

Public comment opens on funding proposal for conservation project near Fort Harrison

By: MTN News

Posted at 11:24 AM, Dec 01, 2018 and last updated 1:24 PM, Dec 01, 2018

The public will have a chance to weigh in on a proposal to use money from Lewis and Clark County's Open Space Bond for a conservation project near Fort Harrison.

The county commission voted Thursday to open 30 days of public comment on Prickly Pear Land Trust's request for \$340,000 for the Peaks to Creeks Acquisition Project.

PPLT requested the funding in February. It would cover 16 percent of the costs to buy 183 acres along Tenmile Creek and 351 acres along Sevenmile Creek.

PPLT acquired both parcels in 2016, through a partnership with Fort Harrison. The Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit, provided “bridge funding” to help the land trust purchase the property quickly. The open space funding would allow the land trust to pay back the Conservation Fund and wrap up the acquisition process.

“This is the final piece that brings together so many different factors that have been a part of making this project and the partnership with Fort Harrison become a reality,” said PPLT executive director Mary Hollow.

Hollow said PPLT will not be able to take on additional financial risk until the Conservation Fund money is repaid.

The land trust has already begun work on the two parcels. The Tenmile Creek land has been turned into a park, with more than four miles of accessible trails and public access to the creek. They have done substantial stream restoration work at Sevenmile Creek.

Much of the money for purchasing the land came from the Montana Army National Guard and the U.S. Department of Defense’s Army Compatible Use Buffer program. That program provides up to 75 percent of funding to purchase or put easements on

land around military installations, to ensure that it remains open space or is used in ways that are compatible with military operations. The rest of the costs must be covered by a partner like PPLT.

ACUB money cannot be used to purchase land for the military or for military operations.

Rick Lamach, master planner for the Montana Department of Military Affairs, said they're proud of the role they've had in making the Peaks to Creeks project possible.

"The thought of having a trail system that runs all the way from the public lands at Mount Helena City Park to the Scratch Gravel Hills sounds good," he said.

Lamach said they look forward to working together with groups like PPLT on future projects.

Commissioner Andy Hunthausen said Friday that the commission will wait for the public comment period to finish, but that they are interested in the Peaks to Creeks Project and what it can accomplish.

"We're generally all positive on the project," he said. "We'll see how the comment comes in over the next 30 days."

Hunthausen said the commission will likely make its final decision in early January.

If you'd like to comment on the request for Open Space Bond funding, you can email the county commissioners at bocc@lccountymt.gov.

-Reported by Jonathon Ambarian/MTN News