

## Closing the Loop



Carla Belski, Heidi Van Everen, Dave Ring and Chris Holdhusen talk about future Whitefish Trail developments during a recent walkaround tour at Smith Lake north of town. (Daniel McKay/Whitefish Pilot)

### Whitefish Trail's new section proving popular, Legacy Partners eyes future expansion

By DANIEL MCKAY  
Whitefish Pilot

This year has been a busy one for the Whitefish Trail.

Right now the trail system includes 42 miles of trails at 12 trailheads around Whitefish, notes Whitefish Legacy Partners executive director Heidi Van Everen. About 6,000 acres of lands are protected as part of the Whitefish Trail, but the trail is headed toward further expansion as Phase I of the Close the Loop project finishes up and organizers look to the next phases. Early statistics are also showing how popular the trail is and what kind of economic benefit it has to the community.

Several topics pertaining to the trail were discussed during a recent Close the Loop update at the O'Shaughnessy Center.

As part of the group's goal to create a looping trail system around Whitefish Lake, Legacy Partners is working to complete Phase I of the larger project with the new Haskill Basin trail section.

The Haskill trail includes 5.5 miles of new trail running between trailheads on Reservoir Road and Big Mountain. The trail will also be groomed for cross-country skiing access between downtown and Big Mountain. Signs and other information still need to be added to the trail, Van Everen said, but she's seen plenty of eager hikers and mountain bikers using the trail already.

The lower trailhead off Reservoir Road will feature an information kiosk, an educational interpretive loop with information on watershed and local history and a memorial to Alex Diekmann, who played

a key role in protecting the basin through a conservation easement.

From November of last year to March of this year Legacy Partners also held the Haskill Match Challenge. Through the challenge, they raised \$251,333 in grants and \$232,877 in donations.

"We're so thankful that the community all came together, in five months, to raise the matching funds to support this project and allow us to begin construction this year," Van Everen said.

The trail is also maintained completely by volunteers and self-funded through donations and state and federal grants, Mayor John Muhlfeld said during the presentation.

"When this entire plan was contemplated years ago, the number one thing we stated was, 'We don't want this to be placed on the burden of the general taxpayers.' We've done that — to date, 100 percent of the trail is maintained by volunteers, and because of the efforts of Legacy Partners and the city of Whitefish we've leveraged significant state and federal grants to get to where we are today," he said.

Director of Development for Whitefish Legacy Partners Alan Myers-Davis reported preliminary results on a trail usage study conducted by Headwaters Economics on the Whitefish Trail. Of the nearly 700 visitors to Whitefish surveyed, 65 percent said they came here for recreation. That 65 percent also spends 20 percent more money in Whitefish than visitors for any other purpose, Myers-Davis said.

"That's pretty impressive, I think, and it makes sense. If you are a recreationist, maybe

you're going to go to the bike shop, or you're going to drink an extra beer," he said. "It's hard to answer why, but these trends are pretty accurate."

The trails are getting a lot of use, he said, both by people and wildlife.

According to preliminary data, the Whitefish Trail saw 75,881 non-unique visits from October 2016 to October of this year, and trail cameras have spotted mountain lions, bears and other animals using the trails after dark.

"For me personally, this is pretty exciting," he said. "I live a half mile from here, and to see three big cats using the busiest section of the Whitefish Trail — it's symbolic. We live in this urban-wildlife interface and we can coexist with these animals, and they can utilize the protected lands around the Whitefish Trail for their livelihood."

Headwaters Economics will share their full findings during a presentation Dec. 11 at the Firebrand Hotel at 5 p.m.

Next on WLP's agenda is Phase II of the Close the Loop plan, which will connect the trail from Beaver Lakes to Swift Creek, west of Whitefish Lake on state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation lands.

The phase will require a permanent 16-foot trail easement, 480 acres protected at Smith Lake and 8.2 miles of trail, with one new trailhead and four bridges. WLP is working with BNSF, Whitefish Lake Institute and adjacent private landowners to construct the trail.

This section of the project will be challenging, Van Everen said. The trail will have



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to cross through environmentally sensitive areas, critical wildlife habitat and challenging terrain to get to Swift Creek.

Van Everen reassured those in attendance that they'll be informed and notified of what will need to happen in those areas to make the trail a reality. Action is still years away, she said.

"The main thing we want people to understand is that the DNRC will go through this analysis and disclose to the public what the issues are, what mitigations need to be followed and how we're going to do this project. There will be public comment before a final decision, but the action is still further down the road," she said. "We have to secure funding, we also need support from the landlord, but our goal is to be shovel ready by 2020 and that's what we're working hard to shoot for."

Phase III will connect Smith Lake on the north end of Whitefish Lake to Haskill Basin and Big Mountain. That connection will require about 3 miles of trail on Forest Service land and 4 miles of trail on private land.

"We believe if we can connect these landscapes with the trail corridor and associated conservation, that connectivity that we'll be helping to create will be a benefit both for the recreation as well as the community, wildlife and water

quality," Van Everen said.

Phase IV of the plan involves a possible connection from the Beaver Lakes to Swift Creek trail to the Lupfer section of the trail, which begins off Highway 93 West.

Replying to a question, Diane Conradi, co-founder and legal consultant for Legacy Partners, said working with private land owners is going to be one of the main challenges moving forward.

"There's a lot of resistance initially by private landowners to having a public trail on their property," she said. "So it'll be a process of educating private land owners, working with private land owners."

Steve Thompson said he and others worry about developing more trails in sensitive areas surrounding Swift Creek and Smith Lake.

"From a conservation perspective, some of us feel that the proposed trails are sort of out of line with the balance of between recreation and conservation, so there is some concerns and obstacles from the public opinion regarding that section of trail," Thompson said. "Right now it's public land, but it's difficult to get into."

Muhlfeld encouraged Thompson and others to continue sharing their concerns as the project moves along.

For more information, visit [www.whitefishlegacy.org](http://www.whitefishlegacy.org).