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PRESS RELEASE

City paves trail to increase safety, accessibility

Fast Facts

- The City of Missoula is paving a section of the Riverfront Trail on Friday, May 21. The trail will be closed from 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., from the Orange St. pedestrian underpass to the Van Buren footbridge (south shore.)
- Paving will improve travel conditions for bicycle and pedestrian commuters year-round, in all weather conditions.
- The project will increase safety and accessibility by making snow and ice removal more efficient.
- Call 721-PARK or visit www.missoulaparks.org for more information.

Commuting to school and work will get a little easier this summer when the City paves an approximately one-mile section of the Ron MacDonald Riverfront Trail on the south side of the Clark Fork River next week. The new surface will stretch from the Orange Street pedestrian underpass to the Van Buren Street pedestrian bridge. It will allow for easier travel for all trail users and make the trail safer in winter by improving snow and ice removal.

For the last several years, bicycle and pedestrian commuters have been asking the City to pave this short trail section to make commuting safer and easier, especially during inclement weather. The trail is a very popular bicycle/pedestrian commuter route, as shown by the recent non-motorized traffic counts done by the Office of Planning and Grants. According to the traffic count, the Orange Street pedestrian underpass is second only to The University of Montana's main entrance at University and Arthur in pedestrian/bicycle use. This section is the only unpaved section of the Riverfront Trail and Bitterroot Branch trail systems.

"This trail is one of the most used trails for both recreation and commuting in our community," says Parks and Recreation Director Donna Gaukler. "Paving the trail will enhance accessibility and increase the seasons and ways citizens can use the trail. Paved trails can be swept of snow and debris, dry faster, and are cleaner and more accessible. Recent community planning efforts related to transportation, particularly non-motorized, along with frequent complaints related to ice and mud on the trail confirmed the need to enhance the trail."

Despite the best efforts of Parks and Recreation maintenance crews, the gravel/clay mix of the current trail collects ice and mud during Missoula's freeze-thaw cycles. A paved surface allows for more complete ice removal, prevents mud puddles and makes the trail safer in inclement weather.

Other benefits of the project include increased accessibility for all wheeled activities, including wheelchairs and strollers.

"A lot of people who have mobility disabilities use Missoula's trail system quite often to get to work, to get around town, or when they're just out enjoying themselves," says Travis Hoffman, Advocacy Coordinator at Summit Independent Living Center. "This section of the trail has been hard to navigate when the weather isn't so great or when a fresh layer of crushed gravel was laid down. We are excited that it will now have a paved surface because that will vastly improve the trail's accessibility and hopefully encourage more people to get out and about if they know for sure the trail is going to be accessible. This is a great improvement to make for Missoula's transportation network and one that everyone can use."

Paved trails entice more people to walk or bike to get around town, particularly when the weather is less than ideal, Gaukler said.

"We gain so many benefits to our health and to our environment by encouraging non-motorized transportation," she says. "Every person on the trail likely means there is one less car on the road."

Asphalt and drainage materials for the project will cost \$30,000. The project is funded by the City's park maintenance program and by funds designated for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The City Streets Division is providing materials and labor for the project.

Where possible, the trail project will include a "runner's tread," an unpaved strip adjacent to the trail for those who prefer running on the gravel surface. Natural-surface running trails are also available at Playfair Park, Fort Missoula, and McCormick Park. Additional gravel trails exist throughout the open space system. Find more information at www.missoulaparks.org.

The City has considered the environmental effects of asphalt paving with this project and found them to be minimal.

"Asphalt trails do not have the same environmental impacts as asphalt parking lots and streets, because bikers and pedestrians do not produce the same pollutants that cars do," says Parks and Trails Development Manager Dave Shaw. "Encouraging non-motorized transportation by making it easier and safer has a positive environmental impact by getting more people out of their cars and on the trails. In addition, potential run-off with the trail will be somewhat mitigated by landscaping and vegetation."

However, some citizens have expressed interest in maintaining permeable surfaces near the Clark Fork River. The Missoula Institute for Sustainable Transportation is partnering with Parks and Recreation to produce a permeable-surface demonstration project on the section of trail near the Clark Fork Native Prairie in John Toole Park. The demonstration project will cover the trail surface with paving tiles, similar to those found in Caras Park, to test the durability and drainage of pavers for use on commuter trails. MIST is raising funds for the project; interested citizens should call 880-6834 for more information or visit the MIST website at www.strans.org.

The trail will be closed on Friday, May 21, 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. from the Orange Street pedestrian underpass to the Van Buren Street pedestrian bridge for the paving project. In case of severe weather, the project will be rescheduled for Friday, June 4.

Closure notices will be posted in advance on the trail and at www.missoulaparks.org. For more information, phone 721-PARK.

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