

## FHWA's Livable Communities Case Study Series

### Connecting Bicycle and Pedestrian Networks in Billings, MT

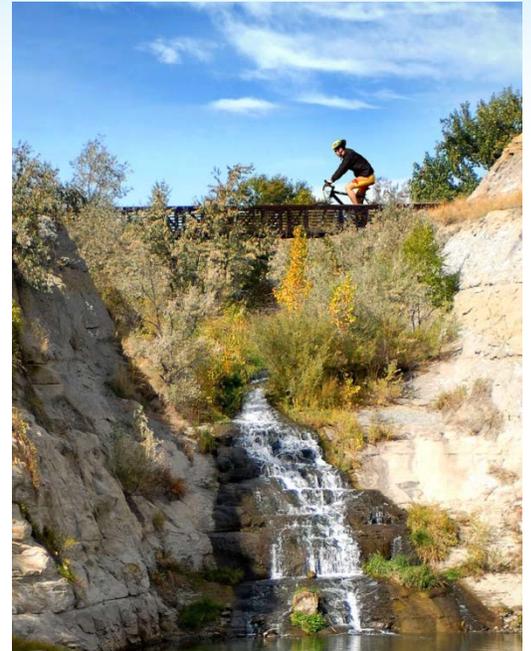
#### **Challenge**—Meeting Community's Demand for More Connected Bicycle and Pedestrian Networks

Over the past several decades, the City of Billings, MT, has used a range of funding sources to develop an extensive bicycling network. By 2011, the city had built 35 miles of multi-use trails, 8 miles of narrower "Connector" trails, and 11.5 miles of on-street bicycle lanes, and hosted a variety of events and programs to encourage bicycling and walking, including bicycle education courses and Safe Routes to School programs.<sup>1</sup>

The existing local bicycle and trail network was largely built on streets that had been reconstructed in the last decade and those which already had sufficient right-of-way for the facilities.<sup>2</sup> The public started asking for bicycle facilities to fill gaps between neighborhoods, schools, and other destinations. To reflect this need, the 2011 Billings Trails and Bikeway Master Plan adopted the vision that "Billings will have one of the most comprehensive bicycle and trail networks in the State of Montana, and will be rated a 'Gold Bicycle Friendly Community' by the League of American Bicyclists by the year 2020." To meet this goal, the city set out to eliminate gaps in the existing network through data tracking, stakeholder engagement, and efficient funding mechanisms.

#### **Solution**—Multi-pronged Approach: Tracking Facility Use, Engaging Diverse Stakeholders, and Leveraging Funding Sources

The Billings City Council confirmed its commitment to improving the pedestrian and bicycle network by adopting a complete streets policy on August 22, 2011 and authorizing a status report on the progress made by late 2012.<sup>3</sup> The report established baseline data for performance measures such as pedestrian and bicyclist counts, pedestrian- and bicyclist-motor vehicle collisions, and yearly bike lane mileage added and total mileage. To aid in pedestrian and bicyclist counts, the city applied for and received a grant from the [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#) for two permanent pedestrian and bicycle counters that provide real-time information about the direction and volume of trail use. In good weather, the counters have documented about 7,000 pedestrians and cyclists per month using one trail in west Billings and 4,800 using another in north Billings. The city also consistently counts



*Cyclist on Bicycle Bridge in Billings, MT*

<sup>1</sup> 2011 Billings Trails and Bikeway Master Plan, p. 5-1

<sup>2</sup> 2011 Billings Trails and Bikeway Master Plan, p. 5-1

<sup>3</sup> Billings Complete Streets Benchmark Report (June 2013), p. iii

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*Pedestrians on Multi-Use Trail in Billings, MT*

pedestrians and bicyclists at 26 other places to gain data about trail and bike lane use across the entire network, which in turn guides decisions about new projects.

Local staff engage a wide variety of stakeholders to evaluate and prioritize gap-filling projects. Based on pedestrian and bicycle counts and maps of existing facilities, the city identifies gaps that should be filled first based on making connections to schools or neighborhoods. Planners then work with advocacy groups, school districts, and the mayor- and county-appointed Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee to rank the projects based on expected benefits to city residents. Some communities in Billings provide further input on the most important bicycle and pedestrian projects to complete. Lockwood, a neighborhood in northeast Billings, organized a six month public process to

develop a prioritized list of sidewalk projects based on the location of school bus stops and commercial areas as well as the projects' cost and impact.

Billings funds bicycle and pedestrian projects using both Federal and local funding sources. In the past, Billings took advantage of the FHWA Transportation Enhancements Program by leveraging additional local and private sources to match those funds. More recently, Billings has advanced some of its bicycle and pedestrian projects using FHWA Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds. The city continues to maximize available funding by involving Public Works Department engineers in supporting bicycle and pedestrian improvements in road and park projects.

### **Conclusion**—Engaging Diverse Stakeholders Facilitates Bicycle and Pedestrian Network Connectivity Projects

Billings' efforts to document, prioritize, and fund gaps in its bicycle and pedestrian networks have earned broad support among community stakeholders. For example, the Chamber of Commerce and downtown business association support sidewalk and bicycle projects due to increased foot- and bike-traffic past their stores, and local hospitals have engaged in Complete Streets efforts through their programs to encourage active living. The Billings 2014 Long Range Transportation Plan incorporates improving bicycle and pedestrian networks as one of its six main goals and identifies 13 projects to help achieve that goal. Billings has already completed some of the projects and plans to finish the rest within the year. The list includes projects like the Heights-Kiwanis bike path, which has enabled more children to bike to the nearby school. Another project will connect one of the major mixed-use trails to a new school that is currently under construction.

The number of people cycling and walking in Billings continues to increase, perhaps most notably among the city's youngest residents. These results suggest that systematic data collection, creative funding, and sustained outreach to diverse stakeholders can not only support efforts to increase bicycle and pedestrian network connectivity but also encourage a culture shift towards nonmotorized modes of transportation.

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