

A G E N D A   R E P O R T

DATE November 15, 2005

ITEM Resolution No. 9532 to Support the "Corridor of Discovery Trail"

INITIATED BY Recreational Trails, Inc.

ACTION REQUESTED Adopt Resolution No. 9532

PREPARED BY Benjamin Rangel, Planning Director

PRESENTED BY Doug Wicks, President, Recreational Trails, Inc.

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended the City Commission adopt Resolution No. 9532.

**MOTION:**

"I move the City Commission adopt Resolution No. 9532."

**SYNOPSIS:**

Resolution No. 9532 would lend support to a combined Great Falls/Helena grassroots effort to acquire and protect the 95-mile Great Falls to Helena rail corridor. Interest is to possibly convert the corridor into a non-motorized trail, as a means of creating new and exciting recreational, tourism and economic development opportunities. The proposed trail has been informally dubbed the "Corridor of Discovery Trail."

**BACKGROUND:**

The rail line between Great Falls and Helena has been owned and operated by several companies during the past 120 years, with the current operator being the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway. In 2000, a portion of the rail line near Ulm was taken out of service because the rail bed and riverbank became unstable and slid into the Missouri River. The line remains severed and unrepaired.

In a 2004 study, titled, Montana Branch Line Study, Phase II, and as prepared for the Montana Departments of Transportation, Agriculture and Commerce, the rail line was identified as an "at risk rail line" in danger of abandonment.

Community leaders, grain producers, rail shippers and other interested parties have for many years expressed concern with the lack of rail competition in Montana. They have strongly advocated that statewide competitive railroad operations, by more than one rail provider, are a means of securing competitive shipping rates. As such, these individuals and groups have continued to urge the reestablishment of the Great Falls to Helena rail line as a means of strengthening the marketability of products produced in our area and in the State of Montana.

There is a combined Great Falls/Helena grassroots group interested in acquiring and protecting the 95-

mile Great Falls to Helena rail corridor for its possible conversion into a non-motorized trail. They have always been sincere in stating that their foremost interest and preference is for the rail line to be reestablished as an active, useful and productive carrier of commerce.

However, they also wonder whether any other entity is interested in acquiring, repairing and operating the rail line, and if there is, whether BNSF would be interested in relinquishing its ownership to a competing railroad. Additionally, they fear that if BNSF formally abandons the rail line and no other legitimate entity acquires it, the rail corridor could likely be fragmented into many ownerships, making it difficult, if not impossible, to reassemble the corridor into a functioning railroad, if future economic conditions warranted. Thus, the group is interested in protecting the corridor in its entirety, possibly through a process called rail banking.

As such, the group feels the acquisition of the entire rail corridor, by a public entity or other organization, could protect its connectivity and continuity for other interim public and beneficial uses, such as non-motorized transportation and recreational trail. The group has dubbed the trail as the "Corridor of Discovery Trail." They feel it could become one of the most scenic and commercially viable trails in the country and could provide the State of Montana with a world-class tourism destination, thus providing economic development opportunities for Great Falls, Helena and the communities in between. These opportunities could be similar to Idaho's "Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes" and other well-visited "rails to trails" around the country. An array of new and expanded businesses and support services could be created in both cities and in the communities along the trail.

The group recognizes that adjoining landowners may have concerns with the possible conversion of the rail line to a public trail. These concerns may include the possible spread of noxious weeds, the provision and availability of law enforcement, safety of trail users and interference with the use of their property, etc. The group intends to work with landowners, appropriate state and local governmental agencies and elected officials to avoid, address and mitigate identified impacts and concerns.

The group also recognizes that the possible conversion of the rail corridor will require a dedicated partnership of public and private sector entities to acquire, hold, develop, manage and operate such a public trail. They are working toward creating a framework under which each of these tasks and needs can be addressed and accomplished.

Finally, the group is in the process of formalizing its organizational structure, expanding public awareness and soliciting support. To date, nearly 1,300 individuals have signed a form to demonstrate their support for the idea. Additionally, presentations are being made to local service groups to secure their support and resolutions of support are being requested from local units of government.

Attach: Resolution No. 9532

Cc: Doug Wicks, Recreational Trail, Inc.