

Interviews Summary

City of Helena - Growth Policy Update

The City of Helena initiated its growth policy update by hosting a series of orientation interviews, inviting city officials, representatives of other agencies, members of the community, educators, real estate professionals, housing developers, transportation planners, and department heads to discuss the topics and issues that will shape this policy update. The two days of interviews – held January 22 and 23 of 2019 – also included evening meetings with the Planning Board, Growth Policy update working group, Helena Citizen Council, and City Commission.

Topics

The conversations uncovered multiple topics of interest, frequently brought out during the back-and-forth discussions of meeting attendees. This topics list represents what came up, but it is likely that other topics will arise through the balance of the process and as we continue our research into the community's economy and demographics.

Participation

Interviewees – particularly those representing agencies – underscored the need for public participation in this policy update. Even if policy from the existing document does not change, most believe that increased awareness of this process and its results will be key to its implementation and wide acceptance.

Relevance

It is important that the growth policy demonstrate its relevance, tying policy initiatives to issues of immediate concern. Those who read or administer the growth policy should be able to understand its importance easily, relating the policy message to topics at hand.

City involvement

This growth policy update is intended to guide Helena's decisions and investments. Accordingly, it is essential that the City's departments all participate in the plan's formation, direction and support. It is more than a tool for planning and

Interview participant	Representing
Sharon Haugen	City of Helena
Hillary Taylor	City of Helena
Ellie Ray	City of Helena
Lucy Morell-Gengler	City of Helena
Michael McConnell	City of Helena
Randall Camp	City of Helena Public Works
Troy McGee	City of Helena Police
Mark Emert	City of Helena Fire/EMS
Glen Jorgenson	City of Helena Admin/Budget
Troy Sampson	City of Helena Facilities
Craig Marr	City of Helena Parks, Rec, OS
Dave Hewitt	City of Helena Parking Services
Don Dahl	City of East Helena
Greg McNally	Lewis & Clark County
Rick Lamach	Fort Harrison
Tom Harrington	Jefferson County MBEC
Frank Preskar	Lewis & Clark County Environmental Health
Doug Haberman	Bike-Walk Helena
George McCauley	ADA
Elroy Golemon	Helena Transit
Sheila Ludlow	Montana Department of Transportation
Jeff Wadekamper	Helena Airport
David Knoepke	Non-Motorized Transportation
Jeff Key	RPA-Peccia
Mark Esponda	Dick Anderson Construction
Alan Nicholson	
Nancy Nicholson	
Bob Peccia	
Mike Magee	HBIA
Donna Durckel	HBIA

Interview participant	Representing
Ryan Leland	City Engineer
Scott Randal	RPA
George Harris	Realtor
Liz Mogstad	Rocky Mountain Development
Mickey Zurcher	BID
Cathy Burwell	Chamber of Commerce
Eric Siedensticker	MBAC
Tyler Emmert	Opportunity Bank
Patty White	Carroll College
Dawn Gallinger	Carroll College
Josh McKay	Helena School District
Russ Fillner	Helena College
Karen Lane	L & C County Health Department
Brad Petty	Helena Police
Craig Marr	Parks and Recreation Department
Eric Sivers	Montana Bicycle Guild
Megan Bishop	Hike Helena
John Moore	Helena Public Art Committee
Pam Attardo	Heritage Preservation & Tourism Development Council
Jordan Tollefson	Lake Helena Watershed Group
Evan Kulesa	PPLT
Jennifer McBroom	L&C Water Quality Protection District
Hannah S. Cail	Helena's Citizen Conservation Board HCCB (Climate Change Task Force)
Dick Sloan	HCCB
Diana Hammer	HCCB

community development. It will also inform public safety, transportation, public services, municipal budgeting and the whole range of City function.

Transparency

To assure its credibility, this process must remain accessible to the general public and any others who may choose to participate. All information generated as part of this process, all workshop and public engagement results, and all discussions of policy direction must be visible and available. A project website is a good initial window into the process, but the process must also emphasize its openness at all public events, making information available for review and conversation for those who participate.

Agency coordination

This growth policy will serve as the foundation for the City's partnerships with other agencies, stating policy positions and objectives. As such, it is important to the City that this process involve those agencies who are now or will emerge as potential partners.

Policy alignment

Few interviewees are aware of the current growth policy's contents. Those who are, explain that it is a difficult document to reference when making decisions and that the policy direction – while often helpful and innovative – can be redundant or inconsistent. Interviewees hope for a growth policy that is clear, easy to use, and easy to update.

Development costs

Some interviewees complained that the costs for doing development are too high when compared to similar development types in the unincorporated county. City system development fees for utility hookups and various other assessments have the effect of driving up land costs, making a single-family house more expensive than many local households can afford. A consequence is the construction of these homes where land is less expensive, free of municipal charges, fees and assessments. Construction costs may be similar, making the difference in land cost a major determinant in whether new homes are built in the city or in the county.

Annexation

While interviewees acknowledge that the lack of land use, subdivision and environmental controls in the unincorporated areas may result in development patterns that will be difficult to sustain, they also acknowledge that the very lack of those regulations – and the freedom from municipal influence in costs and taxes – make annexation an unpopular topic. Interviewees also believe that those who reside in nearby unincorporated areas benefit from their proximity to the city's services and resist annexation for a variety of reasons, most of which are economic. Interviewees noted that some county residents may resist annexation for philosophical reasons, preferring to live where the county style of government – rather than the City's – more closely matches their expectations.

Compatibility

Interviewees mentioned compatibility of land use development to some degree, limiting comments to assuring that new, higher-intensity development projects retain some appreciation for their surrounding context. Several interviewees appear to welcome new, higher-intensity development to help revitalize the city center and to contribute to the City's tax base, and they're eager to find ways to make these types of project fit in. There are some concerns, however, that some residential types have been developed that damage the character of the neighborhoods into which they have been placed. Some interviewees agree and have pursued ways to make new projects both meet market need and more closely conform to neighborhood compatibility desires.

Employment

Helena has a very low unemployment rate. This makes it difficult to fill open positions in virtually every employment sector. Interviewees noted that it is particularly to find workers for jobs in manufacturing or professional sectors, making it difficult to pursue larger economic development objectives.

Job skills/training partnerships

Helena College, Carroll College and the Helena School District are collaborating to identify necessary vocational, technical and professional skills to fill the emerging demand, creating programs to train and otherwise develop local

talent to be employed locally. Larger local employers are participating, working with the educational community to create and deliver appropriate training, coursework, and internships.

Recreation

According to interviewees, many who live or work in Helena greatly appreciate the area's access to open spaces and recreation. Mt Helena's trail system came up repeatedly in interview conversations, cited as a unique, rewarding and accessible resource people of all ages enjoy. Helena's surroundings are beautiful, and the population loves to explore them.

Lifestyle choices

People live and work in Helena largely because they want to. They may choose to earn less than they would elsewhere, but interviewees believe this is a conscious choice motivated by the lifestyle Helena offers. Whether it is access to the outdoors, proximity to family, a slower pace, philosophical alignment with governance, or a business opportunity unique to this place, Helena attracts and retains a population that appreciates what the community and its setting offer.

State government impact

The Montana State Legislature meets every odd year in the spring. For 90 days every other year, the 150 members of the Legislature gather to hold hearings, propose bills and enact law. While the Legislature is in town infrequently, the impacts of being the state's capitol remain. State offices house various state departments, and there are rings of other, related, offices and services that locate in Helena to serve the needs of the State's operations and employees. The legislative session comes and goes, with a swell of activity, but the day-to-day activities of state government are permanent.

Carroll College

Approximately 60% of Carroll College's 1,350 students are from outside of Montana. All freshmen and sophomores must reside on campus or at home, meaning that up to 900 college-age students live within a five-minute walk of Helena's downtown. The college is increasing its efforts to tie the campus to the community's civic scene, sponsoring classes, arts events, and cultural activities downtown. The school has been



Figure 1.01 - As with most communities, big-box retail trends are part of Helena's landscape, shifting shopper trips from historic commercial districts to those more easily accessed by cars.

in Helena since 1909, providing Catholic-based higher education for more than 100 years. It is a big part of the community, and the school works in partnership with Helena College and the local school districts to support academic achievement at all levels.

Issues

Housing

Attracting an adequate workforce to Helena is hampered by the imbalanced ratio of income to the cost of housing. In addition, families who are living paycheck to paycheck and could be one medical bill away from homelessness continues to challenge the Helena community. The growing elderly population continues to create a need for more diverse housing in the community. The tendency has been for multifamily to be located in



Figure 1.02 - Many of Helena’s historic elements are visible as community landmarks, reminding all who see them of a past the community cherishes.

the city and single-family development located in the county; the lack of affordable lots to build on in the city is a factor in this trend. Reevaluating the city development process to remove barriers and move towards a more collaborative process might promote new and infill-housing development in the city.

City/County alignment

The regulatory environment in the City and in the unincorporated county are different. City zoning, subdivision, transportation, and utility policies, rules, charges, and requirements are more robust than those in the County, presuming that urban development requires that more attention be paid to these things. The County’s rules are far less limiting, presuming that development will be essentially rural in character. And state law restricts the County from instituting more urban-style regulations within its jurisdiction on its own initiative.

This discrepancy is an issue in those areas on Helena’s periphery. Suburban residential development in the unincorporated county rings the city limits, creating a lower-density residential pattern reliant on private wells and septic systems and a rural arterial roadway network to access Helena’s services.

As development has moved into these unincorporated areas, wells and septic systems have proven more difficult to manage. Increasing ground water withdrawal has forced some to deepen their wells, and the relatively high ground water and gravelly soils have caused septic systems to struggle during times of flooding.

The rural roadway network has also struggled to adapt to increasing demand. Originally laid out to serve large acreage and farmland, these roads are becoming more congested as incremental development relies on them for access to schools, shopping, jobs, and recreation. The system must retrofit to accommodate the new, non-farm demand patterns, an expensive proposition. It may have the unintended effect of easing access to land even more distant from Helena, perpetuating conversion of the rural landscape to residential subdivisions.

Without closer alignment between City and County land use policy, unincorporated land will continue to develop in a near-urban form, supported and served by systems that are incapable of sustaining that type of use.

Water conservation

The City of Helena has access to plentiful water, diverted from surface water sources on the Missouri River and Ten-Mile Creek. Surface water requires treatment before it can be pumped into the domestic water supply, incurring additional expense for the water the community uses.

While the water rights are there to support the community’s growth, there are also concerns about the ground water’s ability to support the level and intensity of private well construction occurring beyond the city limits. In addition, residents prefer the taste of the water drawn from Ten-Mile Creek, and the water from that source is less available than it is from the Missouri River.

Water rights are apparently abundant, but there is still a need to consider conservation. Preference of Ten-Mile Creek water and stress on ground water recharge make conservation a current issue.

Annexation environment

Whether it is because of taxes or philosophy, many property owners outside city limits do not support the concept of annexation. They may live in neighborhoods that look much like the ones built in the city, work in Helena, and shop in town, but they appreciate living in the county and the independence of owning private wells and septic systems.

At a small scale, this model presented few problems. Demand on the ground water was minimal, and septic systems – widely spaced – were more able to adapt to flooding. As development has increased, however, the challenge of managing ground water impact and mitigating for septic system failure has grown. Annexation and connection to the City’s utility system is an available solution, but it comes at a cost these residents may not welcome.

Downtown vitality

The City has acted on initiatives to stimulate economic activity downtown. The walking mall and the recent downtown strategy are two examples. Both attempt to activate retail storefronts and generate a lively downtown scene, creating civic spaces, providing for parking and enhancing the overall feel of the downtown.

But the economics of retail are changing, moving both toward larger parcels with large-format stores and large parking areas, and to online sales, where fulfillment centers and delivery vans allow shoppers to remain in their homes or offices. This points to a likely failure of a retail-first reinvestment strategy in places like Helena’s downtown.

Downtown’s built environment is rich with beautiful buildings, a quirky street system, functional infrastructure, government offices, and surrounding historic neighborhoods. And it has an impressive backdrop in Mt Helena. The ingredients are there, but its retail environment struggles.

Keys to downtown’s success will lie in its ability to attract additional residential units in its core and within a five-minute walk. That will rely on the downtown’s ability to present itself as a desirable place to live and its ability to successfully compete with residential development occurring elsewhere in the metro area.



Figure 1.03 - Helena’s downtown is set in the Last Chance Creek Gulch, with narrow streets, slopes and turn-of-the-century architecture defining its dramatic landscape.

Civic discourse

Getting everyday people to engage in conversations about a community’s future is a perpetual challenge. More concrete and immediate concerns about employment, school, parenting, and household budgets take priority. This process offers another opportunity to engage, but it must present the issues clearly and compellingly, making them relevant to the ways of life folks in Helena are here to enjoy. In so doing, the process can also elevate the discourse from one based on complaint to one based on aspiration. That can be difficult in planning conversations, where policy options focused on what is best for the community may not always be win-win.



Figure 1.04 - Helena is Montana's state capitol, and the community's identity, economy, and diversity stem from that aspect of the town. But economic diversity is growing, fueled by new industry calling Helena home.

Timeliness

The existing growth policy may have been a few years ahead of its time. It predicted the increasing need for coordination and cooperation between Lewis and Clark County and the City of Helena, anticipating that suburban and exurban growth patterns on the periphery would present challenges and that the downtown would increasingly rely on an injection of housing for its economic prosperity. Those issues are still ripe for inclusion in this update, and the rest of the policy initiatives must also have roots in urgency or relevance to assure their implementation.

Some policies will look at the long haul, and they will deserve to be identified as such. Others, however, will be more immediate, addressing priority issues and linked to some element of time scale to ensure the City is able – and has the political support – to act.

Daytime population

Helena has a population of just more than 30,000. Yet it has a downtown with five parking structures. People come to Helena to work, lobby the state government, dine, be entertained, or take care of other business. The daily tide of people coming in and then exiting places demands on the community's infrastructure. It also presents opportunities, supporting various businesses and familiarizing those daytime visitors with Helena's assets and amenities. The transportation system's roads and parking supply has to manage a regional population, with expenditures made locally that may well serve people who reside outside city limits and pay little tax to support those transportation system investments. But the visitors bring opportunity, too, and this process can explore ways to realize them.

Biennial legislature sessions

There's a swell of activity every other year in the spring. Masses come to Helena from out of town to support the legislative session, filling hotels, restaurants, breweries, and offices for three months. Though the buzz of the legislation session is short lived, activity surrounding the capitol's state offices is more enduring. The State's administrative presence is a significant element of Helena's identity, but it is a quiet partner to the biennial legislative sessions, a short period of time that impacts the way the town feels, moves, and operates.

Budgeting and fiscal environment

The City, with a limited tax base, serves a regional population that is essentially twice the size of its residential population. This means that roadways, commercial districts, community institutions, and other facilities are scaled to serve demand much greater than what a community of Helena's size would otherwise generate. While this may provide opportunity to reap some economic reward, Montana's lack of a sales tax prevents the City from benefitting from much of the economic activity these visits generate. Instead, Helena's libraries, streets and other community facilities serve a population that does not significantly contribute to their funding. This imbalance exacerbates an already challenging fiscal condition, influencing the City's actions to impose user fees, impact fees, system development charges and other revenue-enhancing assessments to sustain levels of service and invest in its infrastructure as a city must.