

## News & Features

# On the Roads

Summer tourism brings in a flood of automobiles driving on the Flathead Valley's infrastructure. Here's how officials at the city, county, and state levels are planning for the future.

BY MOLLY PRIDDY // AUG 29, 2018



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**F**rom the end of May until the kids go back to school, the roadways in the Flathead Valley are full of automobiles of all makes and models, many of which are touting out-of-state or Canadian license plates.

Summer is heavy tourism season in the valley, and while

airport statistics show more people are flying into the

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Flathead than ever, the roads and highways are clogged with cars, trucks, RVs, bicycles, motorcycles, and other modes of wheeled travel.

With the understanding that this traffic volume isn't likely going to decrease in the summers anytime soon, city, county, and state officials are discussing plans for the future of these roadways and how to keep them drivable.

### City Level

In Whitefish, city officials and other stakeholders in the tourism industry, including businesses, have started

the process of drafting a Sustainable Tourism Master Plan, which would help the city map out how it wants to manage increased tourism.

“It’s not about growing tourism,” said Whitefish Public Works Director Craig Workman. “We’re trying to manage it in a responsible manner.”

Workman is part of the group discussing the plan, which will have public meetings again starting in September, and works on the subcommittee on traffic, congestion, and transportation.

Already, the Montana Department of Transportation has plans to continue working on the Whitefish U.S. 93 Urban Corridor Study, which looks to address the downtown environment, as well as local and through-traffic needs. The plan will explore improvement options for Highway 93 through the city, along with other streets with high traffic.

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If the study phase is complete and the project advances, it would move on to preliminary engineering and construction.

“The Whitefish Urban Corridor Plan is going to be one of the key elements that we’ll talk to the public about and try and get buy in and involvement,” Workman said. “The cost of public infrastructure is just going through the roof. We still want to keep the historic and residential charm as you’re coming in on Spokane, but we need to get another lane in. How are we going to accomplish both of those?”

Workman said there’s a meeting in September with the state to start scoping the project, and the hope is to hire a consultant by the end of the year to get the design process rolling.

It’s a process that Workman said can’t come soon enough.

“We’ve hit a critical mass where we need to do something,” he said.

In Kalispell, Public Works Director Susie Turner said the city has more than 150 miles of roads and alleys to care for, and with help from the new gas tax passed by the 2017 Legislature, her crews can do even more.

“We have the capability and resources to reconstruct maybe two to three blocks a year,” Turner said. “This year we have the new funding source coming in, and we were able to do three miles more of mill and overlays this year.”

The new gas tax aims to raise the price of a gallon of gasoline by 6 cents and diesel by 2 cents by 2023. So far, it has increased the price by 4.5 cents, which has still proven a boon to municipalities.

“We were able to get quite a bit more done this year, and that was really with only six months of the new gas tax accumulation,” Turner said.

One of the benefits of the new tax is that municipalities can roll it over to the next year, enabling them to save up for bigger projects. Turner said her department has budgetary approval to complete a transportation facility

plan update to see what improvements need to be made in town as far as improving arterials and collector roadways.

Work has already started in Columbia Falls to update U.S. Highway 2 as it runs through town with curbs and sidewalks, as well as upgrading the road surface to the Flathead River bridge. Farther east on Highway 2, crews are in the process of reconstructing the South Fork Flathead River Bridge.

### **County Level**

Roads not maintained by cities or MDT are usually under jurisdiction of the county, and Flathead County Public Works Director Dave Prunty said he looks at the county's gravel roads to see how the summer traffic has affected the area.

"It's really hard to see [the immediate traffic impact] on the paved surfaces. It just doesn't show up. On a gravel road, it can," Prunty said. "Our gravel road network can get into tougher conditions with the amount of traffic we get."

When it's dry during the summer, the gravel roads are more susceptible to erosion than when they're packed down and damp. Since they can't have water trucks spraying all the roads all summer, many residents pay into the county's dust-control program. In this program, the county and the landowners share the cost for treating public gravel roads so they don't blow away into people's fields and crops or the area's waterways.

"We did 92 miles this year, our most miles ever," Prunty said.

He was also thrilled with the emergence of the new gas tax, and Prunty said when it gets going full bore, it should add another \$500,000 to the road department's budget.

"That money has requirements on it," Prunty said. "We have to use it for materials on the roadway."

### **State/Federal Level**

The U.S. Highway 93 Alternate Route, commonly referred to as the Kalispell bypass, has been open since October 2016, but it isn't quite complete. Kalispell and MDT hope to find the funding to complete the build-out on the bypass' southern end.

Officials said the plan has always been to convert the southern section, which is now two lanes with roundabouts, into four lanes with overpass interchanges as there are on the northern section.

The bypass is already MDT's largest single road construction project, and has been paid for through federal earmarked funds and national highway funds. Kalispell and MDT are pursuing other federal grants as well.

On the other end of the valley, MDT's Bad Rock Canyon Study may see some movement later this year. MDT Project Manager Shane Stack said the state hopes to get a consultant onboard for the project as soon as possible.

The study will consider potential solutions to upgrading sections of U.S. Highway 2 east of Columbia Falls. The project intends to reconstruct the roadway to current MDT design standards and also provide roadside safety enhancements.

Stack said the roadway in question, from the House of Mystery and over the South Fork Flathead River Bridge, is a section of highway built during the 1940s bookended with recently upgraded highways. It doesn't meet modern design standards, and doesn't allow for consistent driver expectations as the highway goes from new to old to new again.

"Bad Rock Canyon, it's such a challenging section of roadway because the rock face has some instability," Stack said. "What really all we're trying to do is take a pragmatic approach, and find a solution."



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