



MAKING HAY

PRICKLY PEAR RESPONDS TO GROWTH IN THE VALLEYS

EVER FELT THAT WE HOLD a bit of a secret? To look out our windows and see wildlife, to be able to hike or bike to our hearts' content without even leaving our town, to soak in spectacular mountain vistas from most any vantage point. Our surrounding environment is why most of us live here.

Last year, the cat got out of the bag. The popularity and use of trails, rivers and campgrounds has exploded. Home prices continue to soar as eager out-of-state buyers look to join our mountain communities.

But after 25 years of responding to new challenges, Prickly Pear Land Trust sees opportunity with our region's booming popularity. "This is a time to harness energy for conservation and the outdoors and we are going to make the best of it," says Mary Hollow, Executive Director. "We have always been and will continue to be advocates for the resources that cause people to live here. The trails, the access to public lands... PPLT responds to the opportunities and needs of our community and our landscape."

"Being solution focused is in complete alignment with PPLT," says Associate Director Rachel Rountree. So while much of the world has hunkered down trying its best to cope with a global pandemic, the wheels at Prickly Pear have continued moving, specifically in its land protection efforts where Conservation Manager Andrea Silverman and Lands Project Coordinator Travis Vincent have kept their noses to the grindstone.

As summer unfolds, PPLT is working on projects to protect 10,000 new acres. For reference, Prickly Pear Land Trust has 10,000 acres in 21 conservation easements to date. Though this number doesn't include the thousands of acres donated to Helena City open lands, Forest Service, or Fish, Wildlife and Parks, it makes one thing clear – there is a lot of conservation going on! The new projects represent a diverse list of geographical opportunities as well as types of properties being pursued. Projects span PPLT's four-county service area. PPLT staff are very cautious about revealing where specific parcels are until agreements are final, but rest assured there will be more places for the public to play and more strategic protection of farm and ranchland, and wildlife habitat on them.

The interest among landowners to put their property in a conservation easement has never been greater.

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Economic changes, the pandemic, real estate market

upheaval, favorable tax benefits and demographics are among the factors getting folks thinking about conservation. "Many landowners are getting to the age where they see two options," explains Travis. They can submit to "the highest bidder" for development purposes or "have a lasting say in how their land is used." "People are getting more comfortable with easements as a tool for protecting their land," adds Mary, and the residual benefits for wildlife, riparian zones, ecology and food sources. "It offers traditional landowners the ability to protect the lands that they've worked so hard on for generations." Above all, says Travis, is "a desire to leave a legacy."

Amidst the pressure for valley subdivision and home development in rural areas, there's a new urgency among forest landowners and ranchers. More landowners are more amenable to protecting their property through partnership with a land trust, says Andrea, who has been shepherding the process for Prickly Pear since 2008. Presently, there are "huge challenges and huge opportunities," she says. "We're trying to do as much as we can. Right now!"

As PPLT grows – memberships, donations and grants are all on the rise – it has been able to respond to that

continued...



THE THREE COMPONENTS OF PPLT'S LANDS INITIATIVES

PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

PPLT places permanent protection on large open space or key wildlife properties, such as the **Potter Conservation Easement** and several protected properties deep in the Elkhorns.



COMMUNITY CONSERVATION

PPLT protects and develops parklands and preserves to make conservation a part of everyone's lives. **Tenmile Creek Park** and the **East Helena Greenway** are big steps towards making land accessible to underserved communities.



TRAILS PROGRAM

PPLT acquires important recreational lands like **the South Hills Trails** and transfers them to public ownership through the City of Helena or the Forest Service.

OFFICE SPACE FOR OPEN SPACE

PRICKLY PEAR PURCHASES DOWNTOWN OFFICE

TRADITIONALLY, the Prickly Pear Land Trust staff, board and volunteers have focused outside its office doors at 40 West Lawrence. But that physical address too, has been a priority. Specifically, the purchase of the 4,600-square feet of downtown office space it has called home for the past four years.

"It began as an off-the-cuff conversation that blossomed," recalls Mary Hollow, the land trust's executive director, in describing informal visits with the Helena attorneys who owned the building, had their practices there, and were long-time friends of PPLT.

"We pursued a Murdock Charitable Trust grant," she said. An application was submitted in 2019 and the grant was awarded in June of 2020. It covered about two-thirds of

the cost, the remainder coming from the Treacy Foundation, the Metcalf Charitable Trust and a variety of private donors.

But as the funding and purchase came to fruition, so did the covid pandemic that, obviously, changed everything, including uses and attitudes about offices, and ownership thereof.

"We had a moment of thoughtful hesitation," thinking "what's going on in the world?" Mary shakes her head in recollecting the signing of the closing documents ... on the sidewalk outside the title company, wearing masks, all while raining. In a word: "Weird."

But the decision was buttressed by unwavering support of the PPLT Board of Directors and Mary's knowledge of

how her staff valued working together under the same roof. "We love being together. By being together, we get the results that people want. Teamwork!"

There's no shortage of excitement when Mary and Associate Director Rachel Rountree talk about their visions for the building. The staff and board "recognized a way to solidify our organization's strengths. A way to present ourselves in a more accessible way that's consistent with our goals of community conservation," says Mary.

A re-configured and larger space lends itself to educational opportunities, even in foul weather, to perhaps a "hall of fame of faces and projects" for public display and "a place where people can learn about the elements of our programming," adds Rachel. "We want it to be a welcoming, warm place for people to come."



PPLT closes the purchase of its "forever home" outside in full pandemic attire, summer 2020.

Already, it has become home to like-minded organizations, specifically the Montana Association of Land Trusts and the Heart of the Rockies Initiative. "The building goes with our inclusivity and collaborative nature in how we function within the conservation community. We practice what we preach," says Mary. "A space like this will always cultivate civility, respect, and fun!"

Soon, they'll be launching a campaign to envision and re-design the space.

UPDATES AND HONORS

A RE-ENVISIONED HARVEST MOON

On Thursday, September 16, at the Kleffner Ranch, Prickly Pear Land Trust will gather for the Crescent Moon Banquet and Auction – a special, re-envisioned Harvest Moon Banquet – to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Prickly Pear Land Trust.

This year's banquet takes place the week of the waxing crescent moon, a moon phase representing positivity

and progression towards goals. It has been two years since PPLT was able to host this beloved community event and they are over the moon to see everyone gather again. The event will look a little different this year, but the core of the event will remain the same. A time for the community to raise their glass and funds for the critical work of PPLT.



LISA BAY, VOLUNTEER EXTRAORDINAIRE

It's taken five years and the orchestration of many, disparate puzzle pieces to bring the Sevenmile Creek Restoration project to what it is today. Wielding a maestro's baton from the beginning has been volunteer extraordinaire Lisa Bay. After decades as a consultant for water-use planning and restoration (and helping a fledgling PPLT in the 90s), Lisa jumped at the chance to help PPLT orchestrate Sevenmile creek's massive overhaul by

making connections and donating countless hours. "Lisa pulled it all together," said Mary Hollow when recognizing Lisa at a June reception commemorating the Sevenmile project, which she described as a "phoenix in every way, shape and form."

In June, Lisa received the Volunteer of the Year Award from the PPLT Board before some 100 Sevenmile partners and funders. Lisa was quick to credit Mary. "Without Mary having the courage, we never would have done this." And Nate Kopp, whose efforts, she said, included "fencing, flooding, fire and fundraising. You're the best!" In addition to beautiful framed photos of the project, Mary presented Lisa with an official Prickly Pear down vest. "You'll forever be part of the team." Quipped Lisa, "Now... I'm in-vested!"



2021 LAWS OF THE LAND

Land trusts fared well in the 2021 Montana legislative session, according to Mary Hollow. Collaborative efforts helped defeat House Bill 677 which would have prevented non-profits from owning agricultural land. Targeting the controversial American Prairie Preserve, the bill would have had onerous effects on all land trusts and even some of PPLT's projects with Fort Harrison. "Our military partners were very helpful," said Mary.

Determining the beneficiaries of the tax revenue generated by marijuana sales (House Bill 701) caused extensive debate and iterations. Ultimately, channeling the revenue to conservation – specifically the Habitat Montana program that allows Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to purchase wildlife habitat – survived, which was consistent with the language in the statewide initiative that passed with 57% of the vote.

AN AUSPICIOUS OTTER

There's a new resident of the Sevenmile Creek Restoration area: a rambunctious otter. And the folks at Prickly Pear Land Trust couldn't be more welcoming. Making Sevenmile a permanent home for this carnivorous mammal is testimony that the restoration goals of the project – now five-years-in-the-works – are coming to fruition. The 358-acre parcel is also home to 169 species of birds, according to Shane Sater, who has been conducting bird counts there for several years.

"Everything associated with the original project is done," says Nate Kopp, the PPLT staffer who's overseen the restoration including recent completion of the final phase. Hopefully, nature continues to cooperate, offering appropriate amounts of precipitation. "We want all those trees, willows and grasses to establish themselves so they can withstand any high water events."

Recovery from last year's grassland fire appears promising. "Overall, it looks awesome. Grass is growing everywhere and there are just blankets of bitterroots. The fire burned out a lot of bad stuff and gave good stuff a chance." Some noxious whitetop weeds have also flourished and will be mitigated.

"We still need to give the vegetation some more time to get established before we get people out there, but we're mulling over options."

The appearance of a river otter at Sevenmile Creek is testimony that the restoration goals of the project are coming to fruition.



CUTTING EDGE

CONSERVATION CORPS HELPS PPLT IN PROACTIVE TRAIL MANAGEMENT

THE NEW AND MUCH-IMPROVED TR Trail, west of Rodney Meadow, allows hikers and bikers to stop and smell the (wild) roses, maybe soak in the beauty of lupine or arrowleaf balsamroot, and stroll or pedal through the woods. That hasn't always been the case. The original trail went straight down the fall line, making it easy to bypass all the glory of the east-facing mountainside. Plus, it was a direct water route, causing unchecked erosion. But all that changed in June when a half dozen Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) members joined forces with Prickly Pear Land Trust staffers and volunteers to re-route the Forest Service managed trail, now a meandering delight.

"This was only possible because of our partnership with MCC and the approval from the Helena Ranger District," said Mary Hollow, PPLT Executive Director. "Projects like these are really proactive. We saw the train wreck coming," she said in reference to issues of congestion, safety and erosion on the popular route.

It's a win-win for PPLT and MCC. "It was their first trail digging hitch," explained Tim Lawrence, PPLT's new Trails Coordinator and himself a former MCC senior crew leader in Helena. "We used it as an opportunity to teach them how to dig tread, and do it well... something they'll be doing for the rest of the season." In fact, the six corps members next assignment took them to the Salmon Wilderness where they were flown in to do similar work.

Tim and PPLT colleagues Nate Kopp and Emmett Purcell laid out the footprint for the new trail and the corps

"Inspiring young people through hands-on conservation service to be leaders, stewards of the land, and engaged citizens who improve their communities."

—MCC's mission



Brad Hurd

members and volunteers crafted it with tools of the trade ... shovels, picks and McLeods. "We would not have been able to do a project of this scale without help from the MCC," Tim said.

Another MCC crew was in town to help Prickly Pear the following week. "We worked on the Mini-Ridge Trail, the Mount Helena Ridge Trail and some re-tread on the Waterline Trail," Tim added.

The new TR Trail is full of cutting edge trail building techniques and considerations, according to Emmett. In trail jargon it's "sustainable," or able to withstand impacts of normal use and natural elements, encourages users to stay on the trail and requires minimal maintenance.

Mandy Alvino of the Helena Ranger District said the Forest Service "is more than pleased" with the outcome, particularly with the "fact that there won't be erosion concerns" going forward. "Keeping the soil on the hillside" is of paramount concern. Mandy has high praise for the work of the MCC crew and the guidance of Tim and Emmett. "They took [the trail] from arm waving to flag placement to actually putting it in the ground."

A gaze across the valley affords a great vantage of Mount Ascension, Emmett adds, and the slower-paced route provides better opportunities for hikers and bikers to interact.

With a 30-year history in Montana, the MCC, partly funded by Americorps,

Montana Conservation Corps members joined forces with Prickly Pear Land Trust staffers and volunteers to re-route a section of the popular TR trail.

is patterned after the renowned Civilian Conservation Corps, born during the Great Depression. Anyone who had the pleasure of seeing the corps members build the new TR Trail were witness to a group that was true to the organization's mission of "inspiring young people through hands-on conservation service to be leaders, stewards of the land, and engaged citizens who improve their communities."

MAKING HAY *continued*

demand. A third member of the lands program, Kevin League, joins the staff this summer. (See sidebar.) Further, Andrea and Travis gain more invaluable experience with each transaction. "We've really matured as an organization," says Andrea.

Unlike most Montana land trusts that were launched with private land conservation as priorities, PPLT's initial focus was trails. That was 25 years ago, when stopping further subdivisions in the South Hills drew a groundswell of public support that helped define the organization.

Helena voters passed a \$5 million conservation bond issue in 1996 and a \$10 million countywide bond issue got thumbs up in 2008. Both have been crucial to PPLT's land programs as has its partnership with the Department of

Defense's Army Compatible Use Buffer program, which funded much of the Tenmile Creek Park and Sevenmile Creek properties, as well as the Whyte-LeGrande and Graham-Upper LeGrande acquisitions to Helena Open Space.

Today, the trails program is no less important (and has grown significantly – in hours, volunteers, and dollars) but shares the stage with private land and community conservation efforts. "It's been an evolution," says Mary, "driven in part by the recognition of the board and staff that these opportunities won't last forever."

"We have maybe 10 years to determine what our lands are going to look like – we need to make hay," says Travis.

Ultimately, Andrea concludes, "We want to be the Montana that people imagine."

KEVIN LEAGUE JOINS PPLT LANDS STAFF

PPLT welcomes Kevin League who joins staffers Andrea Silverman and Travis Vincent in the lands acquisition and project management efforts.

"He comes from an extensive conservation and stewardship background," said Executive Director Mary Hollow. Kevin has worked for the National Park Service, for two Colorado land trusts and for the past seven years has worked for the Montana Fish,



Wildlife and Parks department's lands division.

On top of his work in the field, the newest addition to PPLT is well known in Helena for his photography. Kevin doubles as an accomplished nature, travel, and aerial (drone) photographer.



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connecting land
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SUMMER 2021

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