

# Community Forests: A path to prosperity and connection

## MT. ASCENSION NATURAL PARK

### NOTABLE BENEFITS



RECREATION



TOURISM



EDUCATION

ACRES: 62

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 2013

OWNERSHIP: City of Helena, Montana

MANAGEMENT: Prickly Pear Land Trust (NGO)

COMMUNITY SERVED: City of Helena, East Helena, Montana City, Clancy, and Jefferson City, Montana

POPULATION: 40,530

TOTAL ACQUISITION COST: \$430,000

FUNDING BREAKDOWN:



■ Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program

■ Cost Share

For a comprehensive review of the community and economic benefits provided by this forest and others, go to the full report at [www.tpl.org/economic-benefits-community-forests](http://www.tpl.org/economic-benefits-community-forests)

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**Mt. Ascension Natural Park** (MANP) is the result of ongoing efforts by the city and a local land trust to reassemble a fractured landscape and create an outdoor recreation amenity and community asset. In 2013, the community expanded MANP by 62 acres, which plays a key role in providing access to thousands of acres of public lands.

U.S. Forest Service's Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program (CFP) investment in Helena is strengthening the region's local

recreation and tourism economy. CFP has enabled the community to enhance its South Trail System, which is a critical component of the local tourism economy but also provides essential recreational access and educational opportunities for the resident population.

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**Enabling recreation:** Most of the Mt. Ascension and Mt. Helena trail networks use is by residents, with more than 70 percent of residents using the trail at least three times a week during late spring through summer. With an estimated 12,700 local mountain bikers and 36,500 local hikers, the recreational value provided to the community is approximately **\$850,000** per year.

**Bolstering tourism:** The South Hills Trail System has been central to the community's growing mountain biking tourism economy as well as its designation as a Silver Level Ride Center. The local business community is very supportive of the trail system, and many local businesses sponsor the free community shuttle that connects users to trail heads on the Continental Divide, Helena Ridge, and Mt. Ascension. Andrea Opitz is the executive director of the Helena Tourism Alliance. As Opitz explains, "The Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) continues to use our funds to promote Helena and all of the outdoor recreation opportunities as well as a mountain biking destination and a Silver Level International Mountain Biking Association Ride Center."

A recent analysis estimated that 63,000 users recreated in the South Hills Trail System between May and September 2017, with 22 percent of that use being driven by nonlocals. Altogether, nonlocal users spent \$4.1 million in the local area. A total of **\$4.4 million** in economic opportunity and **60 jobs** can be attributed to the spending by visitors to the area who recreate in the trail system.

**Promoting economic development:** Trail users also support local businesses, including outdoor recreation related businesses. Two-thirds of all users indicated that they purchased hiking, biking, running or walking gear in Helena in the last year, with 60 percent of purchasers indicating that the trail system had a high influence on their decision.

**Enhancing education:** MANP is used by local school groups and scout troops. Each year, local sixth graders participate in an annual Kid's Day where they discuss natural history, trail building, weed management, pine beetles, wildflowers, geology, and botany. There is also a Youth Forest Monitoring Program for high school students.

This project was completed in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and would not have been possible without generous support from the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities and the U.S. Forest Service.

The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come. [www.tpl.org](http://www.tpl.org)

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