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, Scratchgraves, 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 (which operated in Helena since 1888) paid 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 producing. ASARCO filed for bankruptcy in 2005 and ultimately this would become the largest environmental cleanup bankruptcy case in U.S. history. In the five year funds for the East Helena cleanup and natural resource restoration were allocated to the Montana Environmental Trust Group (METG), 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 1 1/4 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. And this is still to 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, Kenneday Park, 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...
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. She’d been a fan of PPTL 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 stuck a chord with Mary.

“I’m an incredibly detail oriented person,” she adds laughing. In the fall of 2018, talks between the two took shape. Having Left The Trail Foundation, she felt it was the time. She joined PPTL 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” and to continue to grow “as we have stronger legs 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 Rachel’s priorities.

With COVID, her inauguration came at trying times. Her initial emphasis was to make sure everyone was felt safe, secure and supported. Thanks to the support from our community “we knocked our socks off” and “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 PPTL’s projects, Rachel sees the Greenway as “that point that people are feeling they’re being protected, thanks to PPTL. It makes my heart happy.”

Lisa Bay
Former PPTL 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 help we can leverage for the next 25 years of Prickly Pear achievements.

“When Prickly Pear was forming I helped Jerry DeBacker (PPTL’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...
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 stop 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**

**Past 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 of Helena. 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 our support.” Andy 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.”

**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 spurred 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 first open space bond efforts “were a great opportunity to chart our course for the next decade.”

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

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 works with landowners, in the form of conservation easements. In 2008, Lewis and Clark residents added more support for conservation and complimentary trail efforts.

The organization also has two tools for land protection—1) buying land outright (then donating it to the City of Helena), or 2) accepting partial land easements. In 2008, Lewis and Clark residents added more support for conservation and complimentary trail efforts.

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Building a community 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 understand 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.”

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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 Buoux
Kapi Byrne
Nick & Kaelyn Clarke
William & Mari Cook
David & Julie Cund
Kelly Anne Dalton
James Dennis
Jenny & Gene Eastvold
Patricia Fodj
Bob Fusie & Lorretta Lynde
Lydia Garland
Bob Goodwyn
Grant Gouldon & Mel Premo
Brian Grant & Lesly Tribethorn
Mike Green & Kelly Keane
Jan & Goose Gregson
Robert Gruder & Martha Stebbins
Becky & Dave Hall
Evan Hammer
Mania Hardy
Megan Helton
Tony & Penny Herbert
Ann Hill
Oliver Hudgins
Paul & Patti Hunthausen
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Tom & Gail Jenko
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Bob Levitan & Nola Freestone
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Douglas Michlovitz
Eileen Mueller
Laura Nishik
Mackenzie Petersen
Julie & Joesy Rye
Radley & Jamie Shaffer
Gloria Tatchell
Maureen Tremblay
Shannon Walden
Jaye Weiner
Neil & Kristen Westeson
Vicki Wilham
Judy & Mark Wilson
Stephanie Witham

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connecting land and people

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