



The fully reconstructed creek and floodplain will provide a pristine landscape for the community to wander.

CHARTING A NEW PATH

GREENWAY IS THE NEWEST EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

Driving by the notorious slag pile that helps define the history of East Helena, it's hard to grasp what lies beyond the mound or what lies in store for this once-industrial community's future.

So visualize for a moment a tranquil, meandering creek with banks supporting abundant grasses, willows and glorious stands of aspen nearby – a sanctuary for wildlife. The creek's pools provide a healthy and growing fishery, while close by a bevy of upland game birds constantly take off and land and an abundance of deer and other small animals busy themselves in the accommodating floodplain. Around you the mountains, the Big Belts, Elkhorns, Scratchgravel, Mount Ascension and Mount Helena create 360 degrees of spectacular vista. And, a public trail system, with kids on bikes and retired smelter workers with rods, all exploring.

The East Helena Greenway project represents an opportunity to help a community achieve their own conservation, access and community goals. While PPLT's Tenmile Creek Park project has benefited the handful of neighborhoods on Helena's western edge, the Greenway will provide foot access to an entire new community of people. That is the big plan for the 322 acres of Greenway land that was transferred to Prickly Pear Land Trust recently. With accessible trails and park amenities on their way, we expect many in the community will be on these parklands daily.

With this land and the future importance to the community, PPLT is committed to working with East Helena residents to set aside and improve the open space and creek access today. The project will provide a ribbon of trails and greenspace through town, connecting businesses, neighborhoods, schools across land that has been closed to the public for over 100 years.

And this community partnership is a longtime coming.

Since 1888 the ASARCO smelter was the lifeblood of East Helena, paying generations of workers good wages for processing lead and zinc. But a monumental environmental mess was left behind from the 70,000 tons of lead bullion produced annually for 113 years. In 1984, with the smelter still operating, the community was designated a Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which meant that federal funds could be used to start cleanup efforts. Remediation began in residential yards, schools and parks in the early 1990s.

Soon after the turn of the century, the smelter stopped smelting. ASARCO filed for bankruptcy in 2005 and ultimately this would become the largest environmental cleanup bankruptcy case in U.S. history. In the next five year funds for the East Helena cleanup and natural resource restoration were allocated to the Montana Environmental Trust Group and the Montana Natural Resource Damage Program.

The stage was set for a nationally-significant reclamation project. In 2009, a "stakeholders" group was established to help steer the cleanup and redevelopment effort. Seeking ideas for future public access, the City's mayor invited Andy Baur, PPLT's Executive Director at the time, to help create a vision for the future parklands and trail connections to Montana City and Helena for some of the lands. "And that is exactly what we did," reflects Mary Hollow, in the last six years.

Fast forward to 2019 when then Gov. Steve Bullock signed the restoration plan that included funding for natural resource management and public access and trail amenities. Betsy Burns, who has been the EPA's remedial project manager for the site since 2010, said that the final project signing "Made me smile, knowing that the vision of trails and public access that the community wanted was likely going to happen."

The Montana Environmental Trust Group (METG), oversaw cleanup efforts, cleaning up and restoring the creek and lands alongside and southward of the slag pile. They approached the restoration with incredible innovation by lowering the groundwater onsite – they restructured 1¼ miles of the creek, eliminating the toxic flow into Upper and Lower Lake and removed the smelter dam. The creek and floodplain were fully reconstructed by 2018, transferred to PPLT in 2020, and will provide a pristine landscape for the community to wander in time.

The community's vision from 2011, didn't end with just this restored property south of the highway. METG worked with PPLT to create additional paths for community access on the 80 acres next to the new East Helena High School, the Prickly Pear Elementary School, and a new 319-home subdivision on Valley Drive, called Highland Meadows.

There is still work to do before East Helena residents can start to explore the lands. The 80-acre property requires

more remediation to reduce the soil contamination down to safe public use levels. "METG will complete the remediation, then the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will add upland bird habitat on the property prior to trail construction," PPLT's Conservation Manager, Andrea, explains. PPLT is currently working on the final stages of the trail design for the 80 acres. A bridge over an irrigation ditch will one day connect the park with the neighborhoods and downtown. In other words, East Helena will have

ballfields, Kennedy Park, and a massive nature park and a long stretch of Prickly Pear creek, all connected and within walking distance from Main Street.

And how does PPLT fit in? For decades, our organization has worked in this region

to connect land and people. Prickly Pear Land Trust has the tools as a non-profit to hold land, fundraise, and negotiate trail easements across private land. The land trust is simply a community partner and a vehicle for trail and conservation outcomes. And over the last ten years, we have been active in East Helena in a way that has not happened before.

Over time, all 322 acres of land in East Helena now owned by PPLT will be opened to the public, with eight miles of trails connecting north and south of town, along the creek. This region is on its way to connect East Helena with Montana City and possibly Helena trails too. Our communities will be weaved together with parks and trails designed

continued...

25 YEARS OF THINKING

A LOOK BACK AT THE PEOPLE OF PPLT

THE FOUNDERS of the Prickly Pear Land Trust all have fond memories of those early years. As they reminisce, a certain pride of accomplishment is apparent. And with that, great humility. To a person, they minimize their own contributions and acknowledge others, not themselves, as the visionaries who saw the potential of a community blessed with a backdrop of natural beauty and a trail system that rivals anything in the country.

While they are quick to credit others, they praise the community spirit – of collaboration, of building bridges, of meaningful partnerships – they helped forge along the way.

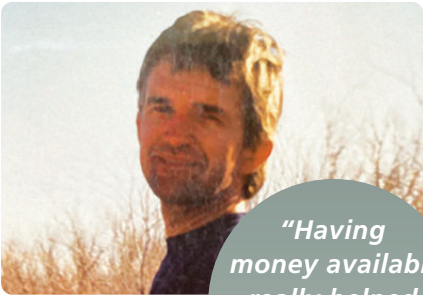
Here are some recollections of just a few of the many who, through 25 years, have made Prickly Pear Land Trust what it is today.



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Chris Hunter
Open Space Bond Committee member and PPLT Board Member, 2010 to 2018

Chris is often recognized as the father of the first open space bond issue, which City of Helena voters passed in 1996. He recently recalled what sparked his interest. He was talking with a person who wanted to build a home on the flanks of Mount Helena. Chris wondered aloud about the appropriateness of the location. Chris remembered him saying, “if people want a say (in the land use) they ought to raise money and buy it.” That’s all it took.



“Having money available really helped Prickly Pear get rolling.”

Chris consulted with the land trust in Missoula, which had had success in open space bond issues, learning that a broad range of supporters was essential. “We began talking to various groups and ended up with really good groups,” among them the women’s softball organization. “We raised—not much money—maybe \$5,000.” The \$5 million bond passed with 51 percent of the vote. Helena Parks and Recreation received \$2 million for Batch Ballfields and other parks and \$2.5 million was allocated to land purchases, mostly in the South Hills and soon included more than 640 acres. “Having money available really helped Prickly Pear get rolling.” Years later, Chris served on the Lands Committee and then the board. “The first few years I was treasurer I put together budgets. It was grim (financially) those first few years.” After the recession, it “got to be really fun. We were in the black. Good things were happening.” “The parcels on Mount Ascension we were able to complete were really big.

Then, Chris mentioned, “there was a little transition from the trails to ranch properties,” when PPLT began its conservation easement program protecting key private properties in sensitive ecosystems. He particularly values the partnership PPLT has enjoyed with the city on the South Hills trail system, which “has become wonderful” and calls the Tenmile Creek project “unbelievable.”

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Connie Cole
19 years a PPLT Board Member and early president, County Open Space Bond member

The early years, Connie says, were “some pretty ragged times ... Some months our director wasn’t paid.” While there was always an interest in conservation easements, she recalled, there also was a “feeling that there was competition” between some in the real estate community and PPLT. “The Realtors wanted to give us a black eye. But we managed to build bridges ... Now, the trails system is viewed by all parties as a wonderful benefit.” These days, real estate listings typically describe the proximity to trail access, she notes.

For conservation easements, she recalls, “It took an awful lot of outreach to different groups,” including farming and ranching and irrigation interests. “Just getting out and talking to them, re-assuring them that our purpose wasn’t to halt real estate sales,” but to look at all existing resources.

The advent of conservation easements provided “a wonderful opportunity for more of our ranchers to do some family planning. It really broadened the discussion of land stewardship in the community.” She’s particularly fond of the historic, 3,000-acre Gehring Ranch conservation easement, about 10 miles northwest of Helena, off Lincoln Road. “It was a delightful experience. Very heartening.”

Connie has a personal connection to the East Helena-to-Montana City Greenway project. When the Coles moved here in 1971, they lived “two blocks from the smelter ... I’ve grown up with an environmental awareness. Seeing the



“The advent of conservation easements really broadened the discussion of land stewardship in the community.”

Greenway project come into fruition is just wonderful.” Fittingly, she was also the executive producer of a documentary that chronicled the smelter’s history up to the demolition of the smokestacks in 2009.

While her days of scurrying up and down trails may have passed, she loves to see the popularity of Tenmile Creek Park. And when she soaks in the vistas from her home north of Lake Helena, she finds solace in “knowing they’re being protected, thanks to PPLT. It makes my heart happy.”

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Lisa Bay
Former PPLT Board Member, City Open Space Bond Committee member and natural resources consultant

Lisa was another proponent in the 1996 City of Helena Open Space Bond, which provided funds and helped set the stage for the next 25 years of Prickly Pear achievements.

“When Prickly Pear was forming I helped Jerry DeBacker (PPLT’s first paid employee). We got out maps and began thinking about what connections were needed.” She, too, speaks of the “protection of Mount Ascension” as a



“Strategic acquisition that turned Mt. Ascension into an organized trail system was a huge coup.”

PROFILE

Rachel Rountree, PPLT Associate Director

Rachel Rountree and her husband Cory were so enamored with a certain region of our country that they named their son West.

That was even a couple of years before the Prickly Pear Land Trust’s new Associate Director and her family moved here from Texas. “We named him after our greatest love, not knowing we’d be living here. We’re humbled, proud and thrilled to be raising him in Montana.”

They were first introduced to Helena in 2014 when Cory came here for work as a government consultant. “We realized we wanted to move to the mountains

and spent the next six years trying to figure out how to do that,” says Rachel. Subsequent visits to Helena told them “this community embodied everything we wanted for our family.”

Their summers included a month stay over in Helena “to see how it would feel.” In the meantime, she began doing her homework on Prickly Pear. “I’d been a fan of PPLT from afar.” She soon connected with Executive Director Mary Hollow and Lanie White, then the Development Manager, and discussed opportunities. Rachel’s background as Development Director for The Trail Foundation in Austin, Texas and her acumen with nonprofit organizational responsibilities struck a chord with Mary. “I’m an incredibly detail oriented person,” she adds laughing. In the fall of 2019, talks between the two took shape. Having left The Trail Foundation, she felt it was the time. She joined PPLT in February, 2020, just as the COVID pandemic was unfolding.

Rachel describes a “yin and yang” working relationship between the executive director and herself. “My focus is on the internal, hers on the external.” Rachel’s operational focus

is to make the land trust “run smoothly and firmly as we continue to grow ... to have stronger legs underneath us.” Budget management, financial development and re-defining everyone’s role with a little more organizational structure have been among her priorities.

With COVID, her inauguration came at trying times. Her initial emphasis was to make sure everyone on the team felt safe, secure and supported. Thanks to the support from our community that “knocked our socks off” and some federal relief assistance, she explains, “everyone kept their jobs and we stayed strong.”

She remains in awe of the Helena community, being “so nice, so welcoming.” Its response to COVID was no different. “People were so generous with their time, their financial gifts at a time they were dealing with their own difficult situations.”

In terms of PPLT’s projects, Rachel sees the Greenway as taking PPLT to the next level. Other priorities? She’d like to see more trails become more accessible, including more compliance with the

“My personal passion is leaving my community in a better place than I found it. Prickly Pear has been doing that for 25 years.”

Americans with Disabilities Act. “We have the potential to make these trails universal to everyone who wants to get out there.”

“Growth in trail use is what we want and what’s important,” Rachel explains. Differences in trail-use opinions are not unique to Helena. “Everyone around the country is asking the same questions and there is not a one size fits all solution.” She sees managing best trail-use practices as an opportunity. “The mental and physical benefits of trail use are what’s important. Trail systems are not designed to be empty ... they’re designed to be used. And we can do that while also making sure everyone is safe, welcome, and without hurting the land.” She admires PPLT’s legacy of developing partnerships and nurturing collaboration, and sees it as an ethic with even more potential. “My personal passion is leaving my community in a better place than I found it. Prickly Pear has been doing that for 25 years and I am honored to continue the tradition into the next 25 years.”



“OUTSIDE”

paramount accomplishment of those early years. “It was such a controversy for people who cared about Helena and its backdrop.” Lisa describes the “gradual ... strategic acquisition that turned the backdrop into an organized trail system as being “a huge coup.”

Her contributions to the land trust certainly didn’t end there. She was an early organizer for the Waterline parcel acquisition, and then more recently an advocate, fundraiser and consultant for the Sevenmile Creek restoration, an effort she says “for me, is the pinnacle of all the work I’ve ever done. It’s so unique. It married protection and restoration. To get nearly 2.5 miles of stream protection... I’m so pleased with that.”

Reflecting on past board members, PPLT’s Director, Mary Hollow noted, “They helped to define the identity of our community over the past 25 years, and ultimately the organization we are today. I really can’t imagine this region without the lands, waters, and trails that PPLT has made possible.”

Andy Baur
*PPLT Executive Director,
2001 to 2015*

Andy was hired in 2001 as PPLT’s trails coordinator, the land trust’s first full-time employee, which was funded by the City Open Space Bond. That fall, he became its executive director.

“We obviously were a much smaller organization. We had to figure out how to grow and get the word out into the community and build support.” That required them to identify colleagues who shared the vision and enthusiasm of the mission. Key to that, he explains, was creating partnerships with the City of

Helena and the national forests. “There was a shared vision of creating and enhancing the trail system. Those partnerships were a great opportunity to chart our course for the next decade.”

As various land parcels were acquired, Andy thought, “Gosh, we have these gaps in private parcels. How do we connect those trails and preserve those backdrops?” The community and partners rose up to help us acquire those parcels and it started to take shape. In time, success bred success. “It enabled us to hire more people, to build staff and take on more projects.”



“Creating partnerships with the City of Helena and the national forests was a great opportunity to chart our course for the next decade.”

Building a constituency wasn’t just about preaching to the choir. “We needed to reach out to non-traditional supporters people may not expect ... to the ranching community ... to real estate. It’s sitting down with the city and county and making sure they understood what we were doing. Prickly Pear set up a culture of that early on. It was important to stay in our lane — open space, trails and ag land. We’ve been fortunate to have this fabulous product to sell. No matter what your political views are, most people support trails and open lands.”



“Without the backing of land-owners and donors, that trail system wouldn’t exist in the manner it does today.”

Ken Eden
*Former PPLT Board President,
Member of Open Space Bond
committee*

These days, Ken says with humor, if someone would yell out “conservation easement” someone else would shout back “Prickly Pear Land Trust!” But back then, if someone yelled out “conservation easement,” the response would have been, “what the hell is a conservation easement?” The times they have a-changed.

Ken credits the 1996 City Open Space Bond issue, its leadership and broad-based committee, that “really got things rolling.” A constant sentiment those days had been “so much opportunity with so little budget.”

The first open space bond leg work involved engaging everyone from “softball dads to soccer moms” as a chunk of the bond proceeds were earmarked for ballfields. Nurturing the ethic of open space and the amenities of a comprehensive trail system was a process of “making people familiar with what was possible and the benefits to the community,” Ken recalls. Building trust was essential. He credits the PPLT staff and board leadership with achieving that. “We took people on walks on potential trails on the southeast side, showing them what could be accomplished.” Back then, the mountain bikers and hikers made their own trail choices. “If Prickly Pear hadn’t come along when it did we’d have the most spidered trails of anywhere in the country. It would have been an abomination” reflecting on the excessive damage and soil erosion that social trails cause.

Ken counts the Mount Ascension acquisitions as the most challenging and rewarding efforts of the early years.

“The Backdrop Initiative was an incredibly difficult project.” There were many mining claims with minimal development and the proposed Timberline Heights housing development, which ultimately was denied by the city. In the same area, called the “Capitol backdrop” a number of ranchette parcels had been drawn up, some having been sold. “One by one, the parcels were bought, paid off or paid off over time” by Prickly Pear Land Trust fundraising efforts, Ken recalls.

“Community support has been so critically important. Donations specifically for purchasing Capitol backdrop land were made. Without the backing of landowners and thousands of donors, that trail system wouldn’t exist in the manner it does today.”

Three other acquisitions highlight Ken’s PPLT days: the 1,200-acre Mullen Pass easement, which at the time became the land trust’s largest conservation easement (and continues to boast the most beautiful lupine blooms year after year!), and the 14-acre Tubbs Trailhead addition to the front of Mount Helena.

Finally, he points to the recent Whyte property acquisition, also on the flanks of Mount Helena. When it came up for sale, the land trust staff was maxed out and didn’t see a way it could take it on without further resources. An “anonymous ringleader” took it upon himself to circulate, via email, requests to contribute to the effort. Within a few days, \$25,000 was raised and ultimately more than \$40,000. Donations ranging from \$50 to \$15,000. The property is now in public domain forever. These projects are team efforts – in every sense of the word.

HOW THEY DID IT

As Prickly Pear Land Trust became official, future supporters organized and began advocating for the 1996 City of Helena Open Space Bond. With the new funding source available, the newly formed non-profit Prickly Pear Land Trust became the primary vehicle for our community to acquire recreational lands. As a Land Trust, PPLT had the ability to raise donations and organize

conservation and complimentary trail efforts.

The organization also has two tools for land protection—1) buying land outright (then donating it to City, Forest Service, Fish Wildlife Parks etc.), or 2) accepting partial land development rights from private land owners, in the form of conservation easements. In 2008, Lewis and Clark residents added more support for

Prickly Pear Land Trust became the primary vehicle for our community to acquire recreational lands.

PPLT projects, passing a bond that continues to support open space conservation, providing funds for small land purchases and large conservation easements. That bond is almost gone, so it’s time to plan for the next one!

For 25 years now, PPLT’s community has continued to grow in numbers but the public land

acquisitions remain, and will become more valuable every year.

As we celebrate our 25th anniversary,

we hope you will celebrate with us. We hope to honor those who paved the way, recognize those working tirelessly behind the scenes and charting the next 25 years as we dream bigger than we ever have.

GREENWAY, continued

for every age and ability. Kids will safely walk to school, the intrepid athletes can walk or run to the Elkhorns or the airport from East Helena. Wheelchairs and walkers will be able to navigate accessible trails overlooking Prickly Pear Creek. Want to give back to your community? Volunteer at a weed cleanup or trail maintenance day. When the work is done and the connections secured, PPLT will turn the property back over to East Helena.

And that unsightly slag heap? It, too, is part of the remediation. As much as the top third of the 14-million-ton pile, will be removed and the remaining slag will be re-contoured and revegetated so that it will more closely resemble the surrounding hills, that you will get to know personally.

Past PPLT Board President Jim Utterback underscored the concerted

effort. “As with every project this one had major hurdles to overcome, aside from COVID challenges this year. This kind of project needs everyone pulling in the same direction. Thanks to support from both governors offices and a long list of stakeholders, we have acquired the land and are now planning for public access.”

PPLT Executive Director Mary Hollow punctuated the monumental impact the Greenway will have last December when the land trust assumed ownership. “Ten years ago, the community of East Helena asked Prickly Pear Land Trust to help envision trails and public access on this land. It’s incredible to celebrate this project coming to life. This community – with new schools, businesses, and now the Greenway Trail – is poised for a strong future.”



The remaining slag will be recontoured and revegetated to resemble surrounding hills.

Ingrid Lovitt

DON'T FENCE ME IN IS BACK!

Despite the cold temps and snow, the days when we can throw on a pair of shorts, a t-shirt, and some sneakers to get out for a run or hike are coming soon. So set your sights on the 21st annual Don't Fence Me In Trail Run and Trail Challenge beginning in May!

Back by popular demand, we'll once again have a multi-week trail challenge – 25 days beginning May 8 to celebrate PPLT's 25th anniversary – including a Bingo card to complete as you go.



We'll have virtual races for every one of our distances too! Whether you are on two legs or four, young or old, on wheels or feet, there is something for everyone. Please join us and make this our best year yet.

Check PPLT's event page for more details. pricklypearlt.org/events

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

- Annette & Dana L. Baird
Cheryl Berrin
Mason Bowditch
Scott & Erica Busoux
Kapri Byrne
Nick & Kaelyn Clarke
William & Marti Cook
David & Julie Curd
Kelly Anne Dalton
James Dennis
Jenny & Gene Eastvold
Patricia Fody
Bob Fusie & Lorretta Lynde
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Bob Goodwyn
Grant Gouldon & Mel Premo
Brian Grant & Lesly Tribelhorn
Mike Green & Kiely Keane
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GREENWAY
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PATHS

A LOOK BACK
AT THE PEOPLE
OF PPLT

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