



City of Missoula, Montana
Item to be Referred to City Council Committee

Committee: Parks and Conservation

Item: Dean Stone Corridor Open Space Acquisition

Date: October 26, 2020

Sponsor(s): Grant Carlton

Prepared by: Grant Carlton, Open Space Program Manager

Ward(s) Affected:

<input type="checkbox"/> Ward 1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ward 4
<input type="checkbox"/> Ward 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Ward 5
<input type="checkbox"/> Ward 3	<input type="checkbox"/> Ward 6
<input type="checkbox"/> All Wards	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A

Action Required:

Set a public hearing for adoption of a Resolution that authorizes the expenditure of up to \$462,500 of the City's portion of the 2018 Open Space Bond proceeds and \$462,500 of anonymous open space estate gift funds, a total of \$925,000, to purchase 350 acres of open space land on Mount Dean Stone to provide a new publicly accessible recreational trail and protect scenic open space and wildlife habitat, and pay transaction and project-related costs associated with the acquisition.

Recommended Motion(s):

I move the City Council: Set a public hearing to adopt a resolution to expend \$462,500 of the City's portion of the 2018 Open Space Bond proceeds and \$462,500 of anonymous open space estate gift funds, a total of \$925,000, to purchase 350 acres of open space land on Mount Dean Stone to provide a new publicly accessible recreational trail and protect scenic open space and wildlife habitat, and pay transaction and project-related costs associated with the acquisition.

Timeline:

Referral to committee:	October 26, 2020
Committee discussion:	October 28, 2020
Council action (or sets hearing):	November 2, 2020
Public Hearing:	November 23, 2020
Deadline:	Click or tap here to enter text.

Background and Alternatives Explored:

Project Overview

The proposed Dean Stone Corridor acquisition project would provide nearly five miles of new publicly accessible trails on approximately 350 acres of open space recreation land to be added to the South Hills Spur area trail portfolio while protecting plant and wildlife habitat and scenic values for Missoula area residents. The Dean Stone Corridor project consists of seven individual parcels totaling approximately 350 acres that Five Valleys Land Trust (Five Valleys) acquired in fee as an interim owner. Five Valleys proposes to transfer the property and recently constructed recreational trail corridor to the City of Missoula for incorporation into the Conservation Lands system. Please see the attached *Dean Stone Corridor Open Space Acquisition Proposal* for a series of maps that depicts the property and its open space values and resources.

Public Access, Recreation, and Connectivity

The Dean Stone Corridor project would allow the City of Missoula to open approximately five miles of new recreational trails in the South Hills Spur area. A loop trail will be constructed on the north-facing slope of Mount Dean Stone and will connect to current City trails located on the South Hills Spur, which can be accessed from both the Barmeyer and Sousa trailheads. The Corridor is adjacent to 2,500 acres of The Nature Conservancy-owned land that stretches south to Miller Creek and east to the West Fork of Deer Creek into Pattee Canyon. Five Valleys recently received funding from the Recreational Trails Program to build a new trail (“House of Sky”) that will connect the Mount Dean Stone saddle to the West Fork of Deer Creek and ultimately to the trails located in the Pattee Canyon recreation area. Missoula’s population is increasing at a relatively rapid rate. Research indicates that pressure on the community’s trail system and demand for open space and recreational opportunities is positively correlated to this experienced growth. Missoula’s trail system has also seen an increase in use and pressure in the wake of the pandemic as residents seek respite in recreational and open space lands. Increasing our trail and open space portfolio proportionately allows the system to meet demand and has the added benefit of dispersing use and mitigating user conflict.

Public Policy

As previously mentioned, Mount Dean Stone is located in the upper portion of Missoula’s South Hills, which falls within a “cornerstone,” as delineated by the *Missoula Urban Area Open Space Plan 2019* (Open Space Plan). A cornerstone is defined as a priority area that encompasses high open space value, and the Open Space Plan encourages the preservation of scenic open space, wildlife habitat, rare and unique plant communities, and protection of lands for recreation, public access, and trails in these areas. The Open Space Plan envisions a connected open space system, with access to a park, trail, open space land, natural area, or recreation area available in every neighborhood.

Additionally, the 2018 *Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails* (PROST) survey indicated that 84% of Missoula County residents want more or better dirt trails for hiking, biking, and running and 85% want more or better natural areas and wildlife habitat. Mount Dean Stone is also a prominent feature of the southern scenic backdrop to the Missoula Valley and visually connects residents to the Pattee Creek and Miller Creek areas and the Bitterroot Valley to the south, as well as providing scenic vistas for users of the property. Further, the Mount Dean Stone project was a flagship project with respect to the campaign to promote the passage of the 2018 Open Space Bond. The project was discussed and prioritized by City leadership and open space and conservation partners throughout the Bond development and promotion process.

Our Missoula Growth Policy (2015) recognizes that a primary, character-defining feature of Missoula is its connection with natural and scenic resources and that outdoor recreation is an essential part of the Missoula community’s character and way of life. The Corridor proposal supports Missoula’s efforts to provide a safe and healthy quality of life through accessible open space conservation and recreation programs

Wildlife Habitat

The combination of open grasslands and a diversity of coniferous forest on the Corridor provides foraging habitat and cover for a variety of wildlife species, and the conservation value of the habitat on the Corridor is enhanced by its proximity to extensive grassland and forested habitats that are protected on adjacent lands. Audubon Society bird surveys on the Corridor found a strong representation of breeding migrant songbirds, and a night flight migration study on the adjacent Line Ranch indicates that the area is used by many other species during periods of bird migration. The Corridor gets some use by elk, but recent data from the North Sapphires Elk Study and historic data indicate that the Corridor does not provide critical winter or summer range habitat for elk. The Corridor provide potential habitat for other species such as red-tailed hawk, western skink, voles, long-tailed weasel, mule deer, moose, black bear, mountain lion, and bobcat.

Health, Wellness, and Social Equity

The Corridor property also promotes health, wellness, and social equity by significantly expanding Missoula's trail system. The trail on the Corridor is being developed at an 8% grade, which is less steep than many of the trails around Missoula and makes it more accessible and suitable for a broader array of Missoula's residents. Additionally, Missoula Parks and Recreation is seeking new locations for operating its many outdoor education programs, as Lolo National Forest permits are limited and opportunities on other lands are currently maximized. The Corridor property will provide a new and suitable location for Parks and Recreation to run recreation and educational programming, which will allow people of all ages and abilities the opportunity to grow, experience, learn and enjoy the natural world around them in an affordable manner. Delivering both physical and mental health benefits, the proposed conservation lands will provide an outstanding recreational corridor where people can exercise and connect with each other in nature.

Ecosystem Services and Growth Management

The project is also consistent with climate change adaptation and growth management objectives. As Missoula grows, it will become increasingly important to focus affordable residential development and services within the urban core while conserving lands with significant open space values. The Mount Dean Stone Corridor, manifesting high risk of wildfire, steep terrain, and lack of proximity to services, will not reduce the availability of land that is appropriate for affordable housing. The Corridor proposal helps meet the goals and strategies prioritized in the City and County's Climate Ready Missoula Plan, as well as, Missoula County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Located adjacent to the City boundary, the project proposal would eliminate the threat of residential development in a high wildfire risk area and mitigate wildfire risk related to both structures and first responders. Five Valleys Land Trust completed a forest health improvement project in 2019 to mitigate wildfire risk on the portion of the Dean Stone Corridor closest to Missoula. City Conservation Lands staff and advisory committees can provide guidance and management plans with respect to further buffering developed areas in the City from wildfire.

Process Background and Committee Recommendations

On March 10, 2020, Missoula's Parks and Recreation Board acknowledged the gift of the construction of the trail by Five Valleys, including recognition of long term City management of the property, and recommended that the City move forward with the project, pending Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC) review of the acquisition and development of a recreation management plan by the Conservation Lands Advisory Committee (CLAC). On March 12, 2020, OSAC unanimously voted to recommend that City Council authorize the requested expenditure for the acquisition of the Dean Stone Corridor property. CLAC has visited the property and has begun the process of developing a management plan for the property, which, as planned, will be presented as an extension of the South Hills Spur management plan.

Pending City Council approval, the Mount Dean Stone Corridor is anticipated to be open to public use as early as spring of 2021. The property will remain closed to the public in the meantime while Five Valleys, City Conservation Lands staff, and other partners work to ensure the property is safe, accessible, and meets City open space specifications.

Financial Implications:

Five Valleys Land Trust, in partnership with the City of Missoula, is requesting \$462,500 of the City's portion of the 2018 Open Space Bond proceeds and \$462,500 of anonymous open space estate gift funds, a total of \$925,000, for the purchase of 350 acres of open space land on Mount Dean Stone.

In June of 2019, the City of Missoula received an estate gift from an anonymous donor "to be used specifically for acquisition, management, maintenance and improvement of trails traversing the wild open space in and around the City of Missoula." The letter accompanying the anonymous open

space estate gift stated, “A portion of these funds might be used to acquire open space land in the South Hills and on Mount Dean stone and for associated trail and trailhead development on that land.” City staff and the Open Space Advisory Committee concluded that the Dean Stone Corridor acquisition project fits squarely within the intent of the gift and is an excellent use of the funds.

Mount Dean Stone Corridor Open Space Acquisition Budget		
2018 Open Space Bond*	18%	\$462,500
Open Space Estate Gift*	18%	\$462,500
Five Valleys real estate and trail donation	50%	\$1,274,147
Five Valleys project facilitation donation	14%	\$370,000
Total	100%	\$2,569,147

*Total requested funds = \$925,000 (36% of expenses)