

## 'Something for everyone': 556 acres near Fort Harrison secured as open space

By TOM KUGLIN

On the banks of Ten Mile Creek Tuesday, a collection of open land advocates along with military and county officials lauded what will be the Helena area's newest recreation destinations.



Prickly Pear Land Trust recently acquired two parcels totaling 556 acres near Fort Harrison with plans to develop trails and restore lands impacted from years of grazing. One parcel will offer the first public access to Ten Mile Creek within Helena's urban area while the other provides more than one mile of access along Seven Mile Creek.

"This project has literally something for everyone," said PPLT Executive Director Mary Hollow. "Prickly Pear Land Trust looks for projects that bring the community and conservation together, and this project has brought together so many diverse interests in one place."

The Ten Mile Creek parcel is nestled between Fort Harrison and Spring Meadow Lake State

Park, and was once slated for subdivision, Hollow said. Along with recreationists and commuters, the locations of both parcels provide places to get outside for active duty military personnel and veterans at the fort and VA. Nearby school groups from the Montana Wild education center and residents at Spring Meadow Resources, which provides services for individuals with developmental disabilities, are also well-positioned to use the lands, she added.

Concerned about potential development, the U.S. Army made acquiring property near Fort Harrison a priority, securing \$1.1 million through the Army Compatible Use Buffer Program to help fund the project. Additional funding for Prickly Pear came via a loan through The Conservation Fund, although Hollow declined to specify the amount. Costs for restoration and development have not yet been determined, she said.

Officials at Fort Harrison applauded the efforts to limit development in the area.

"Having that buffer protects our training areas. We do a lot of small arms training, and we were a little nervous that dense homes wouldn't be compatible with our uses," said Maj. Gen. Matthew Quinn, the Adjutant General for Montana.

ACUB funding allows another entity to purchase the property. If the military directly acquired it, public access would not be

allowed, so Prickly Pear's involvement meets the dual goals of protecting habitat and military training, Quinn said.

Retired U.S. Navy Seal Commander Scott Hannon, also a Montana Wild volunteer, noted the benefits the open space can provide to veterans across the state visiting the VA and health education programs.



Prickly Pear Land Trust announced its purchase of a pair of parcels totaling 556 acres near Fort Harrison aimed at providing public recreation and buffers around the fort. Map provided by Prickly Pear Land Trust

Thomas Pedersen, Capital High science instructor and Montana Conservation Corps and Forest For Every Classroom board member, wrote a letter of support for the project.

"We need to connect this generation to the outdoors not only in our national parks and forests, but also in our connections to our cities; safe, inexpensive places where our kids can hike, ride their bikes and explore after school or on the weekends. The 'Peaks to Creeks' acquisition along Ten and Seven Mile creeks gives that opportunity to all of our children," he wrote.

Spring Meadow Resources already focuses on services in the outdoors, and the project provides a new and unique opportunity, said Executive Director Jim Bissett.

"Spring Meadow Resources is thrilled to see this development in our neighborhood,

bringing better connectivity and new trails that will have benefits to all, including the disabilities community. Being able to access and cross the creek to PPLT's new property, or over to Spring Meadow Lake State Park, will open many wonderful and new outdoor experiences for our residents," he said.

County Commissioner Andy Hunthausen highlighted the goals the project meets that were identified in a joint land use study between Lewis and Clark County and Fort Harrison.

"This is something that began eight years ago and is fantastic for everyone that worked in partnership and participated in making this happen," he said.



Ten Mile Creek flows through the 556 acre 'Peaks to Creeks' acquisition made possible by a partnership between Prickly Pear Land Trust and the Montana National Guard. Thom Bridge, Independent Record

Hollow echoed the many long hours it took to pull the project off, learning only six months ago the ACUB funding was secured and launching negotiations with developers to buy the properties. The project has the distinction of being recognized by the national Land Trust Alliance as one of the best examples of community conservation in the region, she said.

The parcels are not yet open to the public, but Prickly Pear and others are working to get them available as soon as possible, Hollow said. Eventually the land trust would like to see the lands go into public ownership, but

with the restoration needs, that will take some time to be able to hand over a finished product, she added.

“This is a community project in every way, shape and form, and I can’t think of a better way for (Prickly Pear) to celebrate our 20th year than bringing this neighborhood and community together,” she said.said.buffer we need to offset the effects of climate change and rising sea levels.