Chapter 5: Pedestrian, Bicycle and Transit Analysis

5.1 Introduction

Alternative modes of transportation to the private automobile are increasingly an important component of transportation planning. As population grows and the community expands, and the resulting impacts of more traffic become evident on the roadway network, it becomes necessary to expand the role of other transportation choices.

Bicyclists, pedestrians and transit riders comprise the majority of the community's alternative transportation modes and are system users with unique transportation needs and characteristics. These users, in concert with the more traditional vehicular travelers, form a transportation system commonly known as "multi-modal". Multi-modal travel characteristics are an important part of this Transportation Plan. Providing choices for the recreational and commuter traveler, and for those using alternate travel modes to fulfill their daily needs, improves the quality of living in a community and can ultimately relieve pressures on the transportation system. These "alternative" modes of travel can reduce the amount of vehicles on the roadway network, which benefits the entire community by reducing the need for capacity expansion projects, improves air quality, and reduces congestion and travel times.

As stated in **Chapter 1** of this Plan, this document strives to satisfy and incorporate the *Vision* defined for the community under past planning efforts. The *Vision* relies heavily on alternate modes of transportation, improvements to noise and air quality, and encouragement to use bicycling, walking and transit facilities. To reach this *Vision*, the following goals and strategies discussed in **Chapter 1** are restated below:

- Make transit and non-motorized modes of transportation viable alternatives to the private automobile for travel in and around the community.

- Provide transportation choices to the conventional automobile mode of travel through development and encouragement of public transit, on-street bicycle lanes, and off-street pedestrian/bicycle paths, with interconnection to area neighborhoods.

- Provide pedestrian and bikeway facilities and link them together when planning transportation system improvements and when reviewing land development proposals.

- Explore transit planning and development programs to aggressively market and promote transit usage throughout the community.

This chapter of the Transportation Plan will examine the three primary alternative modes of transportation used in the Great Falls urban area; pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit

riders. All three user groups have different travel patterns and different usages. They also have a mixed medium upon which they travel.

5.2 Pedestrian Analysis

Existing Sidewalk Network

The urban area pedestrian transportation system is comprised mainly of sidewalks adjoining the street network, with area trails also serving area pedestrians. In some cases, especially on low-volume rural roadways, the road surface itself serves pedestrian movements, although area transportation and land use professionals are working to provide separated facilities on new or reconstructed roadways, as well as in existing subdivisions where such facilities are lacking.

As a starting point to examining the adequacy of the existing sidewalk facilities in the community, an inventory of existing pedestrian infrastructure on the major roadway network was performed. The results of this data collection effort are contained in **Chapter 2** of this Transportation Plan. **Figure 2-15** identifies the presence or lack of sidewalks along the major street network.

Figure 2-15 can be used to help identify areas where improvements might be warranted when roadway reconstruction projects take place, or when sidewalk construction projects are contemplated. For example, **Figure 2-15** shows that the downtown Central Business District (CBD) has a complete sidewalk system, with sidewalks generally on both sides of a given street for full, continuous pedestrian movements throughout the district. However, when looking at other areas of the community, continuous pedestrian travel is not always possible. For instance, segments along 13th Avenue South have gaps in the sidewalk continuity that could be filled to provide a continuous sidewalk system. The same can be stated for many areas of the City, although recent projects have improved the sidewalks in a number of areas, especially near schools and along major arterials such as 3rd Avenue Northwest and 10th Avenue South.

The inventory of the existing sidewalk system is a useful tool to identify potential sidewalk system additions. It should be noted that many of the trails shown as part of the bikeway network also serve pedestrians, although the separated trails are not shown on **Figures 2-15**.

ADA Access

Another measure that enables transportation planners to look at the adequacy of an existing pedestrian system is the presence of wheelchair-accessible ramps along the sidewalk system. The presence of existing wheelchair accessible ramps was inventoried and is as shown on **Figure 2-16** in **Chapter 2**. This figure shows several intersections where wheelchair access ramp installation should be considered. The Central Business District (CBD) includes ramps at nearly all intersections, providing for full movement throughout the district. However, many of the area's major corridors and commercial areas do not have full access at all intersection corners. **Figure 2-16** should be used as a guide for identifying ADA access needs, and to prioritize new ADA ramp projects. The

Figure should be used only as a guide, however, since some intersections do not have full sidewalks, or are "T" intersections where ramps on all sides are not appropriate. For example, there are some "T" intersections along busy corridors, where pedestrians should only cross at signalized intersections, and existing center raised medians prohibit street crossings. Any proposed project should include a full site investigation for a full scoping for appropriateness.

It should also be noted that many areas on **Figure 2-16** that show no wheelchair access ramps are along rural roadway sections (i.e. no sidewalk and/or curb & gutter is evident along the roadway). In circumstances like this, it is reasonable to expect no ramps are needed unless or until other upgrades occur. It is recommended that areas shown on **Figure 2-16** that do not have any wheelchair access ramps be evaluated for potential construction of ramps as funding and value to the system become known.

Transition Plans

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) required all public organizations to adopt a Transition Plan identifying physical obstacles limiting access to programs, services and activities by persons with disabilities. Specifically, The ADA requires public agencies with more than 50 employees to make a transition plan. The transition plan must include a schedule for providing access features, including curb ramps for walkways. (28 CFR §35.150(d)(2)). The schedule should first provide for pedestrian access upgrades to State and local government offices and facilities, transportation, places of public accommodation, and employers, followed by walkways serving other areas. 28 CFR §35.150(d)(2). The transition plan should accomplish the following four tasks:

1. identify physical obstacles in the public agency's facilities that limit the accessibility of its programs or activities to individuals with disabilities;

2. describe in detail the methods that will be used to make the facilities accessible;

3. specify the schedule for taking the steps necessary to upgrade pedestrian access to meet ADA and Section 504 requirements in each year following the transition plan; and,

4. indicate the official responsible for implementation of the plan. (28 CFR §35.150(d)(3). (9-12-06))

While the City of Great Falls prepared and implemented a Transition Plan in the early and mid-1990s, there may have been no provision for public street accessibility (i.e., curb ramps) and other related improvements. Likewise, research has not produced a Cascade County Transition Plan relative to public streets.

ADA street network deficiencies (as related in **Chapter 2**) have been identified in the Urban Area on the major street network, and the City is currently implementing strategies for upgrade. However, this has not been documented in a Transition Plan. Cascade

County, due to its rural nature, has very few such facilities. It is recommended that the City of Great Falls document current deficiencies and its strategy for upgrading facilities, and that Cascade County also perform an analysis for compliance with ADA. Finally, it is recommended that MDT coordinate with local jurisdictions when updating its statewide Transition Plan.

Committed Project

A current, committed project, funded through the MACI program, includes ADA upgrades to intersections on urban routes, and is expected to be initiated in 2009 or 2010.

Proposed Improvements to Benefit Pedestrians

A variety of projects are being recommended in this Transportation Plan document to benefit pedestrian travel within the community. Some of these projects are already planned or being designed. Several funding scenarios are available to implement these projects, including those listed in the following section. Note that pedestrian facilities that are also shared with bicyclists are shown in the following section.

Montana Air & Congestion Initiative (MACI) Sidewalk Program: The MACI program was instituted several years ago as a means to reduce air pollution directly attributable to vehicles within a community. Up until 1998, the City of Missoula was the only Montana city eligible to receive funding under this program. Under the Federal transportation bill known as TEA-21, the cities of Great Falls and Billings became eligible to participate in the MACI program. The program is administered through the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). Approximately 14 locations throughout the city have been identified for sidewalk installation projects, mainly to "fill-in-the-gap" along an existing sidewalk corridor, with priority areas near schools. The majority of these locations will be completed in 2009, and these locations are not shown in this Plan, as they have been considered completed for the purposes of this Plan. However, this Plan recommends a continuation of the program, and identification of new priority projects for construction.

Community Transportation Enhancement Program (CTEP): Each year, the City of Great Falls and Cascade County receive an allocation of Federal funds to be used on eligible activities. One of the eligible categories is "bicycle and pedestrian facilities", which includes sidewalks, trails, and related amenities and facilities. Both local entities have, in past years, used a portion of their allocations on pedestrian projects. One committed project is to construct a sidewalk along a portion of 23rd Street South. While this Plan does not identify every CTEP project, it does recognize the value of this program to fund necessary pedestrian projects.

5.3 Bicycle Analysis

Background / Existing Bikeway Network

Formal planning activities for a bikeway network in the Great Falls community officially began over twenty-five years ago in the fall of 1975. This first formal planning endeavor was a joint effort between the Great Falls City – County Planning Board and the former Citizens Involvement Committee – Bikeways Task Force. This joint planning effort culminated with the creation of a twenty year, comprehensive bikeway network of roughly 46 miles of bicycling facilities. The recommended network was devised to accommodate a multitude of special needs, notably recreational usages, home-to-work usages, proximity to shopping centers, and proximity to schools. The recommended network consisted of a system of bike paths, bike lanes, and bike routes. The information generated from this effort was bound under a document titled "The 1976 Bikeway Plan".

The 1976 Bikeway Plan document was approved, adopted and incorporated in the local Transportation Plan. Since the Plan's initial creation, the document has been periodically reviewed in conjunction with other planning efforts taking place within Great Falls. The most recent revision to the original bikeway plan occurred during May of 1996. The primary purposes for the review and subsequent revision were as follows:

- To identify completed bicycling facilities since the original Bikeway Plan.
- To delete inappropriate bicycling facilities from the Bikeway Plan.
- To recommend new bicycling facilities to reflect current opportunities & possibilities.
- To recommend an updated network of bicycling facilities.

After the original Bikeway Plan was reviewed and projects identified for deletion and/or addition, findings were issued under a document prepared by the Great Falls City – County Planning Board, in conjunction with the Local Trails Working Group, known as the Bikeway Facilities Technical Memorandum. This technical memorandum contained all known and applicable information on the "formal" bikeway network in the community and has been the most current planning document to date since its creation in May of 1996. As part of this transportation planning effort, the existing bikeway network map was first reviewed and updated to show bicycle facility projects that had been completed since 1996. This update was prepared graphically and is contained in **Figure 5-1**. After updating the existing bikeway network, a series of public meetings, as described earlier in **Chapter 1**, was held with the area bicycle users. As a result of the meetings, an updated Bikeway Network was created to provide for future bicycling opportunities and uses in the community.

Committed Bikeway Network Projects

Bikeway facility improvements identified as priorities in the 2003 Transportation Plan have been committed (priorities 1, 2 and 4) and are scheduled to be let for construction in 2009. The final identified priority (priority 3), improvements from the west end of Warden Bridge, has been approved for a CTEP project, and will begin design in 2009.

The three combined projects scheduled for construction in 2009 are as follows:

- 38th Street North/6th St SW Bridge Underpass/8th Ave N bike route signs: A separated bike path along 38th Street North, north of 10th Avenue North follows the west side of 38th Street North, along the easterly edge of the American Legion ballparks, crossing River Drive North at the signalized intersection, crossing the railroad tracks at the current River Drive North crossing and generally Giant Springs Road to tie into the existing River's Edge Trail. The project has been tied to two other bike facility improvements, including a "loop" trail taking bicyclists off the south end of the 6th Street SW Bridge, allowing them to go under the roadway using the river bridge crossing. Also, bike route signs will be installed on 8th Avenue North.

Estimated Cost: $ 307,000 (MACI)

Proposed Bikeway Network and System Improvements

The projects described below and shown graphically on **Figure 5-2** are a direct result of the public participation process, interaction with various members of the Great Falls Planning staff and others involved with this project, and on the recommendations and experience of the traffic consultant preparing this Transportation Plan. The main goals of this updated network are to encourage expansion to the southwest portion of the community, improve crossing opportunities along major arterial corridors (such as 10th Avenue South), help create a grid system of bikeway facilities in the Central Business District (CBD), and improve access to the River's Edge Trail. The recommended projects for future needs of the bicycle system are listed below. Note that the estimated costs presented include only construction costs and not engineering, inspection, or right-of-way acquisition (if needed). Estimated costs are in year-of-expenditure dollars.

- BIKE-1. River's Edge Trail - South Loop: Complete the south loop of Rivers Edge Trail. Completed loop would extend from the end of Rivers Edge Trail at Garden Home Park along Bay Drive to the end of the trail at Overlook Drive and Warden Park. BIKE-1 is separated into 4 phases for scheduling and estimating purposes.

    - BIKE-1A. Bay Dr to 6th St SW – Construct 10' wide sidewalk from south end of Bay Drive separated trail along Huffman Ave to 3rd St SW. Cross 3rd St. SW and construct separated trail westward along existing utility easement to 6th St SW. Landowner approval required.

      Estimated Cost: $205,100
      (Source: Private; CTEP)

    - BIKE-1B. 6th St SW. Replace existing deteriorated asphalt bike trail along east side of 6th St SW between Country Club Boulevard/I-315 and RR crossing.

      Estimated Cost: $25,300
      (Source: Private; CTEP)

- BIKE-1C. Sun River Connection. Construct separated bike trail on north side of Country Club Boulevard between Fox Farm Road and Warden Bridge.

  Estimated Cost: $725,600
  (Source: Private; CTEP; Rec. Trails Grant)

- BIKE-1D. Construct separated bike trail from south end of existing River's Edge Trail at Overlook Drive and Warden Park, northeastward along the south shoulder of Overlook Drive to the intersection of 10th Avenue South. Cross 10th Ave S and 2nd St S at existing pedestrian crossings and connect to existing widened sidewalk on north side of 10th Ave S.

  Estimated Cost: $115,800
  (Source: Private; CTEP)

- BIKE-2. Riverview Connection: Provide Bike/Ped connection to River's Edge Trail from Riverview neighborhoods. Bike facility would extend eastward from Riverview Elementary along Smelter Ave to 3rd Street NW where it would cross to connect to 4th St NE, which it would follow to River's Edge Trail at West Bank Park.

  Estimated Cost: $130,400
  (Source: Private; CTEP; SRTS)

- BIKE-3. 36th Street and Fairway Drive: Designate a bike route beginning at the south end of the new 38th St Connection separated trail, extending westward 2 blocks along Fairway Drive and then extending south 20 blocks along 36th Street to 10th Avenue South.

  Estimated Cost: $15,500

- BIKE-4. 8th Avenue South Bike Route: Designate bike route on 8th Ave S to provide parallel route to 10th Ave South. Construct separated trail through Chowen Park and Dudley Anderson Park.

  Estimated Cost: $101,600

- BIKE-5. 2nd Street South: Designate a Bike Route along 2nd Street from 10th Avenue South to Gibson Park. Include Sharrow pavement markings along the route.

  Estimated Cost: $16,800

- BIKE-6. 4th Avenue North and 52nd Street: It is recommended that the bike route designation on 4th Avenue North, west of 38th Street North, be extended eastward to 52nd Street. The bicycle route designation should also be extended south on 52nd Street to the intersection with 2nd Avenue North. Included with this recommendation is to mark the area described with appropriate "bike route" designation signs.

  Estimated Cost: $4,400

- BIKE-7. 11th Avenue South, 23rd Street South and 16th Avenue South: It is recommended that a new bicycle lane be designated on 11th Avenue South (between 39th Street South and 23rd Street South), 23rd Street South (between 11th Avenue South and 16th Avenue South), and on 16th Avenue South (between 23rd Street South and 20th Street South). This new facility will serve to provide bicycle commuter access to the large employment centers surrounding Benefis East, and provide a route south of 10th Avenue South. Again, it is recommended to mark the area described under this project with eight inch wide white paint lanes and appropriate "bike route" designation signs.

  Estimated Cost: $24,300

- BIKE-8. Fox Farm Connection: It is recommended that a new bicycle path connection be installed underneath the west end of the Warden Bridge. This path would begin at the east end of Meadowlark Drive, cross a private lot on a proposed easement, traverse along the south right-of-way of 10th Avenue South, pass underneath the west end of the Warden Bridge, then traverse back to the west to tie into the north side of 10th Avenue South and to the bike/pedestrian facility on the north side of the Warden Bridge. A private access easement may also be required.

  Estimated Cost: $169,000

- BIKE-9. Gore Hill Interchange Connection: Provide for a separated bike path connecting the Gore Hill interchange to the westerly end of Park Garden Road and southerly end of Marketplace Drive. This link would serve to enhance bicycling opportunities for futu[re] development around the airport area (including and especially residential subdivisions on Gore Hill), as well as extend the syst[em] to the southwest portion of the community. This trail has been proposed as part of subdivision proposals in the area, provided by the developer.

  Estimated Cost: $93,300

View Figure 5-1

View Figure 5-2

- BIKE-10. Park Garden Road (west of Fox Farm Road): It is recommended that a bicycle lane be designated on Park Garden Road from its intersection with Fox Farm Road west to the intersection with Marketplace Drive. This would involve the use of the existing at-grade crossing of the BNSF railroad grade. This link would ultimately tie into the recommended bike path extending up to the Gore Hill interchange.

  Estimated Cost: $ 11,200

- BIKE-11. 26th Street South, 24th Avenue South, 13th Street South, 23rd Avenue South and 9th Street South: It is recommended that a new bicycle lane be designated on 26th Street South (between 16th Avenue South and 24th Avenue South), 24th Avenue South (between 13th Street South and 26th Street South), 23rd Avenue South (between 9th Street South and 13th Street South) and on 9th Street South (between 17th Avenue South and 24th Avenue South). In addition, a short segment of 13th Street South (between 21st Avenue South and 24th Avenue South) is recommended for a new bicycle lane designation. The existing roadways are fairly narrow for this purpose, and as such any bicycle facility built here in the future would have to be on a newly widened shoulder. This is a long-range project, recommended for implementation as development occurs to this outlying area.

  Estimated Cost: $ 29,700

- BIKE-12. Central Avenue West (between 34th Street Northwest and the I-15 interchange): Provide for a bicycle facility along this corridor. Widen the paved shoulders to allow striping a bicycle lane along the edge of the travel lanes. Adequate right-of-way exists throughout this corridor. This improvement also could be done in conjunction with a roadway reconstruction/upgrade project.

  Estimated Cost: $ 412,500

- BIKE-13. 13th Avenue South: It is recommended that a bike route be designated for the extension of 13th Avenue South between 4th Street South and 9th Street South. This project would provide continuity along 13th Avenue South to the west. A short segment of this route would be on 7th Street South. A connection through Warden Park, between Overlook Drive and 4th Street South, is in place but needs asphalt surfacing.

  Estimated Cost: $ 38,200

- BIKE-14. 13th Avenue Southwest and 13th Avenue Southwest: Designate a bike route along 13th Avenue SW (west of 6th ST SW) and 14th ST SW to Park Garden Rd.

  Estimated Cost: $ 6,600

- BIKE-15. 36th Avenue Northeast (west of 9th Street Northeast): This portion of 36th Avenue Northeast is recommended for addition to the official "bicycle route" for the community. The area has undergone substantial development in recent years, and will continue to do so. A wide roadway, the proximity of an already designated bike route (9th Street Northeast), and the presence of a school near the west end of the roadway make this a desirable addition. It is recommended the route be extended westerly to the intersection of 6th Street Northwest (once that roadway facility is

constructed), as well as extending a marked bicycle lane south on 6th Street Northwest to its intersection with Smelter Avenue.

Estimated Cost: $ 21,200

- BIKE-16. 67th Street North: Extend connection from River's Edge Trail at the Rainbow Dam Overlook south and southeasterly towards Malmstrom Air Force Base on a separated trail. Follow old roadbed initially and then parallel Giant Springs Road/67th Street North to intersection with 18th Avenue North.

  Estimated Cost: $ 237,100

- BIKE-17. Upper River Road, 19th Avenue South and 17th Avenue South: Widen shoulders and designate a bike lane along Upper River Road (just south of Overlook Drive) extending south to 19th Avenue South, then east along 19th Avenue South, north to 17th Avenue South and then east on 17th Avenue South to the intersection with 4th Street South. This could be done in conjunction with a roadway improvement project.

  Estimated Cost: $ 277,000

- BIKE-18. 14th Street North, 15th Street North, and 12th Avenue North: Designate a bike lane along 14th Street North and 15th Street North (north of 8th Avenue North) to 12th Avenue North. Also on 12th Avenue North, east of 15th Street North, to the River's Edge Trail. This route is presently being used to some extent by area bicyclists. This project would provide another access to the River's Edge Trail.

  Estimated Cost: $ 129,900

- BIKE-19. 36th Avenue NE, 15th Street NE: Designate a bike route from 36th Ave NE and 9th St NE, east along 36th Ave NE, south along 15th St NE to separated trail at Railroad Ave.

  Estimated Cost: $ 11,600

- BIKE-20. Lower River Road: Construct separated trail from existing River's Edge Trail at Overlook Drive, south along Lower River Rd until it narrows, then transition to bike lanes with a widened shoulder and end at around 24th Ave S.

  Estimated Cost: $ 333,800

- BIKE-21. Bike racks in Central Business District (CBD): It is recommended that bike racks be installed within the limits of the CBD to the greatest extent possible. Some racks are already evident, but the presence of more racks per block may encourage more bicycle usage in the downtown area.

  Estimated Cost: $ 10,000 (BID)

- BIKE-22. Inventory and Modify Signing and Pavement Markings on Bicycle Facilities: A common theme noted at the various public meetings, over the course of the project, has been the lack of adequate pavement markings delineating bicycle facilities and the lack of actual signs marking the various facilities. Questions ranged from why designated bicycle routes weren't marked on the asphalt, to why 6th Street

Southwest does not have a painted bike lane with symbols and words. A recommendation would be to update signing and pavement markings as funding becomes available and as appropriate. High volume bicycle routes should receive priority over less used facilities.

Estimated Cost: Unknown

- BIKE-23. Bicycle Education Program: It is advised to create a bicycle education program with an educational brochure and possible bicycle group involvement with the schools. The brochure would be utilized to discuss the different types of bicycling facilities in the community, and the laws and regulations pertinent to vehicular traffic and bicycling concerns. Special consideration should be given to educating bicyclists about the benefits of helmet usage. The intended audience would be the schools, the Malmstrom Air Force Base, and any others deemed appropriate.

  Estimated Cost: $ 10,000 (SRTS)

- BIKE-24. 18th Avenue Southwest bike/ped crossing: Provide bike route signs along 18th Avenue Southwest and negotiate with BNSF for a trail crossing of the railroad, to connect Fox Farm neighborhood with the Marketplace shopping area.

  Estimated Cost: Unknown
  (included as an illustrative project)

TOTAL BIKEWAY NETWORK AND SYSTEM PROJECTS = $3,462,900

Long Range Project

The following project may become a functional component of the trail system, although funding sources are not identified at this time. Funding is likely through private sources, including grants and a private capital campaign. Should federal or state funding sources become available for a project such as this, the project should be considered for funding.

It is not included in the fiscal constraint determination, and is included for illustrative purposes.

LONG RANGE PROJECT: 10th Street Bridge Rehabilitation
Problem: Structural Deterioration
Recommendation: Rehabilitate historic 10th Street Bridge and incorporate as a functional component of the area trail system.
Estimated Cost: $3,000,000
Possible Funding Sources: SPECIAL APPROPRIATIONS, PRIVATE, OTHER

Fiscal Constraint

Even though specific funds have not been identified for many of the proposed projects, past success in receiving Community Transportation Enhancement Program (CTEP) funds for trail projects have shown that, traditionally, approximately half of the yearly allocations have been available for trail projects. Because the estimated CTEP allocations until 2030 are projected to be $6.8 million, excluding local match (13.42%), it is assumed that there will be enough funds available over the life of the plan to fund the recommend

project list (the total of which is estimated at approximately half of the 20-year CTEP Federal amount).

In addition, the following projects are considered fundable, based upon current funding commitments and availability of CTEP funds in the near future:

Project I.D.	Estimated Cost*	Funding Sources
BIKE-1A	$205,100	CTEP; Private
BIKE-1B	$25,300	CTEP; Private
BIKE-1C	$725,600	CTEP; Private; Rec Trails Grant
BIKE-1D	$115,800	CTEP; Private
BIKE-2	$130,400	CTEP; SRTS; Private

* In anticipated year-of-expenditure

Further projects are fundable with traditional funding sources (CTEP, MACI, PRIVATE, STP, Recreational Trails Grant, Safe Routes to School, etc.), but funding cannot be guaranteed at this time. Funding should be assigned on a case-by-case basis as funding opportunities arise.

5.4 Transit Analysis

History of Existing Transit System

The history of the existing public transit system in Great Falls goes back to 1978 when, by voter referendum, the establishment of a Transit District was approved. The purpose of the Transit District is to provide an alternative form of transportation to residents of the City of Great Falls. Funding for the district is provided by a combination of fare collections, property tax revenue, and Federal funds (including a yearly transfer of air quality improvement funds from the MACI program). Passenger service within the Transit District commenced in February, 1982.

Since the creation of the Great Falls Transit District, a variety of studies and plans have been created to assist the District with operations, and specific measures to improve financial sustainability and customer needs were identified. Several component studies were undertaken as part of a larger "Transit Development Plan (TDP)" completed by Nelson\Nygaard Consultants between 1998 and 2000. Much of the existing and proposed information presented herein relies heavily on the TDP prepared and completed by Nelson\Nygaard Consultants. This plan contained three volumes of information:

- Volume 1: Existing Conditions
  This portion of the TDP offered a detailed analysis of ridership characteristics and other key planning information for the system as it existed in 1998. The work effort included a ridership count by stop location and by trip, as well as data from an on-board questionnaire.

- Volume 2: Partial Service and Implementation Plans
  This volume laid out the proposed 1999 restructuring of the District's management and operations, and included a large public involvement component.

- Volume 3: Year 2000 Service Initiatives and 1999 Review
  This final volume of the TDP brought the Plan up-to-date through January 2000, and essentially served to summarize all needed recommendations for the Great Falls Transit District Transit Development Plan. The primary elements of this volume were a service analysis to identify areas of service design improvement coupled with recommendations for capital improvements and marketing initiatives.

Existing Transit System

Currently, the Great Falls Transit District operates seven lines on weekdays with hourly service. Six of these lines also operate every 30 minutes during the peak hours (6:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.). This allows for extensive coverage during both school hour and commuter business hour travel times. Saturday service was eliminated in July of 2008, due to increased operating costs and shortfalls in funding. The service will be reinstated upon obtaining adequate funding. There is no transit service provided on Sundays.

The seven lines radiate from a timed-transfer point downtown at 1st Avenue South and 4th Street (referred to as the Downtown Timed Transfer Hub). Lines one through four also make timed connections at 57th Street South and 3rd Avenue South (called the East End Timed Transfer Hub). To reduce the need for transferring, six of the eight lines operate as through-routed pairs. For example, buses from Line 1 continue onto Line 2 and vice versa, so that one could ride from 35th Street and Central Avenue to Holiday Village Shopping Center on 10th Avenue South without transferring. Lines 3 and 4 also operate as a pair, as do lines 5 and 6.

A short description of the seven transit lines shown on **Figure 5-3**, along with their primary service market and basic ridership characteristics, are as follows:

Line 1 (Southeast): this route serves various medical facilities, shopping destinations, lower and higher educational facilities, and residential areas. The presence of all these components makes Line 1 the strongest line in the Great Falls system. Line 1 achieves this performance despite being very slow and circuitous. This line snakes its way through the area on minor streets, rather than running straight along an east – west roadway route. Line 1 gets relatively strong ridership all day, without a significantly strong morning or evening peak.

Line 2 (Central): this route serves Central Avenue from the Central Business District (CBD) to 44th Street, then turns south and east along 3rd Avenue South to the East End Timed Transfer Hub, where buses turn around and become Line 1. Line 2 serves numerous public and private schools, some commercial areas, and extensive residential areas. This line's high demand areas occur mostly around the schools on Central Avenue. Line 2 is comparatively consistent in its productivity throughout its entire length, with boardings occurring along the entire route, with primary focus centered on the various adjacent schools.

Line 3 (North Central): this route primarily runs along 8th Avenue North and has consistently low ridership when compared to the boardings of Lines 1 and 2. Line 3 runs adjacent to residential areas, a few small commercial centers, and services the Malmstrom Air Force Base. Ridership is generally low along the entire route, with the exception of each end. Line 3 is the only line that has a significant morning and evening peak at typical work-commute hours, with virtually no school hour peak.

Line 4: (South Central): Line 4 has rather high boarding counts between the CBD and 20th Street South. Daily activity is strongest in the early morning and mid-afternoon. These times correspond with school arrivals and releases. Additionally, there is a slight peak in the late evening, including some commuter traffic.

Line 5 (Northwest): Line 5 has high boardings around CM Russell High School, and in the older west side neighborhood around 3rd Avenue Northwest and 14th Street Northwest. Except for these two areas, each end of the line and Central Avenue West are the only areas of any significant activity. Ridership peaks in the early morning and in the mid-afternoon, corresponding to the beginning and end of school.

Line 6 (Northeast): Ridership on Line 6 occurs primarily at a few locations: the transit center, North Middle School and Wal-Mart. There are also a number of boardings around the node of commercial land uses at the intersection of 10th Avenue North and 14th Street North, which includes the Great Falls Transition Center. Daily activity on Line 6 is greatest in the morning and in the mid-afternoon, corresponding with school hours.

Line 7 (Southwest): This route serves a mostly residential area with the Marketplace Shopping Center located at the end of the line. Ridership has significantly increased during the last couple of years. This is the only route which runs on an hourly basis. There are no significant peaks during the day on Line 7.

The current transit rate schedule is shown as **Table 5-1**.

Table 5-1 – Transit Rate Schedule (2008)

Fare / Pass Type	**Rate**
Fare:	
Regular Fare	$ 1.00
Student Fare	$ 0.75
Senior Citizen & Disabled	$ 0.50
Children (5 yrs & under)	Free
Paratransit Service Clients	Free (with I.D.)
Passes:	
Regular Punch Pass (11 rides)	$ 10.00
Student Punch Pass (15 rides)	$ 10.00
Senior Citizen & Disabled Punch Pass (21 rides)	$ 10.00
Regular Monthly Pass	$ 30.00
Student Monthly Pass	$ 25.00
Senior Citizen & Disabled Monthly Pass	$ 21.00
Day Pass (Unlimited rides for one day)	$ 4.00

Existing Transit Goals

One of the immediate goals of the Great Falls Transit District will be to work towards implementation of the remaining, unimplemented service design changes recommended in the current Transit Development Plan completed by Nelson\Nygaard Consultants. Another immediate goal is to reinstate the Saturday service, which was cut in July of 2008. Local government should continue to support the Transit District to the greatest extent possible. In some cases, this may be in the form of requirements that a new development provide some sort of infrastructure compatible with transit facility usage. It may also mean expansion of Transit District boundaries as development occurs around the perimeter of the community. The four basic goals that govern the day-to-day operation of the system, and which were presented in previous study efforts, are as follows:

- Resolve running time and reliability problems;
- Improve ridership using the existing resources available;
- Respond to Transit District Board desires regarding new service; and
- Minimize disruption for existing riders.

Planned, Committed Route Improvements

As of this writing of the Transportation Plan document, there are only three planned, committed improvements known for the transit operations. All three involve modifications to the existing routes serving the community. Although many changes were identified and recommended as part of the previously mentioned Transit Development Plan, inadequate funding and unavailable personnel dictate that these items be placed on hold (they are described in greater detail in the following section of this Chapter). The three known and committed route changes are as shown on **Figure 5-4**.

Paratransit Operations

There are a number of paratransit operators that provide an alternative transit mode of travel to system users in the community. First and foremost is the paratransit known as the "Access Transportation Service", which is the ADA paratransit service provided by Great Falls Transit. The service is restricted to eligible registrants based on a functional assessment administered by the Great Falls Transit staff. The service is provided "in house" using GFTD employees and vehicles.

In addition to the service provided by the GFTD, there are several retirement developments that provide service to residents of the various retirement facilities. Some of the facilities that are served by Aging Services are The Lodge, Cambridge Court, Cambridge Place, and Rainbow Retirement Center.

Inter-City Transit

Finally, more traditional intercity bus service is available in the Great Falls community via Greyhound Bus Lines and Rimrock Trailways, via the route to Butte which connects to other intercity service. The Northern Transit Interlocal provides service between Great Falls and Shelby. The service was established in 2008.

View Figure 5-3

View Figure 5-4

Identified Transit Needs

The Transit Development Plan prepared as a part of past planning efforts identified several service design needs that were recommended for implementation. These needs are very valid and still warranted. The Great Falls Transit District plans to eventually implement the recommendations below upon realization of improved funding mechanisms.

Needs identified by the Transit District are as follows:

Consistent All-Day Schedule Pattern: one need identified during prior planning efforts was that of "timed-transfer" system. A timed-transfer system is one in which a service pattern is recognized that allows for the consistent and uniform scheduling pattern to move users throughout the day. The schedule is set up to optimize the operation of the transit system itself, and is not necessarily the most convenient schedule for the users of the system. The system provides for a consistent schedule at known times throughout the day (for example buses leave every :17 and :47 minutes after the hour), as well as providing a known down time at transfer points (say every 5 minutes). Currently, the transit system does not operate on a "timed-transfer" system, but rather operates on a system of coordinated schedules where all buses converge downtown every hour, and in some cases every half hour.

Evening and Weekend Service Demand: another need that has been identified, but not addressed, is that of longer service into the evenings and increased weekend service. Requests for these services changes have been made historically from the users of the system. Many businesses in Great Falls stay open into the evening, long after the transit service has shut down. Although extension of service longer in the evenings and into the weekend is a worthy endeavor, the TDP suggests this issue be deferred until more urgent priorities and fiscal constraints are eliminated.

Further Redesign Options: there are a variety of service redesign options recommended in the TDP prepared in May, 2000. It is clearly stated that any redesigns must address clearly identified problems. Suggestions were made for improving ridership and operations on Routes 1, 4 and 7. They are not reiterated in this document. The concluding statement on this identified need was that the Great Falls Transit should continue to operate the present network and conduct a new study of ridership by stop before any service route changes are made.

Fixed Stops: the need to go to a "fixed stop" system exclusively was identified as a beneficial improvement over the current system. Currently, the system operates on a combination of fixed stops and flag stops, whereby passengers can hail a bus at any safe location. Flag stop systems are common in smaller communities, and they have obvious advantages to the regular rider, but they also can present safety problems. A fixed stop system eliminates most of the inherent problems.

Marketing and System Image: it was suggested that the Great Falls Transit become more visible in the community through an extensive marketing program. This could serve to increase ridership on the system and present a more modern system image. Some of the suggestions contained in the TDP include advertising at fixed stops, providing electric overhead signs at the next fleet replacement for each bus, re-evaluation of advertising "bus wraps" on the buses, and an enhanced electronic brochure of the system and costs.

Rolling Stock Capital Needs: The GFTD operates with a fleet of twenty buses on the Fixed Route side and nine minivans on the Paratransit side of the operation. Thirteen buses are 1991 35' Gillig Phantom models, which have a useful life of 12 years. 2009 marks the beginning of the 18th year these buses have been in service. Four buses are 1999 25' Bluebird Transhuttle models, which have a useful life of 7 years. 2009 marks the beginning of the 10th year these buses have been in service. Finally, four buses are 2003 35' Gillig Lowfloor models, which have a useful life of 12 years. 2009 marks the beginning of the 6th year these buses have been in service.

Federal funding has been earmarked by Congress for two new buses that will replace two of the 1991 Gillig Phantom buses. These new buses will be 2009 30' Gillig Lowfloor models with a 12-year useful lifespan.

This leaves fifteen buses in need of replacement. At a 2008 cost of $320,000 each, $5,120,000 is needed to accomplish this replacement, and the cost will continue to rise.

Five Paratransit vans are 2003 Chevrolet Venture vans, which were converted for Paratransit use by the Braun Corporation and have a useful life of seven years or 100,000 miles. All five have reached, or will reach in early 2009, the 100,000 mile threshold. It will cost $200,000 to replace these vans, at 2008 prices.

Four Paratransit vans are 2005 Chevrolet Venture vans, which were converted for Paratransit use by the Braun Corporation and have a useful life of 7 years or 100,000 miles. All four have approximately 50,000 miles on them and will reach the end of their useful life in early 2011.

As of December of 2008, the only means of replacement of rolling stock has been through Congressional earmarks (Federal 5309 funds.) While Federal 5307 operating funds are eligible for capital use, the GFTD has been unable to meet the growing need for operating funding. This makes using operating dollars for capital vehicle replacement an unlikely scenario. Finding a long-term solution to capital needs must be a priority of the Transit District.

Federal economic recovery efforts and actions should be investigated for possible sources of funding capital needs.

Operating Needs: As fuel and other operating costs rise, and as area development and growth occurs and transits routes expand, further sources for operating funding should be investigated. Additional Federal funds, in the form of transportation funding authorizing bills, special appropriations or Federal economic stimulus efforts, should be pursued.

Additional local funding options such as expansion of the Transit District boundaries should also be explored.

Committed Transit Projects (Short Range with committed funds)

The Transit District has secured an appropriation for the purchase of two new buses and construction of a new vehicle wash system, in the amount of $787,920 (Federal 5309 funds). This amount includes $656,600 in federal funds (80%), matched with $131,320 in local funds (20%). The buses and wash system are expected to cost $794,317.50. Any cost above the earmark will be provided by the Transit District.

Operating support through the MACI program has been relied upon since the passage of SAFETEA-LU. A yearly transfer of $450,000 ($562,500, with local match) has occurred. While this support cannot be guaranteed, a transfer of a like amount through the end of the planning horizon has been assumed in this Plan. With the approval of the local transportation planning process, this support may continue. However, it should not be relied upon as a guaranteed source of operating revenue.