres of public land that provide unparalleled access to year-round outdoor recreation. All of this, combined with stable economic foundations, make Helena a thriving, amenity-rich, and desirable community to make a life or visit.

*Helena's high quality of life and stable, diverse economy are attracting new residents and businesses and new opportunities and challenges. In the years ahead, Helena will need to meet demands for attainable and diverse housing options and ensure reliable infrastructure and public services while retaining its character and being resilient to change. The **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** will serve as a foundation for decision making and help guide the City as it works to implement the community's vision and goals for the next 10 to 20 years.*

Planning Process

Where are we now?

Project Initiation

Public Engagement

Existing Conditions Analysis

MONTANA LAND USE PLANNING ACT

The 2023 Montana State Legislative Session passed a variety of land-use related bills including the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA). MLUPA requires cities with populations over 5,000 people, that are located in counties with populations in excess of 70,000, to complete a land use plan, and update their zoning and subdivision regulations to align with the land use plan within three years of the passage of the Act.

The City of Helena meets this population threshold, and therefore is subject to the requirements of the MLUPA. Cities that must comply with MLUPA are required to engage in more detailed comprehensive planning than what is required of cities in the Growth Policy outlined in the Montana Subdivision and Platting Act. This includes inventorying existing conditions, housing stock and type, infrastructure, and community facilities and providing a plan to prepare for and accommodate future growth.

WHAT IS A LAND USE PLAN?

The Land Use Plan creates a long-term vision for the city and serves as the roadmap for the community as it grows and evolves over the next 10-20 years. The Plan recommends strategies and policies that should guide municipal standards and annual budgeting to ensure that future growth and development in the city aligns with the community's priorities.

The Plan integrates previous planning efforts, existing policies, local, regional and national data, and, most essentially, community input. The Plan articulates a cohesive vision representative of Helena's residents, business community, and community stakeholders.

The Land Use Plan is a living document that reflects dynamic, interdependent elements that make up Helena and it is intended to respond to changing conditions over time. The Plan is comprehensive but cannot foresee every issue in sufficient detail to prescribe appropriate action for every eventuality. It is not regulatory and is not an ordinance, but it identifies key areas of focus, defines a vision for future growth and development, and guides City actions and investments over the next two decades. The Land Use Plan will guide the adoption of land use regulations and policies, and prioritization and budgeting to make improvements to community facilities and infrastructure.

HOW WAS THIS PLAN CREATED?

The City initiated the planning process for the Land Use Plan in March 2024 as an update to its 2019 Growth Policy. The planning process was organized around the objectives of accurately capturing and reflecting community hopes and values, being comprehensive, and being innovative and future-oriented, while being practical to implement and grounded in market realities.

The process applied geospatial analytical tools to examine and assess potential future growth and development. Insights gained through this process informed land use recommendations that were developed to best accommodate projected community growth while preserving Helena's sense of place and anticipating impacts on infrastructure.

The approach used to create the **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** included these major components:

Where do we want to go?

How do we get there?

Vision, Goals, and Preliminary Land Use

Preliminary Plan Elements

Draft and Final Land Use Plan

Public Engagement

A core part of the process was identifying and developing consensus around key areas of interest, priorities and strategies for moving forward. To ensure the process was inclusive and reflected the perspectives of the entire community, both online and in-person activities were undertaken, including online surveys and mapping tools, in-person interviews and focus group discussions, workshops, multiple meetings and working sessions with a joint committee of the Helena Citizen's Council and the Planning Commission, and open houses.

Existing Conditions Analysis

Before planning could proceed, the process required a comprehensive inventory and assessment of existing conditions, regulations, current and past plans, and the physical attributes of the community to establish a thorough understanding of the community's context.

Establishing a Vision

All input received through the extensive community engagement and outreach was analyzed to identify shared community aspirations, values, and priorities. These were shaped into a vision — a strong statement of the kind of community Helena is and will be in the future.

Developing the Plan

From the insights gained from scenario testing and community and stakeholder feedback, the Plan was developed. This included innovative but practical recommendations to help the City achieve its vision, goals and objectives.

Implementation Strategies

Finally, once the core elements of the Plan were developed, an implementation strategy was established to help put the Plan into action.

HOW TO USE THE PLAN?

The Land Use Plan should be used to:

Communicate the City's Vision – The Plan is a statement of the community's vision for how it wants to grow and change in the years to come. The Plan identifies and articulates the City's priorities and charts a path for long-term growth.

Inform Development Proposals – The Plan is a long-term guide that should be used to evaluate public and private proposals that affect the community's physical environment and economy to ensure that proposed development supports the City's long-term goals.

Serve as a Foundation for Development Regulation – The Plan establishes the basis for zoning and subdivision regulations that will determine what will be built, where. The City should consider updating its development regulations to help achieve the long-term goals of the Plan.

Coordinate with Other Jurisdictions and Initiatives

- The Plan informs planning initiatives that affect the city at the local, county and regional levels. The Plan should aid, inform, and respond to regional efforts related to housing, transportation, transit, trails, natural resources, economic development and recreation.

Identify the Need for Additional Studies - The Plan establishes a path forward but cannot address every issue faced by the city in sufficient detail. It should help identify additional studies and future action steps to address specific needs.

Align and Inform CIP and Budgeting

- The Plan elucidates the community's priorities and should inform the development of the city's Capital Improvements Program (CIP) and budgeting.



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CHAPTER 2

PLAN CONTEXT

Where is Helena today? The City needs to establish a clear understanding of the community's current conditions as it plans for the next 20 years. Collectively, this understanding of the city's needs and existing opportunities, along with community input, created the foundation for Helena's vision for the future.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

The City of Helena, Montana, situated amidst the breathtaking landscapes of Lewis and Clark County, is currently home to 34,460 residents as of the 2023 U.S. American Community Survey, making it the 6th most populous city in Montana. It encompasses a land area of 10,752 acres.

Helena is entering a transformative phase with the update of its Growth Policy and conversion to its Land Use Plan. The Growth Policy update reflects a forward-looking vision, seeking to sustainably meet the evolving needs of residents while preserving the city's distinct character. The Land Use Plan conversion aligns with this vision, integrating innovative strategies to manage development, protect natural resources, and enhance overall quality of life as Helena prepares for and guides its future. These initiatives emphasize collaboration between local government, residents, and stakeholders, fostering a coordinated approach for Helena to thrive as a vibrant and resilient community.

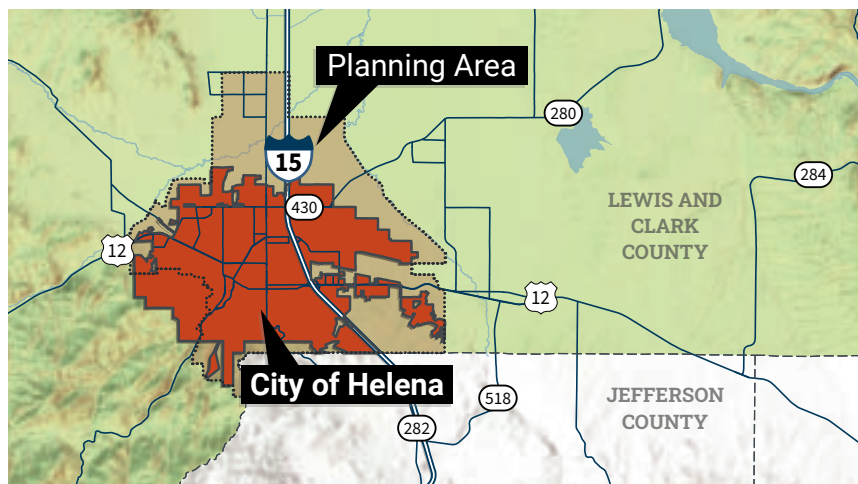
PLANNING AREA

The planning area boundary depicted in the map indicates the area under the planning jurisdiction of the City of Helena. The planning area includes the municipal limits and extends beyond to adjacent unincorporated areas in order to inform compatible land uses, growth boundaries, and the provision of infrastructure. The unincorporated areas and direction of outward growth is primarily located to the north and east within Lewis and Clark County.

PAST PLANNING EFFORTS

The Land Use Plan reflects and builds upon Helena's past planning efforts that have shaped the city into what it is today. The review of the city's past plans and studies ensures existing community policies and goals are carried forward within the Plan where relevant.

For a more detailed description of each plan/study and its relevance to this planning activity, see the Existing Conditions Memorandum.



Below is a list of the plans and studies that were reviewed and consulted in the processes of creating the Helena Land Use Plan.

- The Helena Floodplain Ordinance (2012)
- Greater Helena Area Long Transportation Plan (2014)
- The Railroad Urban Renewal District (URD) Plan (2015)
- The Downtown Helena Master Plan (2016)
- ADA Transition Plan (2017)
- The Downtown Urban Renewal Plan (2018)
- The Parks and Recreation Master Plan (2018)
- The Growth Policy (2019)
- The Capital Hill Mall Urban Renewal District (URD) Plan (2020)
- Downtown Renewal Vision for Cruse Avenue (2020)
- Helena Open Lands Management Plan Update (2020)
- The Helena Subdivision Regulations (2024)
- 6th Ward Railroad District Neighborhood Plan (2024)



LEWIS AND
CLARK COUNTY

Great Falls

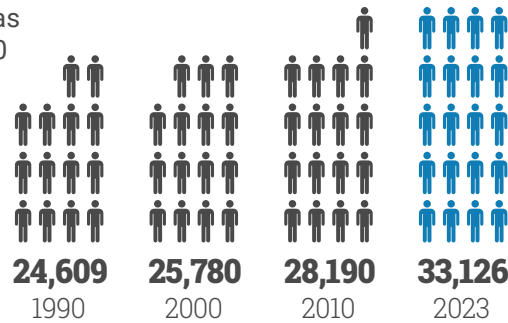
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POPULATION GROWTH

Helena's population has almost doubled since 1950 and has grown by more than 4,000 people from 2010-2023

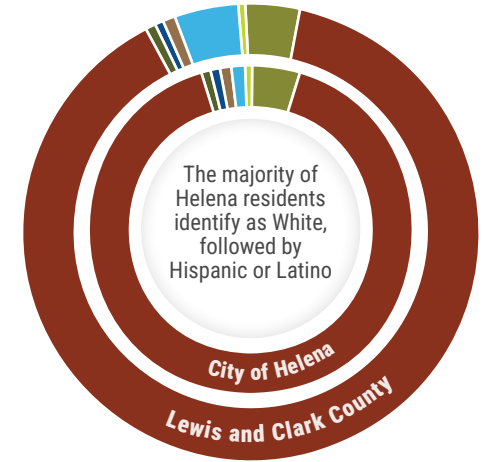
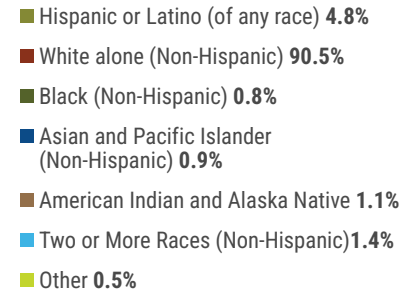
18.9%
Population increase
from 2010-2023



Source: U.S. Decennial Census and 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION (2023)

City of Helena



Source: 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

The demographic snapshot assesses the existing demographic characteristics of Helena. The snapshot helped guide the planning process to ensure the Helena Forward Land Use Plan reflects accurate demographic data and addresses existing trends, issues and opportunities.

Population

Since 1950, Helena's population has nearly doubled, growing from over 17,500 to 33,126 in 2023. The 2019 Growth Policy projected a gradual increase, estimating the population would grow from 30,345 in 2017 to 32,989 by 2040. However, Helena has already exceeded this forecast by 137 residents, reaching the projected 2040 total nearly two decades ahead of schedule. This accelerated growth highlights the city's increasing appeal and underscores the need for proactive planning to accommodate future housing, infrastructure, and service demands.

Age

As of 2023, Helena's median age was 40.4 years, slightly younger than Lewis and Clark County's median age of 41.3. However, the city has experienced a notable demographic shift, driven largely by a significant increase in its senior population. Between 2010 and 2023, the number of residents aged 65 and older grew by 69%, contributing to the overall rise in median age. This trend reflects broader national patterns of aging populations and has important implications for housing, healthcare, and community services.

Race Ethnicity

Helena's population remains predominantly white, comprising nearly 91% of residents. However, the city has experienced a gradual increase in racial and ethnic diversity over the past decade. As of 2023, Hispanic or Latino residents make up nearly 5% of the population, reflecting a 9.9% increase since 2010. Other demographic shifts include growth in the share of residents identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander (+0.2%), Black (+0.8%), and two or more races (+4.5%). While these changes may appear modest, they highlight an evolving community landscape with increasing cultural diversity.



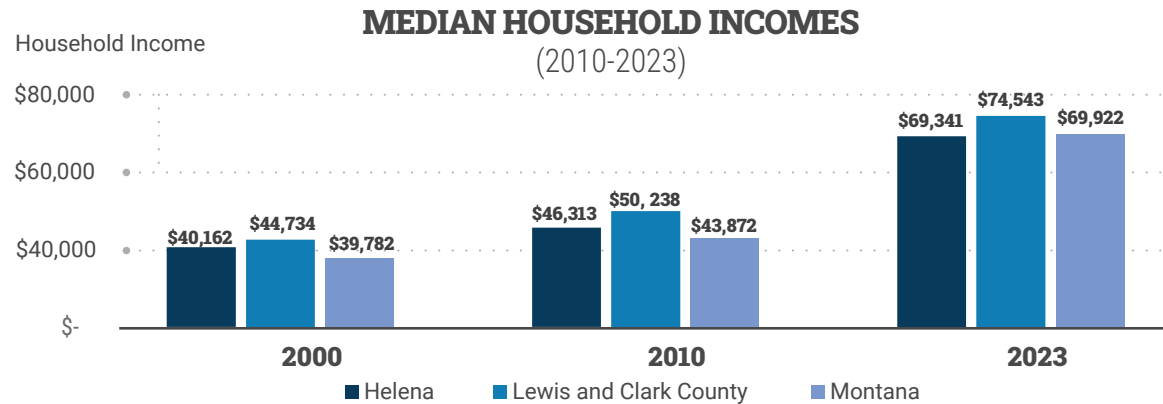
Source: 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Housing

Helena has over 16,500 housing units, with a high occupancy rate of 93.3%. Of these occupied units, 53.8% are owner-occupied, while 46.2% are renter-occupied. The majority of Helena's housing stock—52.4%—consists of single-family detached homes, which is lower than the 66.3% in Lewis and Clark County. The second most common housing type in Helena is multi-family buildings, typically buildings with 3 to 4 dwelling units.

Income

In 2023, Helena's median household income rose to approximately \$74,543, a substantial increase from \$46,313 in 2010. This growth reflects a shifting economic landscape, driven in part by a 4.3% rise in the number of residents earning \$150,000 or more. Additionally, the share of households earning between \$100,000 and \$149,999 grew by 2.4%, while those earning between \$75,000 and \$99,999 increased by 0.7%. At the same time, the percentage of households earning less than \$25,000 declined by -2.1%, suggesting an overall upward trend in income levels. These changes indicate a stronger local economy and a growing middle- to upper-income population. However, they also highlight potential challenges related to affordability, as rising incomes can drive up housing costs and living expenses, potentially outpacing wage growth for lower-income households.



Source: 2000, 2010 and 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Poverty

The U.S. Census Bureau defines households in poverty as those earning less than the cost-of-living threshold. The threshold is calculated every year to consider changes in the cost of necessities like housing and food. In 2024, it was calculated at \$31,200 for a family of four. According to the 2023 American Community Survey, 2,903 residents in Helena lived in poverty (9%). Of those individuals in poverty, 7.8% are under 18 years old and 9.2% are 65 years old or older. The population in poverty is 89.1% White, 5.4% American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 4.7% two or more races, and 5.7% Hispanic or Latino. Compared to the overall population's race and ethnicity makeup, Helena's Hispanic and Latino population (4.8%) is overrepresented in the population of individuals living in poverty.

Educational Attainment

The educational attainment of residents can impact the physical, social, and economic development of a community. It also has an impact on the labor force. In examining the latest data on educational attainment from the U.S. Census Bureau, Helena is generally on par with Lewis and Clark County, with a higher share of residents having a bachelor's degree or higher. Over 31% of Helena and around 28% of Lewis and Clark County's population have completed a bachelor's degree. About 4% more of Helena's population has a graduate or professional degree compared to Lewis and Clark County.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community outreach and engagement is the foundation of the comprehensive planning process. In Helena, residents, business owners, officials and community stakeholders provided feedback and insight into community values, interests, concerns, priorities, opportunities, and aspirations for the future. Public engagement included a web-based survey and interactive mapping tool, public meetings, community and special area workshops, open houses, engagement at the farmers market and other events, do-it-yourself workshops, key stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions. The feedback gathered helped shaped the **Helena Forward Land Use Plan**.

The planning process has engaged thousands of participants through a combination of in-person and online community outreach tools and exercises. Throughout, community members provided hundreds of comments, insights and ideas for consideration. A detailed description of the community outreach process is provided in the Existing Conditions Memorandum, on file with the City. Outreach efforts undertaken in this planning process included:

- Business Community Workshop
- City Department Heads Meeting
- Joint Citizen's Council/Planning Commission/City Leadership Meeting
- Key Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups
- Online Community Questionnaire
- map.social
- Community Visioning Workshop
- Helena Citizen's Council Open House
- Farmers' Market Pop-Ups
- Flyers, Posters, and Sandwich Boards throughout Helena

Online Community Questionnaire

The online community questionnaire featured multiple-choice questions in nine sections focused on housing and residential areas, commercial and industrial land uses, community facilities and services, transportation, parks and recreation, image and identity and top strengths and weaknesses. The survey helped capture a variety of feedback from residents and business owners across the city and in the unincorporated areas and helped formulate plan recommendations.

Community Quotes

A selection of comments from the community engagement are included throughout the Plan with minimal edits for clarity and/or brevity. These comments are intended to provide insight into community perspectives and context for the Plan's recommendations.

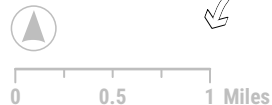
map.social

map.social, an online mapping tool, was used to allow participants to pinpoint issues and opportunities within Helena on their own personalized map. More than 520 points identifying Helena's assets and opportunities, such as community assets, priority development sites, new bike routes and paths and desired uses and developments, were collected through this outreach exercise. Participants also identified issues in Helena, such as problematic intersections where traffic creates unsafe conditions. Participant feedback gathered from map.social helped in formulating Plan recommendations.



The Helena outreach process generated significant participation. Look for quotes from the community throughout the Plan.

- Participant Responses (Optional Question)



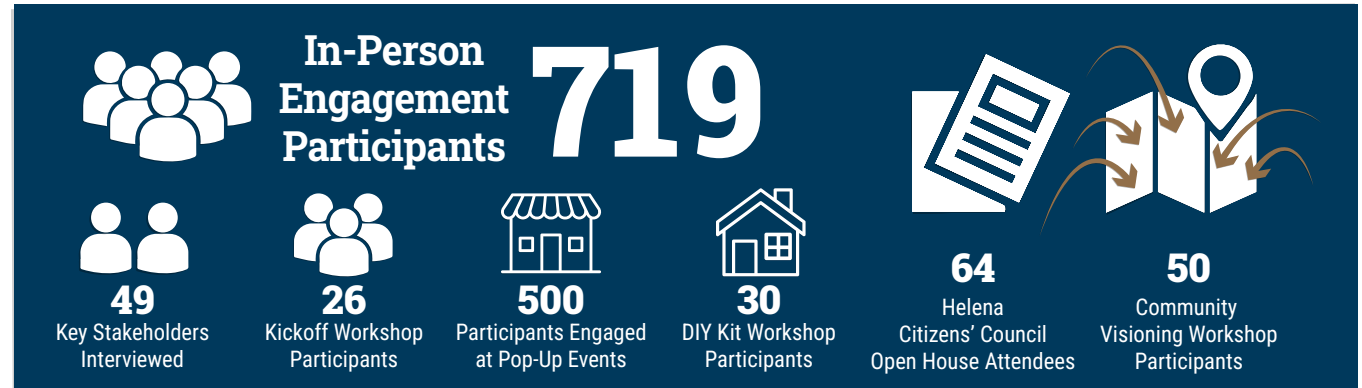
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East
Helena


Overall
Participants
Engaged

1,159



 **18**
Total Public Events

15,471
Fliers Sent
(Through
Utility Bills)



 **6**
Pop-Ups at
Farmers
Markets

Fliers, Posters, and
Sandwich Boards
Distributed at
Key Locations



 **Community Workshops**

Working Group Sessions

City Staff Meetings

Community Open House

Public Hearing and Adoption

 **Online Engagement Participants 440**

 **11**
Social Media
Posts


 **389**
Community
Surveys Taken

 **10,579**
Project Website
Interactions
(Unique Clicks)

51 map.social Contributors

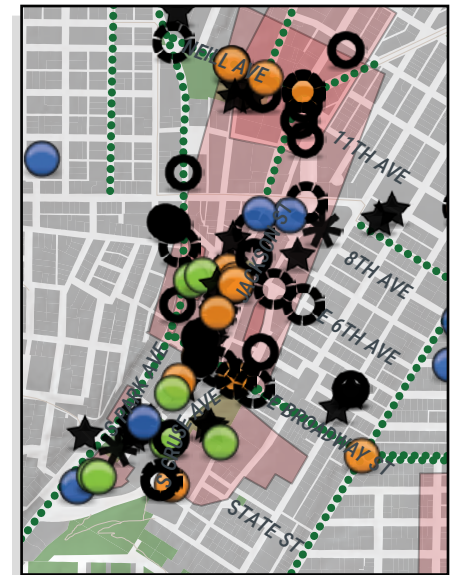
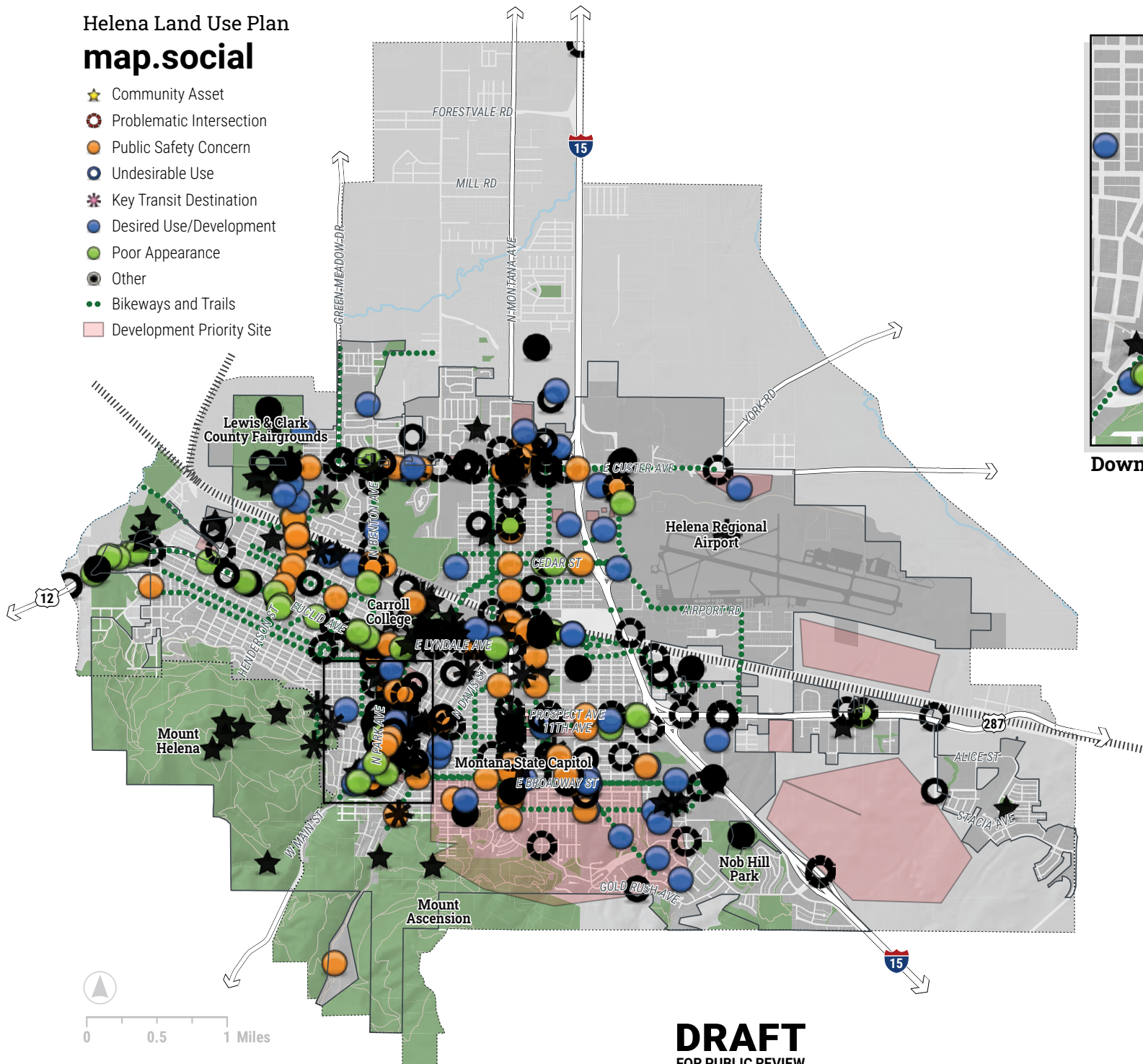
523 map.social Points Created

587 map.social Likes and Dislikes



Helena Land Use Plan map.social

- ★ Community Asset
- ⊗ Problematic Intersection
- Public Safety Concern
- Undesirable Use
- ✱ Key Transit Destination
- Desired Use/Development
- Poor Appearance
- Other
- Bikeways and Trails
- Development Priority Site



Downtown Helena

East
Helena

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COMMUNITY TAKEAWAYS

The Helena Forward Land Use Plan is the product of an extensive public outreach and engagement process that supported a community-led approach to the development of the Plan. Community feedback and input were valuable and the engagement process gave community members a chance to be heard and take part in charting Helena's future. Throughout the outreach process, the community identified their top priorities and concerns. These issues represented areas of focus for the Plan as well as future initiatives across the city. The community priorities identified include the following:

Housing Affordability

There were consistent concerns raised about the lack of affordable housing options in Helena, highlighting that rising costs are outpacing wages. Participants emphasized the need for more housing options, including multi-family units, smaller homes for downsizing, and housing to accommodate intergenerational households. Some participants also suggested incentivizing affordable infill development and making it easier to build accessory dwelling units (ADUs) to address the housing shortage. The Land Use Plan considers the existing housing stock and long-term housing needs as the city plans to support existing and future residents.

Improving Transportation and Mobility

Improving transportation options and overall connectivity was a major theme throughout community engagement. Participants identified multiple concerns in the city including inadequate bike lanes, disconnected sidewalks, lack of public transit, and problematic intersections. Some participants commented on specific connectivity issues such as freight trains causing traffic delays and the need for better wayfinding throughout Helena. The Land Use Plan investigates expanding infrastructure for bicyclists and pedestrians to better connect the community.

Diversifying the Economy

While Helena benefits from a stable employment base due to government jobs, participants expressed concern about income levels not keeping pace with rising living costs. Participants also expressed concerns with stagnation, noting a desire to diversify Helena's economy and attract new businesses and amenities. The Land Use Plan considers ways to address the growing gap between income and cost of living, the need to diversify Helena's economy, and how to attract new businesses while identifying where future development should occur based on infrastructure and service provisions, access to skilled labor, and major transportation routes.



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Preserving Parks and Natural Areas

Helena's abundance of parks, open spaces, and recreational trails was consistently cited as one of the city's strongest assets during project outreach. Participants stressed the importance of maintaining and improving trailhead facilities, promoting better connections to parks and trails, and implementing protections for open spaces and agricultural land. The Land Use Plan helps identify and facilitate responsible management of Helena's natural resources, wildlife areas, parks and trails.

Expanding Community Services

Feedback from participants included concerns about the future funding and capacity of essential public services and facilities as the city grows. Providing quality and easily accessible programs, facilities, and services are an integral part of supporting a strong and equitable community. The Land Use Plan explores ways to optimize its public services and facilities and consider ways to expand and improve service to underserved areas of the community.

Preserving Helena's Character

Helena has a rich history and was lauded by participants for its unique character and small-town charm. Participants emphasized the importance of conscious development that preserves Helena's personality. The Land Use Plan articulates a well-defined vision and identity for the City to attract future development and enhance the arts and culture throughout the community.

Improving Partnerships and Coordination

Participants highlighted the need for better planning and coordination between the City and County, as well as non-profit organizations, to tackle the complex issues and past plan recommendations. The Land Use Plan considers ways for the City to develop meaningful partnerships with organizations in the community to promote and maintain services and amenities in Helena.



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CHAPTER 3

VISION AND GOALS

Building upon feedback, input and discussion from Helena residents and stakeholders, the vision and goals were developed to reflect the aspirations and priorities of the community. Maintaining and enhancing Helena's unique character and sense of place, including its beautiful open spaces, environmental features, attractively landscaped corridors and engaging third places, remain essential to the community's vision moving forward.

Vision and goals are essential components of the Plan and critical to guiding development of Helena's future. These elements define the desired plan outcomes and provide a framework for decision-making, resource allocation and policy development. The vision and goals presented in this chapter were used to guide the development of each chapter of the Helena Land Use Plan, ensuring that each and every element of the Plan is aligned and working together to collectively deliver the vision for the community.

VISION STATEMENT

Helena is a community rooted in history, opportunity, and legacy. It is an exceptional place to live, work, raise a family, start and grow a business, and visit. Over the next 20 years, Helena will continue to capitalize on its distinctive character, welcoming atmosphere, and plentiful access to public lands to be a livable, resilient, and sustainable community.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

History – *Helena preserves and celebrates its rich history and draws on its past as a source of identity, community pride, and wisdom to attract visitors and investment and to support and guide community resilience and sustainability.*

Opportunity – *Helena is a community that embraces diversity and possibility where anyone can realize their potential—whether through education, by starting or growing a business, or in its varying land uses and variety and quality of employment options.*

Legacy – *Helena looks forward to its future while recognizing its debt to the past and its responsibility for generations to come—it is a community dedicated to government transparency and accountability, fiscal responsibility, and protecting the environment.*

HELENA STRIVES TO...

Be a welcoming, safe, inclusive, and affordable community, accessible to all;

Preserve and celebrate its history, historic neighborhoods, and heritage;

Ensure that growth is thoughtfully planned and upholds community values while meeting community needs;

Be a connected and walkable community;

Support a healthy, and diverse economy that benefits all;

Be resilient and adaptable to meet the challenges of a changing climate;

Support a vibrant arts, cultural, and civic environment;

Invigorate and nurture a lively, authentic downtown, create and sustain attractive commercial corridors, and support connected and inviting third spaces;

Be a leader in preserving, conserving, and restoring its natural environment and open space while maintaining and enhancing residents' access to exceptional outdoor recreational opportunities;

Provide quality, efficient municipal services; and

Empower citizen involvement and engagement in all community decision-making.

GOALS

Goals are broad and long-range desired outcomes. They are ambitious and will require the culmination of incremental actions to be fully achieved. The goals and objectives are organized by key planning topics.

Housing

- Support residents' access to affordable, quality housing throughout Helena's socially diverse and livable neighborhoods
- Preserve Helena's historic integrity and small-town character throughout existing and new development.
- Ensure Helena's zoning code and regulations provide a great amount of flexibility in housing development, enabling creative solutions and denser housing types.

Economic Development

- Incentivize high-quality commercial and industrial opportunities that support beautifying major corridors and neighborhoods.
- Promote a series of neighborhood nodes that embody the character of the area and encourage local businesses to grow.
- Continue to revitalize Downtown, cementing its status as the central place for entertainment and activities that serve all ages, ability levels, and lifestyles for residents and visitors alike.

Transportation and Mobility

- Promote a transportation network that enables easy access to neighborhoods, community facilities, employment opportunities, and recreation areas.
- Improve infrastructure and encourage alternative modes of transportation such as walking, bicycling, and public transit for traveling while making roadways and intersections safer and more efficient for all user groups.

Public Facilities, Utilities, Infrastructure, and Community Facilities

- Continue to maintain and improve facilities, services, and infrastructure, ensuring they are reliable for current and future residents.
- Leverage the city's role as the state capital and county seat to collaborate with other agencies and jurisdictions and improve public services while addressing regional impacts.
- Promote sustainable technologies and renewable energy through policies and actions as new technologies become available.

Parks, Open Space, and Natural Resources

- Continue to conserve and steward Montana's land, air, and water and serve as a model for sustainability and resilience.
- Support an extensive parks, open space and trails network, and continue to monitor opportunities to increase and secure outdoor recreational access and improve the wayfinding and safety of trails.

Cultural Resources and Placemaking

- Preserve the city's local landmarks and attractions, encouraging a lively and active tourism economy.
- Continue to support the preservation of Helena's historical structures and maintain the city's heritage and identity.
- Promote a strong sense of community and personal connections to continue to be an exceptional place to live at all ages and stages of life with a healthy, work-life balance.
- Maintain and enhance the city's unique character, including its charming downtown and neighborhoods, all set within a stunning and accessible natural environment.



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CHAPTER 4

LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Land Use and Development chapter establishes the definitions and guidance for land use and promotes strategies to make Helena more sustainable and resilient, preserve its character, enhance its quality of life, accommodate growth, and advance its economy. This chapter is specific enough to guide land-use decisions while also allowing the City to be flexible and creative in individual approaches to new development.

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LAND USE FRAMEWORK

The Land Use Framework builds upon existing uses and patterns of development within the community to establish a sustainable, compatible, and desirable mix of uses to meet the needs of current and future residents and stakeholders. This framework provides a high-level guide for the type and location of future land uses within the community, enhancing the character and quality of life in each of the City's neighborhoods and employment districts while conserving natural resources.

Rural

Rural land uses encompass areas dedicated to crop production, livestock raising, and other agriculture-related activities, along with farmsteads and low-density residential homes. These areas are distinctly separate from urbanized zones and are typically situated at the periphery of the city's water, sewer, and stormwater infrastructure. Located along the outer edges of the city's planning area, rural land uses should prioritize large-lot, low-density development that preserves the character of the countryside. Additionally, rural land uses should support and sustain agricultural operations, ensuring these areas remain functional and aligned with the City's broader planning goals.

Suburban Residential

Suburban residential land uses are characterized by low-density residential areas typically situated beyond the city's core. These areas act as a transitional zone between more densely developed urban neighborhoods and rural land. Suburban residential areas should primarily accommodate single-family detached homes, providing a balance between accessibility to urban amenities and the spacious, less dense character of rural living.

Urban Residential

Urban residential areas are located near Helena's core and are designed to support moderate- to high-density residential development while accommodating a range of complementary business types. These areas should offer a diverse mix of housing options in addition to single-family detached homes, townhomes, duplexes, and triplexes, and multifamily developments of more than four units to promote greater density and housing variety. Additionally, compatible commercial uses such as small-scale retail, cafes, professional offices, and personal services should be incorporated to encourage mixed-use neighborhoods.



Mixed Use

Mixed use areas are characterized by developments that integrate multiple, distinct uses either vertically within a single building or horizontally across a unified space. These areas often feature active uses like retail and restaurants on the ground floor, with residential and/or service-oriented uses situated above. Unlike the mixed use development envisioned for Downtown, future mixed use areas should focus less on vertical integration and more on allowing a blend of uses that complement one another. These districts should concentrate diverse residential, office, and commercial activities within a cohesive environment.

Downtown

The Downtown area consists largely of high-density office, retail, housing, entertainment, institutional, and governmental uses. New development Downtown should seek to provide a mix of these uses, promoting a strong pedestrian-friendly environment and activating the historic core of the city. The Downtown land use should emphasize and maintain Helena's community character including preservation of existing historic structures or architectural elements and contribute to Helena's cultural resources and sense of place.



Commercial

Commercial land uses include a range of retail and services such as grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants, and pharmacies. Essential commercial services should be located adjacent to existing and future residential areas, ensuring that the scale and intensity of commercial development complements nearby neighborhoods. More large scale commercial development should be prioritized along high-traffic corridors such as East Custer Avenue and Interstate 15 to maximize visibility and accessibility. Commercial land uses may also include high density residential development.

Technology and Innovation

Technology and innovation uses are vibrant, modern developments incorporating a variety of uses, including tech, office, and flexible-use spaces, that are integrated into and complement the existing natural and built environment. The development of Technology and Innovation uses should be encouraged south of Canyon Ferry Road and west of Prickly Pear Creek on the outskirts of the City boundary east of the airport.

Medical and Healthcare

Medical and healthcare uses are designed to accommodate a variety of medical office settings, including corporate group homes and senior living centers. It also may be business parks that typically consist of clusters of office buildings in a campus-like setting, including medical offices, headquarters, and corporate offices. The development of medical office and healthcare uses should be encouraged along and in the vicinity of East Broadway Street, Colonial Drive, Winne Ave, and Saddle Drive, west of I-15 to complement existing land uses and align with Helena's overall character.



Industrial

Industrial land uses are intended to accommodate manufacturing, warehousing, and distribution activities. This land use classification includes both heavy and light industrial areas. Heavy industrial areas include more intense uses that may generate fumes, constant loud noise, or involve hazardous conditions. Typically, these areas are not compatible with residential uses. Light industrial/manufacturing areas focus on less intensive activities such as the assembly of products, storage and distribution of goods, and packaging. These uses typically exclude basic industrial processing and are often more compatible with residential, commercial, and other land uses.

Public/Semi-Public

Public/semi-public land uses include areas utilized for governmental and quasi-governmental purposes such as municipal, county, and state government buildings, schools, non-profit agencies, and community service providers. These land uses provide essential facilities and services to the community. While public/semi-public uses are generally distributed throughout the community, Helena exhibits a higher concentration of these uses compared to other communities due to its status as the state capital and the seat of Lewis and Clark County.



Parks and Open Space

Parks and open space uses encompass large areas of the natural environment and public and private open spaces of varying size and function. Public open space refers to areas that lack formal recreational purposes, but have landscaping, natural flora, and public easements or agreements in place that allow public access. Private open spaces serve a similar function to public open spaces but without public accessibility. These land uses also incorporate important environmental features such as woodlands and stream corridors. Natural open spaces throughout the Helena planning area include areas of land managed by the city, county, state, and federal entities that may require collaboration to maintain and enhance recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

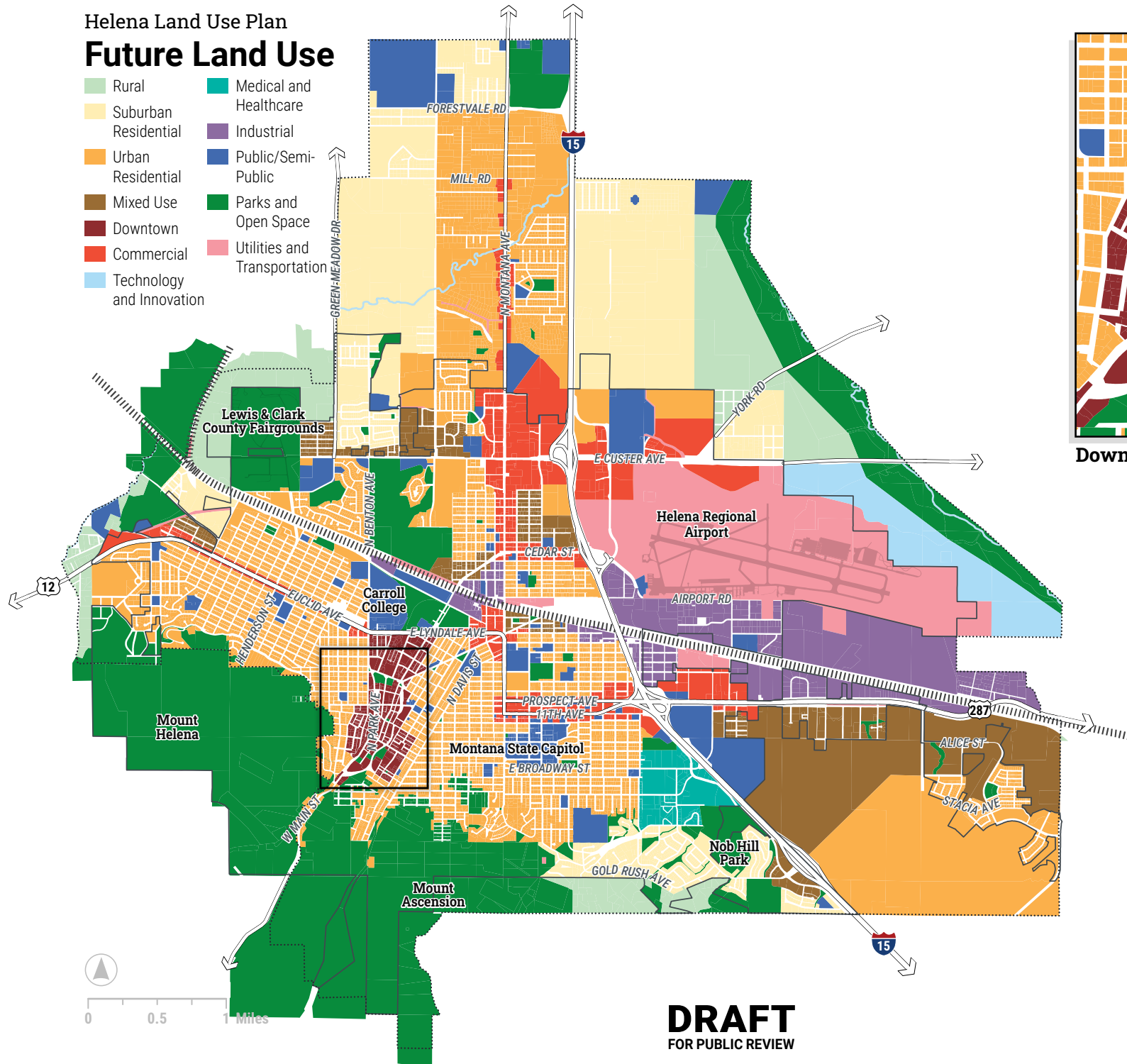
Utilities and Transportation

Utilities and transportation land uses include sites and facilities that accommodate critical infrastructure services such as water, sewer, electric, broadband, and transportation right-of-ways. These land uses provide essential facilities and services to the community and are dispersed throughout Helena. Utilities and transportation land uses should be located as needed throughout the community to provide essential services and support economic development.

Helena Land Use Plan

Future Land Use

- Rural
- Suburban Residential
- Urban Residential
- Mixed Use
- Downtown
- Commercial
- Technology and Innovation
- Medical and Healthcare
- Industrial
- Public/Semi-Public
- Parks and Open Space
- Utilities and Transportation



Downtown Helena

East
Helena

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CHAPTER 5

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Consistently, the top issue identified by residents during the planning process was housing affordability and the need for a greater mix of housing options throughout Helena. Skyrocketing housing costs over the past several years have become a significant weight on the community and its economy.

The Housing and Neighborhoods chapter provides direction for the City to meet its housing needs. It identifies Helena's current housing inventory and future housing needs and provides detailed and specific recommendations for how to fulfill projected demand over the next two decades including identifying and addressing constraints on new development and guidance for public and private investments in residential development. The chapter builds on the residential land use categories established in the Future Land Use map to provide a Residential Growth Framework that identifies opportunities for new housing to satisfy Helena's needs.

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD GOALS

Support residents' access to affordable, quality housing throughout Helena's socially diverse and livable neighborhoods

Preserve Helena's historic integrity and small-town character throughout existing and new development.

Ensure Helena's zoning code and regulations provide a great amount of flexibility in housing development, enabling creative solutions and denser housing types.



HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Helena is committed to addressing various housing issues in the community. The City works with the Helena Housing Authority (HHA), which was established by federal and state legislation in 1938, to provide safe and affordable housing throughout the City. The non-profit organization supports programs such as Public Housing, Local Housing Choice Vouchers, Project-Based Voucher, and Affordable Rental programs.

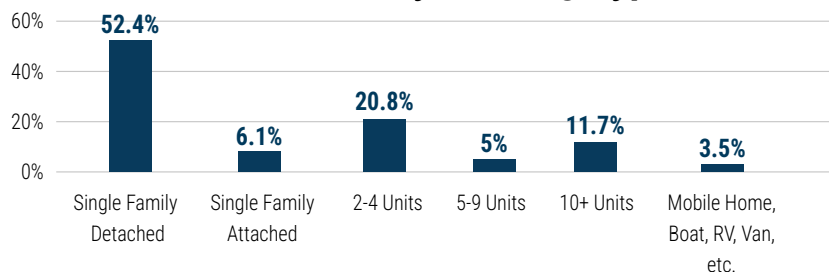
Issues and Opportunities

As of 2022, the City had over 16,500 homes, with single-family detached houses making up 52.4% of the housing stock. Over the past five years, the median sales price of homes in Helena has experienced fluctuations. As of June 2024, home prices in Helena have decreased by 5.9% compared to the previous year, with median prices now at \$400,000.

Notably 21.2% of renters and 10.2% of homeowners with mortgages are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. While Helena's homeowners are less cost-burdened than Lewis and Clark County homeowners (at 10.2% compared to 13.3%), the City's renters are slightly more cost-burdened than the county's (21.2% compared to 20.4%). Gaps in the City's housing stock are likely to contribute to the high renter cost-burden of Helena. There is a mismatch between population trends that indicate a growing number of older individuals living alone or households without children and a historic housing stock that is geared largely to families.

A significant portion of Helena's housing stock (42.5%) was built between 1960 and 1999. Helena has a large share of older housing, with 21.9% of its homes built in 1939 or earlier. As the City evolves, there will be opportunities to address maintenance and efficiency needs for homeowners in the community. On the other end of the spectrum, new construction has begun towards the city's edges to the north and southeast. With building permits for residential development ranging from 67 to 113 annually between 2010 and 2021, the City has seen moderate growth in its housing stock with over 1,156 new residential buildings constructed during this period.

Household by Building Type



Source: 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimates



Home prices have **increased by 45.4%** since 2019 with **median prices at \$355,100**

PROJECTED HOUSING ANALYSIS

As part of the Montana Land Use Planning Act, cities must prepare an inventory and plan to prepare for future housing growth and development. Historic developments in the early 2020s, including the COVID-19 pandemic and in-migration to Montana from other states, make predicting Helena's future population difficult.

The first step in this analysis utilized data from the Montana Department of Commerce (MDOC) which provides six estimates based on different assumptions to project the future populations of Montana communities and advises that municipalities choose the one that they think may be the most accurate. For Helena Forward, the City reasonably expects that Helena's projected population for 2045 will be approximately 44,817 in alignment with the compound annual growth rate model.

Helena could accommodate as many as **22,000 to 39,000** new residents by 2045.



The compound annual growth rate provides a more accurate representation of long-term trends, smoothing out short-term fluctuations and more reliable for long-term planning. This estimate incorporates decennial census counts, county-level vital statistics, administrative records, and national immigration records.

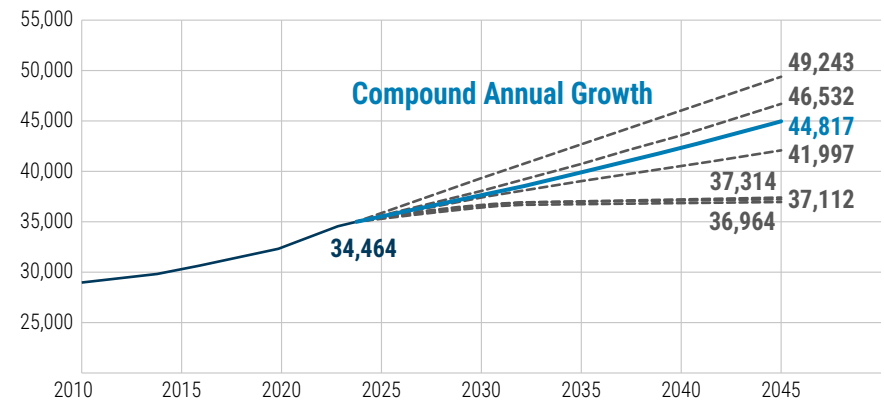
The next step in the housing analysis utilized 2020 U.S. Census blocks to take an inventory of existing household densities and the number of residents per household within each of the residential future land use categories. These densities were recorded as follows:

- **Suburban Residential** areas typically develop with 3.73 households per acre (2.20 people per household)
- **Urban Residential** areas typically develop between 3.73 – 9.58 households per acre (1.78 - 2.20 people per household)
- **Mixed Use** areas typically develop with 4.34 households per acre (2.13 people per household)
- **Downtown** areas typically develop with 10.40 households per acre (1.62 people per household)

Following the inventory, these densities were applied respectively to the available acreages for each land use category within the planning area. An 80% efficiency rate was applied to the households per acre calculation to reflect the approximate usability of the total area. There are approximately 3,589 acres of agricultural and vacant land poised for new residential development according to the Future Land Use Plan, when apportioned, results in the following distribution of 1,311 acres for Suburban Residential, 1,448 acres for Urban Residential, 828 acres for Mixed Use, 2 acres for Downtown.

Based on the calculation presented, the City's future land use plan can accommodate a potential population increase of **22,000 to 39,000 new residents**, suggesting there is plenty of land available for housing development. With this analysis, the City can carefully evaluate the types of growth it permits, particularly regarding sprawl. The City should work to avoid unsustainable expansion that could strain public utilities and services and lead to diminishing land availability, consequently driving up development and housing costs.

MDOC Population Projections



Source: Montana Department of Commerce



REDUCING CONSTRAINTS TO HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

As the community continues to grow, the City will need to consider where to prioritize residential development with thoughtful planning and coordination. The following list highlights geographically- and financially-based incentives and growth strategies which could be applied to targeted growth areas as effective tools to encourage efficient and orderly growth patterns while also reducing constraints to development.

- Development/service connection fees can be reduced or waived within targeted growth areas.
- Density bonuses can be provided for decreasing minimum lot areas or increasing allowable dwelling units per area within targeted development growth areas.

Current Zoning and Subdivision Regulations

The Land Use Plan is a policy guide that outlines actions the City should take to realize its aspirations; zoning and subdivision regulations are the legal tools that Helena will use to implement the Land Use Plan. The Land Use Plan itself does not have the “legal teeth” needed to require new development or redevelopment in the community to align with the community’s vision, goals, objectives, or recommendations conveyed in the Plan. Zoning and Subdivision Regulations address the physical characteristics of development such as height, bulk, density, and lot coverage. It also defines allowable uses within zoning districts.

The recommendations and strategies in this chapter may require updates to the city’s zoning and subdivisions regulations to facilitate these desired land use and development patterns within the community. Properly drafted land development regulations that align with the vision and goals of the Land Use Plan can remove unnecessary barriers to investment by providing developers with clear and concise development and design standards.

Infrastructure Needs and Capacity

The Land Use Plan should prioritize long-term growth and residential development within the existing planning area, utilizing existing infrastructure before expanding beyond the City’s available infrastructure support. The City should encourage infill development and promote policies to avoid “leap-frog” development where developers skip over large tracts of land to build housing on cheaper land further away from the city.

The City could consider a variety of responses to limit leap-frog development, including requiring developments to show access to a one-hundred-year supply of water that would not contribute to depletion of groundwater.

NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER

Neighborhood character plays a vital role in fostering attractive, desirable, and sustainable neighborhoods. Character is a combination of architectural design, size, scale, landscaping, street layout, street furniture, sidewalks, setbacks, and other elements that contribute to the appearance and feel of a neighborhood. Many of the existing neighborhoods throughout Helena exhibit a great deal of historic integrity and small-town charm that is highly attractive for residents. Qualities such as access to nearby community amenities, well-maintained infrastructure, and affordability are essential for building strong communities. Preserving and enhancing these unique elements and identities throughout existing and new housing development is a critical component to the Land Use Plan.



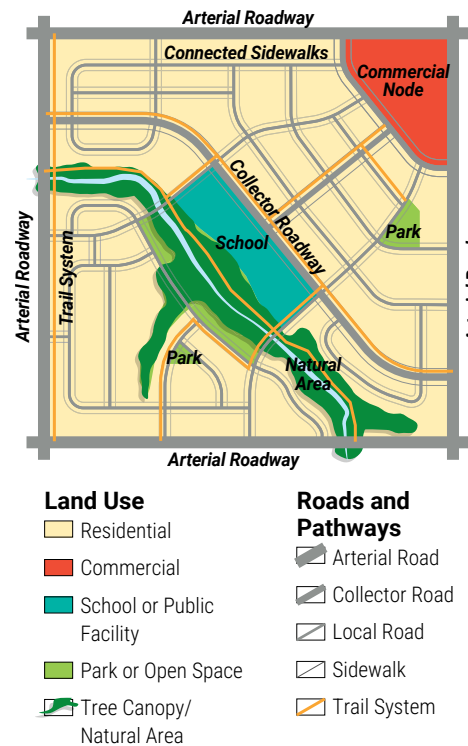
Quality Residential Neighborhoods

Helena's neighborhoods form the core of its uniquely historic and small-town identity, characterized by a blend of architectural design, scale, landscaping, and layout. Preserving and enhancing this character while accommodating future growth is essential to maintaining the community's appeal. Future development should embrace the community's distinctiveness, ensuring new projects are contextually appropriate and varied. This can be achieved through effective development regulations that address factors like material use, scale, massing, setbacks, and roadway design to provide continuity between existing and future neighborhoods.

Complete Neighborhoods

To meet rising housing costs, Helena will need to develop a greater variety of housing options and improve access to employment and recreational opportunities. The concept of "complete neighborhoods," where residents can access housing, shops, parks, and schools within a short walking distance, should guide future development. These walkable, amenity-rich neighborhoods would support diverse residents of all ages and incomes, strengthen the local economy, and promote job growth. Compact, mixed-use development along key routes and intersections can enhance neighborhood connectivity and foster a stronger sense of community.

Neighborhood Elements



Recommendations

- Require well-designed, walkable residential developments with access to open space, recreation, commercial centers, and community services.
- Coordinate with Helena Housing Authority, Habitat for Humanity, and other housing- and social service-related non-profits to identify and address housing issues and opportunities.
- Buffer residential areas from incompatible uses and promote transitions between housing types.
- Support programs to ensure affordability for people at all income levels.
- Continue to support property owners, residents, and non-profit organizations to bring properties into compliance with city codes as needed.



HOUSING VARIABILITY

As Helena accommodates its growing population, it will need to balance preserving its small-town neighborhood character while supporting a variety of higher-density housing options. Helena currently has over 15,000 housing units, with 53.5% of the housing stock consisting of single-family detached homes. To meet the evolving needs of residents, the City should continue to encourage higher-density housing options like duplexes, townhomes, and multifamily apartments. These alternatives can offer affordability, particularly for those who cannot afford a single-family home or wish to downsize, while enhancing the community's inclusivity and livability.

Housing diversity in neighborhoods can be an important aspect in building socio-economic diversity. A broad range of housing types and prices can also provide greater stability to a neighborhood during market fluctuations. Future homebuyers may be looking to live in a particular area, either due to employment reasons, social and family ties, or access to childcare resources. In the same vein, seniors may be looking to downsize and want to move into a senior living community, multi-generational housing, or other living options near family or other support or amenities.



Missing Middle Housing

Missing middle housing types include a range of options between single-family homes and small-scale apartments such as townhomes, duplexes, triplexes, four- to six-unit apartments, and mixed-use buildings. Missing middle housing can help address multiple housing issues including affordability, adapting to changing demographics, walkability and transit support, and environmental sustainability. By offering a variety of housing options at different price points, housing in Helena can provide more flexibility and begin to accommodate young professionals, growing families, and seniors looking to downsize.

Mixed-Use

Mixed-use development typically refers to buildings that include multiple uses within the same structure or horizontally across a unified space. Promoting mixed-use development, with housing conveniently located near employment centers, shopping areas, restaurants, parks, and other day-to-day activities can better connect residents with necessary services and amenities. The City should encourage mixed-use development to minimize the negative impacts of physically separated uses and subsequently promote active transportation options such as walking, biking, and public transit.



Safe, affordable and accessible low-income housing is absolutely critical to the growth of our community.





Senior Housing

According to the AARP's 2024 Home and Community Preferences Survey, 75% of adults aged 50 and older would prefer to remain in their homes as they age, but nearly 44% of them expect to have to move to accommodate their new wants and needs later in life. As the median age in Helena has risen by approximately 1.7% to 42.6, the City will need to consider ways for residents to be able to age in place and remain active participants in the community. The ability to age in place is an important factor for long-term residents who wish to remain in a community as well as attract new residents to the area. Alternative, small-scale housing options should be considered that integrate into Helena's neighborhoods to support residents looking to age in place, rather than developing large senior living communities that can be disconnected from parks, commercial centers, and services.

Accessory Dwelling Units

An additional type of dwelling unit that could satisfy the need for missing middle housing is the accessory dwelling unit (ADU). An ADU is a smaller, independent dwelling unit located on the same lot as a single-family home. ADUs can be attached to the main home, as basements, upper floors, new additions, or detached as standalone structures elsewhere on the parcel. ADUs can support housing affordability for both homeowners and tenants and offer options for senior relatives that want to stay close to family. ADUs also provide flexibility for Helena's transient population, including Legislature that meets every other year and university students needing housing nine months out of the year.

While ADUs are a unique and desirable option for increasing density, the actual implementation towards developing this housing option can be difficult. ADUs are typically expensive to build and do not provide enough return on investment for homeowners and property owners to consider developing. Furthermore, other restrictions such as dimensional requirements from zoning can prohibit ADU development. The City should consider strategies for loosening restrictions and offering incentives to encourage ADU development while discouraging any negative impacts of vacation rentals.

Recommendations

- Encourage additional missing middle housing types to accommodate residents of all abilities and incomes.
- Promote a mix of housing options that complement the existing neighborhood character, support the market, meet the needs of residents, and encourage a livable community.
- Encourage housing options that allow senior residents to remain in the community.
- Work with developers to explore incentives to promote housing development that aligns with the City's vision.
- Encourage a greater variety of housing types while maintaining existing neighborhood character.
- Diversify density and housing types to create varied neighborhoods, providing options for senior citizens, empty nesters, and families at all income levels.
- Consider adopting regulations to limit the impact of short term rentals on the local housing and rental market.



PRESERVATION AND MAINTENANCE

Historic preservation has played a key role in the heritage and cultural significance in many neighborhoods throughout Helena. While this plan aims to promote residential growth to meet housing needs, the Plan aims to balance this with the preservation of existing housing. Historic preservation contributes to a community's character, cultural identity, and sense of place. Elements such as architectural features, historical landmarks and significant sites are all able to be regulated under preservation.

The National Register is the United States federal government's official list of sites and structures considered worthwhile of preservation for their historical significance. While the National Register supports broad scope of preservation in the United States, local law is typically more effective at supporting the historical character of a community. Preservation efforts should be balanced with critical improvements to properties and ensuring the community's need for future growth and development.

Historic Preservation Authority

The Lewis and Clark County Heritage Preservation & Tourism Council primarily reviews and oversees development affecting historic properties and districts while serving as an advisory capacity to local government entities. The council serves other responsibilities including budget management, grant administration, Historic Preservation Officer supervision, and maintaining service standards in accordance with the Certified Local Government Program for Historic Preservation and community development objectives. The Heritage Preservation and Tourism Council can play an active role in preserving Helena's sense of place, and advancing sustainable building practices by guiding the adaptive reuse of historic buildings to meet the community's needs.

Code Enforcement and Property Maintenance

Consistent, fair, and efficient code enforcement is an effective strategy to maintain Helena's housing stock in existing neighborhoods and help revitalize areas that have fallen into disrepair. New development, demolition of quality homes, and poorly designed renovations and additions can also place the City's established character at risk. Adequate staffing should be budgeted to maintain consistent code enforcement operations.



Additionally, a broad spectrum of design-oriented policies and regulations can provide guiderails for developers and educate residents about context-sensitive development. Targeted design-oriented development controls, development guidelines or pattern books, and “how to” guides can support the implementation of the vision for housing throughout Helena.

Recently, the City has developed a new online licensing and permitting system to streamline and simplify code enforcement for residents. The system features a public-facing online portal called Civic Access that allows residents to:

- Apply for and manage Planning and Zoning cases
- Apply for and manage Building related permits
- Apply for various Business, Liquor and Pet Licenses
- Pay invoices
- Schedule inspections

The City also provides dashboards for “In Progress Residential and Commercial Development” and future subdivisions and annexations to ensure community members and key stakeholders have the latest information regarding planning and development needs. In addition, the City provides easy access to other online resources including grant funding opportunities available through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and Urban Renewal Districts with tax-increment financing provisions.

Recommendations

- Improve the community’s image through enhanced design-specific standards.
- Support property owners, residents, neighborhood associations, and non-profit organizations to bring substandard housing and unmaintained properties into compliance with City codes.
- Support residents in the upkeep of their property through programs and incentives like permit fee waivers for qualifying home repairs and maintenance projects.
- Advertise grants, low-interest loans, and other tools or mechanisms available to property owners to help fund private property improvements.

It is important for the city to try to find ways to make homeownership a reality for other young people, families and people like me that have lived here since they were kids, but were simply outspent out of the market.

RESIDENTIAL GROWTH FRAMEWORK

The Residential Growth Framework is based on the collected community outreach and specific characteristics of each residential area. Building on the residential land use categories established in the Future Land Use map, the Residential Growth Framework indicates where the City can strategically plan for future residential development along with enhancing and preserving its existing neighborhoods and public services.

While the high-level recommendation for this chapter is to promote a greater mix of housing and promote strong traditional neighborhood development across Helena, the areas outlined in the framework provide vision and scope for where the City can more readily plan for significant growth.

Infill Development

There are approximately 725 parcels of vacant or undeveloped land, totaling nearly 3,500 acres, located within Helena's planning area. These parcels range from less than one acre to over 100 acres. These vacant or undeveloped parcels provide significant opportunities for infill development.

The infill development area includes land adjacent to the established and developed areas within the municipal boundary as well as areas where the City is expanding infrastructure and future development. While there are opportunities for infill development throughout the City, the most significant opportunities are located along the eastern edge of the City along Route 287 and Interstate 15. Future infill development areas should emphasize connectivity with adjacent, established development and align design standards with existing development in scale and intensity.







Growth Development

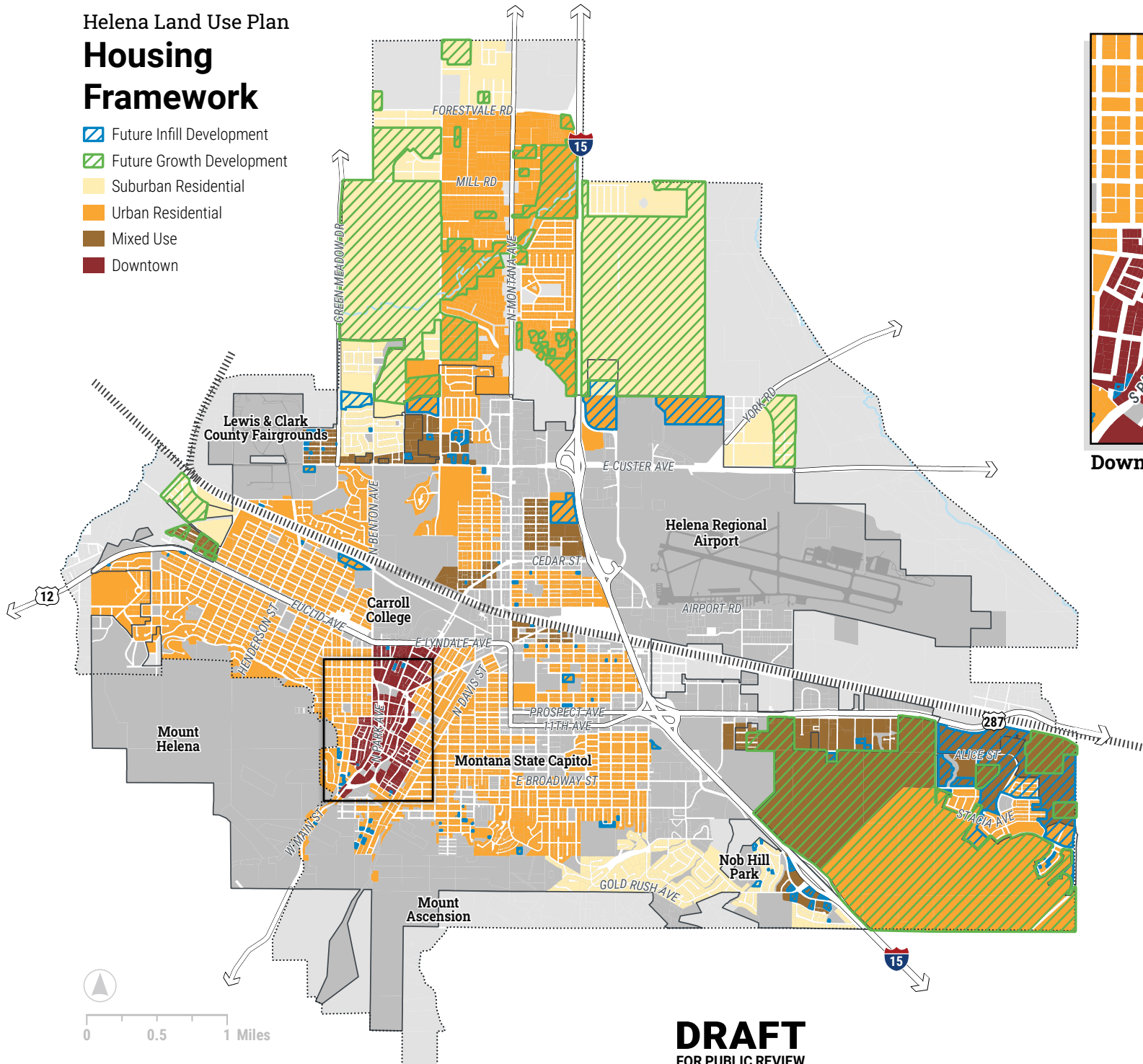
The growth development area consists of new growth areas that present significant opportunities for expansion beyond Helena's existing neighborhoods and commercial corridors. While the demand for single-family homes may continue, it is important to provide a mix of housing options that complement the existing neighborhood character, support the market, meet the needs of residents, and encourage an equitable community. Future development in these areas should integrate into the fabric of surrounding neighborhoods while meeting the needs of the City's growing population.

Context Sensitive Density

Context sensitive density refers to a development pattern of incorporating a mix of residential housing types and other supporting land uses such as commercial, retail, and service-related uses within a compact, well-connected node. This idea can be applied across the City to promote a mixed-residential development pattern and maintain vibrant and diverse neighborhoods throughout Helena. While context sensitive development encourages density, it also aims to address concerns related to infill development and redevelopment projects that could have an impact on the existing surrounding neighborhood scale and character. Additional development considerations should be included for preserving unique architectural elements and aesthetics of neighborhoods without completely restricting maintenance and growth.

Helena Land Use Plan Housing Framework

-  Future Infill Development
-  Future Growth Development
-  Suburban Residential
-  Urban Residential
-  Mixed Use
-  Downtown



Downtown Helena



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CHAPTER 6

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Largely as a benefit of being the state capital, Helena has enjoyed relative economic stability. High-paying government jobs have created a foundation that has attracted new industries eager to take advantage of the City's location, infrastructure, and high quality of life. Diversity makes Helena's economy more resilient, attracts investment, and will make the City more prosperous. In the years to come, Helena should strive to further diversify its economy and attract industries that provide high-paying jobs.

The Economic Development chapter outlines strategic recommendations designed to attract diverse industries, build a skilled and adaptable workforce, and cultivate thriving commercial areas. These efforts aim to enhance the city's economic foundation, promote long-term growth, and create a flourishing environment for both residents and businesses.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Encourage high-quality commercial and industrial opportunities that support beautifying major corridors and neighborhoods.

Promote a series of neighborhood nodes that embody the character of the area and encourage local businesses to grow.

Continue to revitalize Downtown, cementing its status as the central place for entertainment and activities that serve all ages, ability levels, and lifestyles for residents and visitors alike.



CURRENT ECONOMY

Helena's economy is driven by public administration, which remains the City's largest employment sector, accounting for approximately 21.5% of all jobs in 2022. Healthcare and social assistance is the second-largest sector, making up nearly 16% of the workforce. Major employers include the State of Montana, St. Peter's Hospital, the Federal Government, Lewis and Clark County, Carroll College, and Boeing, reflecting a strong foundation in government, healthcare, education, and advanced manufacturing.

According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau Center for Economic Studies, Helena had 32,851 jobs in 2022—marking a 10% increase since 2010. The City's fastest-growing industries during this period were manufacturing and construction, which surged by 141% and 68%, respectively. However, not all sectors experienced growth; educational services saw the largest decline, losing 284 jobs.

JOBS LOCATED IN HELENA: 10 EMPLOYMENT SECTORS (2022)

	<i>Total Jobs in 2022</i>	<i>Share of Job Market in 2022</i>	<i>Change in Jobs since 2010</i>
Public Administration	7,071	21.5%	-2.3%
Health Care and Social Assistance	5,156	15.7%	31.2%
Retail Trade	3,711	11.3%	19.7%
Accommodation and Food Services	2,778	8.5%	5.2%
Construction	2,264	6.9%	67.6%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	2,105	6.4%	15.7%
Finance and Insurance	1,771	5.4%	-8.5%
Administration & Support, Waste Management and Remediation	1,668	5.1%	53.0%
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)	1,528	4.7%	-5.8%
Educational Services	1,329	4.0%	-17.6%
Totals	29,381	89.5%	158.2%

U.S. Census Bureau Center for Economic Studies 2022

Top Industries

The top industry for Helena residents, either working in the city or elsewhere, is the Health Care and Social Assistance sector, which employs 17.2% of city residents. The other industry sectors that employ the most Helena residents include the Public Administration (16.7%), Retail Trade (10.7%), Accommodation and Food Services (9.4%), and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (6.7%) sectors.

Between 2010 and 2022, the total number of working residents increased from 14,526 to 16,635, showing a 14.5% growth. Among all industry sectors, the largest percentage increases in employed residents were seen in Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting (95.7% increase, representing 44 additional jobs); Construction (64.4% increase, or 372 more jobs); and Administration and Support, Waste Management and Remediation Services (47.1% increase, or 282 more jobs). Collectively, these three sectors added 698 jobs, though they still represent a relatively small portion of total employment.

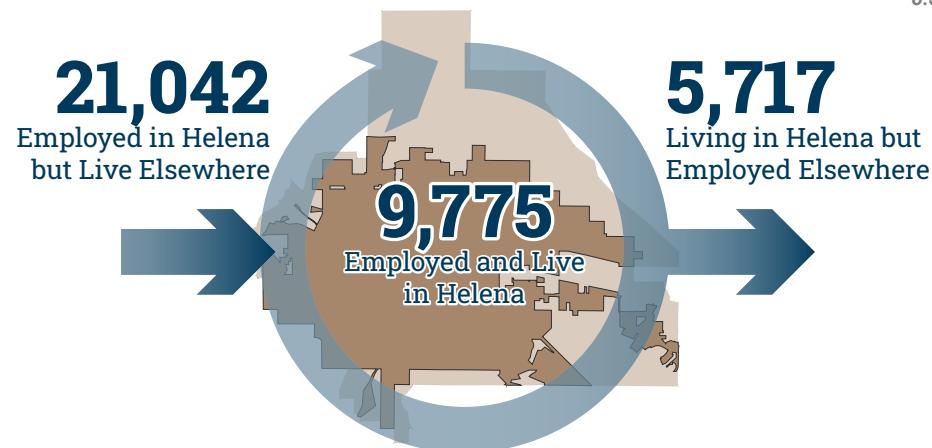
Where Residents Work

As of 2022, Helena had 15,492 residents with primary jobs—defined by the U.S. Census as an individual's highest-paying job for the year. Approximately 9,775 of these workers both live and work in Helena, while 5,717 residents commute to jobs outside the City. Major job centers in the region include Helena Valley Southeast, Helena Valley West Central, Helena Valley Northeast, and the City of Great Falls.

TOP EMPLOYERS FOR HELENA RESIDENTS: 10 EMPLOYMENT SECTORS (2022)

	<i>Total Jobs in 2022</i>	<i>Share of Job Market in 2022</i>	<i>Change in Jobs since 2010</i>
Health Care and Social Assistance	2,859	17.2%	26.8%
Public Administration	2,783	16.7%	0.5%
Retail Trade	1,775	10.7%	12.6%
Accommodation and Food Services	1,566	9.4%	19.1%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1,110	6.7%	37.2%
Educational Services	987	5.9%	-15.0%
Construction	950	5.7%	64.4%
Administration & Support, Waste Management and Remediation	881	5.3%	47.1%
Other Services (excluding Public Administration)	761	4.6%	4.7%
Finance and Insurance	727	4.4%	-11.7%
Totals	14,399	86.6%	185.7%

U.S. Census Bureau Center for Economic Studies 2022



POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE

Helena has experienced steady population growth in recent years, largely driven by in-migration as more people are drawn to the area's high quality of life and economic opportunities. With the city's population projected to reach 44,817 by 2045, there is a growing need for strategic investments in infrastructure, affordable housing, workforce development, and business-friendly policies to sustain and attract a skilled labor force. One of the most promising areas for growth lies in the manufacturing sector, which has seen significant expansion in recent years.

Helena has a unique opportunity to build on this momentum by leveraging available land and fostering industry development near the airport which is an area ideally suited for economic growth due to its proximity to air and rail transportation and a burgeoning ecosystem of manufacturing industries. Targeted investments in utility infrastructure, transportation networks, and workforce training programs will be essential to support long-term business growth and ensure Helena remains competitive as a regional hub for advanced manufacturing and technology innovation. By proactively planning for this expansion, the City can strengthen its economic base, create high-paying jobs, and enhance its role as a center for industry and innovation in Montana.

“Helena should be investing in its existing businesses and promoting sustainable economic growth. Manufacturing, technology, and other innovative businesses could help support community services.”

NEW BUSINESSES

To ensure long-term economic sustainability, Helena must prioritize diversifying its industries. Expanding into new and emerging sectors will not only protect and improve the City's tax base but also create a more adaptable and resilient economy. Key opportunities lie in technology industries and advanced aerospace parts manufacturing spurred by regional developments associated with the federally-designated Technology Hub.

To support this growth, the City must ensure it has the required infrastructure, workforce development resources, and business-friendly policies to attract and sustain these sectors. By strengthening its existing industries while actively pursuing new ones, Helena can build a dynamic, future-proof economy that provides a broad range of opportunities for residents, businesses, and the region as a whole.

Recommendations

- Conduct market research to identify and attract emerging industries such as technology and advanced manufacturing to Helena.
- Collaborate with nonprofits and state agencies including Montana Business Assistance Connections and the Montana Department of Commerce to promote Helena as an attractive location for new industries.
- Invest in modernizing infrastructure, including transportation networks, broadband access, and utility systems, to accommodate the needs of new industries.
- Identify sites in proximity to the airport that are suitable for new industrial development.
- Consider incentives to attract new industrial development including options such as tax abatement, reduction or waiving of development fees, making tax increment financing available, and other tools.
- Integrate sustainability into new industry development, offering incentives for businesses that adopt green technologies and sustainable practices.
- Evaluate the need/potential to create an Economic Development department within the City.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A strong workforce is essential to Helena's economic growth, attracting new businesses and ensuring long-term prosperity. To support workforce development, the City should collaborate with major employers, educational institutions, and economic development organizations to create targeted training programs that reflect local industry needs.

Emphasizing partnerships with trade schools, local colleges, and high school career and technical education (CTE) programs will create clear, accessible pathways to in-demand, skilled careers. These partnerships can connect students and jobseekers directly to opportunities in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, health-care, and other trades critical to the local economy.

Ongoing engagement with employers will help identify workforce gaps and emerging skill needs, guiding the development of technical training, recruitment strategies, and talent retention efforts. In addition, expanding access to apprenticeships, job shadowing, dual-enrollment, and work-based learning will provide Helena residents with the hands-on experience and credentials necessary to succeed in a competitive job market. By aligning education and training with local economic priorities, the City can build a dynamic, adaptable workforce that supports current employers while positioning Helena for future economic opportunity.

Recommendations

- Support programs that prepare residents for the workforce, including soft skills training, interview preparation, and resume-building workshops.
- Incentivize employees to remain in the area after completing training or apprenticeships.
- Work with local businesses, industries, and educational institutions to organize job fairs and recruitment events that connect businesses with potential employees.
- Collaborate with major employers and educational institutions including Helena College, Carroll College, and local vocational schools to create career-focused programs that provide students with the skills needed by key industries.

Commercial Development

The character of commercial areas forms the overall image of a community. Commercial areas function as focal points of activity and are often what visitors see first. Higher quality, attractive commercial areas can foster greater economic development by drawing new businesses and customers. During public engagement, community members stressed the desire to improve the character of the Helena's commercial areas. Rather than generic shopping centers, residents expressed a strong desire for commercial spaces that feel distinctive and truly reflect Helena's identity.



COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS

Key commercial corridors, including Montana Avenue, Custer Avenue, Prospect/11th Avenue, Cedar Street, and Lyndale/Euclid offer a diverse mix of retail, service, and commercial amenities that serve the needs of Helena residents and visitors. To further enhance these areas, the City must explore strategies to support the growth and retention of businesses that contribute to the local economy while providing inviting, lively spaces where residents can shop, dine, and engage with their community.

Support Infill Development

Promoting infill development along Helena's existing commercial corridors offers an opportunity to transform underutilized areas into cohesive environments. Currently, corridors such as Montana Avenue and Euclid Avenue are fragmented by vacant or underdeveloped parcels, which hinder their full potential. Strategic infill development can revitalize these areas, fostering economic growth while creating attractive spaces for local businesses to expand. By focusing on redeveloping these corridors, Helena can strengthen its identity as a thriving economic hub and enhance its sense of place through efficient land use. Modernizing the zoning code will play a role in guiding this transformation.

Promote Compatible Land Uses

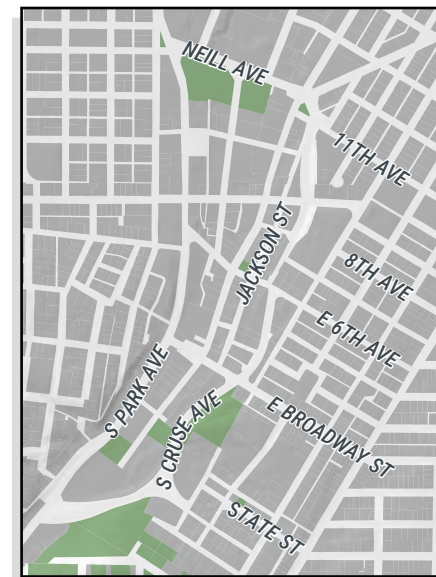
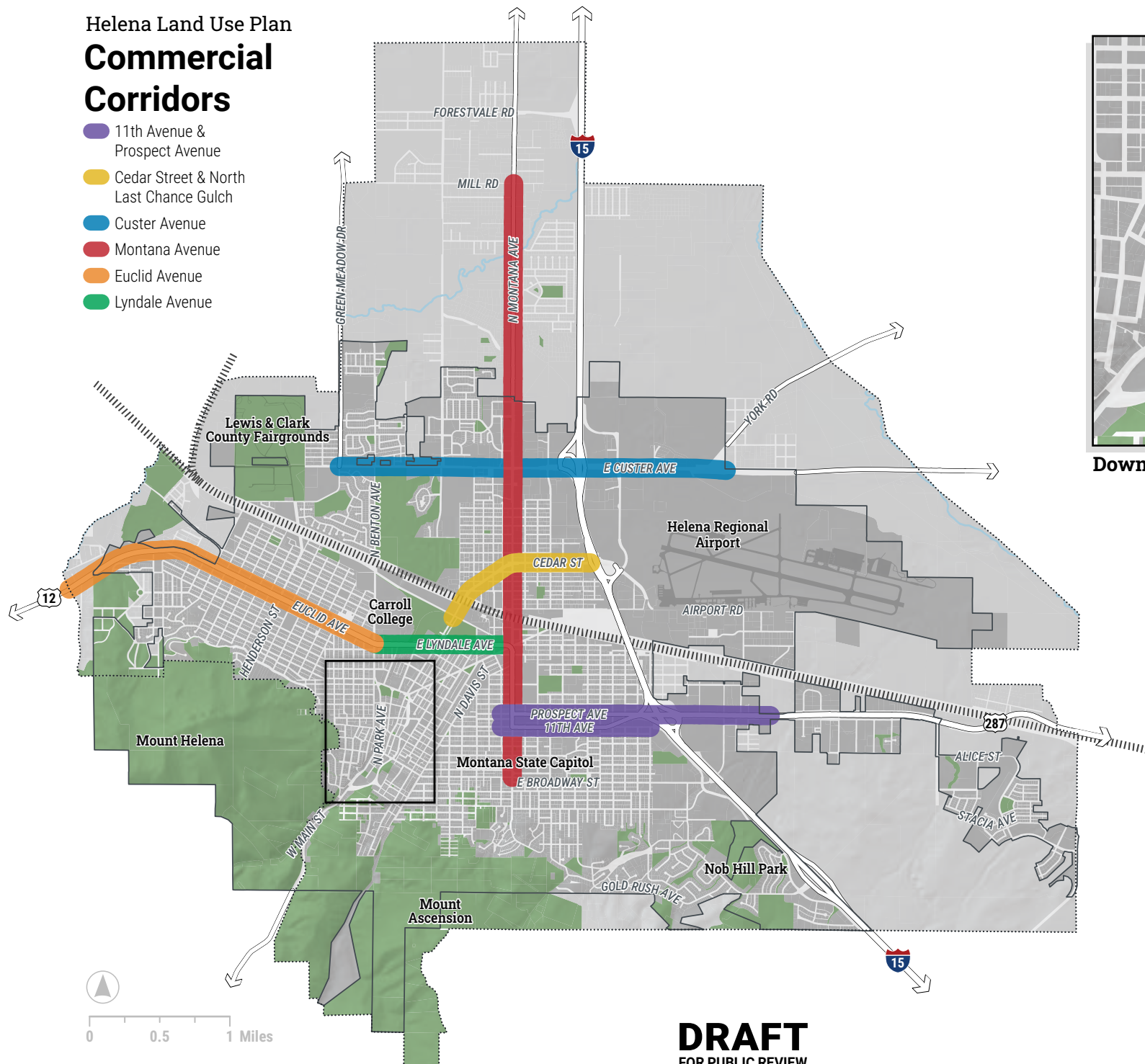
As infill development and redevelopment occur along Helena's major commercial corridors—such as Montana Avenue, Cedar Street, and Lyndale/Euclid Avenue—it is essential to ensure that new development is compatible with adjacent land uses, particularly where these corridors border residential neighborhoods. Promoting land use compatibility helps protect community character, minimize potential conflicts, and maintain a high quality of life for residents. To guide this process, new development should be consistent with the Future Land Use Plan. Aligning redevelopment efforts with this vision will help support a more cohesive urban environment while advancing the overall health, safety, and welfare of the Helena community.

Recommendations

- Establish tax incentives, grants, or fee waivers to encourage property owners and developers to invest in underutilized parcels.
- Simplify permitting and regulatory procedures for infill projects to reduce barriers and encourage timely redevelopment.
- Support the rehabilitation and repurposing of vacant or obsolete buildings for new commercial, office, or mixed-use developments.
- Consider updating the zoning ordinance to remove parking minimums.
- Ensure that all new developments align with the Future Land Use Plan and are compatible with surrounding uses.

Helena Land Use Plan Commercial Corridors

- 11th Avenue & Prospect Avenue
- Cedar Street & North Last Chance Gulch
- Custer Avenue
- Montana Avenue
- Euclid Avenue
- Lyndale Avenue



Downtown Helena

East
Helena

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Encourage Regional Commercial

East Custer Avenue has emerged as a key destination for regional commercial development in Helena, attracting both local residents and a broader customer base from surrounding areas. The corridor is home to large shopping centers, big-box retailers, and other high-traffic businesses that serve as economic drivers for the City. Additionally, its direct connection to Helena Regional Airport enhances its role as a critical gateway for commerce. To strengthen its position as a regional commercial hub, Helena should continue supporting development along East Custer Avenue, encouraging growth that capitalizes on its momentum while strategically planning for future opportunities. The Community Development Department, City Commission, and Planning Commission should only approve new regional commercial development if it complements the character of Helena.

Recommendations

- Encourage regional commercial development including destination retail and entertainment offerings that align with the needs of the community and region.
- Promote infill development and the redevelopment of underutilized parcels.
- Align transportation planning with economic development efforts to reduce traffic congestion and provide multimodal travel options where appropriate.
- Continue to support outlot development in large retail areas to maximize land use efficiency.



Improve Multimodal Access

Much of Helena's commercial development is currently designed with an auto-centric focus, characterized by front-loaded parking lots, buildings set far from the sidewalk, and limited amenities for pedestrians and cyclists. This layout not only prioritizes car travel but also discourages the use of alternative transportation options. As Helena's commercial corridors evolve, the City should emphasize site designs that cater to pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit users. This can be achieved by positioning buildings closer to the street, creating a more inviting environment, while locating parking behind or to the side of buildings rather than in front. To further enhance multimodal access, the City should encourage the development of wide, accessible sidewalks, protected bike lanes, and well-placed crossings, making it easier for people of all ages and abilities to navigate between destinations safely.

Recommendations

- Encourage the development of complete streets that prioritize multimodal transportation along key commercial corridors.
- Update zoning regulations to incorporate design standards for new commercial developments including setback and parking design requirements.
- Implement protected bike lanes and designated bike parking areas throughout commercial corridors to encourage cycling as a viable transportation option.



Character and Image

Helena's commercial corridors face several challenges that impact their character and appeal, including outdated infrastructure, insufficient maintenance, and a lack of beautification efforts. These issues not only detract from the visual appeal of the corridors but also limit their potential for future growth and development. To address these concerns and improve the overall image of these areas, the city should focus on establishing and enforcing clear development standards that enhance the aesthetic and functional quality of commercial spaces.

This can include requirements for thoughtful landscaping—such as xeriscaping, tree-lined streets, green buffers, and decorative planters—which add vibrancy, reduce water usage, and soften the built environment. Xeriscaping, in particular, can help ensure landscaping remains attractive and sustainable in Helena's semi-arid climate by using drought-tolerant native plants and efficient irrigation techniques. Additionally, encouraging the use of high-quality, durable building materials that complement the surrounding area can help create a cohesive and attractive corridor. Routine maintenance, such as cleaning, repairing, and updating infrastructure, should also be prioritized to ensure that commercial areas remain welcoming and well-kept.

Recommendations

- Align future development efforts with the goals of the Railroad District Neighborhood Plan to ensure consistency in design, character, and connectivity
- Develop a streetscape plan that includes landscaping features such as tree-lined streets, decorative planters, green buffers, and public art installations to enhance the aesthetic appeal of commercial corridors.
- Encourage incentive programs that support local businesses in updating and improving the appearance of their storefronts.
- Establish commercial design guidelines that promote high-quality materials and building designs that reflect the character of Helena.
- Reduce or eliminate parking minimums for commercial land uses and encourage shared parking to reduce land used for surface lot parking and reduce instances of unused/underutilized parking spaces and lots.



DOWNTOWN HELENA

Downtown Helena is the city's historic and cultural core, offering a vibrant space for work, shopping, dining, and exploration. The Business Improvement District (BID), operating under the brand The Gulch, plays a pivotal role in preserving and boosting the area's economic vitality. Through initiatives such as façade improvement grants, new business development grants, and event grants, The Gulch fosters growth and revitalization, helping local businesses thrive. As Helena's downtown continues to evolve, it is essential for the City to prioritize the preservation of its unique character while encouraging economic development. By striking a balance between growth and historic preservation, Helena can ensure that its downtown remains a dynamic hub that attracts residents, visitors, and businesses for years to come.

Recommendations

- Continue funding and expanding event grants for festivals, the farmers market, and public gatherings to attract visitors and increase local business exposure. Coordinate with local businesses, groups, and nonprofits, including the Business Improvement District and Visit Helena to schedule events to align efforts and decrease competition.
- Make better use of underutilized Performance Square including music festivals, outdoor theater, etc.
- Continue to support and expand The Gulch brand to increase visibility and promote downtown businesses.
- Prioritize mixed-use spaces that combine residential, retail, and office functions to boost activity throughout the day and night.
- Continue to invest in placemaking and make additional improvements to infrastructure Downtown including landscape architecture, street furniture, lighting, public art, and play features to further enliven Downtown and attract visitors.
- Encourage industries that are central to the downtown economy, such as retail, hospitality, and creative sectors.
- Simplify the event permitting process to make it easier to attract and hold community events Downtown.

“

Our identity is strongest in downtown Helena. If we could strive to make all of Helena as welcoming as that area of the city we would be heading in the right direction.

”

Downtown Framework



Great Northern District

This area should be a modern center for business and family entertainment that includes high-quality multifamily housing, desirable amenities, and lively nightlife activities.



Fire Tower District

This area should be a hub for all kinds of entertainment, recreation, arts and culture embracing a mix of businesses and architecture.



Last Chance Gulch Corridor

This commercial corridor should serve as a traditional downtown shopping street that appeals to both tourists and local residents looking for their daily needs. The corridor should include wide sidewalks, engaging storefronts, and the distinctive walking mall.



Gateways

Gateway features should be used to announce the entrance into Downtown as a distinct area within the community. Other considerations should be included for the Fire Tower and Great Northern Districts.



Intersection Improvements

The safety of pedestrians, bicyclists, and car users is still paramount to creating a widely accessible Downtown environment. Elements such as bump-outs, ADA-accessible sidewalk ramps, crosswalk treatments, and pedestrian refuge islands should be considered throughout the Downtown.



Carroll College Connection

Work with Carroll College to strengthen the connection between the campus and Downtown encouraging pedestrian connections and supporting land uses.



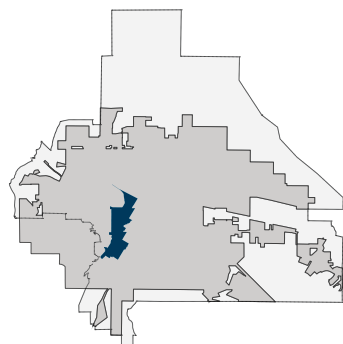
Residential Connection

Strengthen the connections to surrounding residential neighborhoods and other community nodes and destinations. Continue to develop a comprehensive pedestrian and bikeway network.



Helena Business Improvement Districts (HBID)

Continue to work with the HBID to monitor and facilitate the implementation of the Downtown Helena Master Plan.



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CHAPTER 7

TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY

Helena's transportation system creates a balanced, efficient, and well-connected network providing access to goods, services, and community resources, and supports land use development through a variety of modes. The Transportation and Mobility Chapter provides guidance aimed at providing a system that will ensure the community will be effectively served by multi-modal transportation opportunities. The section discusses the Plan's approach to "human-centric transportation," including strategies to support walking, biking, and complete streets.

TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY GOALS

Promote a transportation network that enables easy access to neighborhoods, community facilities, employment opportunities, and recreation areas.

Improve infrastructure and encourage alternative modes of transportation such as walking, bicycling, and public transit for traveling while making roadways and intersections safer and more efficient for all user groups.

ROADWAY NETWORK

The Transportation Systems Department is responsible for planning approvals, maintenance of the local roadway system, and implementing the city's engineering standards for both public and private transportation facilities. Engineering standards are focused on providing a safe and efficient transportation system, while implementing a complete streets policy. In addition to these standards, transportation plans and subdivision regulations are used when planning and evaluating new and existing facilities.

Currently, the City is responsible for approximately 84.5 miles of roadways that support regional mobility to local streets that ultimately provide property access to residents and businesses within city limits. As the population in Helena continues to grow, it is critical to foster a transportation network that enables easy access to neighborhoods, community facilities, employment areas and recreational opportunities.

Functional Classification

The roadway system in Helena consists of a variety of street types that serve varying functions. Functional classifications describe the type of service intended for a roadway and the degree of travel mobility. Overall, a roadway system should include a balance of mobility and access. Helena's roadway system is classified as defined by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT).

Principal Arterial

The purpose of a principal arterial is to serve the major centers of activity, the highest traffic volume corridors, and the longest trip distances in an area. This group of roads carries a high proportion of the total traffic. Most of the vehicles entering and leaving the area, as well as most of the traffic bypassing the central business district, utilize principal arterials. Significant intra-area travel, such as between central business districts and outlying residential areas, and between major suburban centers, is served by principal arterials. Principal arterials in Helena include Prospect Avenue/11th Avenue east of Montana Avenue, North Benton Avenue, Montana Avenue, Lyndale/ Euclid Avenue, Custer Street and Cedar Street/Last Chance Gulch.

Minor Arterial

The minor arterial street system interconnects with and augments the principal arterial system. It accommodates trips of moderate length at a somewhat lower level of travel mobility as compared to principal arterials, and it distributes travel to smaller geographic areas. With an emphasis on traffic mobility, minor arterials include all arterials not classified as principal arterials while providing some access to adjacent lands. In Helena, examples of minor arterials include Henderson Street, Broadway Street, 11th Avenue West of Montana, and Green Meadow Drive.

Major Collector

Major collectors provide a balance between mobility and access, linking arterial roadways to local streets and facilitating traffic flow through a community. These roadways are often continuous and designed to handle moderate volumes of traffic at lower speeds than arterials, serving short-distance travel. In Helena, Helena Avenue, Rodney Street, Cruse Avenue, and National Avenue function as major collectors.

Minor Collector

Minor collectors focus on connecting smaller populations and properties not served by higher-classified roadways. These roads prioritize property access over mobility, with lower traffic volumes and speeds. 6th Avenue, Davis Street, and Hauser Boulevard are examples of a minor collector in Helena.

Local Road

Local roads primarily serve neighborhood traffic and provide direct access to adjacent land uses. These roadways typically have lower speeds, reduced traffic volumes, and limited connections to arterial roads. They are often not continuous through a community and are designed to support local movement within residential and commercial areas.

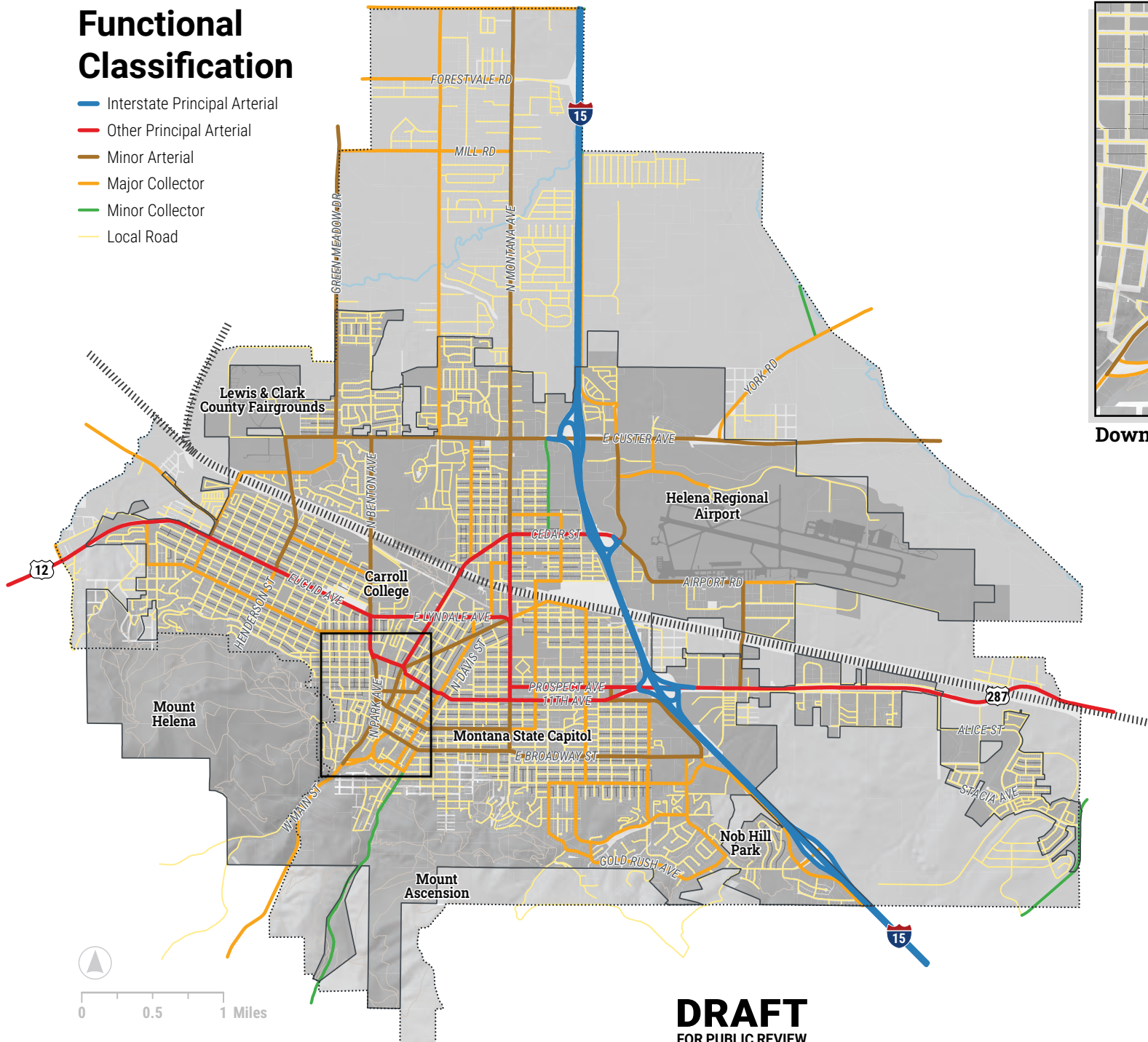
Jurisdiction

There are routes within the City that are the responsibility of entities other than Helena, such as Lewis and Clark County and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). The City should maintain close coordination with these entities as routes under their jurisdiction may require improvements due to age, level of service, or the expanding needs of the community.

Helena Land Use Plan

Functional Classification

- Interstate Principal Arterial
- Other Principal Arterial
- Minor Arterial
- Major Collector
- Minor Collector
- Local Road



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Traffic Flow and Congestion

Traffic flow and congestion issues have many detrimental effects on communities and the environment, including economic impacts due to delayed delivery of goods and services, air quality and fuel consumption, and a general disruption of daily routines resulting from longer commute times and unpredictable delays.

The Greater Helena Area Long-Range Transportation Plan, updated in 2014, examined projected roadway volumes and capacity for the year 2035. The plan calculated volume/capacity (v/c) ratios for principal and minor arterials, and major and minor collector routes, identifying multiple routes projected to be very near, at or over capacity in 2035. These routes include Custer Avenue, Prospect Avenue, 11th Avenue, Benton Avenue, Montana Avenue, and Airport Road

One considerable issue within Helena, resulting in significant traffic delays, is the presence of six railroad crossing locations with no grade separation. At these locations, traffic is required to stop when trains are in route. Four of these crossings are on low volume roads; however, crossings on North Montana Avenue and North Benton Avenue, both major north-south traffic corridors, can cause traffic to back up for several minutes. Both routes are within the Greater Helena Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) boundary; however, North Montana Avenue is the responsibility of MDT, while North Benton Avenue is the responsibility of the City.

The City should continue conducting traffic studies and surveys to determine how residents travel through Helena. In addition, the City should continue analyzing current crash locations and severity to identify problematic intersections and corridors to determine improvement priorities. While the City has complete authority over local streets, it should continue working with regional partners to develop a comprehensive traffic management plan to balance the needs of regional corridors with the safety needs of residents.

Complete Streets

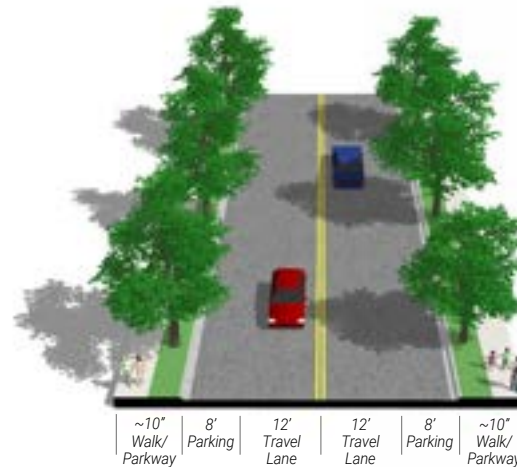
Complete streets are designed and operated to be safe for all types of road users, not just drivers. Pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists of all ages and abilities must be able to safely move along and across a complete street. Complete streets incorporate physical infrastructure, such as raised crossings, protected bike lanes, medians, and similar treatments, to reduce hazards from automobiles and protect and make pedestrians and cyclists more visible. In addition to their safety benefits, Complete Streets often ease congestion, support economic growth, encourage walking and biking, improve air quality, and enhance mobility options for children and elderly residents.

Greater Helena Area Metropolitan Planning Organization

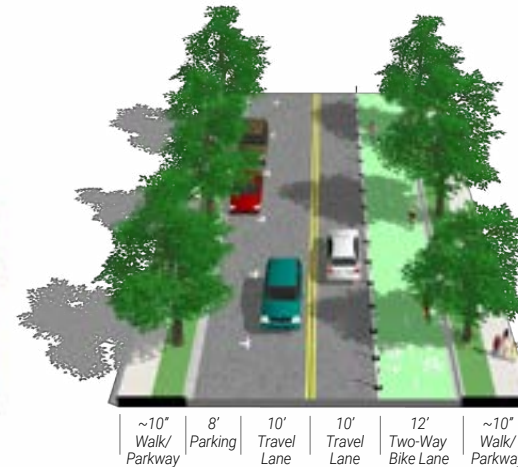
In 2020, the Greater Helena Area MPO was federally required to be created as the area's population exceeded 50,000 people. The MPO is comprised of the City of Helena, City of East Helena, Lewis and Clark County, and the Montana Department of Transportation. The purpose of the MPO is to provide greater coordination and cooperation between all agencies for improved transportation planning. While the MPO does not directly provide funding for projects, they receive financial assistance in the form of Metropolitan Planning (PL) funds to carry out the required planning activities and transit funds for transit planning.

Complete Streets Example

Existing Example Configuration



Potential Example Configuration



***NOTE:** The City has developed several off-street multi-use path options throughout the community. This option is intended to illustrate a general on-street reconfiguration emphasizing multi-modal transportation and safety. Future road diet recommendations will require case-by-case considerations and alternative design configurations.

In 2010, Helena adopted Resolution No. 19799 which requires the implementation of Complete Street infrastructure and principles for newly constructed streets and those undergoing reconstruction or extensive maintenance. Perceptions of safety are a primary factor for residents in determining whether to utilize bicycling or walking for trips, especially for trips that include major streets. To successfully implement Complete Streets principles, the City should identify points of potential conflict where existing bicycle or pedestrian routes intersect with high-speed corridors and analyze crash location and severity data to identify street segments and intersections where injury risk to people walking and bicycling is most acute. The City should then prioritize roadway infrastructure projects that improve multi-modal safety.

Complete Streets principles recognize that the City cannot rely on laws or human nature or common sense to adequately protect more vulnerable users of roadways and encourages the use of physical barriers between vehicles and pedestrians and bicyclists. By prioritizing infrastructure projects at locations with observed safety issues and targeting street safety projects based on crash data analysis and risk factors, Helena can improve pedestrian safety outcomes and perceived comfort for active users.

Recommendations

- Ensure new developments comply with the City's Engineering and Design Standards for roadway design.
- Continue implementing the Complete Streets Policy and following the Public Right-of-Way Access Guidelines (PROWAG).
- Improve connectivity within the roadway network to meet the demands of future growth.
- Support future and ongoing city roadway development through Capital Improvement Projects to ensure long-term functionality.
- Identify mechanisms to assist the City with funding necessary roadway projects, such as Special Improvement Districts, Street Maintenance Districts, and private funding sources.
- Coordinate with regional and state entities to align roadway expansion and maintenance needs.
- Conduct the planned update to the Greater Helena Area Long-Range Transportation Plan to ensure that current and future transportation network needs are met.
- Identify new projects that will address traffic flow and congestion issues for the projected population increase.
- Coordinate with MDT and BNSF to evaluate options that will alleviate traffic delays due to at-grade railroad crossings including replacing at-grade crossing on Montana Avenue with an overpass.
- Seek grant and loan funding opportunities to help finance modifications to at-grade railroad crossings.
- Evaluate major north-south and east-west routes within Helena to identify concerns for freight traffic.
- Continue incorporating new infrastructure in their streets to improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists, and reduce automobile crashes.



BIKE AND PEDESTRIAN FACILITIES

The introduction of safe, interconnected, and accessible bike and pedestrian facilities with the transportation framework of a community encourages greater usage and provides numerous benefits, including reduced traffic congestion, positive environmental impacts, and improvements to physical health. With the adoption of the Complete Streets policy, the City should continue to promote active transportation.

Connectivity Between Residential Areas and Key Destinations

Certain areas of a community are more apt to attract pedestrian and bike traffic, and improving pedestrian and bike traffic connections to these areas will encourage additional non-motorized transportation throughout the City. In Helena, the numerous schools, the Capitol Complex, parks and open space, and the Last Chance Gulch area are all local destinations that would benefit from increased connectivity from residential areas.

“With the increasing popularity of e-bikes and more people getting around on two wheels, Helena’s street improvements should be designed to enhance pedestrian safety.”

There are large areas of older residential development in Helena that have very limited sidewalk networks, likely because they were not required during development of the neighborhoods. In addition to gaps in sidewalk infrastructure, there are large gaps without existing bike infrastructure, which proves challenging for those choosing to travel via bike rather than automobile. Because bikes are most often sharing the road with vehicles, it introduces added safety concerns for bike users. Newer residential areas, and areas yet to be developed, must follow the City of Helena Engineering and Design Standards, which contain requirements for sidewalks, bike and pedestrian paths, and bike lanes.

In 2021, The City of Helena Multimodal Traffic Study examined existing conditions and provided recommendations for connecting the downtown and midtown areas of Helena. Within this study, multiple projects were identified to improve connectivity to key destinations, such as sidewalk improvements along Last Chance Gulch, Lyndale Avenue pedestrian crossings, Helena Avenue bike lanes and pedestrian accommodations, and the Montana Avenue Centennial Trail crossing.

As the population of Helena continues to grow, the lack of connectivity between key destinations and residential neighborhoods will continue to inhibit the appeal of using non-motorized transportation methods to travel throughout the City. This results in increased vehicle traffic, leading to greater traffic congestion, a lack of adequate parking, and unfavorable environmental impacts.

Bikeways

A tiered approach to implementing bikeways throughout Helena's streets can provide a range for the City to support bike infrastructure. A tiered approach can include bikeway types that are comfortable and easily implementable such as conventional bike lanes to high-investment, high-safety infrastructure like protected bike lanes and grade-separated side paths. Shared-lane bike markings, otherwise known as "sharrows," were not included due to the safety risk they pose for bicyclists. The following categories provide more details about how these bike lanes should be implemented:

- **Multi-Use Trail/Side Path:** Shared use path located immediately adjacent and parallel to a roadway, typically grade-separated and designed with a buffer between the street and path.
- **Conventional Bike Lane:** Exclusive space on the side of the road for bicyclists designated by pavement markings and signage.
- **Buffered Bike Lane:** Exclusive space for bicyclists with additional buffer space between bicyclists and drivers typically designated by diagonal hatch or solid lines.
- **Protected Bike Lane:** Dedicated space for bicyclists with physical separation from vehicles typically using concrete barriers or bollards.



Multi-Use Trail/Side Path



Conventional Bike Lane



Buffered Bike Lane



Protected Bike Lane

Example images of bikeway types for reference



Sidewalk Improvements

As identified in the 2014 Long Range Transportation Plan, the southeast portion of Helena, neighborhoods west of Benton Avenue, and the area west of North Montana Avenue and north of the railroad tracks are condensed areas of incomplete sidewalks. In addition to these large areas, the Plan identifies numerous locations throughout Helena that have smaller gaps in sidewalk infrastructure, resulting in an unpredictable walking resource.

Inadequate or nonexistent ADA accessible facilities also exist throughout Helena, deterring sidewalk usage by pedestrians with disabilities and creating a barrier to independent mobility. The existing ADA accessible transportation facilities are currently inadequate for community members requiring use and will certainly not accommodate the future population demands of Helena.

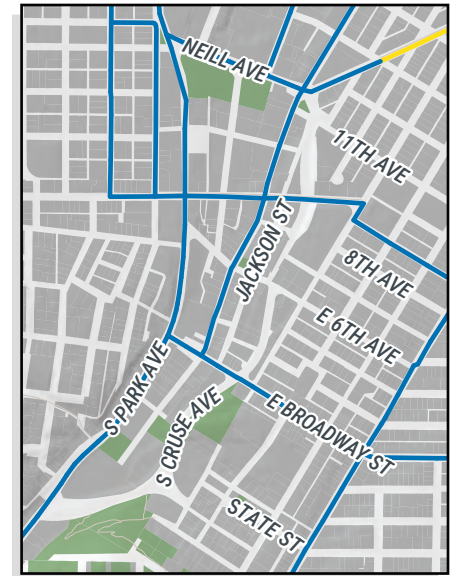
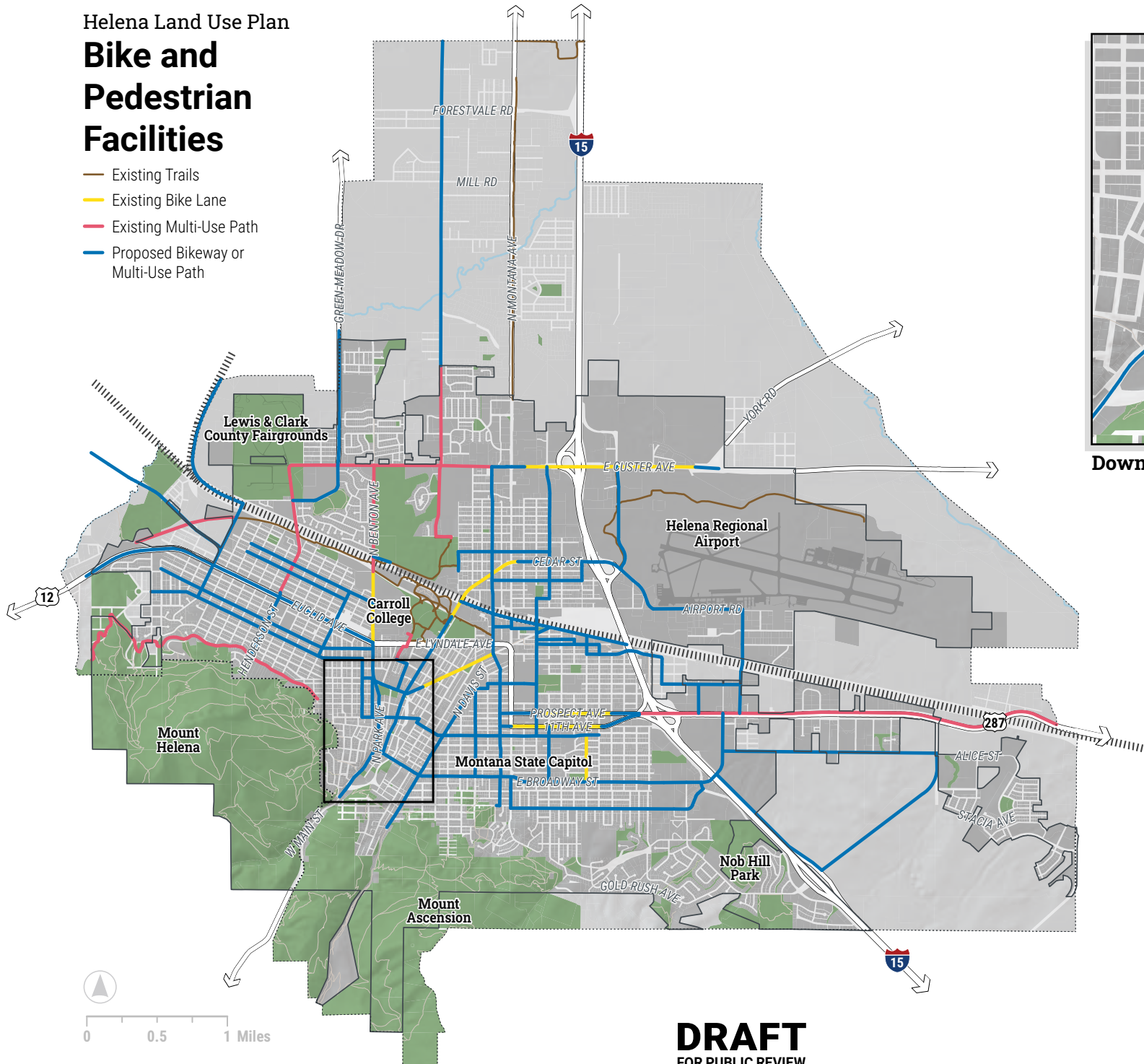
Addressing gaps in sidewalk and ADA accommodations throughout the transportation network can result in reduced motorized transportation, improved pedestrian safety, and access for all mobility levels.

Recommendations

- Utilize identified priority routes from the Long-Range Transportation Plan to plan pedestrian and bike network improvements throughout Helena.
- Update the Long-Range Transportation Plan to identify areas of connectivity to key community destinations.
- Prioritize completion of the Centennial Trail.
- Plan similar north-south paved shared use trails or routes that will connect with the Centennial Trail and enable users to connect to more parts of the City without riding on roads.
- Provide access to existing residential trail systems through city pedestrian and bicycle facilities.
- Adhere to City of Helena Engineering and Design Standards for new and reconstructed roadways.
- Prioritize and implement project recommendations outlined in the Long-Range Transportation Plan.
- Implement a tiered approach to incorporating bikeways throughout Helena's streets that can provide a range of options for the City to support bike infrastructure.
- Continue to upgrade existing facilities to meet ADA requirements.

Bike and Pedestrian Facilities

- Existing Trails
- Existing Bike Lane
- Existing Multi-Use Path
- Proposed Bikeway or Multi-Use Path



Downtown Helena

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PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Public transportation can provide multiple benefits to a community: economic, health, reduction in road congestion, and safety. Public transportation systems meet the needs of individuals who are unable to drive, cannot afford to own or operate a vehicle, or just wish to sit back and allow someone else to do the driving. It results in less traffic congestion, lower carbon emissions, and more efficient travel for all.

Aligning Transit Options with Employment

Providing transit options in a community provides many economic benefits and lowers obstacles related to transportation insecurity. In a report published by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), approximately 20,000 jobs are supported for every \$1 billion spent nationally on public transportation in a year.

To make public transportation successful, however, it is important to align transit options with employment opportunities. Making sure that transportation systems access the primary areas of employment opportunities and are available during the times they are most needed by users are important considerations when planning transportation routes.

Capital Transit, Helena's public transportation system, provides curb-to-curb service throughout the city as well as limited service between the Capital Transit Station and East Helena. Though Helena has had fixed bus routes in the recent past, there are no fixed bus routes offered through the service at this time. The 2013-2018 Transportation Development Plan (TDP) identified that the primary way to increase transit usage was to develop a more efficient transit service, which resulted in the curb-to-curb service currently offered. Feedback received during public outreach revealed that curb-to-curb service may not be adequate to meet demand for regular transit service.

Potential Return of Passenger Rail

The Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority is working to rebuild passenger rail service across southern Montana, with the proposed route stopping in Billings, Bozeman, Helena or Butte, and Missoula. Overall, restoration of this passenger rail route will connect Seattle to Chicago, and Billings to El Paso, Texas, opening transportation opportunities throughout the nation.

Restoration of passenger rail would have a significant economic impact on the state and Helena specifically by creating jobs and providing an affordable transportation alternative. While this service is currently not available, the introduction of passenger rail service will become more valuable as the population of Helena, and other Montana cities, continues to grow.

Air Travel

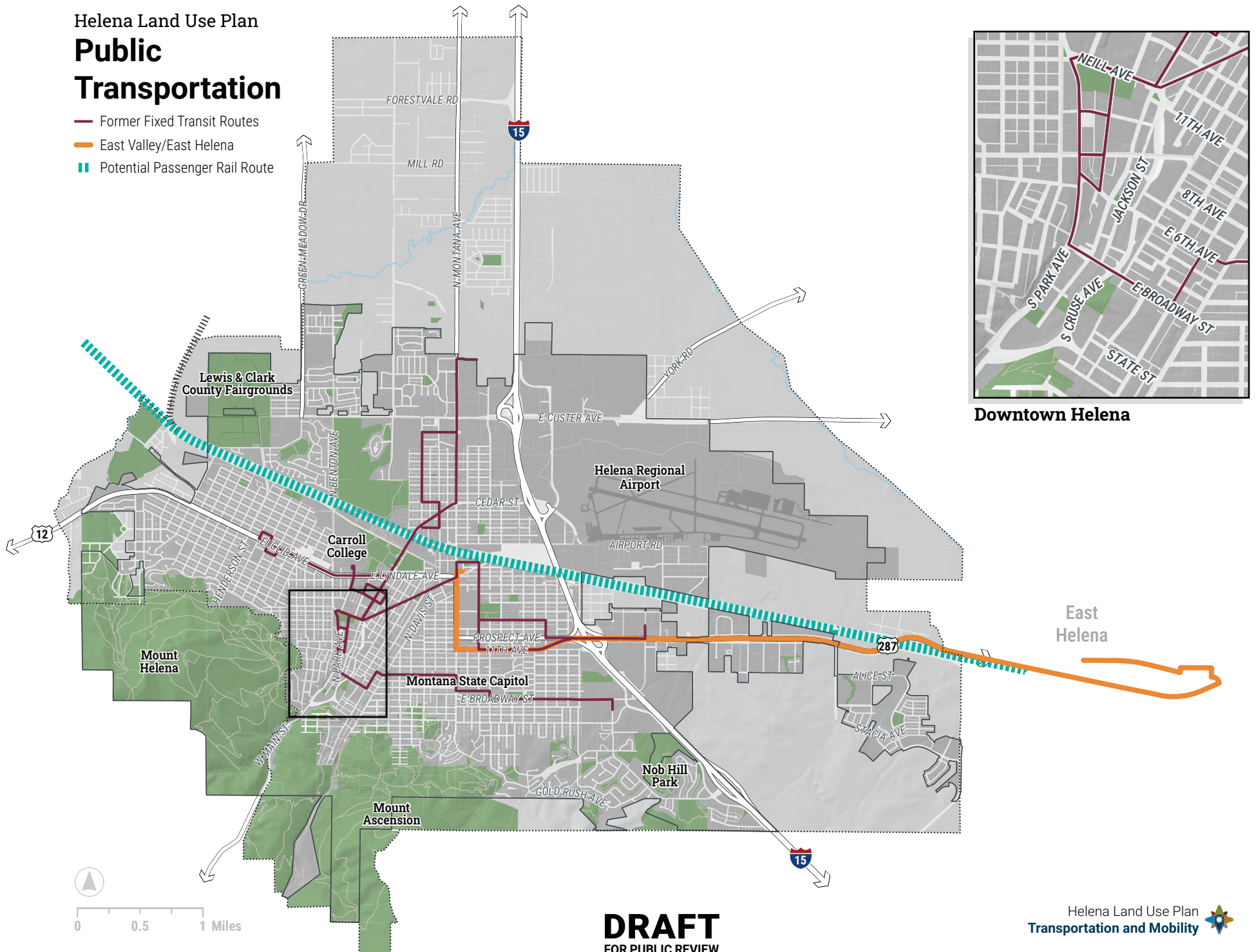
The Helena Regional Airport is located on the eastern edge of the city. The airport provides major airlines such as Delta, United, and Alaska Airlines with direct flights to Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Denver.

Recommendations

- Expand public transit options to establish fixed routes as identified in the Capital Transit FY2023 Coordination Plan.
- Update the Transportation Development Plan to identify existing and future community needs.
- Establish designated transportation stops with signage and ADA access that align with community employment opportunities.
- Expand Capital Transit hours of operation as ridership increases.
- Develop a Capital Transit fleet expansion plan to meet the growing demand for service.
- Continue to implement the Complete Streets Policy outlined in the Engineering and Design Standards, which identifies "public transportation stops and facilities" and "transit priority signalization".
- Coordinate public transit opportunities near housing centers for all income levels.
- Update the Transportation Development Plan to identify existing and future community needs.
- Support the efforts of the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority.

Helena Land Use Plan Public Transportation

- Former Fixed Transit Routes
- East Valley/East Helena
- Potential Passenger Rail Route



Downtown Helena

East Helena

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CHAPTER 8

COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Helena's quality of life, economic vitality, workforce strength, and adaptability all depend on reliable community facilities and infrastructure. The Community Facilities and Public Services chapter presents guidelines to help ensure that Helena is served by reliable, high-quality facilities and services into the future. The Plan does not replace efforts undertaken by the City and other providers such as detailed infrastructure and capital improvements plans but intend to complement and extend those efforts.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND PUBLIC SERVICES GOALS

Continue to maintain and improve facilities, services, and infrastructure, ensuring they are reliable for current and future residents.

Leverage the city's role as the state capital and county seat to collaborate with other agencies and jurisdictions and improve public services while addressing regional impacts.

Promote sustainable technologies and renewable energy through policies and actions as new technologies become available.



CITY FACILITIES

Helena's city facilities are essential hubs for government operations, public services, and civic engagement, providing residents and businesses with critical resources and support. As Helena continues to grow over the next 20 years, investing in facility maintenance, modernization, and accessibility enhancements will be key to ensuring these spaces remain functional, efficient, and welcoming while preserving their historic significance. Upgrading infrastructure, improving energy efficiency, and ensuring compliance with ADA accessibility standards will help city facilities continue to serve the evolving needs of the community. Strategic planning and investment will allow these facilities to operate at peak efficiency, reinforcing Helena's role as a dynamic and responsive city.

Recommendations

- Support future and ongoing city facility upgrades through Capital Improvement Projects to ensure long-term functionality.
- Promote renewable energy solutions such as geothermal heating and rooftop solar on city facilities to reduce operational costs and environmental impact.
- Integrate water conservation measures and renewable energy solutions to promote long-term sustainability in public facilities.
- Preserve the historic character of public buildings while integrating modern amenities to enhance usability.
- Ensure that the City allocates the necessary funding to ADA accessibility improvements.
- Conduct regular assessments of public facility conditions and service demands to accommodate anticipated population growth and demographic shifts.
- Expand multi-purpose spaces within city facilities to better serve residents and host community programs.

Fire Department

The Helena Fire Department consists of three divisions including Administrative-Operational Leadership, the Fire Prevention and Investigation Bureau, and Fire Suppression. The Suppression Division is responsible for structure protection, wildfire suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials response, and technical rescue operations. Currently, Helena is served by two fire stations, with plans underway for a third station and training facility to meet the growing demands of the community. This expansion aims to enhance emergency response times, improve firefighter training, and ensure the department can continue to provide high-quality service as the city evolves.

Recommendations

- Utilize the 2023 Fire Department Master plan to implement proposed recommendations.
- Strengthen coordination with state agencies, neighboring counties, and East Helena for firefighting efforts and hazard mitigation planning.
- Implement recommendations from 2023 Fire Department Master Plan.
- Enhance wildfire mitigation through partnerships with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and Lewis and Clark County fire departments.
- Modernize fire stations and facilities to ensure they remain functional, efficient, and up-to-date.
- Maintain adequate staffing levels to ensure all fire stations and emergency services operate effectively.
- Conduct comprehensive hazard mitigation planning to safeguard residents, property, and infrastructure.
- Promote firewise landscaping and structural features in residential and commercial buildings.



Police Department

The Helena Police Department's Patrol Division provides preventive patrol, law enforcement, emergency assistance, public information, and hazard mitigation. The department also includes Support Services, which oversees the 911 Communication Center, a Criminal Investigations Division, and Animal Control. In partnership with Lewis and Clark County, the City recently renovated the former Blue Cross Blue Shield building into the Law and Justice Center, now home to the Police Department, Municipal Court, and County Sheriff's Office. This investment reflects the City's commitment to preserving historic properties while ensuring accessible and efficient public safety services.

Recommendations

- Continue to renovate and modernize police facilities to improve functionality and efficiency.
- Ensure that 911 dispatch and emergency response infrastructure remain up-to-date to support timely assistance.
- Provide adequate staffing levels to meet the city's growing needs and maintain efficient emergency response.
- Support ongoing training and professional development for officers, including de-escalation techniques, crisis intervention, and community policing strategies.
- Partner with schools, businesses, and community organizations to enhance crime prevention and public safety education efforts.



EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Helena's education system is a key asset to the community, offering diverse learning opportunities through public schools, charter schools, and virtual programs. While enrollment trends have remained relatively stable, many residents have voiced concerns about insufficient funding and failed levies, which have impacted the ability to maintain and improve school facilities. The Helena School District drafted a Facilities Master Plan to address shifting community needs, but many school buildings require upgrades to sustain their level of service. Deferred maintenance can result in costly emergency repairs, highlighting the importance of proactive planning and investment. As Helena grows, ensuring that educational facilities remain modern, well-maintained, and equipped with necessary resources will be essential to supporting students, teachers, and the broader community.

Recommendations

- Prioritize long-term planning and budgeting for school facility maintenance and renovations to extend their lifespan and prevent costly repairs.
- Invest in new school facilities as needed to accommodate population growth and neighborhood shifts.
- Ensure all educational buildings meet modern safety, accessibility, and sustainability standards.
- Strengthen programs that recruit, support, and retain high-quality teachers, ensuring students receive the best education possible.
- Ensure schools are equipped with up-to-date technology and digital learning tools to enhance educational outcomes.
- Invest in student support services, including mental health resources and special education programs, to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.
- Implement ongoing safety and security improvements to protect students and staff.



HEALTH AND MEDICAL FACILITIES

Helena is home to a variety of private and non-profit healthcare facilities, including St. Peter's Hospital, Benefis Health System Specialty Center, Pure-View Health Center, Leo Pocha Memorial Clinic, and Shodair Children's Hospital. The Fort Harrison Veterans Administration Medical Center provides essential care for veterans, while private clinics affiliated with St. Peter's or Benefis, offer services such as dental, physical, and mental health care.

Additionally, Lewis and Clark County's Public Health Department conducts regular Community Health Assessments to identify priorities and address the most pressing health needs. The most recent assessment, completed in 2024, found that while Helena has sufficient healthcare facilities and professionals to serve its population, access to care is limited, primarily due to a lack of providers accepting Medicaid. This issue is particularly significant for dental, mental, and behavioral health services.

Recommendations

- Increase investment in community health initiatives to address unmet needs and promote preventive healthcare, focusing on populations most affected by access barriers.
- Plan for and prioritize the development of new healthcare facilities to accommodate the increasing population, ensuring that both primary and specialized care are accessible to all residents.
- Implement public health education programs to raise awareness about available services and resources, especially for residents who may have difficulty accessing care.
- Enhance public transportation options to ensure that all residents, especially those without private transportation, can access healthcare facilities easily.

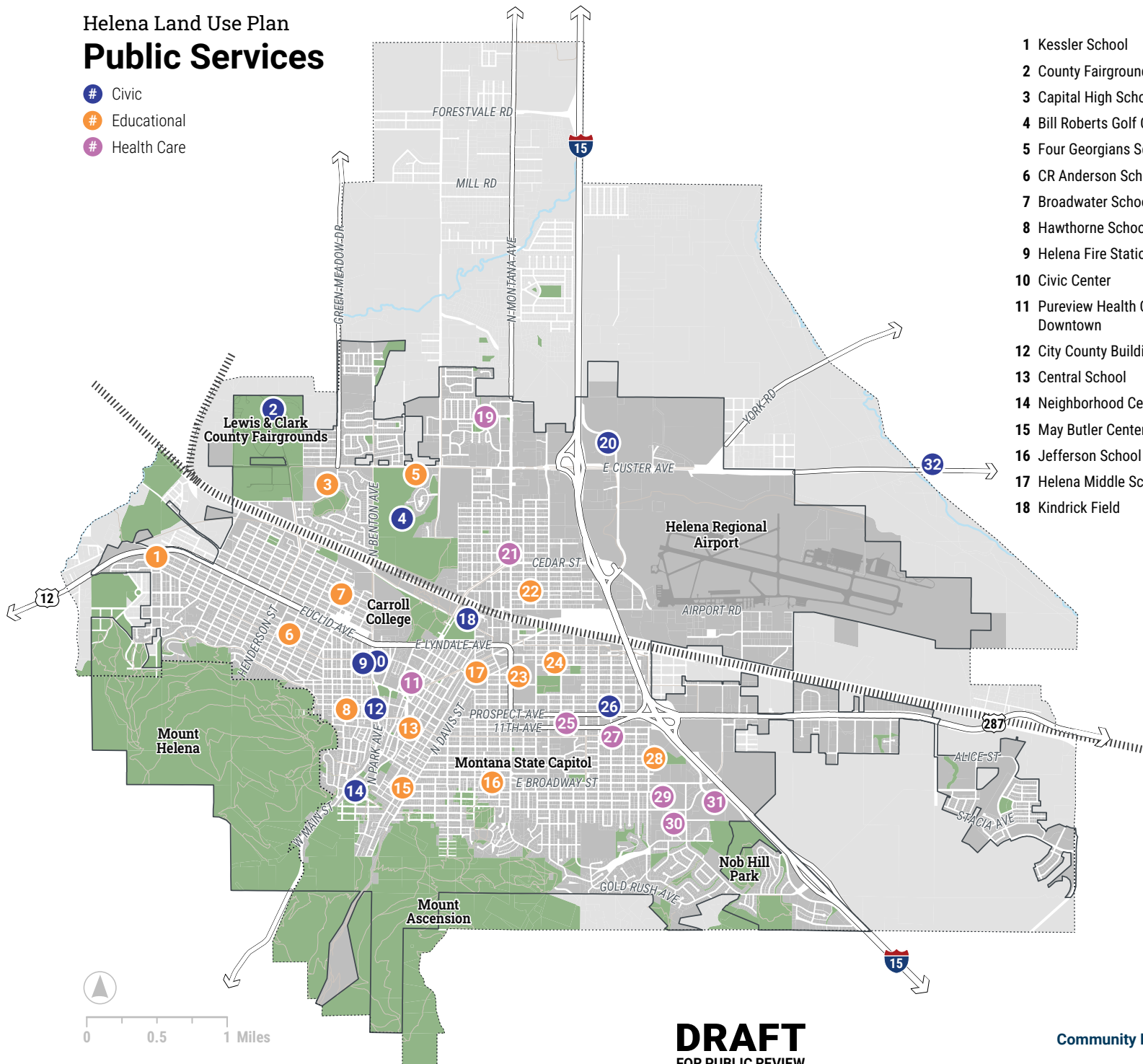
In general, Helena has great services, police, library, street maintenance, trash removal. There is room for improvement garnering public support for funding education and mental health services.

Helena Land Use Plan

Public Services

- # Civic
- # Educational
- # Health Care

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 Kessler School | 19 St. Peter's Health Urgent Care - North |
| 2 County Fairgrounds | 20 Wastewater Treatment Facility |
| 3 Capital High School | 21 BestMed Urgent Care |
| 4 Bill Roberts Golf Course | 22 Lincoln School |
| 5 Four Georgians School | 23 Helena High School |
| 6 CR Anderson School | 24 Bryant School |
| 7 Broadwater School | 25 Benefis Helena Specialty Center |
| 8 Hawthorne School | 26 Helena Fire Station #2 |
| 9 Helena Fire Station #1 | 27 Lewis and Clark Public Health Department & PureView Health Center |
| 10 Civic Center | 28 Smith School |
| 11 Pureview Health Centre Downtown | 29 St. Peter's Health |
| 12 City County Building | 30 Benefis Health System |
| 13 Central School | 31 Shodair Childrens Hospital |
| 14 Neighborhood Center | 32 Missouri River Water Treatment Facility |
| 15 May Butler Center | |
| 16 Jefferson School | |
| 17 Helena Middle School | |
| 18 Kindrick Field | |



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INFRASTRUCTURE

The Public Works Department oversees the planning, maintenance, and expansion of essential infrastructure. Several studies guide these efforts, such as the Water Master Plan Update (2020), Storm Water Management Program (2022-2027), Water Treatment Master Plan Update (2023), and the Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan (2024). Additionally, Helena is conducting an infrastructure study with Lewis and Clark County within the Urban Services Boundary (USB)—areas adjacent to city limits prioritized for future annexation and utility connections. This study will assess existing and future infrastructure needs, including drinking water, wastewater, stormwater management, solid waste, fire protection, and transportation systems. The following sections outline Helena's current infrastructure, planned expansions, and necessary improvements to meet the city's future growth.

Stormwater

Helena's stormwater system is an extensive network of gutters, storm sewers, and engineered collection systems designed to manage runoff efficiently. The system includes 70 miles of storm pipe, 30 miles of open drainage channels, 700 manholes, and 1,800 storm inlets, directing runoff to seven drainage basins and 34 outfalls. To ensure consistency and regulatory compliance, all new developments must adhere to City of Helena Engineering and Design Standards, which align with local ordinances, state permits, and best engineering practices. Developers are required to implement stormwater systems before constructing impervious surfaces and the use of Low Impact Design (LID) techniques is encouraged to enhance runoff management. By maintaining and expanding its stormwater infrastructure, Helena can accommodate future growth while protecting local waterways.

Recommendations

- Expand and maintain stormwater infrastructure to accommodate future growth and prevent localized flooding.
- Ensure all new developments comply with City of Helena Engineering and Design Standards for stormwater management.
- Encourage the use of Low Impact Design (LID) techniques to improve water quality and reduce runoff.
- Regularly inspect infrastructure to ensure efficient operation and longevity. Enhance public awareness and education programs on responsible stormwater management practices.
- Coordinate with regional and state agencies to align stormwater management strategies and funding opportunities.
- Evaluate and update stormwater policies as needed to reflect best practices and climate considerations.



Low Impact Development

Low Impact Development (LID) is the integration of green infrastructure and conservation of on-site natural features to mitigate stormwater runoff and protect water quality. Green infrastructure is an attractive and sustainable alternative to traditional concrete (or “gray”) infrastructure that substitutes paved and hard surfaces with vegetated or permeable areas. It has numerous environmental benefits on top of stormwater management, including reducing urban heat islands, improving air quality, and promoting economic vitality through attractive urban settings. Examples include incorporating permeable surfaces, xeriscaping, grassed swales, rain gardens, bioretention strips, and green roofs into parking lot, streetscape, and building designs. Native and locally adapted vegetation should be encouraged to support LID, pollinators, and wildlife habitats.

Wastewater

The wastewater system in Helena includes seven lift stations, 178 miles of sanitary sewer pipes, and 3,470 manholes, with wastewater treated through a biological nutrient removal process at the city's treatment plant. Recent improvements include a system expansion on Helena's westside to support new development and the rehabilitation of over 11,500 feet of aging sewer mains. Ongoing capital projects include additional sewer main replacements, a new gravity main at the airport, treatment plant upgrades, and equipment replacements totaling nearly \$45 million. Additionally, a Wastewater Collection and Treatment System Master Plan, along with the anticipated Joint Infrastructure Study, will guide future system expansion and operations.

Recommendations

- Continue implementing wastewater system rehabilitation projects to replace aging infrastructure and maintain system reliability.
- Continue expanding wastewater infrastructure to accommodate new development and support growth in underserved areas.
- Secure grant and loan funding opportunities to help finance system improvements while minimizing financial impacts on residents.
- Implement strategic rate adjustments to ensure sustainable funding for wastewater system operations and maintenance.
- Upgrade treatment plant facilities and equipment to enhance efficiency and maintain regulatory compliance.
- Invest in workforce development and training to ensure a skilled team capable of managing and operating a modern wastewater system.



Helena should become more resilient. While the stormwater maintenance is excellent, there is room for improvement in preventing flash floods and heavy water events.





Solid Waste

As Helena continues to grow, it is essential to ensure that solid waste management systems remain efficient and sustainable. The City's Solid Waste Division oversees both residential and commercial waste collection through curbside service and the Solid Waste Transfer Station, which processes approximately 45,000 tons of refuse annually. To address the increasing demands of a growing population, Helena is collaborating with Lewis and Clark County to develop an Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan.

To address the increasing demands of a growing population, Helena collaborated with Lewis and Clark County to develop an Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan. This plan evaluates the current waste management operations, identifies potential improvements, and explore alternative waste management practices. By also considering funding strategies, the master plan will help guide the City's decision-making process regarding necessary upgrades to the existing system. These efforts help ensure that Helena's solid waste management infrastructure can meet the future needs of the community, maintain environmental sustainability, and promote efficient resource utilization as the city expands.

Recommendations

- Utilize the Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan to guide future system improvements.
- Upgrade solid waste infrastructure, including warm storage and new scales at the transfer station.
- Expand recycling and composting programs, including initiatives to encourage household composting and food waste reduction.
- Explore partnerships to establish a waste diversion thrift store at the transfer station, providing a second life for reusable goods and reducing landfill demand.
- Evaluate funding options to sustain long-term waste management improvements.
- Enhance partnerships with private and public entities to optimize waste management efficiency.
- Support local and regional efforts to conserve energy, promote recycling and reduce solid waste.

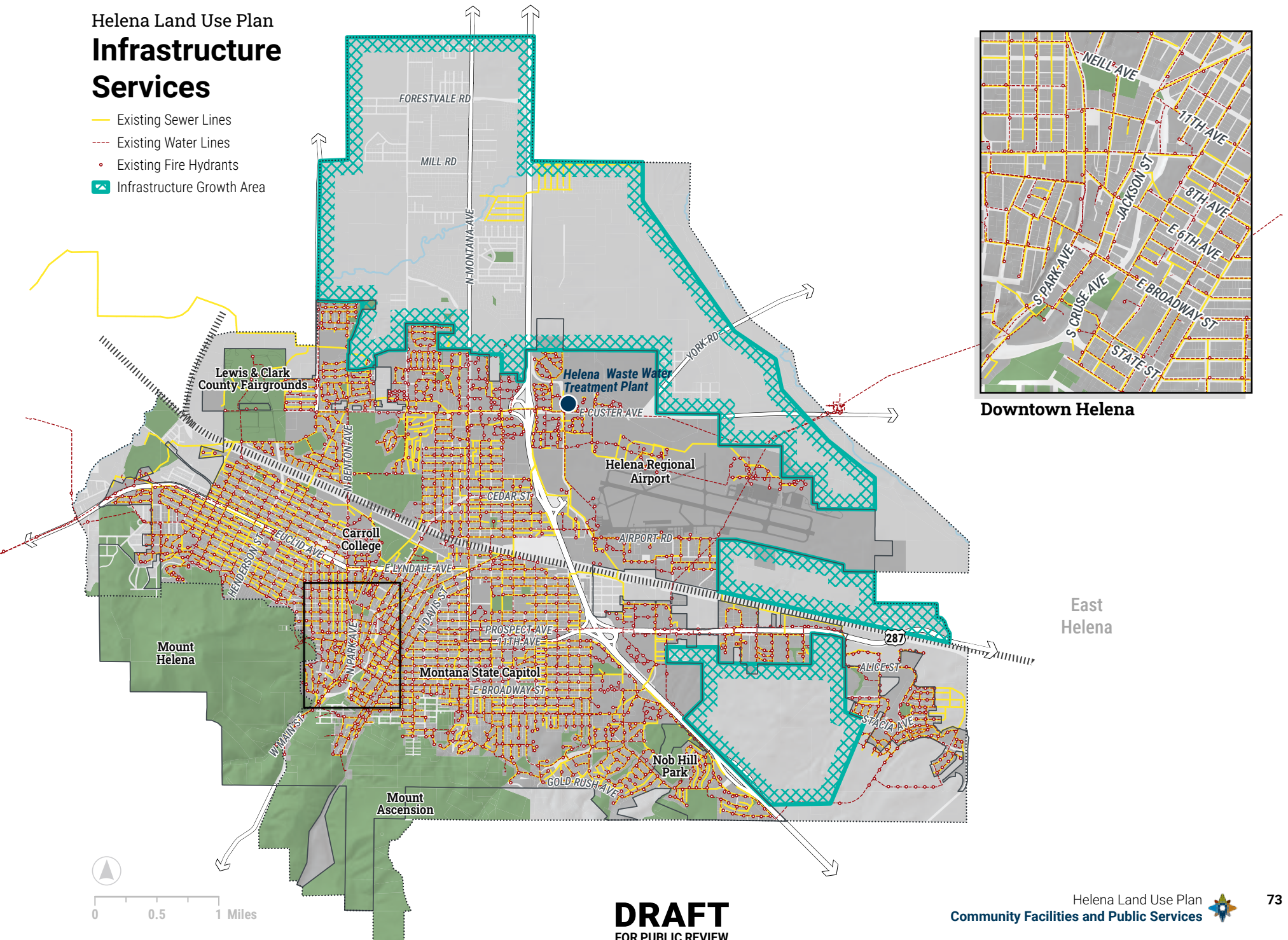
Maintain and Expand Community Facilities

As Helena continues to grow, so too will the demand for community services and facilities, including infrastructure, libraries, schools, recreational amenities, and public safety services. As the needs and desires of residents change over time, the City should plan ahead for increases in service demands and need for new amenities. Long-term planning and coordination with respective service providers will be key to ensuring the efficient and equitable distribution of new and expanded facilities and services.



Helena Land Use Plan Infrastructure Services

- Existing Sewer Lines
- Existing Water Lines
- Existing Fire Hydrants
- Infrastructure Growth Area

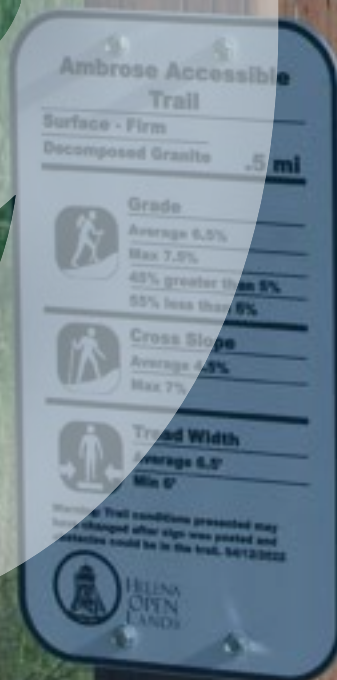


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CHAPTER 9

PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Helena is an exceptional place to live, in large part, due to its complementary mix of intact and functioning natural ecosystems and a high-quality built environment. Its natural resources and environment ground the community in place and provide a foundation for its future. Residents and visitors alike cherish these elements and rank the City's parks, natural areas and open space as some of the most desirable and valued features in Helena.

Incorporating practices that protect the natural systems that ensure the City's ability to provide clean drinking water, protect clean air and biodiversity, improve stormwater management, preserve and sustainably manage wetlands and forests, and safeguard topsoil will make Helena more resilient to growth and a changing climate.

PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND NATURAL RESOURCES GOALS

Continue to conserve and steward Montana's land, air, and water and serve as a model for sustainability and resilience.

Support an extensive parks, open space and trails network, and continue to monitor opportunities to increase and secure outdoor recreational access and improve the wayfinding and safety of trails.



CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

In 2007, City of Helena Commission passed Resolution 19530, recognizing that there is “sufficient scientific evidence to conclude that global climate change is occurring, that humans are contributing to it, and that reduction in greenhouse gases (GHG) is necessary in to avert the negative consequences of a changing climate.” Lowering GHG emissions will likely result in numerous additional benefits to the Helena community, including improved water quality, reduced energy costs, and improved waste and air pollution efforts. The passage of this resolution, allowed for the construction of a Climate Change Task-force, and for this task-force to give recommendation on the following categories:

1. Energy Efficiency & Municipal Operations
2. Water Supply, Treatment, and Delivery
3. Transportation, Waste, Recycling, and Public/Private Partnership

Over the years the City has pursued many of these recommendations and moved its GHG goals forward. In 2017, the City Commission adopted Resolution 20347, requiring the preparation of an annual report to document specific activities implemented by the City, track greenhouse gasses, energy usage, and other resources such as water and recommend future sustainability measures for Helena. The City continues to make energy efficiency and sustainability upgrades to buildings, parks, and practices. The information below outlines the upgrades and efficiencies for each calendar year as well as purposed projects for the future. Where applicable, the activity references the corresponding recommendation from the Climate Action Plan.

PARKS, OPEN SPACE, TRAILS, AND RECREATION

Helena’s developed parkland supports the City’s high quality of life by providing essential green space for recreation, relaxation, and community engagement. These parks offer residents opportunities to maintain a healthy lifestyle, host organized sports, and gather for civic events, all of which contribute to the City’s vibrancy. With over 2,140 acres of parkland and 30 parks, including bike and pedestrian trails, the Parks, Recreation and Open Lands Department is committed to preserving and enhancing these valuable assets.

As Helena continues to grow, strategic investments in accessibility, maintenance, and expansion will ensure that parks and open spaces remain welcoming, equitable, and resilient—safeguarding natural resources while adapting to a changing climate. Through thoughtful planning and partnerships, the City will continue to enrich its parks, trails, and open spaces, making Helena an even more vibrant place to live and visit.

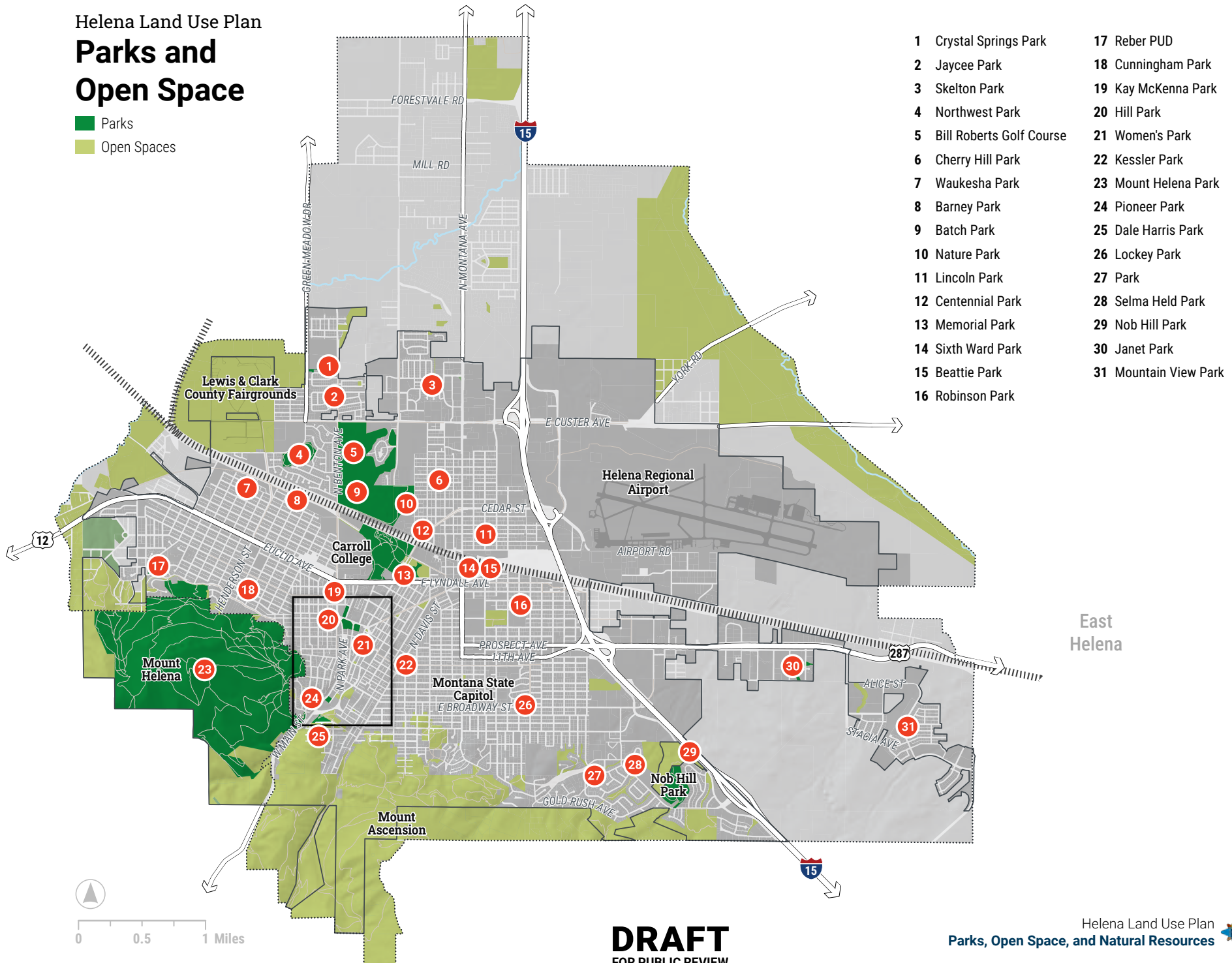
Park Access

Ensuring equitable access to parks is essential to fostering a healthy and well-connected community. While Helena is home to iconic parks like Mount Helena and Centennial Park, some areas—particularly north of Last Chance Gulch between McHugh and Sanders up to Custer Avenue—have limited access to park space. Addressing these gaps will help ensure that all residents have parks and recreational amenities within a short walk of their homes.

Additionally, improving connectivity through new paths along existing rights-of-way and within neighborhoods will make cycling and walking safer, more convenient, and enjoyable for all. Enhancing park quality and usability is equally important, as aging facilities and inadequate ADA accessibility can limit inclusivity. Climate-related challenges, such as drought and wildfire smoke, further impact safe outdoor recreation. By prioritizing strategic park investments and improvements, Helena can create a more accessible and resilient park system that serves the needs of all residents.

Helena Land Use Plan Parks and Open Space

■ Parks
■ Open Spaces



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Trail Connectivity and Improvements

Helena's 75-mile trail network is a regional treasure, seamlessly connecting urban neighborhoods to surrounding wildlands while attracting tourists and outdoor enthusiasts. However, increasing use, outdated or insufficient signage, limited trail-head access, and gaps in connectivity pose challenges to its long-term success. There is significant potential to improve trail interconnectivity within Helena and throughout the region to further solidify the city's reputation as a premier destination for hikers, mountain bikers, and endurance athletes.

By securing access to key trailheads and linking multiple soft-surface trails, the city can further position itself as a hub for mountain biking and trail running events that bring visitors and economic benefits to local businesses. Collaborating with Prickly Pear Land Trust and neighboring jurisdictions will be essential in expanding trail connections between parks, neighborhoods, and adjacent communities. Additionally, ongoing investments in trail maintenance, signage, and facilities will help ensure the system remains safe, accessible, and enjoyable for all.

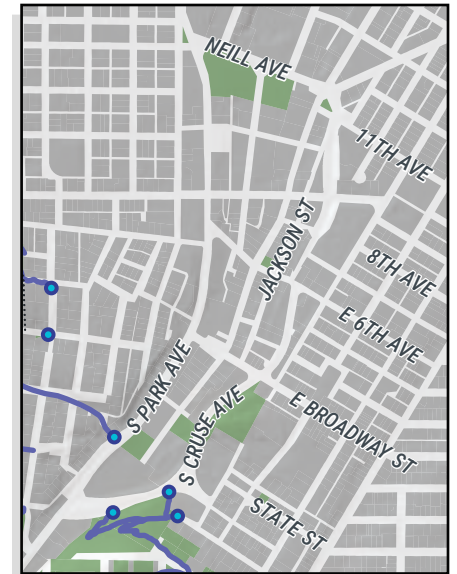
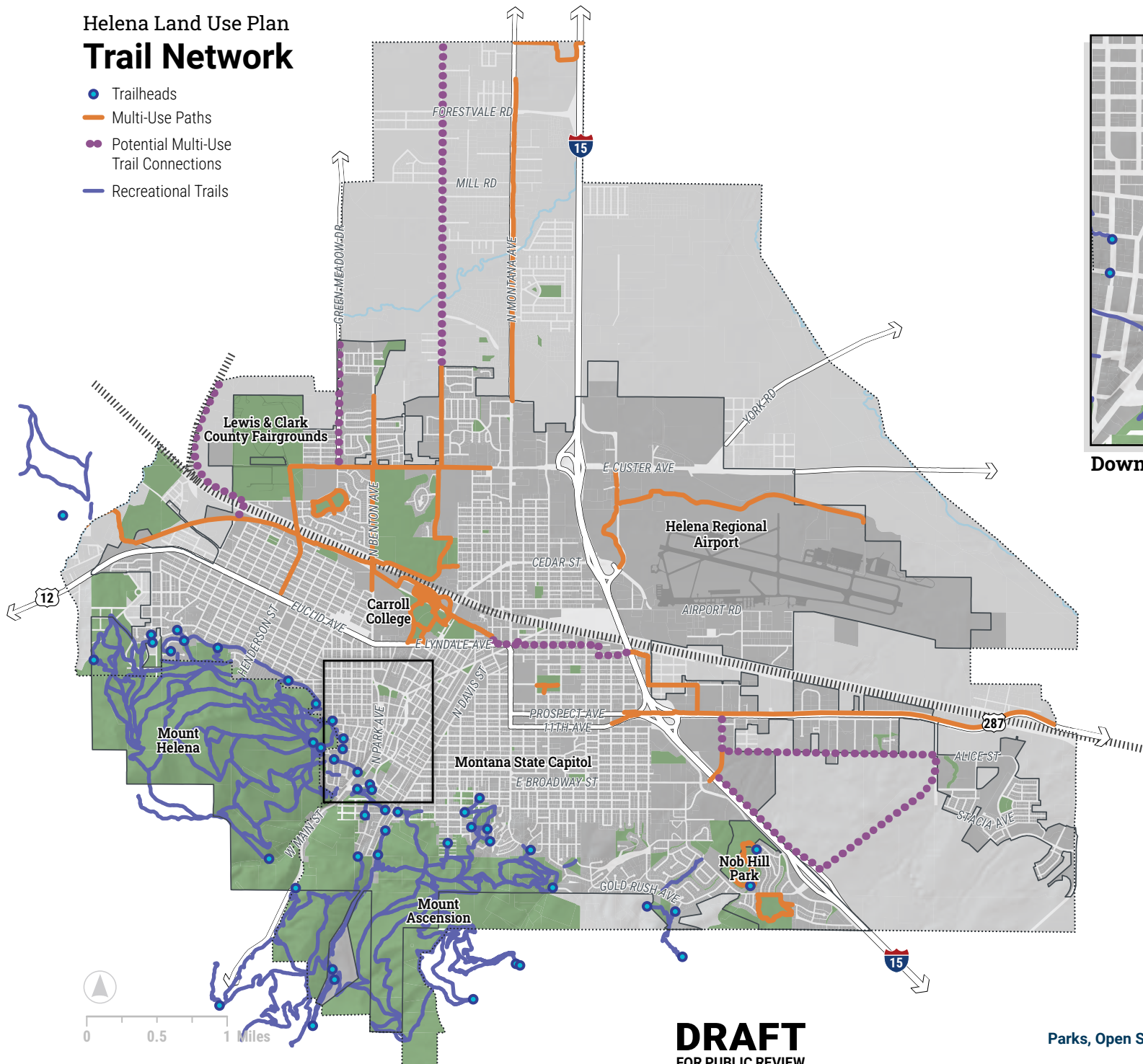
Recommendations

- Work towards acquiring lots that would be suitable for more inclusive park spaces that are multi-generational.
- Partner with other City departments to identify and plan to address key barriers of access to parks and recreational components.
- Focus short-term strategies toward maintenance of aging or distressed components in the park system.
- Continue to evaluate current offerings for efficiencies, and opportunities to provide more value through programming or facilities.
- Maintain current levels of trail access and look for opportunities to secure and expand access for existing trails as well as for new trail construction.
- Strive for a balance of providing multiple access points with concentrating access in specific areas to reduce public resource and user impacts.
- Improve wayfinding at trailheads and through easily accessible mobile-optimized web-based information to help distribute users more evenly throughout the system, reduce overuse and crowding at high use trailheads and on high use trails, and prevent conflicts between trail users.
- Expand accessible trails within the Helena open lands and trails system where feasible.
- Analyze current trail system to identify opportunities to connect trails to maximize accessibility, and to identify possibilities for designating or creating new trails that are restricted to mountain biking or foot travel to reduce user conflicts.
- Continually look for opportunities to increase trail connectivity, active transportation infrastructure and public transit, if it is available, to make access more inclusive.
- Increase signage, such as on blind corners, and to inform users that the Helena Open Lands system is a multiple use trail system, educating users on trail etiquette, and preventing user conflicts.
- Strengthen partnerships with land management entities including the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Forest Service, and federal Bureau of Land Management to coordinate trail planning and management initiatives.
- Work with community partners like bike shops, Prickly Pear Land Trust, Chamber of Commerce to help develop safe urban bike routes to connect to trailheads.

Helena should strengthen its Sustainability Program - additional outreach and education for the community, led by City staff, private and public entities would go a long way in improving trails, urban tree canopy, composting and so much more.

Helena Land Use Plan Trail Network

- Trailheads
- Multi-Use Paths
- Potential Multi-Use Trail Connections
- Recreational Trails



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NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

A healthy natural environment is essential to ensuring a sustainable and resilient local economy. The natural environment includes, but is not limited to, land, topography, agriculture, open space, flora and fauna, sand and gravel resources, air quality, surface and ground water, wetlands and riparian areas, floodplains, noise, light, and climate.

Helena experiences a dry climate, receiving approximately 11.2 inches of annual precipitation, with an average daily temperature of 45.4°F. Seasonal extremes range from average lows of 35°F in December to highs of 86°F in July, though winter temperatures can drop well below freezing and summer highs can occasionally exceed 100°F. Despite these variations, Helena's climate remains a key factor in its appeal as a place to live, work, play, and invest.

Residents value the city's natural environment and support sustainable growth that protects its resources. As the city expands, preserving open space, critical habitats, and natural areas will be essential to maintaining a high quality of life. Thoughtful planning should prioritize conservation, enhancement, and mitigation efforts to balance development with environmental sustainability. Additionally, an increasing demand for housing will put pressure on open spaces and wetlands, altering ecosystems and reducing essential services such as clean air and water, shade, biodiversity, and the psychological benefits of nature. To accommodate growth while safeguarding these natural systems, Helena must focus on strategic planning and sustainable development practices that enhance resilience and protect the City's long-term environmental health.

Land and Topography

Helena is situated on the southern edge of Lewis and Clark County, just East of the Continental Divide, approximately mid-way between Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. The city sits on the southern end of the Helena Valley, which still contains agricultural uses. There are five lakes within a 30-minute drive, and Helena is surrounded by timbered mountain ranges that contain sites of former mining activity conducted during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Much of the Helena valley floor was in agricultural use prior to residential and commercial development.

Helena's greatest natural assets include its forested mountain backdrop and open spaces. These areas provide not only aesthetic value, but also wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities – including city parks such as Mt. Helena and Mt. Ascension, state and federal lands, and privately held lands – some of which are preserved through conservation easements.

Sand and Gravel Resources

Gravel is an important component in many construction activities and is essential for future development in the area. Gravel extraction can be noisy and dusty and include extensive truck traffic, which can conflict with other land uses. Balancing the need for gravel and the pressure to provide land for homes to accommodate the incoming population can be difficult. Due to its geology along the Missouri River, the Helena Valley has numerous gravel deposits. Most current gravel extraction occurs outside the municipal boundary east and northeast of Helena.



Flora and Fauna

The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) identifies one sensitive flowering plant species of concern in the area surrounding Helena (the Lesser Rushy Milkvetch). Most of Helena's flora have been intentionally planted as people have developed individual properties. Since the area receives less than twelve inches of rainfall a year, landscaping that incorporates drought-tolerant and deer-resistant plants should be supported in this Plan's implementation framework and in adopted standards.

Helena's natural environment include complex ecosystems with diverse wildlife and habitat. It may also include areas essential to the conservation of species protected by the Endangered Species Act or of special interest or concern to the State of Montana. In addition to deer, the adjacent mountains to the south also provide habitat for elk, coyotes, mountain lions, foxes, occasional black bear and moose, along with numerous birds and non-game animals.

Grizzly bears have also been sighted in the hills west and south of the City in the past few years. Sandhill cranes have been reported within the northern part of the City and northeast of the City. Antelope have been observed in the grassy areas located to the southeast, east of I-15. Riparian areas provide important wildlife habitat and wildlife travel corridors and contribute to the community's sense of place. Wildlife management issues will continue to be a development consideration for subdivisions and annexations as the City grows in the future.

Nuisance and noxious weeds are a concern in Helena. The City works closely with the Lewis and Clark County Weed Board to enforce noxious weed control, and City code defines noxious and nuisance weeds and identifies property owners' weed-control responsibilities. The County has adopted a weed-management program that reviews the distribution and abundance of each noxious weed species known to occur within the district, and specifies herbicide management goals and procedures. The City's weed-management program generally refers to nuisance weeds if they are a fire hazard. State law also requires a re-vegetation plan for subdivisions; these are submitted to the County Weed Board for approval.

Air Quality

Helena and its residents are directly affected by the air quality in Lewis and Clark County. Helena's air quality is generally good because of winds that scatter pollutants. Yet air inversions occasionally occur during winter, creating poor air-quality days until the wind disperses wood smoke, dust, particulates, and pollutants.

Recent trends show a spike in the number of days with high particle counts in the county. This is mainly due to the forest fires that have become more common in recent years, causing more "poor" air quality days during the summer months. In response to wood smoke particulate issues, the Lewis and Clark Public Health Department monitors air quality conditions closely during the period from November 1 to March 1 and enforces no-burning rules during poor air quality episodes.

Given the concerns around air quality, Helena should focus on its land use patterns, especially those promoting urban densities and residential development in close proximity to employment and services, reduce vehicle miles traveled and promote more efficient use of land, infrastructure, and the transportation network. As a result, the potential for air pollution can be reduced, and development pressures on the natural environment can be lessened.

Further, Helena should inventory public facilities that serve as refuges where vulnerable populations can escape unhealthy air quality and the heat during the summer fire season.

Surface and Groundwater

Helena, located in a semi-arid region, receives 11–12 inches of annual precipitation, making water essential to the city's health, economy, and quality of life. Beyond residential and commercial use, water supports fire suppression, recreation, forest health, wildlife preservation, and agriculture. In addition to surface water from the Ten Mile Creek watershed and from the Missouri River, the City holds water rights for groundwater wells in the Helena Valley, which could support future expansion, particularly for irrigation.

Unlike City residents connected to municipal water, those outside City limits depend on private wells, which are currently exempt from permitting and regulation. This less regulated and relatively easy-to-obtain water promotes growth in the areas surrounding Helena. A number of factors can influence the quantity of groundwater in a given area: the number of wells, extended drought conditions, and the functioning of recharge areas.

Although the City has adequate water supply at this time, the population of Helena and the surrounding areas is growing. Future needs should be evaluated on a regular basis, with actions taken to ensure that Helena will always have sufficient and economical water, and that other water-dependent uses, such as recreational activities, forest health, wildlife preservation, and maintaining viable agriculture lands, are balanced with urban uses.

One way to promote future availability of adequate water supply is to make land-use and development decisions that promote efficient use of water infrastructure and resources. A number of other mechanisms can increase future water availability, such as water conservation, reuse, and more efficient use of water resources; drought-resistant landscaping; and means that increase the City's access to water sources. Compact, higher density development also reduces water consumption compared to more spread out or larger lot development. As Helena grows, managing water resources sustainably will be crucial to maintaining a reliable supply for both urban and rural users.

Water Quality

Ensuring adequate water quantity is essential to Helena's future—ensuring water quality is equally vital. In addition to providing a source of municipal water, surface water in the Helena area provides water for industrial uses, agricultural irrigation, wildlife habitat, fisheries, and recreational opportunities.

Groundwater is the sole source of drinking water for most of the people in the vicinity who live outside of Helena including more than 27,000 people in the surrounding areas. Mitigating the impacts to water quality is should be a main focus of the City, including issues related to municipal wastewater outflows; failing septic systems; aging wastewater treatment facilities; wetland and waterway encroachment; erosion, and agricultural runoff.

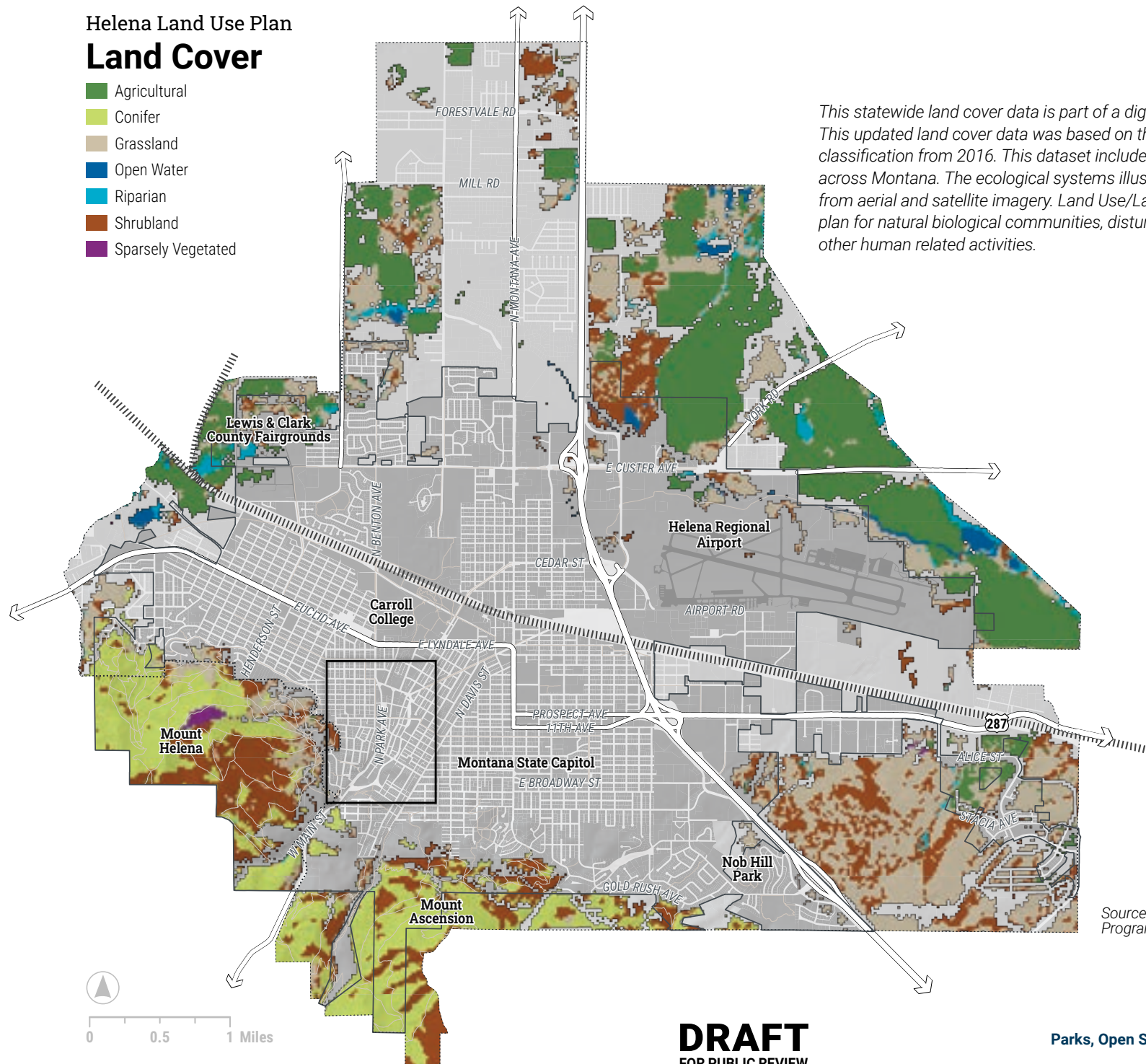
Recommendations

- Plan for and establish types and quantities of land uses in Helena supporting community needs, neighborhood centers, aesthetics and the City's long-term sustainability.
- Coordinate with adjacent jurisdictions, including East Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Jefferson County, Broadwater County, and state and federal land management agencies on environmental and natural resources issues that have regional impacts.
- Promote energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy in new and existing development, minimizing impacts on natural resources and the environment.
- Preserve habitat areas identified by the Endangered Species Act or as important to wildlife identified by the State of Montana as species of conservation concern.
- Encourage use of technologies and techniques that direct light downwards, minimizing intrusive or excessive glare, reducing energy use and optimizing "dark sky" conditions in Helena.
- Reduce the spread of invasive plant species in Helena, including requiring City operations or contracts to include weed-free materials and construction methods
- Increase vegetation, particularly trees in parks and open spaces, and landscaping on individual properties and in boulevards to help offset the negative effects pollutants have on air quality.
- Consider creating a system of public refuge locations where vulnerable populations can escape unhealthy air quality during the summer fire season.

Helena Land Use Plan Land Cover

- Agricultural
- Conifer
- Grassland
- Open Water
- Riparian
- Shrubland
- Sparsely Vegetated

This statewide land cover data is part of a digital raster map completed in 2023. This updated land cover data was based on the Landfire Existing Vegetation Type classification from 2016. This dataset includes natural and human land cover uses across Montana. The ecological systems illustrated on this map were classified from aerial and satellite imagery. Land Use/Land Cover datasets help record and plan for natural biological communities, disturbances such as invasive species, and other human related activities.



Source: 2023 Montana Natural Heritage Program, Montana State Library

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ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

It will be important to protect environmentally sensitive areas by encouraging urban development where appropriate and with lower density or minimal development in areas with environmental constraints. As the City continues to develop, it should consider constraints such as the wildland-urban interface, floodplains, potential liquefaction during an earthquake, and earthquake faults.

Flooding

Ten Mile Creek is located within a mile north and northwest of the city, bordering an area that could be developed in the future. The floodplain along Prickly Pear Creek extends through East Helena and continues north and east of the airport. These areas tend to have higher groundwater than property located farther from the floodplains. Some limited floodplain areas are located within City limits. Ten Mile Creek floods periodically, most recently in the Spring of 2018, and flash flooding during summer rainstorms can overwhelm the City's stormwater system and roar down Last Chance Gulch and through Downtown as they did in the July of 2022.

Helena has adopted a Floodplain Ordinance and building codes to address construction standards that will affect the identified floodplain areas as the City grows to the north and northwest. Development is prohibited in the 100-year floodplain, while development in the 500-year floodplain requires buildings to be elevated without basements.

2022 Floods

In June 2022, Montana faced severe flooding triggered by heavy rainfall and snowmelt, prompting Governor Greg Gianforte to declare a statewide disaster. The floods submerged roadways, damaged infrastructure, and threatened communities, particularly agricultural areas where crops were destroyed and fields remained underwater for weeks. Residents faced property damage, and some were forced to evacuate. The economic impact was substantial, with millions of dollars in damages to homes, infrastructure, and agriculture. In response, local authorities focused on emergency repairs and improving flood preparedness to mitigate future risks. Together with a summer storm and flash flood that sent a foot-deep torrent of water down Helena's Last Chance Gulch on July 3, 2022. This event highlighted Helena's vulnerability to climate-driven disasters and underscored the need for enhanced flood defenses.

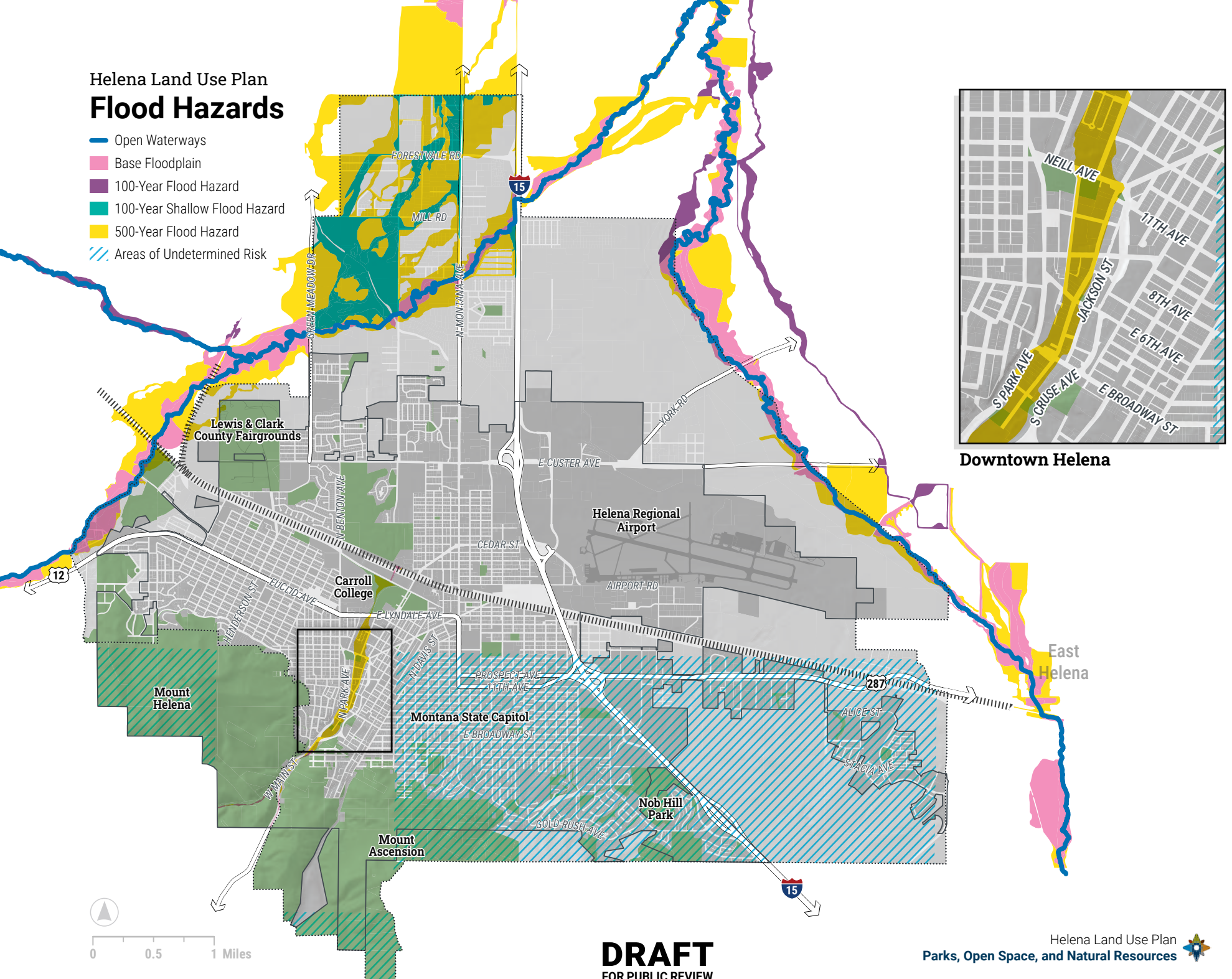


It is extremely important we plan and prepare for Helena's natural disasters, including extreme weather, earthquake, wildfire and flooding.



Helena Land Use Plan Flood Hazards

- Open Waterways
- Base Floodplain
- 100-Year Flood Hazard
- 100-Year Shallow Flood Hazard
- 500-Year Flood Hazard
- Areas of Undetermined Risk



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Earthquakes

Helena is located in Seismic Design Category D for earthquake potential. In 1935, Helena received extensive damage from a series of significant earthquakes and aftershocks. Occasional earthquake activity is often experienced in the area since that time, and another large earthquake is anticipated.

Additionally, a large portion of the Helena Valley has been identified as susceptible to liquefaction. A geotechnical analysis is currently required by the City during preliminary plat application, and on a case-by-case basis for building permits, helping provide site-specific liquefaction potential.

Because of the earthquake potential associated with the Seismic Design Category D designation, certain building code standards are required for all construction. Compliance with these building codes means buildings will better withstand earthquakes and the accompanying liquefaction.

1935 Helena Earthquake

On April 18, 1935, Helena was struck by a magnitude 6.2 earthquake, one of Montana's most destructive seismic events. The disaster caused widespread damage, including landslides, ground ruptures, and structural collapses. Property damage totaled \$3 million at the time (equivalent to over \$66 million today). Key landmarks like the Montana State Capitol and Hotel Broadwater's Natatorium sustained significant damage, with the Natatorium closing permanently in 1941. The earthquake disrupted transportation networks and altered landscapes, indirectly affecting recreational areas and infrastructure. In response, the city prioritized long-term efforts to improve earthquake preparedness and infrastructure resilience. The event underscored Helena's vulnerability to seismic activity and highlighted the need for stronger disaster defenses.



Image Source: Montana History Portal



Wildfires

Wildland fires in Montana and across the US West in recent years have clarified the immediate threat such events pose to Helena. Wildfires are a yearly occurrence, increasing in frequency and severity as the climate warms and dries. They have the potential to spread into the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), threatening homes and lives. Recent fires near population centers have increased levels of awareness and spurred efforts to mitigate wildfire dangers in WUI settings. Beyond the costs of fighting wildfires, the loss of property and potential loss of life, the secondary effects of a wildland fire are also significant, including unhealthy air quality, loss of wildlife habitat, soil erosion, the spread of noxious weeds, flash flooding and landslides. Affected areas may not return to pre-fire conditions for decades.

The southern portion of Helena is located in the WUI and has the potential for human and environmental conflicts including wildland fires. Helena's WUI has also seen significant issues associated with pine beetles, which leave trees vulnerable to a deadly fungus. As a result, significant portions of surrounding forests include dead stands of trees, increasing the potential for wildfire. Urban Standards Boundary has been enlarged to incorporate sections of the WUI to better facilitate the establishment of joint standards with Lewis and Clark County.

South Hills

Helena is vulnerable to wildfire along the South Hills due to a number of factors including the accumulation of fuels from beetle-killed trees; urban development; the wildland setting; varied topography, and areas that are difficult to access. As population and recreational uses increase along the South Hills, the number of fires and potential fire impact may increase.

Recommendations

- Consider and implement ways to reduce nutrient discharges from Helena's wastewater treatment plant and its stormwater system to meet regulatory standards, including enforcement of the Stormwater Ordinance and erosion control requirements.
- Protect and sustain irreplaceable natural features such as wetlands, stream corridors, and similar high-value areas that provide wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, improved water quality and safety values such as flood control.
- Minimize environmental degradation in areas with challenging physical and environmental characteristics, such as steep slopes, watercourses, drainage ways and wetlands.
- Adopt policies discouraging new construction in the wildland urban interface to reduce the wildfire risk to homes and human life.
- Minimize cut-and-fills on slopes resulting from road or building construction to reduce soil erosion and the risk of landslides.
- Evaluate subdivision impacts to ground and surface waters, drainages, floodplains, riparian areas and wetlands, incorporating adequate buffers or requiring appropriate mitigation, including, but not limited to, stormwater treatment and discharges to improve wetland viability.
- Encourage the use of xeriscape landscaping, grey water, rain barrels, and other mechanisms to reduce demand on potable water and the amount of effluent. Educate property owners and provide incentives to create defensible space around homes
- Require new construction and renovation of existing buildings in high wildfire risk areas to use fire-resistant materials



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CHAPTER 10

CULTURAL RESOURCES AND PLACEMAKING

Helena has a distinctive and vital character and sense of place that is almost tangible for residents and visitors alike. Consistently, participants cited its historic charm and small-town feel as assets to be protected and leveraged for sustainable economic development. The Cultural Resources and Placemaking chapter offers strategic guidance to enhance and promote Helena's local attractions, events, public art, and historic sites. These initiatives aim to strengthen the City's cultural identity while attracting visitors and supporting local community engagement.

CULTURAL RESOURCES AND PLACEMAKING GOALS

Preserve the city's local landmarks and attractions, encouraging a lively and active tourism economy.

Continue to support the preservation of Helena's historical structures and maintain the city's heritage and identity.

Promote a strong sense of community and personal connections to continue to be an exceptional place to live at all ages and stages of life with a healthy, work-life balance.

Maintain and enhance the city's unique character, including its charming downtown and neighborhoods, all set within a stunning and accessible natural environment.



SUPPORT LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

Helena is a lively community that takes pride in its arts and cultural amenities. Residents recognize these assets as essential to Helena's identity and the City has actively worked to promote year-round cultural activities that foster social connections and enhance regional appeal. Through partnerships with local organizations, the City supports a wide range of events celebrating art, music, food, history, and the performing arts. These efforts signal Helena's commitment to cultural enrichment, strengthen community engagement, and contribute to its economic vitality.

Unique Destinations

Helena has many unique destinations that make it a regional tourism hub. Attractions such as the Grand-street Theatre, Holter Museum of Art, the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, the Montana Heritage Center, the State Capitol, Reeder's Alley, Montana WILD Outdoor Education Center, Exploration Works, Myrna Loy Center, the Helena Indian Alliance, and its historic downtown and neighborhoods offer diverse cultural and artistic experiences that showcase the City's rich history and creative spirit. By strategically promoting these destinations through coordinated marketing efforts, improved wayfinding, and event programming, Helena can strengthen its identity as a premier arts and heritage destination. Investing in visitor-friendly infrastructure, partnerships with local businesses, and expanded tourism initiatives will not only attract more visitors but also support local economic growth and community vitality.

Recommendations

- Collaborate with Visit Helena and the Montana Department of Commerce Office of Tourism to increase the visibility of Helena's cultural and artistic offerings.
- Develop a tourism strategy that incorporates both local and regional attractions to position Helena as a comprehensive arts and heritage destination.
- Create promotional materials, including brochures, websites, and social media campaigns, to showcase the city's attractions.
- Install clear and attractive signage throughout the city to direct visitors to local attractions utilizing improved transportation connectivity plans, models, and strategies.
- Improve accessibility for all visitors, including supporting the installation of ramps, accessible parking, and other accommodations at arts and cultural destinations.
- Ensure continued investment in the upkeep and expansion of key cultural and artistic institutions to maintain high-quality experiences for visitors.
- Consider resurrecting the Helena Trolley free public transit system, allowing visitors to move between local attractions, lodging, and restaurants without having to worry about parking.



Events and Festivals

Events and festivals are a fun and engaging way of building a sense of community and drawing outside visitors to Helena. These celebrations not only boost tourism but also increase the visibility of local businesses and encourage cultural exchange. Helena already hosts a diverse array of events, such as Alive at Five, Ales for Trails, Last Chance Community Pow Wow, Art Walk, Montana PRIDE, Vigilante Days Parade, Last Chance Stampede and Fair, Septemberfest, Don't Fence Me In Trail Run, Governor's Cup, and the Montana Symphony under the Stars. To further enhance Helena's appeal, the City should continue to support and expand these events while encouraging the development of new ones that reflect Helena's unique identity and spirit.

Recommendations

- Continue to collaborate with key partners like the Helena Area Chamber of Commerce, Visit Helena, The Gulch (Business Improvement District), Prickly Pear Land Trust, Big Sky PRIDE, and local nonprofits and businesses to schedule, organize, improve, and create new community events and activities.
- Regularly review events after they are held to identify and address issues that impacted their operation as well as explore opportunities for new events.
- Conduct regular surveys with both residents and event attendees to identify which events are most successful and potential improvements that could be implemented at future events.

- Increase marketing of existing events to attract more residents and regional visitors.
- Simplify the permitting system for events.
- Consider resurrecting the Helena Trolley free public transit system to support events and festivals allowing attendees to park further away or to move between events and local attractions, lodging, and restaurants.

Tourism

Tourism is an important asset to a community as it draws new visitors to the area to spend time and money and enhances the community's reputation and identity. Tourism can be a tool for economic development, increasing local tax revenues and job opportunities for tourism-based industries. Helena offers many assets that can be leveraged for tourism. Heritage tourism can also be promoted based on the city's historic districts and structures.



HISTORICAL ASSETS

Helena is home to a rich tapestry of historic assets that reflect its diverse and evolving story, from its Indigenous peoples to the dynamic city that stands today. These resources are essential to Helena's identity, contributing to the city's unique character and sense of place. Currently, there are twelve designated historic districts and forty-two Helena area properties are individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Of the forty-two properties, three are cemeteries in addition to a variety of residential, commercial and public buildings. Recent properties added to the register include the Crump-Howard House, Dorsey Grocery and Residence (2017), the Haight-Bridgewater House (2014), the Huseby, John. H. House, Western Life Insurance Company Helena Branch Office and the Unemployment Compensation Building (2012). By preserving and celebrating these assets, the City can leverage its history continues to shape its future, creating lasting connections for both residents and visitors alike.

Established Historic Districts and Sites

As Helena continues to grow and evolve, it is essential to support and preserve the City's established historic districts and sites. By capitalizing on the distinctive qualities of these districts and sites, the City can create an intriguing and attractive environment that honors its history while accommodating modern development.

Strategies should include promoting the adaptive reuse of historic buildings, providing incentives for preservation, and fostering an atmosphere that celebrates Helena's past while supporting its future. As the City changes over time, maintaining a balance between progress and preservation will ensure that historic landmarks remain integral to Helena's identity, offering residents and visitors a connection to the past while enhancing the City's overall appeal.

Recommendations

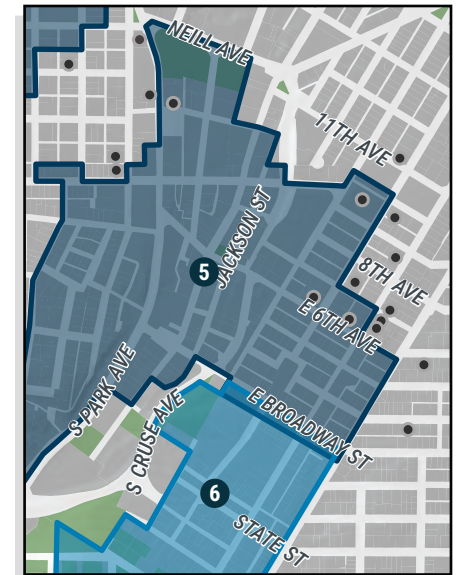
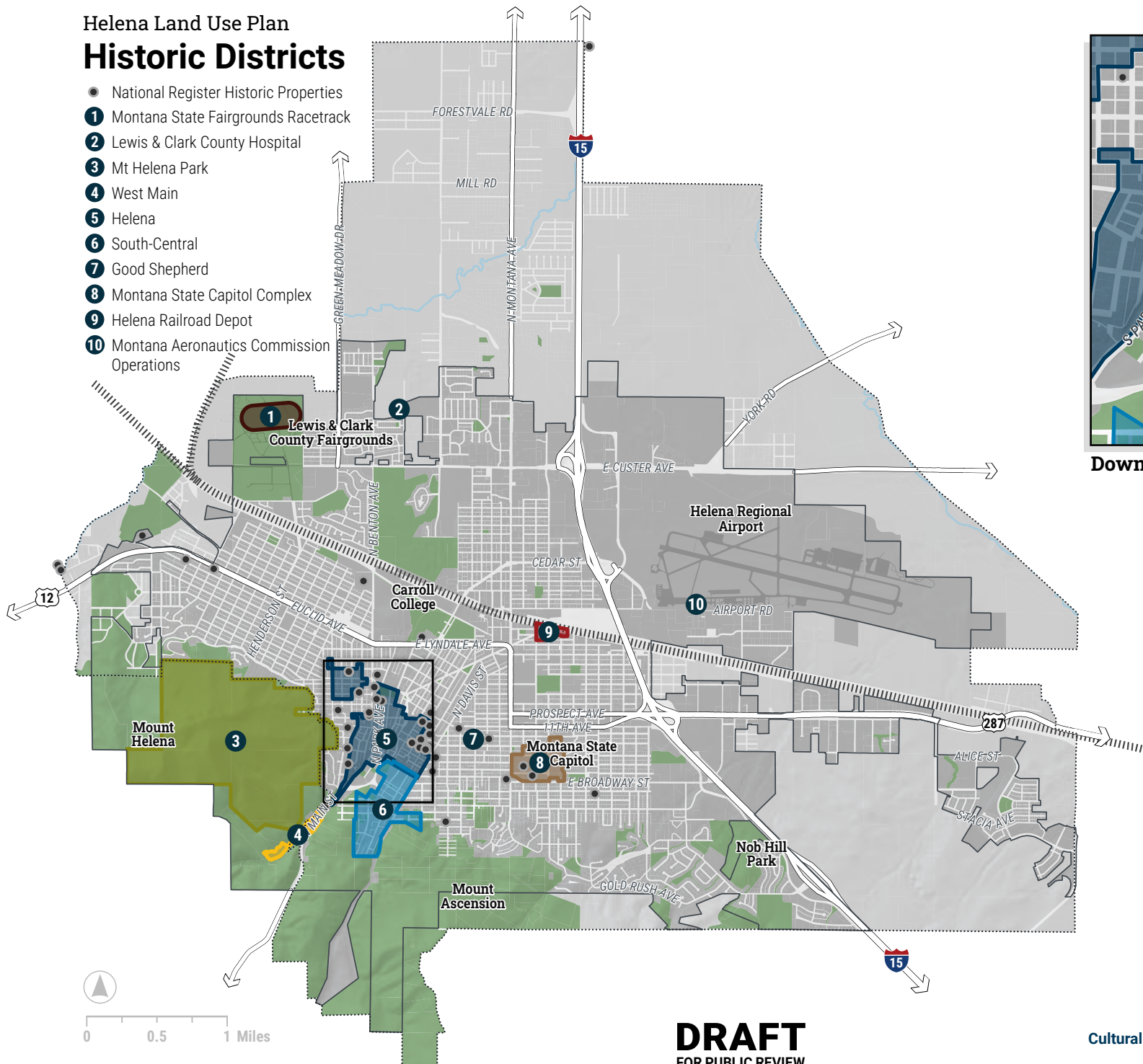
- Provide information, advice, and guidance to property owners for restoration, rehabilitation, landscaping, or maintenance of historic buildings or structures.
- Develop additional incentives to support the use and reuse of existing historic structures through maintenance, conservation, and rehabilitation.
- Continue to maintain City-owned historic buildings in a manner that is consistent with the buildings historic integrity.
- Review and update implementing programs, codes, and ordinances.
- Conduct surveys to identify under-recognized historic sites and buildings that may be eligible for local, state, or national landmark status.
- Incorporate informational signage that highlights the historical significance of key buildings and districts.
- Collaborate with local historic preservation organizations to share resources, knowledge, and funding for preservation efforts.

Helena's arts, culture, and historic buildings are huge public assets that contribute to community identity and sense of place, and are worthy of public and local government support.

Helena Land Use Plan

Historic Districts

- National Register Historic Properties
- 1 Montana State Fairgrounds Racetrack
- 2 Lewis & Clark County Hospital
- 3 Mt Helena Park
- 4 West Main
- 5 Helena
- 6 South-Central
- 7 Good Shepherd
- 8 Montana State Capitol Complex
- 9 Helena Railroad Depot
- 10 Montana Aeronautics Commission Operations



Downtown Helena

East
Helena

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PLACEMAKING AND IDENTITY

Placemaking combines branding, beautification, and functional infrastructure to create an attractive identity and encourage social interaction. Through thoughtful design and artistic expression, the City can celebrate local character, strengthen neighborhood connections, and distinguish itself within the region. Moving forward, the City should continue incorporating placemaking elements—such as public gathering spaces, comprehensive branding, and community-driven art installations—that reflect the area's function, culture, and the distinct character of its neighborhoods and businesses.

Third Spaces

Third spaces—such as parks, plazas, streetscapes, and parklets—act as an informal setting for social connections beyond the confines of primary environments. Among these, streetscapes offer the most extensive public space, providing opportunities for people to socialize, shop, and relax. A well-activated streetscape integrates residential, commercial, and civic uses with pedestrian- and bike-friendly design. By investing in third spaces, Helena can strengthen its sense of place, support community engagement, and create areas that enhance daily life.




Gateways

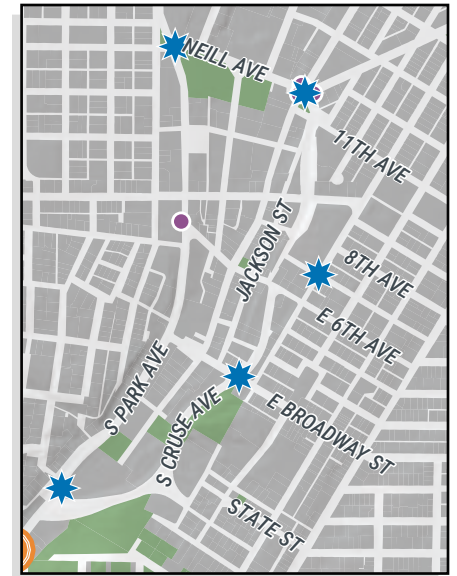
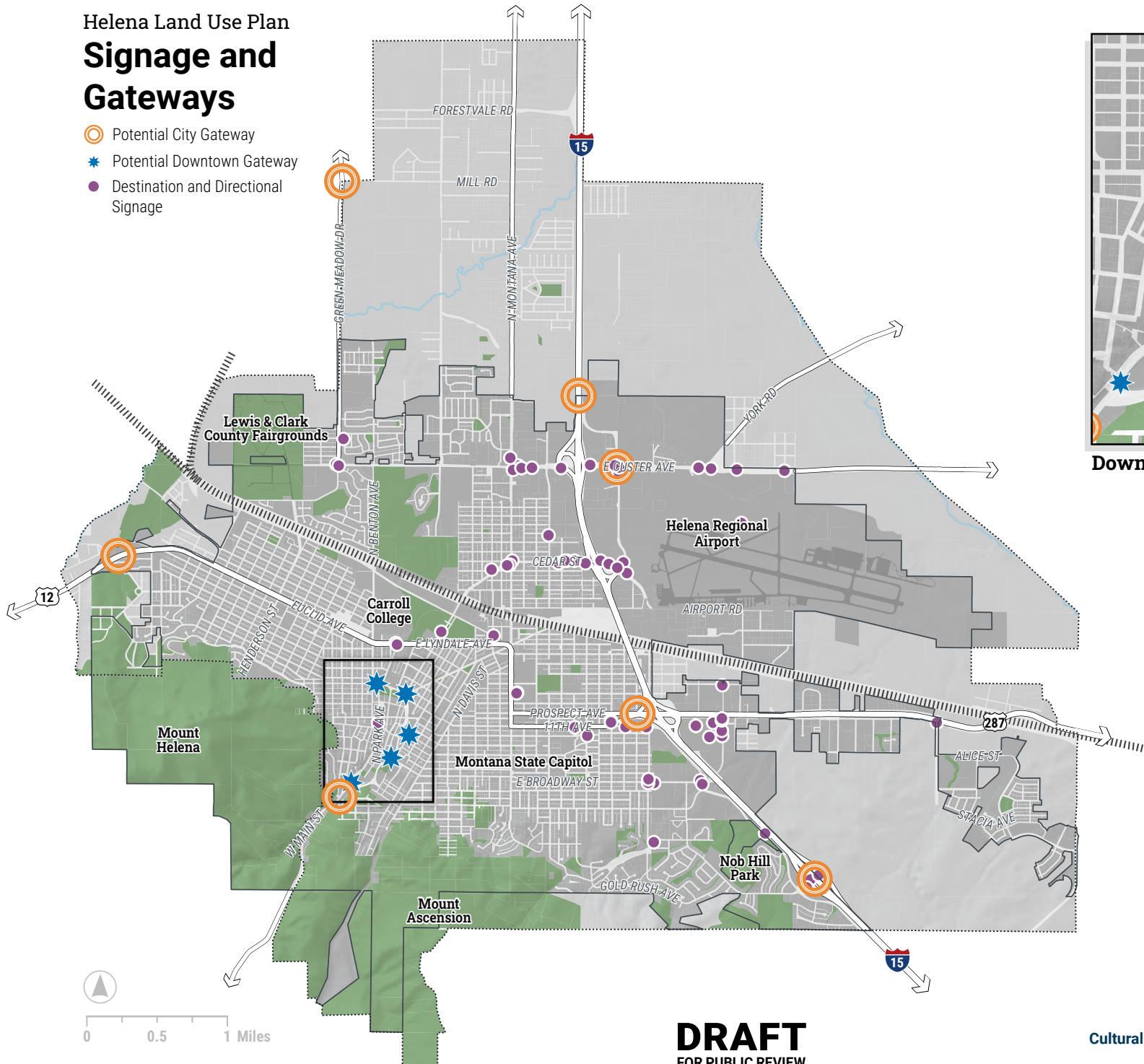
Gateways serve as key entry points that shape the first impression of Helena, visually defining where the city begins and enhancing its overall identity. Thoughtfully designed gateways at major entry points should incorporate elements such as signage, architecture, landscaping, and lighting to create a welcoming and distinctive sense of place. High-quality materials and design should reflect Helena's character while directing visitors to key destinations, including historic landmarks, public gathering spaces, event venues, and downtown parking. By investing in well-designed gateways, the city can strengthen its identity and create a more cohesive and inviting experience for residents and visitors alike.

Recommendations

- Consider ways to expand the street-scape network throughout the city to create different nodes and corridors for public gathering.
- Develop parklets Downtown and in other neighborhood commercial areas to expand usable human-scale third spaces.
- Evaluate zoning districts, particularly in gateway areas, to ensure certain districts and land uses align with the intent of activating the streetscape.
- Where appropriate and feasible, promote the development of public gathering spaces and plazas with consideration for landscaping, pedestrian amenities, and site furniture.
- Install gateway features and wayfinding at key locations in the community to announce the entry points into Helena.
- Include considerations for signage, architectural elements, landscaping, lighting, and other design features around gateways into the city.
- Implement a comprehensive signage program to guide visitors to key locations across all modes of transportation throughout the City, starting at key gateway locations.

Helena Land Use Plan Signage and Gateways

-  Potential City Gateway
-  Potential Downtown Gateway
-  Destination and Directional Signage



Downtown Helena

East
Helena

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Public Art

Public art plays a role in enhancing Helena's economy and community identity. With a thriving local artist population, the arts contribute significantly to the city's economic vitality by boosting regional tourism and attraction. Public art not only beautifies public spaces but also helps cultivate a unique sense of place, transforming streetscapes and enriching the city's character. The Helena Public Art Committee (HPAC) has been instrumental in spreading art throughout the city, creating accessible and engaging spaces for residents and visitors alike. To continue fostering this cultural growth, the City should collaborate with HPAC, the local art community, and other partners to expand the public art collection and ensure it remains a dynamic force in Helena's development.



Arts and Culture

Helena enjoys an active arts community that, with the right support, could help turn the City into a regional arts destination. Downtown features a cluster of galleries, studios, and art shops. These establishments are within walking distance of each other, making coordinated events or arts-centric neighborhood branding an opportunity. The City should supplement these various cultural assets with decorative signage, gateways, public murals, and sculptures, as well as establish recurring and special events to activate parking lots and public spaces.

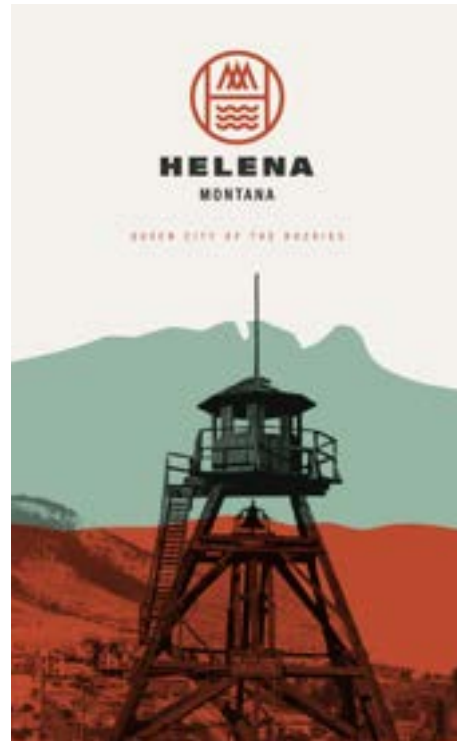


Branding

A strong community brand helps establish Helena's visual identity, attracting businesses, homebuyers, and tourists while supporting local shops and restaurants. Effective branding goes beyond a logo or slogan—it requires a thoughtful approach that reflects Helena's history, culture, values, and unique character. By investing in a well-defined brand, the City can strengthen its sense of place, enhance economic opportunities, and create a lasting impression that resonates.

The Helena Tourism Business Improvement District, otherwise known as Visit Helena, led a rebranding effort that aimed at stimulating long-term growth in tourism, workforce development, and business attraction while maintaining a distinct Helena look.

This comprehensive rebrand included a new logo mark, website redesign, video production, and every piece of collateral from digital ads to trade show booths. The results of this effort led to a fresh, bold new look and a one-stop resource for events, entertainment, and activities.



Branding image by SOVRN and Visit Helena

Recommendations

- Prioritize integrating public art at key focal points and activity centers with high foot traffic and gateway routes to the airport.
- Work with HPAC to increase funding resources to commission local artists to create public art installations.
- Work with property owners to install murals on large-scale windowless buildings, activating facades into cultural destinations.
- Enhance the appearance of industrial areas with public art and decorative screening that reflects the industrial nature of the area.
- Continue to support the Art Walk event to celebrate local artists and local businesses.
- Use the city's public art program to celebrate the region's indigenous peoples.
- Continue to promote the Visit Helena brand, ensuring that it properly reflects the community over time and contributes to the visual identity of the City.
- Consider opportunities for promoting thoughtful community branding within neighborhoods.
- Work with HCC, Neighborhood Watch, and other neighborhood groups to promote what residents love about their neighborhoods and amplify placemaking efforts in the community.



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CHAPTER 11

IMPLEMENTATION

*Realizing the vision and goals of the **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** will require leadership, organization, persistent monitoring, and adjustment. The Implementation chapter translates the Land Use Plan's recommendations into tangible actions the City should take to achieve the Land Use Plan's long-term vision.*



USING THE PLAN

The **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** should be used as the official policy guide for planning decisions by elected officials, boards, commissions, and staff. The Plan should serve as a primary reference in guiding policy formation, evaluating projects and planning initiatives, reviewing development proposals, and prioritizing public expenditures. Referencing the Land Use Plan will ensure future planning efforts and decisions align with the community's long-term vision and goals. Service providers and partner organizations should also be encouraged to use the Land Use Plan when considering new development, facilities, infrastructure updates, and programming within Helena.

Update Related Plans

Past plans, studies, and reports have influenced planning and development policy in Helena. The **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** has integrated relevant goals and ideas from these documents. Looking ahead, these plans should be updated to correlate with recommendations presented in the Plan.

REVIEWING AND UPDATING THE PLAN

Noting the City's dedication to thoughtful planning, the Land Use Plan should not exist as a static document, but rather the center of a continuous planning process. Following adoption of the Plan, the City will continue to move forward, change, and evolve. As such, the Plan should be updated on a regular basis to respond to these changes, addressing shifts in community aspirations and demographic trends as well as new and unexpected issues as they arise.

Montana statute requires that the planning commission review the Land Use Plan at least every five years and determine whether an update to the Land Use Plan and Future Land Use Map is necessary. Change, of course, follows its own schedule without much consideration for state statute. Given the fast pace of change, a full review should be completed at least every two to three years. Best practice, however, would be an annual review. This process should coincide with the preparation of the City's annual budget and Capital Improvements Program, enabling recommendations and projects from the Plan to be considered as part of upcoming funding commitments for that fiscal year. Establishing a routine for review of the Plan will ensure the document remains relevant to the needs and desires of the City.

Capital Improvements Program

Helena's Capital Improvements Program (CIP) represents its fiscal commitment to initiatives aimed at maintaining and improving the community. As a critical tool for implementing the Land Use Plan, the City should review and update the CIP as needed to reflect Land Use Plan recommendations. Projects or initiatives may include restoring and upgrading existing utilities and infrastructure, and the renovating, expanding, or relocating City facilities.

The annual review of the CIP should ensure that projects align with the vision and goals set out in the Land Use Plan. This review should assess short-term and long-term recommendations that City staff can review, prioritize, and organize cost-estimates and potential funding sources to complete. Some of these projects could be broken down into incremental stages that contribute to the Helena's long-term vision.



Jurisdiction Cooperation and Participation

While Plan recommendations require an active role by the City, successful implementation will require coordination with partner agencies and organizations that influence quality of life in Helena. For the Land Use Plan to be successful, the City should assume a leadership role in facilitating the cooperation and participation of its local and regional agencies, organizations, and various jurisdictions. Establishing partnerships and maintaining open, clear communication will contribute to more efficient implementation.

REVIEW ZONING AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROLS

While the **Helena Forward Land Use Plan** articulates a vision for the Helena community, the City's development regulations are one of the primary tools that can be used to implement Plan recommendations. Following the adoption of the Land Use Plan, the City should consider updating its current zoning code, subdivision regulations, and related development ordinances. These regulations should reflect the desires of the community.

Implementation Through Regulation

The Land Use Plan is a policy guide that outlines the necessary actions for Helena to achieve its vision. It serves as a foundation for decision-making for staff, elected and appointed officials, developers, residents, and other stakeholders. Despite the comprehensive scope of the Plan's vision, it is not regulatory. The Plan itself is advisory and does not have the "regulatory teeth" needed to require new development and redevelopment to align with the City vision, or with the goals and strategies conveyed in the Plan.

Land development regulations are the rules that new development and redevelopment must follow, making them an essential tool in Plan implementation. Often, communities will adopt a plan with a clear vision, only to "pull the reins back" on the land development regulations needed to achieve their objectives. The common rationale for this is that stakeholders often feel that such regulations will drive development elsewhere. However, properly drafted land development regulations that align with the vision and goals of the Land Use Plan can remove unnecessary barriers to investment by providing flexibility for potential developments and offsetting the requirements related to design. In this way, land development regulations offer an opportunity to implement the Plan by making preferred development easier.

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

The following funding sources are available to the City and its partners to help implement the plan. This is a general overview of the potential tools and resources. City staff should research each in more detail and regularly monitor these sources to account for legislative and statutory changes that may affect the applicability or availability of funding as well as proactively seek new funding sources.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF)

TIF funding is a tool that can be used to incentivize and attract desired development within key areas, including housing. As with commercial developments, TIF can be used for infrastructure, streetscaping, public improvements, land assemblage, and offsetting the cost of development.

Affordable Housing Trust Fund

In 2020, the City established an Affordable Housing Trust Fund to provide gap financing to organizations that serve beneficiaries of low- to moderate-income. The fund was initially created through several investments from the City Commission and will receive \$100,000 each year from the City's General Fund. Since the fund was created, staff have been working with a seven-member advisory board that will provide recommendations to the City Commission, which makes the final decision concerning which projects receive support.

Home Investment Partnerships Program (HOME)

This federal block grant program is directed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and administered in Montana by the state Department of Commerce. It provides funds to units of local government and non-profit organizations to expand the supply of affordable housing for Montanans with low- and very low-incomes. HOME supports the state and local governments in implementing strategies to achieve adequate supplies of decent, affordable housing and provides financial and technical assistance to develop model programs for affordable housing.

Housing Trust Fund (HTF)

The Housing Trust Fund Program is an affordable housing program that complements existing federal, state, and local efforts to increase the supply of decent, safe, and sanitary affordable housing for extremely low income (ELI) households, including special needs households, unhoused households, and those at risk of homelessness. Administered by the Montana Department of Commerce and funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the HTF provides grants for the construction, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable rental housing for ELI families. Cities, non-profits, or public housing authorities may apply for HTF funds.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

The State CDBG Program, administered by the Montana Department of Commerce, provides grant funding and technical assistance to help local governments plan for future growth and development, develop specific plans for individual projects, and take action to address community needs. Grants are available for general planning, infrastructure and community facilities planning, for the construction of public and community facilities, to support planning and construction of attainable housing, and for economic development with an emphasis of serving low-to moderate-income residents (whose incomes fall below 80% of the median household income).

Montana Main Street (MMS) Program

MMS, administered by the Montana Department of Commerce and coordinated with the Main Street American network, provides grant funding for planning and implementation of projects related to downtown revitalization, development, and historic preservation.

Pathways to Removing Obstacles to Housing (PRO Housing)

In 2024, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded the State of Montana \$7 million to help its largest and fastest growing cities update their land use development regulations to facilitate the construction of more housing. Helena received \$391,270 from the PRO Housing grant which it can use to update its zoning and subdivision regulations and implement the housing-related recommendations of the Land Use Plan.

Montana Facility Finance Authority

The Montana Facility Finance Authority provides low-interest financing and planning grants to non-profit health-care organizations to build health care capacity and to Montana businesses to secure capital to expand manufacturing and to improve their energy efficiency or install renewable energy to support their business.

State-Local Infrastructure Partnership (SLIPA) Program

SLIPA is a state-funded program to help cities and towns fund the maintenance and repair of local government facilities on a partnership basis, with the local governments providing a cash match.

Montana Community Reinvestment (MCR) Program

The MCR Program, administered by the Montana Department of Commerce, provides planning grants to local governments for planning and zoning reforms to increase the housing supply. Eligible projects include general planning (e.g. Land Use Plans), zoning and subdivision regulations and updates, housing needs assessments and conditions surveys, housing affordability and market feasibility studies, inventories of opportunities for infill and redevelopment, development of local or regional housing assistance programs, fair housing plans, preliminary architectural reports, site-specific development plans, and downtown and neighborhood revitalization or master plans related to increasing attainable workforce housing.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Tax Increment Financing (TIF)

TIF funding is a tool that can be used to incentivize and attract desired development within key areas. TIF dollars can typically be used for infrastructure, streetscaping, public improvements, land assemblage, and offsetting the cost of development. TIF utilizes future property tax revenues generated within a designated area or district to pay for improvements and further incentivize continued investment. As the Equalized Assessed Value of properties within a TIF district increases, the incremental growth in property tax over the base year that the TIF was established is reinvested into the area. Local officials may then issue bonds or undertake other financial obligations based on the growth in the new revenue. Over the life of a TIF district, existing taxing bodies receive the same level of tax revenue as the base year.

Business Improvement District (BID)

Montana municipalities can establish one or more Business Improvement Districts (BID) within their community. Helena currently as one BID that supports Downtown (The Gulch). State law allows municipalities to establish an assessment methodology that allows properties within that geographic area to contribute to programs aimed at promotion, management, maintenance, and development of the district. Assessments are restricted to commercial and industrial properties within a municipality that are subject to real estate tax. Tax-exempt properties, such as those used for religious purposes, public utilities, or government functions, as well as properties used exclusively for residences, cannot be included in the assessment district.

Job Growth Tax Credit (JGTC)

Businesses looking to relocate or expand in Helena may be eligible for a Montana JGTC which is intended to encourage the growth of high-paying Montana-based jobs in the construction, natural resources, mining, agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, transportation, utilities, or outdoor recreation sectors. The credit applies to certain industries and offers a tax credit equal to 50% of employer-paid payroll taxes for qualifying new employees.

Montana Tourism Grant Program

The Montana Office of Tourism awards grants for projects that strengthen Montana's economy through the development and enhancement of the state's tourism and recreation industry. Funds are available for heritage preservation projects, infrastructure upgrades or enhancements, community and/or outdoor recreation opportunities made more visible through signage or mapping or destination development.

Montana Historic Preservation Grant Program

The Montana Historic Preservation Grant (MHPG) Program is a state-funded program created in 2019 to support the preservation of historic sites, historical societies, or history museums through grant funding. The MHPG Program provides public and private entities the opportunity to stimulate economic development, community revitalization, and statewide tourism through investment, job creation or retention, business expansion, and local tax base growth.

Brownfields Grant Program

Funded through the federal Environmental Protection Agency and administered by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the Brownfields Grant Program provides direct funding for the assessment of "brownfields"—former industrial or commercial site where future use is affected by real or perceived environmental contamination. Funding can be used to assess, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse contaminated properties.

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Safe Streets and Roads for All

This federal program provides grants to support local safety planning and safety implementation projects such as improving pedestrian or school crossings, updating traffic and street lights, or separating bike lanes.

Transportation Alternatives (TA) Program

The TA Program, administered by the Montana Department of Transportation, provides units of government funding for smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, community improvements such as historic preservation and vegetation management, environmental mitigation related to stormwater and habitat connectivity, recreational trails, safe routes to school projects, and vulnerable road user safety assessments.

Water Pollution Control, State Revolving Fund (WPCSRF)

The WPCSRF program provides loans to eligible units of government for water pollution control projects.

Montana Coal Endowment Program (MCEP)

MCEP, administered by the Montana Department of Commerce, is a state-funded program that provides planning and construction funding to assist communities with the costs of public facilities including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater facilities and bridges.

INTERCAP

The Montana Department of Commerce's Board of Investments INTERCAP Loan Program offers variable low-interest loans to eligible units of government for capital improvements and other projects. Loan terms are limited to fifteen years by statute, or the useful life of the project, whichever is less.

PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND TRAILS

Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)

Administered by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), LWCF provides federal grants for planning and funding program outdoor recreation projects including ball fields, open space acquisitions, public parks, outdoor swimming pools, playgrounds, picnic facilities, trails and more.

Recreational Trail Program (RTP)

RTP is a federally funded program administered by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks that supports trail development, maintenance, restoration of areas damaged by trail use, development of trailside facilities, and education and safety projects related to trails.

Montana Trail Stewardship Program (MTSGP)

Administered by FWP, this state program provides funding for the development, renovation, and maintenance of motorized and non-motorized recreation trails and trailside facilities.

ACTION MATRIX

The action matrix offers a comprehensive list of all implementation strategies, policies, and recommendations included within the **Helena Forward Land Use Plan**. It serves as a tool for staff to prioritize implementation tasks and projects throughout the duration of the Plan. In addition, the matrix allows the City to approve specific, actionable items on an annual basis and evaluate progress based on completed implementation strategies.

Priority Level

Each action item has been designated a priority level to aid with implementing the Plan recommendations. Action item priorities are broken into three levels:

- **(1) - Actions that have immediate impact.** Though not necessarily more important, items listed as priority 1 may have a fundamental impact on the community, may be more easily completed, or may be necessary for long-term projects to begin.
- **(2) - Actions that have interdependent needs.** These items include strategic and substantial projects, actions that indirectly impact the quality of life, and actions that require the completion of other projects before they can begin. They may require additional planning, have additional financial considerations, or include outside agency cooperation.
- **(3) - Actions that are desirable or aspirational.** Though these items may not be necessary for Helena's daily operations, they represent the community's forward-looking planning approach.

Timeline Estimate

Timeline estimates indicate, in years, how long it would take to complete a specific action.

- **(S) Short-term:** Less than two years.
- **(M) Mid-term:** Two to five years.
- **(L) Long-term:** Greater than five years.
- **(O) Ongoing:** Requires immediate action and continued attention throughout the life of the Land Use Plan.
- **(ADO) As Development Occurs:** Can be implemented as development occurs over time.

Partners

To fully implement the Land Use Plan, Helena will require the assistance of neighboring government units, organizations, and community groups. Although the City is primarily responsible for initiating and implementing the Plan's policies and recommendations, numerous partnerships will be essential to realize the goals and supporting strategies outlined in the Plan. The partners section of the action matrix identifies potential partner organizations; however, there may be instances where an organization that is well-matched to one of the Plan goals, supporting policies, or recommendations is not listed as a potential partner for a given topic and should be added.

Potential Funding Sources

Realizing the vision and goals of the Land Use Plan will require funding beyond what will be provided for by the City's general fund. For each action item, potential funding sources are provided to help guide the City in implementation.

#	Key Action	Priority Level	Timeline Estimate	Partners	Prospective Funding
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Action Matrix
Forthcoming