



PUBLIC MEETING

July 30, 2020
MINUTES

The Lewis and Clark County Commissioners Public Meeting was held on Thursday, July 30, 2020, at 9:00 AM in Commission Chambers Room 330.

Roll Call

Vice Chair Andy Hunthausen called the meeting to order at 9 a.m.

Commissioner Jim McCormick was present. Commissioner Good Geise was out of the office. Others attending all or a portion of the meeting included Roger Baltz, Nancy Everson, Nicho Hash, Jacqueline Isaly, Peter Italiano, Lindsey Babcock, Margareta Bishop, Jerry Wells, Shirley Herrin, Mitzi Grover, Joel Gerhart, Mary Pierce, Sarah Sandau, Joel Peden, Coleen Street, Bev Rankin, Howard Reid, Sue Mohr, Michele Webster, Nate Kopp, Eric Grove, Kevin Wright, and Nadine McCarty, Recording Secretary.

Pledge of Allegiance

Everyone recited the pledge.

Proclamation Declaring July as Disability Health Equity Month in Lewis and Clark County.

Sara Sandoh, Lewis and Clark Public Health Prevention Program Supervisor, gave an overview of the Inclusiveness Committee and read the proclamation declaring July as Disability Health Equity month in Lewis and Clark County. She presented a short video on the inclusiveness work in the Helena area.

Consent Action Items

- a. Board of Investments Certificate of Appropriation. (Nancy Everson)
- b. Pledged Securities. (Paulette DeHart)

Roger Baltz reported on the consent action items 2 a-b and recommended approval.

No public comment was received.

A motion to Approve was made by Commissioner McCormick and seconded by Commissioner Hunthausen. The motion Passed on a 2-0 vote.

Presentation by Bureau of Land Management. (Lindsey Babcock)

Lindsey Babcock, Acting Field Manager of the Butte Field Office for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Montana/Dakotas, introduced Katie Stevens the BLM Western Montana District Manager and noted they will give a brief overview of things occurring in the District and for discussion on the Scratchgravel Hills Recreation Area Management Plan.

Commissioner Hunthausen informed those in attendance that the Scratchgravel Hills Plan is not a County plan, the BLM is the decision maker and the County is a commenter on the plan. The meeting held two weeks ago was only to request an extension on the comment period

Katie Stevens, BLM Western Montana District Manager, gave an update on BLM Western Montana District leadership changes, the Resource Advisory Committee status, the Great American Outdoor Act and its impacts to the District.

Ms. Babcock gave an update on projects that included: 1) forestry & fuels, the North Hills, miscellaneous updates and Scratchgravel Hills. They participated with the Tri-County FireSafe Working Group to finalize the 2020 update to the Regional Community Wildfire Protection Plan; over the past 12 years BLM has treated 1,400 plus acres in mostly the Scratchgravel Hill and Marysville areas that consisted of timber harvest, biomass removal/utilization, machine piling, burning, and mastication work; currently updating a field wide hazardous fuel assessment that will guide future Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) hazardous treatments throughout Lewis and Clark County; the 10 miles EIS projects using the Good Neighbor Authority timber sales will treat approximately 240 acres in Colorado Gulch, focusing on timber harvest and fuel treatments working with the state; in Marysville area there are just under 1,000 acres and over the past 3 years have been treating with forest health and resiliency-based prescriptions, there are four timber sales; there has been an uptick in Douglas-fir beetle and mountain pine beetle mortality. The North Hills area reopened on June 3, following a temporary post-wildfire closure for public safety and to allow for rehabilitation that included weed treatments, revegetation, mulching, fence repair, and repaired the main road four times; moving forward with the pursuing fire trespass for the North Hills fire with the intent to recover costs due to natural resource damage and/or rehabilitation efforts. Other miscellaneous updates are the BLM weed employees have been working closely with the Lewis and Clark County Noxious Weed Board; this year there has been \$10,000 to the Lewis and Clark County Noxious Weed Board through assistance agreements, with much of it going towards the North Hills; the in-house staff has treated 110 acres focused at trailheads and recreation sites; they are mitigating hazards of a dump that occurred adjacent to Hauser Lake and are pursuing suspects in the case; renewed the Great Divide Ski lease for 20 years.

Ms. Babcock explained the Douglas-fir beetle targets Douglas-fir when they are stressed such as drought and dense forest. The best thing is to continue thinning, fuels treatments in the understory and prescribed burns. She also explained the use of pheromones for treatment of the highest value stands. She added the area is just coming off about a 10-year spruce budworm outbreak. It defoliates Douglas-fir, producing an additional stress for the trees making them less able to respond to the beetle outbreaks. Ms. Babcock explained the difference between the two insects in what they target and noted the treatments for both are pretty much the same.

Ms. Babcock stated the predominant native species in the Scratchgravel Hills are mostly Ponderosa Pine with Limber Pine and assumed juniper trees. Predominantly native species were planted in the North Hills, she does not believe any tree planting was necessary and noted majority of the fire area did not burn that hotly. The areas that were hot and scorched were not good candidates for tree planting due to rocky soil. They are monitoring Ponderosa Pine new growth and if not seen, trees will be planted.

Ms. Babcock gave an overview of the Good Neighbor Authority that allows for work across boundaries and sharing authorities.

Ms. Babcock stated in 2009 when the Butte Resource Area Management Plan was finalized the Scratchgravel Hills was designated as a special recreation management area. Following the Resource Management Plan, the Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP) for the Scratchgravel Hills was proposed to improve the recreation experience, formalize and update the trail system. The RAMP and preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) were first scoped in 2018; about 120 public comments were received, with about 100 for the plan. After 2018, due to the big fire season, there was not ample staff to continue the effort then the Coronavirus caused another pause. When Phase 2 reopening started, the

efforts began with the RAMP and EA released for public comment in late June of 2020 with the original comment period set to end August 7, 2020 and extended to August 22, 2020. Since then there has been significant public interest with a request from a variety of groups to extend the comment period further and those requests are currently be considered.

Ms. Stevens stated for the next week or so they will weigh the request as to whether approved. It is already a longer than normal comment period for a project of this scope. They appreciate the Commission's interest and want to hear their concerns and what they think the community concerns are prior to a decision.

Ms. Babcock gave a brief overview of the RAMP project noting there are currently 40 miles of trails for hikers, bikers and equestrians. In addition, the entire area is available for cross-country travel, meaning none of those users are restricted to trails. The current proposal would maintain the existing 40 miles of trails used by hikers and equestrians with an additional 40 miles of trails proposed to be used by hikers, equestrians and mountain bikers. Two disk golf courses would be formalized and sponsored by a local disk golf group in the Helena Valley. Each of the trailheads would receive improvements to have the potential of vault toilets, better parking facilities and kiosks. Two public listening sessions were held during July with about 53 attendees, during the public comment period, thus far about 200 comments have been received with about a 50/50 for and opposed response. So far the preliminary issues identified are related to user conflicts, primarily focused on mountain bikes and equestrian; private landowner concerns related to enforcement and various activity at trailheads; and e-bikes being allowed.

Ms. Stevens noted also heard was the difference between existing equestrian and hiker use and concerns about how the addition of mountain bike design trails would affect that as well as the increase in activity expected from mountain bikes.

Ms. Babcock noted they have heard of a non-BLM sanctioned collaborative that has been meeting representing a number of user groups and they are happy to hear that. A group of BLM employees will be meeting with County staff, Commissioner Hunthausen and the Sunny Vista Homeowners Association to discuss concerns with Head Lane and how the proposal could potentially affect that. BLM is interested in supporting a trail steward for the Scratchgravel Hills and she explained that position.

Commissioner Hunthausen asked if the plan has improvements on the existing trails and Ms. Babcock noted the majority of improvements would be trail marking and noxious weeds. Majority of the implementation would be based on outside funds. Getting it funded in one year is not very likely and it would be a phased effort.

Ms. Babcock stated they have been asked to include e-bikes for any travel management plans in the BLM. They are considering class 1 pedal assist only; class 2 pedal assist with throttle, up to 20 mph, and class 3 up to 28 mph. The intention is that e-bikes can help people access public lands that might otherwise not be able to access those trails. This is a community project. She did not recall the specific details of the parking improvements, thought it would include some fencing, potential parking expansion. They have heard requests for being able to separate parking areas for equestrians and bikes.

Ms. Stevens stated the plan projects the need for additional bathrooms and parking facilities, but does not include design of those. The expectation is the project will be a multi-year process, but when communities get excited, they often see a daunting amount of funding raised quickly in 2 to 3 years.

Ms. Babcock stated the majority of their involvement now is on the roads and trails that are BLM responsibility and most of them start at the trailheads. Some of the roads that bring people to the trailheads are either county or private roads and the reason for partnership with locals to arrive at solutions that works for everyone.

Ms. Stevens added there are also situations where homeowners are responsible for road maintenance, they would need to consider that and work with the homeowners, the County and the BLM internal crews.

PUBLIC COMMENT -

Shirley Herrin, 703 Poplar Street, stated she is a 5th generation in the Helena Valley and a 55-year member of the Helena Drill Riders Saddle Club. The club has been in the Helena for over 80 years and has used the Scratchgravel Hills for multiple generations. The Scratchgravel Hills have been traditionally for equestrians. Equestrians and hikers want peace, quiet and tranquility, while the mountain bikers are looking for speed and excitement. One area in the valley should be kept available for equestrians where they can feel safe and not have horses spooked by the bikes. She added Arizona, Colorado and Utah have banned bikes in many BLM managed trail areas due to fatal accidents between horses and mountain bikes. Please consider the Scratchgravel Hills be designated for equestrians.

Jerry Wells, a member of Helena Hikes Steering Committee, stated they support the development of alternative C as opposed to the two alternatives offered in the BLM RAMP. They are involved with an adhoc group of hikers, bikers, equestrians and landowners working in collaboration to create this alternative. They hope it will create a more balanced, safe and enjoyable activity among uses. That it will protect natural resources and better hold BLM accountable for long-term management. They feel the collaborative effort to be successful will need more time than August 22 to complete their work. The adhoc group has met twice, they feel they are making progress and are thinking with enough time some good community work can be done. They are working to ensure alternative C includes: both shared and separated-use trails, particularly to ensure safety for equestrians; using appropriate trail standards for respective uses, not a bike-optimized standard across all of the proposed system; engaging local landowners actively in the process to address their concerns; involving local equestrians trails routing, preferred user experiences and safety measures; eliminating the bike-skills course currently proposed for the Head Lane area; reducing the amount of projected trail miles so as to better promote wildlife habitat, open space, provide for a more remote experiences among users, and reduce potential user conflicts; for every mile of new trail, reclaiming a mile of existing trail. They support maintaining the non-motorized status of the area and consider e-bikes as motorized; maintaining a wildlife conservation area in the north end and other identified important habitats. The BLM needs a day-to-day employee in the area, he understands currently one law enforcement officer covers over 7 million acres of BLM land in this region; and the BLM needs to adequately fund, develop, and maintain the Scratchgravel Hills and its impacts.

Sue Moore, 6001 Birdseye Road, stated she is the secretary of the Last Chance Back Country Horsemen. She has spent time in the Scratchgravel area since 1978. The Scratchgravel Hills are a dry, fragile area and very important to the Helena Valley. It is accessible all four seasons except maybe heavy snow years. The area is strong for wildlife with an elk herd of about 200, which in turn brings other wildlife. It has a long history and has been thought that Native American trails have been seen along with artifacts. This all needs to be considered prior to any changes made to the area. A couple of years ago the proposal had no discussion of e-bikes; it was merely to improve the trails. There are currently no conflicts between bikers, hikers and equestrians. The Back Country Horsemen group devote thousands of hours doing volunteer work on trails. When they saw the RAMP proposal there was no reflection of what they thought it would be. The BLM at the national level has been supporting it. The idea of optimized trails means faster. She also supports a collaborative committee. Because of the way the proposal has been submitted she believes it might be good to conduct an environmental impact study or expanded review of the area prior to coming out with a proposal. She hopes it is not rushed.

Joel Gerhart, 1719 Golden Street, attending on behalf of the Helena Trails Alliance, a group of non-motorized trail users with approximately 650 members. The adhoc committee, mentioned previously represents a wide array of user groups. Most members support the BLM, except they have some concerns with the various alternatives. They feel alternative A is not an option for the area and misses an opportunity to make improvements and better protect the area, everyone has questions and issues with alternative B. The committee is working hard on alternative C and need an extended comment period.

Nate Kopp, Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT) Project Manager, stated they are in support of the BLM extending the comment period and noted the Scratchgravel Hills are a tremendous community resource

and instituting intentional and thoughtful management to landscape would improve current conditions. He added PPLT does share many of the community concerns such as the spoken scale of alternative B, e-bike use, and questions about perpetual funding and agency partnership for maintenance of roads and trail infrastructure. PPLT is also participating in the adhoc collaborative spoken of previously. They encourage the County Commission to be proactive on the project and look for solutions to move it forward in a collaborative manner. They believe alternative A does not address existing concerns from many homeowners and users, nor does it provide thoughtful future oriented solutions for a well-managed sustainable multi-use landscape. PPLT has seen in the south hills firsthand the opportunities and difficulties that have come with increasing trail usage and the challenges of managing multiple types of users on the same landscape. Intentional planning and well-designed trails should create a long lasting landscape for all non-motorized user groups as long as there is appropriate investment in the resource. To have success the project will require a sustainable funding source and committed partnership among the BLM, County, homeowners and other users. They believe the project highlights the continued need for a regional parks district that could help support maintenance and development of projects like this throughout Lewis and Clark County. This pandemic has shown open lands are more important than ever before. Growth will continue and we need to be ready for it.

Bev Rankin, 5906 Head Lane, stated her concern goes back to the original scoping process an article appeared in the newspaper and now that the plan out, it appears letters went to landowners that border the BLM land, but not the rest of the homeowners. There are people in that area that had no idea this was coming until the letters went out. She questions why the BLM sent letters now and not at the beginning.

Mitzi Grover stated she agrees with all of the voiced concerns and she would like the present BLM to explain liability issues, who makes the final decision and what about timing. She is concerned why they think August 22, 2020 is a gift when so many people were not aware.

Commissioner Hunthausen stated the Commission would take the comments heard today into consideration when formulating their comments. He noted with the request for extension under consideration; he would recommend those working on alternatives have their comments to the BLM by August 22, 2020; not knowing if the October 6, 2020 extension would be granted.

Public comment on any public matter within the jurisdiction of the Commission that is not on the agenda above.

Adjourn

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 10:35 am.

LEWIS AND CLARK COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



Susan Good Geise, Chair



Andy Hunthausen, Vice Chair



Jim McCormick, Member

ATTEST:



Amy Reeves, Clerk of the Board