

Date: Jul 30, 2009; Section: The Big Sky; Page: C1

'Bikeable, walkable, livable'

Montana coalition forms to push alternative transportation funding



Charles Dye bikes up South Black Avenue Wednesday with his kids Colm and Maeve riding in the side car. Congress is currently working on a transportation bill that will influence how Americans commute and some groups are pushing for more alternative transportation.

NICK WOLCOTT/CHRONICLE

By **JESSICA MAYRER**
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As Congress prepares to reauthorize a federal transportation bill that directs hundreds of billions of dollars toward commuter infrastructure, organizations across the state and country are uniting to push for alternative, more sustainable ways of getting around.

And with Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairing the Senate Finance Committee, this is an important time for Montanans to pipe up about what they'd like transportation corridors to look like, said Ted Lange, community trails planner for the Gallatin Valley Land Trust.

"We want to see continued funding for a bikeable, walkable, livable community," Lange said Wednesday. "It's something that profoundly affects the lives of everyone."

Every six years, Congress sets the country's transportation priorities. With the existing transportation bill slated to expire Sept. 30, the new Transportation for America coalition is pressing Congress to

funnel more money toward buses, trains, trails and pedestrian-friendly streets.

"It's going to be really hard to make them happen without federal support," Lange said.

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— **Ted Lange**, community trails planner for the Gallatin Valley Land Trust

In Montana, a coalition of 33 groups and mayors — including the Bozeman Sustainability Group, the Association of Montana Public Health Officials and insurer New West Health Services — has formed to lobby Montana's delegation in Washington, D.C.

"One thing all of us can do as citizens is contact our elected representatives in Washington," said Dr. Robert Shepard, New West

Health Services medical director. "If we can get that cascade going, then we can really accomplish some powerful activities."

National transportation policy has changed little since the 1950s, when President Dwight Eisenhower established the interstate road system with the Federal Aid Highway Act.

But today, with petroleum a financially and environmentally costly commodity and global warming and air pollution triggering worldwide concern, it might be time for an overhaul, reformers say.

Shepard also sees a health benefit from a change in transportation priorities. If federal funds are put to making streets safe for non-motorized transportation, that could help lure folks out of their cars and toward obesity- and heart disease-fighting ways of getting around like walking and biking, he said.

"The way the streets are designed, they're actually hazardous to bicyclists and pedestrians," Shepard said. "It doesn't have to be that way."

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And as sprawl spreads, smart transportation plans tie in with building sustainably oriented neighborhoods, said Lisa Ballard, owner of Bozeman consulting firm Current Transportation Solutions.

"You can't just build roads without connecting it to the way our neighborhoods are designed," Ballard said.

Meanwhile, for those 65 and older, expanding transportation options like buses will help enable them to remain independent, she said.

Pushing policymakers to think more about how to move people and less about how to move cars is a good

first step toward building healthy people and communities, Ballard said.

"A lot of it really is just a shift in policy and how people think," she said.

It's clear that a rural state like Montana will always need roads and cars, she said. Yet diverting a relatively small part of the massive federal transportation allocation would go a long way toward changing the way people get around, members of the coalition say.

"We think there's a great opportunity here," Lange said.

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