

# HELENA TO GREAT FALLS RAILROAD REACTIVATION FEASIBILITY STUDY

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## 2) Helena to Great Falls Railroad Reactivation Feasibility Study

### Details

The Helena to Great Falls railroad has been embargoed due to various structural and logistical issues. This project aims to assess the current state of the railroad and determine the feasibility of its repair and reactivation. The primary objectives include identifying existing issues with the track, locating wash-outs, and evaluating the necessity for remediation. Additionally, the project will assess the number of tunnels requiring upgrades and estimate the costs involved in reactivating the railroad. Finally, the project will explore potential financial partnerships that could support the reactivation efforts. By applying classroom knowledge in civil engineering and project management, learners will gain practical experience in infrastructure assessment and strategic planning.

[Montana official asks BNSF to reopen Great Falls-Helena line | Trains Magazine](#)

[Road closures continue along I-15 between Great Falls and Helena](#)

### Deliverables

The project will deliver a comprehensive report detailing the findings of the track assessment, including identified issues, wash-out locations, and necessary remediation actions. Additionally, the report will include an analysis of tunnel upgrade requirements and a cost estimation for the reactivation process. Finally, the project will propose potential financial partnership models to support the reactivation efforts.

# 1 ABSTRACT

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The Helena to Great Falls railroad has encountered significant structural and logistical challenges. This project focuses on evaluating the railroad's current condition and determining the feasibility of its repair and reactivation. First, we will identify existing track issues, locate washouts, and assess the remediation required. Second, we will evaluate the tunnels needing upgrades and estimate the costs of reactivating the line. Lastly, we aim to explore potential financial partnerships to support the reactivation efforts.

# 2 BACKGROUND

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In 1,886, on January 25, James Jerome Hill, president of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway (StPM&M), established the Montana Central Railway. There are several reasons why they decided to build a north-south railroad through central Montana to connect Great Falls with Helena and Butte. First, Butte was a booming mining town that needed to get its metals to market. Second, gold and silver had been discovered near Helena, and coal companies in Canada were eager to get their fuel to Montana's smelters. Third, Hill and his friend, Paris Gibson, founded the town of Great Falls on the Great Falls of the Missouri River in 1883 and promoted it as a site for developing cheap hydroelectricity and heavy industry. They provided low power, sewage, and water rates to attract commerce and industry to the city.<sup>i</sup>

On September 18, 1889, James J. Hill renamed the Minneapolis and St. Cloud Railway to the Great Northern Railway. On February 1, 1890, he transferred ownership of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba (StPM&M), Montana Central, and other rail systems he owned to the Great Northern Railway. Over time, most of these systems were integrated into the Great Northern. By 1907, the Montana Central was officially dissolved and fully incorporated into the Great Northern Railway. On October 31, 1987, Dennis Washington started a lease of Southern Montana main line, Montana Rail Link (MRL). However, they have confliction in Burlington Northern and the United Transportation Union because they were using track belonging to BNSF.

From Railroads Link Montana to the Nation (1881-1915)<sup>ii</sup>, the railroads revolutionized transportation, economy, and society between 1,881 and 1,815. Trains decreased travel time and increased safety for people traveling to Montana. Also, mining, ranching, and agriculture connected Montana to the national and international markets to grow the economy. Gold, silver, and copper production thrived due to railroad construction. Large-scale cattle and sheep ranching can access distant markets, and the coal industry expanded to fuel locomotives, further boosting industrialization.

From the perspective of social and cultural changes, trains brought consumer goods, mail-order houses, and fresh food, improving daily life and helping establish towns such as Billings, Livingston, and Havre. These towns became economic hubs to support local businesses and labor unions. Immigrants from China, Japan, and Europe had job opportunities to construct the railroad.

In communication and tourism with railroad construction, telegraph lines along railroads improved communication, leading to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park (1872) and Glacier National Park (1910), connecting rail networks to reach communities for entertainment, traveling circuses, and political campaigns.

However, there were some conflicts and controversies between farmers and workers. Farmers protested high transportation costs, while industrialists benefited from favorable rates. Railroad corporations held substantial power over Montana's economy through land grants and political influence, and train robberies and worker exploitation were common issues.

Consequently, railroads played a crucial role in Montana's transportation system. Even though they brought prosperity, growth, and modernization, they also contributed to the loss of Native American lands and shifts in social dynamics in 1915.

From the Montana Branch Line Study Phase II Other At-Risk Lines <sup>iii</sup>, even though the Great Falls and Helena railroad is no traffic at this time, there's a chance that it will reopen and operate by a short line operator. The railroad moved between 1 and 5 million gross ton miles (GTM) or 3 to 5 trains per day through 1997. Between 1997 and 2000, the BNSF realized an increase in the north/south in general and began routing almost twice as much traffic via Laurel instead of Helena, they closed the railway to Helena by 2003, and MRL began to get five-day a week service from Laurel to Great Falls. If the line were opened, the MRL stated it would probably use the branch as a route through to Canada. The MRL, however, is satisfied with current operations.

On January 1, 2024, MRL was absorbed into BNSF, including MRL operations, technology and personnel. <sup>iv</sup>

Figure 1 showed the current status of the railway between Helena and Great Falls. We will discuss the following topics in the draft.

- Current state of the railroad and dilemmas of reactivation plan
- Primary transportation methods between Helena and Great Falls before rail reactivation
- Determine the feasibility of railroad's repair and reactivation
- Exist issues with the track, locate wash-outs, and evaluate the necessity of remediation
- Figure out the number of tunnels requiring upgrades and estimate the costs involved in reactivating the railroad
- Explore potential financial partnerships that could support the reactivation efforts

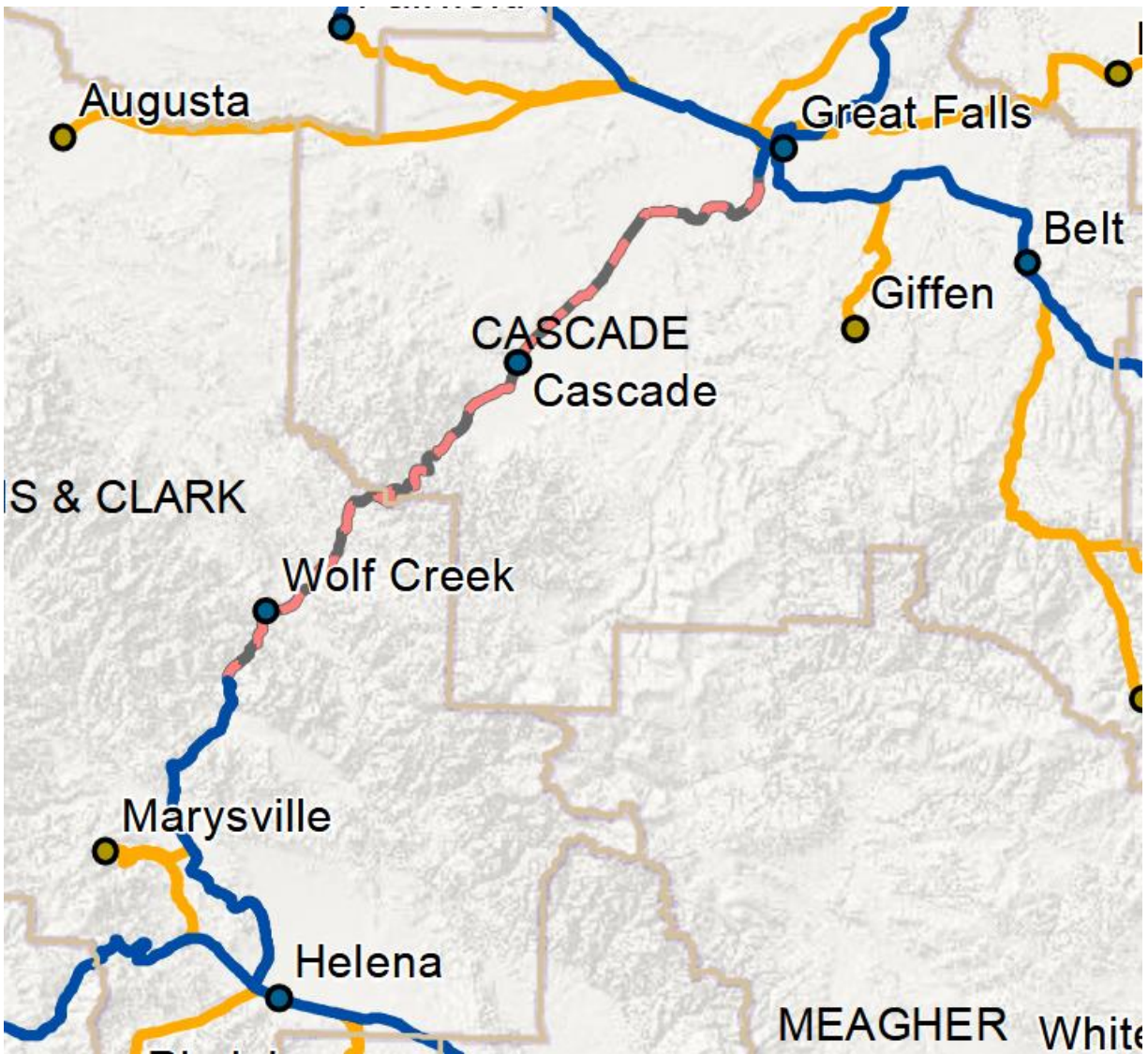


Figure 1: Helena to Great Falls rail from Railroads of Montana

### 3 INTRODUCTION

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#### 3.1 CURRENT STATE OF THE RAIL AND DILEMMAS OF REACTIVATION PLAN

##### 3.1.1 Montana Official Asks BNSF To Reopen Great Falls-Helena Line

The railroad connecting Helena to Great Falls is vital for boosting Montana's economic activity. According to *Trains* website, Montana Agriculture Department Director Ron de Yong urged BNSF Railway officials to reopen the Great Falls-to-Helena line to address ongoing traffic and shipping delays. He noted that the oil, coal, and intermodal shipments surge has significantly hindered the railroad's ability to transport essential agricultural products like corn, soybeans, and wheat.

As farmers increasingly planted alternative crops on fallow wheat fields, demand for shipments rose. Although BNSF has attempted to alleviate the situation by adding more rail cars and double-tracking 60 miles of track between Minot, North Dakota, and Glasgow, Montana, the continuous oil production and transport growth has kept the problem persistent.

De Yong presented several compelling reasons to reopen the Great Falls-to-Helena route, emphasizing its potential to reduce congestion on the northern rail line:

- BNSF cannot double-track its scenic southern border route near Glacier National Park without blasting part of a mountainside due to physical and political constraints
- If a significant snow slide derails oil cars into the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, reopening the Helena-to-Great Falls route would provide a critical alternative. This rerouted path could move shipments from Shelby through Helena and westward via the Montana Rail Link (MRL) to Spokane
- The Golden Triangle area, north of Great Falls, is diversifying its agricultural output. The reopened route could facilitate the southbound shipment of its products, such as Montana's high-quality malting barley and pulse crops like peas and lentils, which are in demand by Colorado brewers and other markets

Reopening this rail line could be a strategic solution to Montana's shipping challenges, enhancing regional commerce and agricultural efficiency.

BNSF's regional public affairs director, Matt Jones, stated that the railroad does not plan to reestablish service between Helena and Great Falls. After thorough evaluation, the company determined that expanding capacity to accommodate increased train traffic on this route would not yield sufficient economic or operational benefits. The Great Falls to Helena line have been out of service since 2000, and restoring it would require significant investment to upgrade or replace infrastructure, including tracks, sidings, bridges, signals, and telecommunication systems. Additionally, surplus cars would need to be transferred along parts of the route. BNSF has instead maintained connections with Montana Rail Link (MRL) through alternative routes, including the Great Falls to Laurel line and the line through Sandpoint, Idaho.

### **3.1.2 Contract Confliction Between BNSF & NTEC For Coal's Requirements**

From a news in NonStopLOCAL on June 27, 2023 <sup>v</sup>, BNSF Railway had a contract confliction with the Navajo Transitional Energy Co. (NTEC). A federal board ordered the BNSF to transport at least 4.2 million tons of coal to NTEC for overseas use. The U.S. Surface Transportation Board said BNSF has an ability to fulfill the contract demand for shippers. NTEC has lost revenue with \$165 million for the shortage of the coal destining for Japan and Korea. The board requested BNSF must move 23 trains of coal per month for NTEC, and another 6 trains per month when additional trains and crew are available. However, BNSF struggled to deliver products on time because the COVID-19 caused worker shortages to them. In the lawsuit between BNSF and coal company, they didn't meet a consensus on the coal's requirements, instead of 5.5 million tons of coal, BNSF only committed to deliver 3.1 million tons of coal. As a result, BNSF considered the costs associated with reopening the Great Falls to Helena line are not competitive compared to other investments to enhance capacity along the northern corridor.

### **3.1.3 Rail expansion at Calumet refinery threatens access to Great Falls wastewater treatment plant**

From a news posted on Jan 22, 2025<sup>vi</sup>, BNSF and Calumet planned to expand rail service at the Calumet refinery in Great Falls from one to three tracks. The expansion required closing a small rail crossing at Fourth Street Northeast. However, this method would influence the city's wastewater treatment plant, located north of Calumet and south of the Missouri River. If they tried to reroute access to the wastewater treatment plant, it would cost millions to the city. The government tried to figure out how they got funded for the plan.

Although the expansion will affect the wastewater treatment plant, expanding the rail line would bring value to Calumet with more capacity in its rail service and more efficient railcar switching for years. Calumet could compete with the West Bank Urban Renewal District, having become a victorious upriver commercial and public park development area.

The primary concern for the city is access to the treatment plant. Construction could block a significant stormwater outlet and the area located in a floodplain. If they built an access road from the west through the park, the access would be blocked by the bathroom building. Also, increasing the rail traffic in this area.

BNSF and Calumet planned to complete the rail expansion within 1 to 2 years. However, the city is figuring out solutions to its access problems. The estimated cost will be 2 million dollars to build a controlled gate at the Fourth Street crossing and 5 million dollars to construct a new road through West Bank Park. Combining both options would increase costs.

Calumet and its subsidiary, Montana Renewables, are the largest taxpayers in the city. However, they protested for taxes since 2017, preventing millions of dollars from being distributed to Great Falls and other public entities. Besides, they have privileged tax breaks from both the city and Cascade County and a \$1.4 billion loan from the federal government to support an expansion of Montana Renewables. Although they had conflicts with many benefits from the city, they stimulated the economy in Montana with an oil refinery and biofuel production. The rail expansion had been decided before Montana Renewables came online.

Once the railroad is finished, the additional rail will reduce congestion in the refinery's railyard and reduce the number of daily switches needed to handle inbound and outbound traffic. The expansion at West Bank Park, where the playground sits, will reduce to one line before it becomes more expansive, and the expansion out of the Calumet refinery would expand from one to three rail lines.

West Bank Park belongs to the West Bank Urban Renewal Tax Increment Financing District, which includes commercial developments. The district's market values steadily increased, and the tax increment captured in the fund even doubled its debt service obligations. However, the fund is insufficient to cover all potential construction costs through West Bank Park.

Even though Commissioner Susan Wolff made a forward-looking plan, she did not further explain the future development of the refinery, the riverside park, the growing commercial corridor, or a combination of them.

### 3.1.4 Greater Helena Area Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) – 2014 Update

From the 2014 LRTP goals in Helena <sup>vii</sup>, they planned several goals to maintain and improve the transportation system, estimate the safe and secure issues to the transportation system, support economic and environmental benefits to the community, and promote a financially sustainable transportation plan to further the transportation decision-making process.

The LRTP planned improvements such as rail infrastructure, focusing on railroad crossings and safety measures. Several railroad-related projects were identified, but most remain incomplete. Some important projects include:

- Benton Avenue Railroad Grade Separation
- Montana Avenue Railroad Grade Separation
- Henderson Street Railroad Crossing

The MDT compared the benefits and drawbacks of the railroad construction plan, such as the overpass and underpass options for Benton Avenue, and decided which option would be suitable for this crossing. Further information can be found in 3.1.6.

According to the record, trucks moved freight on Interstate 15 between Helena and Great Falls in 2012. The Great Falls-Helena rail line was out of service due to damage along the route. Further freight move and change plans on Interstate 15 can be found in 3.2.3.

Rail service in 2012 occupied seven percent of all freight in terms of dollars of freight. Figure 2 shows that of freight moved by rail in 2012, trucks (55%) and pipelines (29%) carried most of the goods. Rail only covered seven percent of total freight values in Montana. Figure 3 will show locations, types, active or passive, AADT in 2013, and notes of railroad crossings. The at-grade rail on Alfalfa Rd, Hill Dr, and Silver Creek must be repaired before the GF-Helena rail line is reactivated.

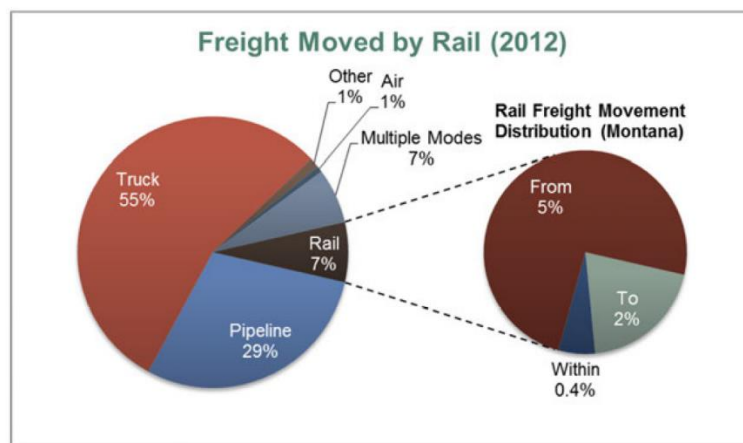


Figure 2: Freight Moved by Rail (2012)



ID #	Location	Type	Active/Passive	2013 Roadway	
				AADT	Notes
<b>MRL Line from Laurel, MT to Sandpoint, ID</b>					
1	S. Mitchell Gulch Rd	At-grade	Passive	Not available	
2	McClellan Creek Rd	At-grade	Passive	Not available	
3	MT 518	At-grade	Active	2,140	
4	S. Montana Ave	At-grade	Active	Not available	
5	HWY 282	At-grade	Active	Not available	Multiple crossings
6	HWY 282	At-grade	Passive	Not available	Montana City spur
7	US 12	Grade-separated	N/A	20,730	Overpass
8	Carter Dr	At-grade	Active	4,500	
9	Carter Dr	At-grade	Passive	4,500	Spur Line
10	I-15	Grade-separated	N/A	23,720	Overpass
11	N. Roberts St	At-grade	Active	2,840	Multiple crossings
12	N. Montana Ave	At-grade	Active	13,900	Multiple crossings
13	National Ave	At-grade	Active	Not available	Multiple crossings
14	Last Chance Gulch	Grade-separated	N/A	17,920	Overpass
15	Benton Ave	At-grade	Active	9,840	
16	Henderson St	Grade-separated	N/A	7,600	Underpass
17	Joslyn St	At-grade	Active	2,790	
18	Head Ln	At-grade	Active	310	
19	Birdseye Rd	At-grade	Passive	2,310	Spur
20	Birdseye Rd	At-grade	Active	1,510	
<b>BNSF Line to Great Falls (inactive)</b>					
21	Alfalfa Rd	At-grade	Passive	Not available	
22	Franklin Mine Rd	At-grade	Passive	690	
23	Hill Dr	At-grade	Passive	Not available	
24	Norris Rd	At-grade	Passive	420	
25	John G Mine Rd	At-grade	Passive	280	
26	Silver Creek	At-grade	Passive	Not available	
27	Lincoln Rd	At-grade	Active (no gate)	2,020	
28	Chevallier Dr	At-grade	Passive	50	

*Figure 3: Railroad Crossings*

However, the data provided by the Freight Analysis Framework estimates that the rail will only have six percent of the freight by value in Montana, less than the percentage of the freight in 2012. Since the rail traffic volume and frequency in Helena will impact the road traffic, the city will consider their economic factors and plans for infrastructure improvements, focusing on the road traffic and highway infrastructure. Figure 4 shows their estimation of freight moved

by rail in 2,040.

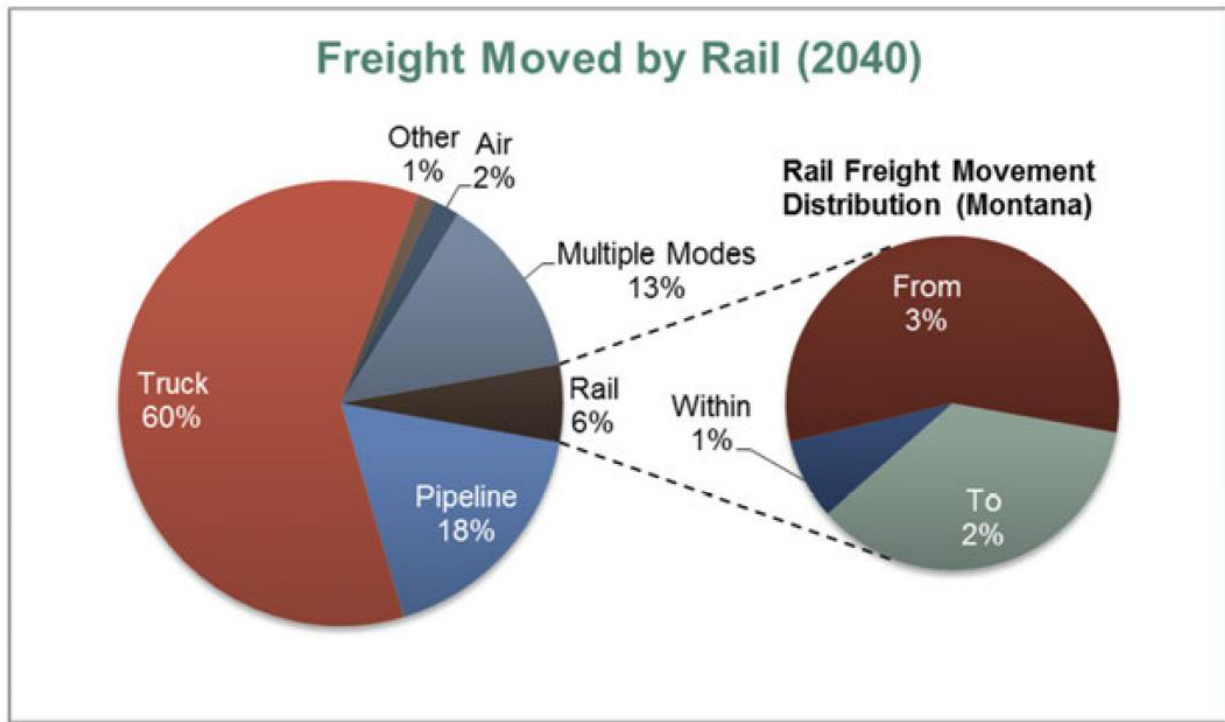


Figure 4: Freight Moved by Rail (2040)

### 3.1.5 Great Falls Area Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) – 2018 Update

From the Great Falls Area LRTP<sup>viii</sup>, the government aimed to facilitate the development of LRTP and complete the community's vision for the future transportation system with the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). Five principles follow goals and objectives:

- Create an intelligent transportation system through land use and transportation planning to facilitate travel desire and make travel more convenient for travelers and citizens.
- Enhance economic vitality through transportation improvement to bring more opportunities to regional industries and establish a freight hub for local, regional, and national industries.
- Minimize transportation costs and increase mobility for the community.
- Consider sustainability and impacts on natural and cultural resources during transportation planning.
- Increase safety for the transportation system to reduce crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

#### 3.1.5.1 Goals and Objectives in the transportation system

After considering these principles, they planned seven goals and objectives for the transportation system.

The first goal is to maintain the existing transportation system. The transportation system must consider whether available funding is sufficient for the necessary roadway maintenance. The government considered the following objectives:

- Roadway systems: optimize the usefulness, minimize life-cycle costs, monitor the performance of crucial facilities, and collaborate with local and regional partners to check critical deficiencies
- Transportation system: Follow transportation project selection criteria to identify and prioritize maintenance activities; Infrastructure improvements, maintenance, and system preservation activities to relieve pressures on the existing transportation system instead of expanding the current system; Reuse or redevelop the existing transportation facilities

The second goal is to improve a balanced transportation system's efficiency, performance, and connectivity. This goal aims to increase the efficiency system to take less time in travel and improve congested traffic. When making route decisions, the connectivity is based on traffic, road conditions, and citizens' perspectives. The government considered the following objectives:

- Roadway network: Increase safety and efficiency in minor and principal arterials and the interstate; Develop improvements in intersection and roadway capacity; Identify and reduce freight train impacts on roadways and further eliminate deficiencies to the freight train
- Increase connections by increasing pedestrian, bicycle, and transit connections.
- Facilitate travel options for physically challenged populations in the Great Falls area.
- Reduce traffic in residential areas.

The third goal is to promote consistency between land use and transportation plans to enhance mobility and accessibility. The goal was to decrease vehicle miles of travel, build alternative travel options, prepare for decreasing the number of persons per household in the future, and integrate transportation plans with local land. The government considered the following objectives:

- Develop the transportation system with land use planning, which follows consistent access management and corridor preservation standards.
- Prepare a new development plan to satisfy development patterns in the community.
- Minimize environmental impacts while applying the transportation plans.

The fourth goal is to provide a safe and secure transportation system. Methods to reduce crashes, improve emergency responders, provide evacuation routes, and develop educational programs that help travelers understand safety concerns in various travel modes. The government considered the following objectives:

- Make efforts to reduce the rates of fatalities and crashes in all transportation facilities
- Make effective emergency responses by identifying barriers
- Develop educational programs for all modes of transportation
- Ensure the security of the freight transportation system with operators and agencies

The fifth goal is to support the economic vitality of the community. Link economic vitality contributes to the economic success of a community. The government considered the following objectives:

- Optimize the transportation system to satisfy the needs of the Great Falls Area
- Attract and retain businesses, young professionals, families, and older adults through transportation improvement
- Facilitate transportation methods for goods and freight trains to commercial and industrial centers

The sixth goal is to protect and enhance environmental sustainability, provide opportunities for active lifestyles, and conserve natural and cultural resources. Follow the FAST Act planning factors from HUD, EPA, and USDOT point to consider the quality of life concerns in LRTP. The goal should also be to preserve natural, historical, and cultural resources. The government considered the following objectives:

- Encourage sustainability plans to reduce fuel consumption, vehicle miles of travel, and air pollution
- Consider transportation plans with land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation, and historic preservation.
- Collaborate with stakeholders and the public while making plans.
- Combine transportation planning activities with local and regional land use planning activities.

The last one is to maximize the cost-effectiveness of transportation. Reduce the time spent traveling and fuel consumption, and optimize the usage of public funds for infrastructure improvements. The government considered the following objectives:

- Identify available funding mechanisms used in similar cities
- Develop cooperation with public, private, and non-profit organizations
- Balance the cost of transportation, available funding, and expected expenditures

### ***3.1.5.2 Transportation improvement and analysis method in Great Falls***

Road systems in metropolitan used level of service (LOS) to measure the amount of vehicle delay at intersections. The scale of the LOS presented the amount of traffic and full range of operating conditions. Although 50 intersections have been included in the LOS analysis, new data only received in three locations from the I-15 Gore Hill to Emerson Junction Corridor Study article. (See 3.1.6)

Heavy industry plays a significant role in the Great Falls Area. Oil and gas extraction materials and equipment that are used in aerospace and wind energy companies. The Great Falls created a “Goods Movement Network” plan to improve transportation systems, including truck, rail, and air transportation movement networks. In addition, Interstate 15 (I-15) and Great Falls International Airport facilitate trade between Great Falls and northern Montana and the South of Great Falls to Mexico corridor, strengthening its position in the global economy.

The “Good Movement Network” connects commercial districts, residential neighborhoods, and parks to increase the region’s economy and population growth and combine goods movement with the transportation system and local land uses.

Truck routes in the Great Falls Area mainly travel on I-15 to access markets outside the region. Rail lines in Great Falls are integrated into the nation's freight rail system, extending from south to northwest. Great Falls is located on the 100-mile BNSF main line that links Shelby and Great Falls. A spur line that crosses the Missouri River and circles north and west to the Malting Plant supports industrial facilities accessing significant goods movement. Airlines also played an important role in the cargo industry. The Great Falls International Airport occupies 2,100 acres and has a 531,000-square-foot cargo apron area and 72,000 square feet of cargo warehouse space to distribute cargo from FedEx in the warehouse space.

Road systems in metropolitan areas use level of service (LOS) to measure the amount of vehicle delay at intersections. The scale of the LOS presented the amount of traffic and a full range of operating conditions. Although 50 intersections have been included in the LOS analysis, new data was only received from the I-15 Gore Hill to Emerson Junction Corridor Study article in three locations. (See 3.1.6)

### **3.1.6 Additional Reasons for Reactivating the Great Falls-Helena Railroad**

The railroad from Helena to Great Falls will pass through several towns, including Sieben, Wolf Creek, Craig, Mid Canon, Hardy, Cascade, Riverdale, Ulm, and arrive in Great Falls. From the I-15 Gore Hill to Emerson Junction Corridor Planning Study <sup>ix</sup>, MDT has solved some of problems on the transportation system, but some problems on transportation system and environmental considerations caused the railroad reactivation plan would be arduous to resume service, including severe weather problems on Highway I-15 and I-315.

- The Interstate crosses the railroad at two points within the study area
- Prime farmland, if irrigated, and farmlands of statewide significance are present in the study area
- I-15 spans the Sun River
- The Missouri River/Warden Bridge is recognized as a historic property

### **3.1.7 Montana Rail Grade Separation Study**

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) conducted the 2016 Montana Rail Grade Separation Study to evaluate at-grade and grade-separated railroad crossings <sup>x</sup>. The study aimed to assist transportation decision-makers in allocating funding for highway-rail grade crossings by developing a benefit-cost analysis (BCA) for various improvement options.

The primary objectives included:

- Assessing high-volume at-grade and grade-separated crossings based on train and vehicular traffic.
- Identifying potential improvement strategies.
- Conducting BCAs to determine the feasibility of these improvements.

The proposed crossing enhancements aim to improve safety, freight and passenger mobility, and overall traffic operations.

**3.1.7.1 At-Grade Crossings Evaluation**

To assess at-grade crossings, the study considered Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) and Average Daily Train Traffic (ADTT) to identify locations with the highest combined traffic volumes. The total crossing value (R) was calculated using the following formula:

$$R = AADT * AATT$$

Crossings were ranked in descending order based on R values, with higher values indicating greater traffic volume.

After the calculation of for at-grade crossing in Montana, the article selected five highway-rail crossings in Helena. Each crossing will be evaluated by three weighted screening criteria: MDT Priority Index (60%), Roadway Functional Classification (30%), Average Train Speed (10%). Details can be found in 3.1.1.1 (MDT, 2016). Based on the result of composite score, the highest score to the lowest was Montana Avenue (82), Benton Avenue (67), Carter Drive (42), Roberts Street (38), and Joslyn Street (37). After an evaluation of at-grade crossings, the article proposed the final at-grade crossings allowing to determine feasible grade separate in Helena. In Helena, Benton Avenue, Carter Drive, and Montana Avenue were considered to propose grade separation solution. Table 1 showed the feasible grade separation solution for each location in Helena.

City	Location	Feasible Grade Separation Solution
Helena	Benton Avenue	Overpass and Underpass
Helena	Carter Drive	Underpass
Helena	Montana Avenue	Underpass

*Table 1: Feasible Grade Separation Solution for at-grade crossings in Helena*

**3.1.7.2 Grade-Separated Crossings Evaluation**

The study used AADT and Minimum Vertical Clearance for grade-separated crossings to determine a composite score (R). These criteria were used as follows:

$$R = C1 + C2$$

Where;

C1 = rank score from Criterion 1, AADT

C2 = rank score from Criterion 2, Minimum Vertical Clearance

AADT Ranking: Crossings with higher AADT received lower rank scores, prioritizing heavily used crossings.

Minimum Vertical Clearance Ranking: Crossings were ranked in ascending order, with lower clearances receiving higher priority. Vertical clearance data was sourced from the MDT Bridge Management System (July 2,015).

After ranking AADT and Minimum Vertical Clearance separately, a composite score was determined and listed in ascending order to prioritize grade-separated crossings in Great Falls and Helena.

After the calculation of for at-grade crossing in Montana, the article selected five highway-rail crossings in Helena and Great Falls. In Helena, the highway-rail crossing at Henderson Street required to be improved. In Great Falls, River Drive S, 6<sup>th</sup> Street N, and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue N were required to be reconstructed.

The crossings in Helena and Great Falls followed six weighted screening criteria: AADT (20%), Vertical Clearance (20%), Horizontal Clearance (20%), Functional Classification (20%), Substructure Rating (10%), and Percent Commercial Traffic (10%). Details can be found in 3.1.2.1 (MDT, 2016).

**3.1.7.3 Railroad-Highway Crossings in Benton Avenue, Helena**

In Benton Avenue, Helena, daily vehicle volumes were over 8,800 AADT in 2014. In 2034, the volumes are expected to be over 11,200. Thirty-five trains traveled through this crossing daily, which required improved traffic, roadway conditions, and safety hazards. The MDT considered underpass and overpass option shifts to resolve the traffic blocked by the train. Table 2 shows underpass and overpass options for solving traffic congestion by trains.

	<b>Underpass</b>	<b>Overpass</b>
<b>Cons</b>	A sloped access road is needed to reach the Batch Fields northeast of the crossing Require a double track shoofly	Increase the effects on the residential neighborhood situated northwest of the intersection Require relocation of approximately five residences
<b>Pros</b>	Minimal effects on the residential neighborhood situated northwest of the intersection	Minimize any direct effects on the Benton Avenue Cemetery

*Table 2: Comparison of traffic solution in Benton Avenue*

**3.1.7.4 Railroad-Highway Crossings in Carter Drive, Helena**

Daily vehicle volumes in Carter Drive, Helena, were over 4,000 AADT in 2014. In 2034, the volumes are expected to be over 6,100. Thirty-three trains traveled through this crossing daily, with additional switching moves from the east end of the railroad yard. The frequency of trains resulted in traffic delays in urban areas. The MDT proposed an underpass railroad solution at Carter Drive. There are two main reasons why the underpass method is more feasible and practical: 1. The low vertical grade of Carter Drive on the north side of the crossing, and 2. The overpass will increase overall impacts, cutting off business and street access to the north side of the crossing.

The MDT proposed two methods to construct the underpass railroad. The first used temporary track relocations, or shoofly, and constructed the railroad bridge on the existing track alignment. The second method leaves the tracks in place, constructs the bridges south of the existing track alignment, and then relocates the tracks on a new alignment to construct the

bridge. The shoofly construction method will be required to maintain railroad operations at the east entrance to Helena Yard and the Main and East Long Lead tracks. Once the underpass track is completed, the shoofly construction will be removed from the road. The shoofly construction method was used to develop construction costs and BCA. (See 3.4.2.1.2) Another option is to build a new bridge to realign trackage to the south. However, further research was required to decide the potential of extending a few yard tracks depending on how the realigned East Long Lead Track connection with these tracks was maintained in the final configuration.

If the reconstruction plan is decided, complete preparation for traffic impacts during construction will be needed. For example, building a temporary at-grade rail crossing for use on the east, displaying advanced warning signs to inform drivers of possible delays, and informing construction plan and updating status for people living around the construction area.

**3.1.7.5 Railroad-Highway Crossings in Montana Avenue, Helena**

Montana Avenue crossing in Helena had the highest AADT volumes. In 2014, the AADT was 11,930 vehicles, and the MDT is estimated to reach 14,557 vehicles in 2034. The trains in Montana Avenue had thirty-five trains through the crossing per day. Due to the frequent train crossings and high roadway volumes, the research found a method to reduce congestion and provide practical solutions with key statistics for the crossing.

After analyzing land uses, rights-of-way, and existing crossing features, the MDT proposed an underpass solution with Montana Avenue traversing underneath the railroad, which would be the best solution. After the MDT compared an overpass and underpass solution, the grade line was found to be approximately three feet below the existing railroad grade from the south side of the tracks to the north side of the tracks. As a result, an underpass option would be more practical for the crossing. Table 3 provides a specific comparison of overpass and underpass solutions.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Overpass</b>	<b>Underpass</b>
<b>Business Access Impact</b>	High	Lower
<b>Impact on Intersecting Streets</b>	Greater	Less
<b>Visual Impact</b>	High	Lower
<b>Construction Complexity</b>	Higher	Lower
<b>Safety</b>	Moderate	Higher
<b>Railroad Involvement in Funding</b>	No direct railroad funding participation	Possible railroad participation with full underpass option
<b>Connectivity &amp; Traffic Flow</b>	Reduced connectivity	Improved connectivity
<b>Right-of-Way Requirements</b>	Larger footprint required for approach ramps	Smaller footprint compared to an overpass
<b>Overall Feasibility</b>	Less practical due to extensive impacts	More practical due to fewer impacts and better safety benefits

*Table 3: Comparison of overpass and underpass options in Montana Avenue, Helena*



After the comparison based on several criteria, the underpass solution in Montana Avenue has fewer impacts on businesses, better safety benefits, and potential railroad funding participation for the crossing. On the contrary, since the overpass solution will cause significant disruptions to access, intersecting streets, and the overall streetscape when they eliminate at-grade railroad crossings, the overpass option will demand more effort for the crossing. Further estimate of probable construction cost will be explained in 3.4.2.2.

## **3.2 PRIMARY TRANSPORTATION METHODS BETWEEN HELENA AND GREAT FALLS BEFORE RAIL REACTIVATION**

### **3.2.1 I-15 Improvement Plans Since 1987**

Since the current status of the railroad was out of service and BNSF didn't plan to reopen the railroad of this line, Highway I-15 and aerial transportation became important ways for improving convenience for residents and travelers in Great Falls and Cascade County. From the past, current, and future projects in I-15 Gore Hill to Emerson Junction of corridor planning study, Great Falls have finished several projects to improve transportation system and the Interstate System, such as

- Great Falls Transit Development Plan (2010): Analyzing public transportation services for the Great Falls Transit District 2. Providing secure, reliable, affordable sound transportation system for people of Great Falls and Black Eagle, Montana
- Great Falls Area Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and City of Great Falls Growth Policy Update (2013): 1. Offering guidance of transportation infrastructure investments for the decision-makers 2. Identifying I-15 as the main regional route 3. Identifying Tenth Avenue South as the largest road facility
- Great Falls International Airport Master Plan (Ongoing): 1. Evaluate the long-term vision for Great Falls International Airport serving by Gore Hill Interchange 2. Changes to the transportation system and land use near airport could change the function of the Interstate System

Additional projects finishing since 1987 will be shown in Figure 1.

Table 1.1: MDT Projects within the Study Area Since 1987

Project Designation	Description
10 <sup>TH</sup> AVE SOUTH - WARDEN BR TO 6TH SOUTHWEST	Concrete repair, median adjustment, and diamond grinding from Warden Bridge to Fox Farm intersection
2002-10 <sup>TH</sup> AVE SOUTH/FOX FARM RD-GREAT FALLS	Roadway and Roadside Safety Improvements
BRIDGE DECKS-GREAT FALLS	Rehabilitation of I-15 bridges at Sun River and the overpass at 5 <sup>th</sup> Avenue Southwest
FOX FARM RD & 10 <sup>TH</sup> AVE SOUTH - GREAT FALLS - CASCADE COUNTY	Safety improvement project to address rear end crashes involving right turning vehicles
GREAT FALLS - CENTRAL AVE WEST BRIDGE APPROACHES – CASCADE COUNTY	Rehabilitation of the eastbound Warden Bridge
GREAT FALLS – FOX FARM RD./10 <sup>TH</sup> AVE. SO CASCADE COUNTY	Concrete resurfacing between 6 <sup>th</sup> Street Southwest / Fox Farm Road and Warden Bridge
GREAT FALLS-NORTH & SOUTH	Interstate rehabilitation
GREAT FALLS-NORTH & SOUTH CASCADE COUNTY	Interstate fence replacement and installation of cattle guards
GREAT FALLS URBAN (I-315)	Overlay of I-315 and ramps at 10 <sup>th</sup> Avenue South and exit 0
I15-BRIDGE REPAIR-GREAT FALLS	Emergency repair of beams damaged by trucks hauling high load
SF 129-GREAT FALLS WRONG WAY-PH 1	New signing to address wrong way traffic on off ramps on I-15
2002 INTERSECTION IMPV-T-GF	Safety adjustments to northbound I-15 off ramp at Central Avenue West
D3 SIGNING (I-15)	Guide sign replacement
GREAT FALLS-VAUGHN	Seal and cover from Emerson Junction to the north

Figure 5: MDT projects within the study area since 1987<sup>1</sup>

The studies mainly focused on improving Highway I-15 and I-315. Since the I-15 is a principal arterial highway on the NHS Interstate System, connecting Montana and Canada as the main north-south corridor, the corridor strengthened the position in the global economy because of facilitating trade. Several problems that the MDT concentrated in:

- Prevent snow from blowing across the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue South Interchange
- Implement alert systems, variable message sign (VMS), to alarm the drivers during adverse weather conditions
- Freeze on the bridges to cause operational issues for motorists
- Utilize a viable detour route for the Gore Hill area to reduce incidents near Gore Hill and increase in vehicle delay and queuing

### 3.2.2 I-15 Roadway Improvement Project<sup>xi</sup>

The I-15 roadway improvement project aims to enhance safety, extend the service life of the highway, and reduce ongoing maintenance needs. Key improvements focus on providing a smoother driving surface, upgrading roadside barriers, and improving signage and pavement markings.

<sup>1</sup> Source: MDT Project List accessible at [http://www3.mdt.mt.gov:7.782/mttplc/mttplc.tplk0.007.project\\_init](http://www3.mdt.mt.gov:7.782/mttplc/mttplc.tplk0.007.project_init)

### ***3.2.2.1 Planned Upgrades for the Southbound Lanes (Current Work)***

- Removal and replacement of two feet of deteriorated roadway material
- Repaving the driving surface for a smoother ride
- Upgrading concrete barrier rails, metal guardrails, and roadway signage
- Installing road delineators on inside curves for better visibility
- Enhancing erosion control measures

### ***3.2.2.2 Future Upgrades for 2024-2025***

Improvements will continue on the northbound lanes and surrounding infrastructure, including:

- Removing and replacing two feet of degraded roadway material on northbound I-15
- Resurfacing interstate ramps, crossroads, and pullouts
- Upgrading concrete barrier rails, metal guardrails, and signage
- Installing roadside markers for improved lane guidance
- Replacing right-of-way fencing and cattle guards as needed
- Adding new pavement markings for increased visibility
- Lining and repairing culverts along I-15
- Enhancing erosion control features
- Upgrading storm drains in the Wolf Creek area
- Updating curb ramps on Walsh Street (between Main Street and Recreation Road)

These upgrades will improve roadway durability, enhance safety features, and reduce maintenance needs along the I-15 corridor.

### **3.2.3 Freight Moved Concerns on Interstate 15 in Helena in the research of Greater Helena Area LRTP – 2014 Update**

According to the report, trucks occupied 55 percent of freight moves in Montana in 2,012. Figure 3 shows the freight moved by truck (2012). Table 4 shows the average annual daily

traffic (AADT), the percentage of heavy vehicles at various locations, and the heavy vehicles per day average in 2013.

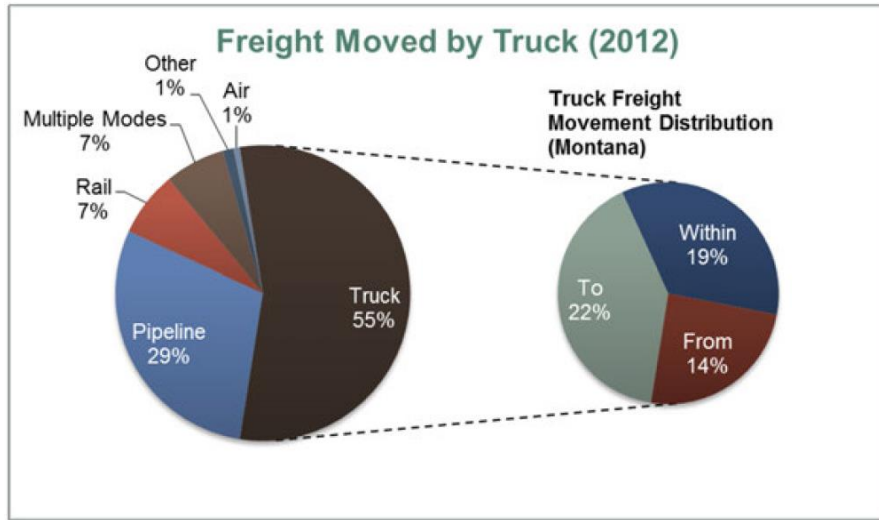


Figure 6: Freight Moved by Truck (2012)

Location	2013 AADT	Percent Heavy Vehicles	2013 Heavy Vehicles (per day average)
US 12 - east of Lake Helena Drive	6,160	5.7	351
US 12 - between Carter Dr and Wylie Dr	20,730	3.6	746
US 12 - between 11th Ave and Carter Dr	23,950	3.1	742
Montana Ave - between Prospect Ave and Lyndale Ave	18,840	2.0	377
Lyndale Ave - between Last Chance Gulch and Benton Ave	20,280	2.9	588
Eulcid Ave - west of Joslyn St	11,560	5.0	578
Custer Ave - east of I-15	18,860	3.2	604
Custer Ave - west of I-15	23,620	2.6	614
Montana Ave - north of Custer Ave	21,960	1.1	242
I-15 - south of South Helena Interchange	9,760	7.0	683
I-15 - south of Prospect Ave	13,270	5.1	677
I-15 - south of Cedar Ave	23,720	3.7	878
I-15 - south of Custer Ave	16,990	5.2	883
I-15 - south of Lincoln Rd	10,730	7.4	794
I-15 - north of Lincoln Rd	4,300	18.4	791

Source: Montana Department of Transportation Data and Statistics Bureau, Traffic Data Collection Section, 2014

Table 4: Percent of Heavy Vehicles

Based on the AADT and heavy vehicles in 2013, Interstate 15 carried almost 900 heavy trucks per day. The freight move number was the highest compared to US 12 within Helena, with 500 heavy vehicles per day, and 750 heavy trucks per day on US 12 outside of Helena. They estimated that the truck freight movement will reach 60 percent in Montana compared to other

types of movement. Figure 5 shows the estimate of freight moved by truck in 2040.

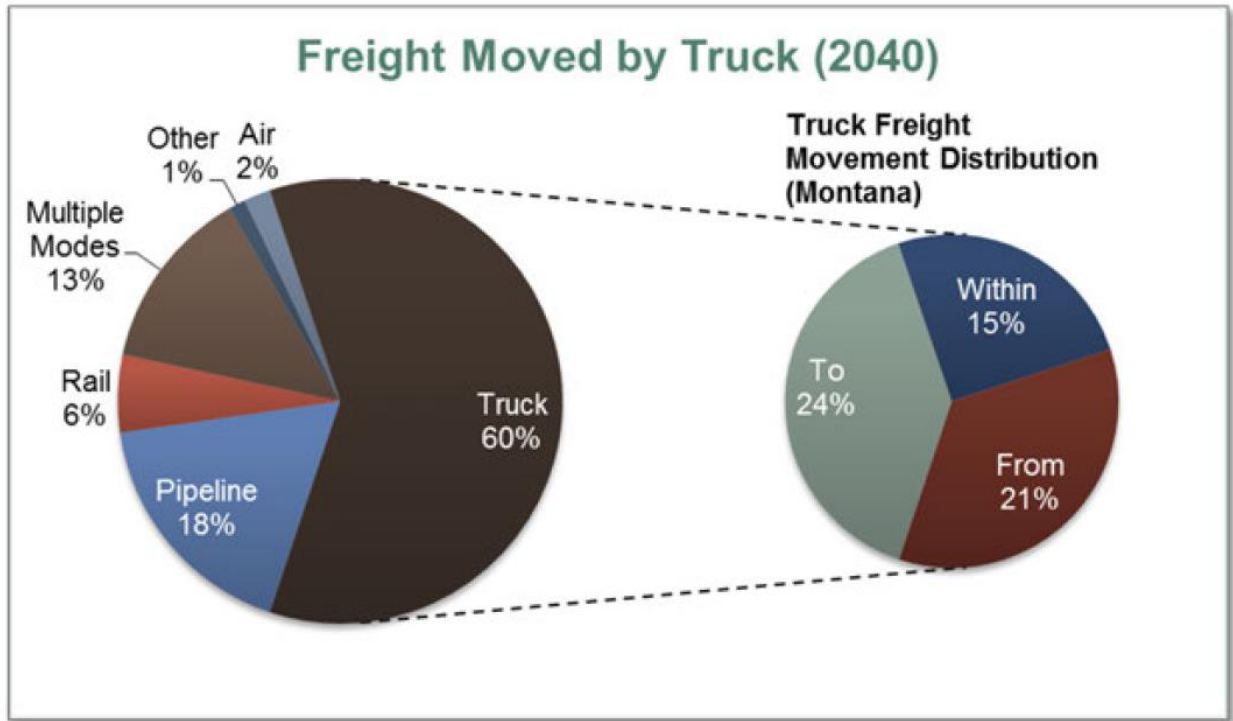


Figure 7: Freight Moved by Truck (2040)

A potential concern for the transportation network is that the location of trucking activity centers should be decided after careful consideration. Large trucks require enough space for them to unload goods and ensure that they do not block traffic and create a safety hazard.

### 3.2.4 Montana State Freight Plan 2022

The 2022 Montana State Freight Plan offers a comprehensive assessment of the state's freight transportation system, addressing current and future trends. Developed in alignment with federal legislation—including 49 USC §70202, the FAST Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)—the plan supports Montana's long-range transportation policy, TranPlanMT, while advancing national multimodal freight goals. The plan emphasizes the importance of efficient freight movement across truck, rail, pipeline, and air modes. In 2020, commercial trucks in Montana traveled 3.35 million miles daily, with truck freight projected to grow most significantly by 2050. The state's freight network comprises over 3,500 miles of rail, 15,500 miles of pipelines, and 126 public-use airports, with air cargo increasing by 34% between 2017 and 2020. Key challenges include commercial vehicle safety, insufficient truck parking, aging infrastructure—particularly bridges—and overall system reliability. The plan sets goals for safety, infrastructure preservation, reliability, environmental stewardship, and resiliency, as well as tracking performance through federal measures and National Highway Freight Program (NHFP) projects along critical corridors like I-15 and I-90. Using 2019 as the baseline year to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on data, the plan incorporates infrastructure data through 2021, trade data through 2020, commodity data from 2017, and forecasts through 2050 using the

FHWA Freight Analysis Framework Version 5. Trade is vital to Montana's economy, with exports supporting jobs and industries and imports supplying essential goods. As a key trade gateway with Canada, Montana's ports of entry processed \$15.7 billion in trade in 2020 and averaged \$18.4 billion annually from 2017 to 2019, with imports making up 60–65% of total trade value. Export commodities by weight include coal, minerals, and agricultural goods, while high-value exports include chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and textiles. Canada remains the most significant trade partner, receiving 60% of Montana's \$1.8 billion in 2017 exports and contributing to nearly all import volume and value. Although air freight comprises just 1% by weight and value, it boasts the highest value per ton, reflecting the growing influence of e-commerce. Montana's higher-than-average reliance on pipelines and rail for bulk goods highlights the critical role of its multimodal freight infrastructure in supporting a safe, efficient, and resilient supply chain. Regarding freight transportation modes, trucks are the dominant carrier by value, moving about \$51 billion of goods (61% of total value). At the same time, pipelines and rail dominate by weight, transporting 41% and 14% of total tonnage, respectively. Although air cargo accounts for just 1% by weight and value, it has the highest value per ton and is increasingly important due to growing e-commerce demand. Montana's reliance on pipelines and rail for bulk, low-value goods is higher than the national average, emphasizing the importance of its multimodal freight network.

In 2017, approximately \$84 billion worth of goods and 179 million tons of freight were transported into and out of Montana, primarily via truck, rail, and pipeline. Trucking dominated in terms of value, accounting for about \$51 billion. At the same time, rail and pipelines were more prominent by weight due to their typical use for transporting low-value, bulk commodities over long distances. Montana significantly exceeds the national average in freight movement by rail and pipeline, with rail carrying 14% and pipelines 41% of the state's total tonnage, compared to national averages of 8% and 18%, respectively. Highways and trucking remain essential to the state's freight system, carrying 61% of goods by value and 35% by weight. The state's vast highway network includes over 73,000 centerline miles—78% rural—with NHS and Primary roads comprising just over half the system but handling 83% of total traffic and 91% of commercial truck traffic as of 2019. Trucks move many commodities, such as gravel, cereal grains, animal feed, meat, live animals, seafood, and machinery. While bulk commodities dominate by weight, higher-value items like live animals and machinery rank among the top in value. The top six commodities moved by truck represent 61% of tonnage but only 40% of value. From 2002 to 2020, truck and container traffic into Montana increased steadily, with 164,000 trucks entering the state in 2020 and cross-border truck traffic and container volumes rising by 16% and 3%, respectively, since 2017—despite a temporary dip due to COVID-19. That same year, commercial vehicles traveled 3.35 million miles daily, a 2.7% increase from 2019, with most activity occurring along interstates and non-interstate NHS routes. I-90, especially between Billings and Butte, experienced the highest truck volumes, followed by I-94, I-15, US 212, US 87, and US 93. Montana's freight network also includes several congressionally designated corridors established under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, including the Canamex Corridor along I-15, the Camino Real Corridor along I-90, US 87, and I-15, and the Theodore Roosevelt Expressway via US 2 and MT 16. While the US Department of Transportation's Interim National Multimodal Freight Network (NMFN) includes highway and

rail components for Montana, it remains in interim status. However, the National Highway Freight Network (NHFN) plays a more definitive role in guiding federal investment and freight policy. Within the NHFN, segments of I-15 and I-90 are designated as part of the Primary Highway Freight System (PHFS)—the nation's core freight corridors prioritized for funding—while I-94 is recognized as an important connector. As of now, Montana has not designated any Critical Rural or Urban Freight Corridors (CRFCs or CUFCs), but such designations are vital for securing federal funding through the National Highway Freight Program (NHFP), which supports critical freight infrastructure projects across the state. Truck parking remains a significant national safety concern in freight transportation. Since a lack of available spaces can lead to driver fatigue or unsafe, unauthorized parking, "Jason's Law" under Title 23 USC §120 was proposed and mandated tracking and analyzing truck parking availability. A 2014 survey found Montana had the highest number of truck parking spaces per 100,000 daily combination vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in the U.S. The state remained in the top five in a 2019 update. MDT continues to work toward improving truck parking and rest area access to enhance safety along major freight corridors. On the rail side, Montana's BNSF Railway, the state's primary Class I railroad, runs east-west along U.S. Highway 2 and north-south from the Sweet Grass Canadian border crossing, connecting Montana to major intermodal hubs like Seattle and Chicago. Montana Rail Link (MRL), a key Class II railroad operating nearly 900 miles of BNSF track, is a critical link along the former Northern Pacific route paralleling I-90 and Highway 200. In 2021, BNSF began initial steps to acquire MRL, though no formal filing had been made with the Surface Transportation Board at the time of the plan. Class I and short-line railroads support Montana's industries and access to broader markets.

Coal is Montana's leading commodity transported by rail, comprising over 61% of total rail freight by weight and 9% by value in 2017. Other commonly shipped energy-related products include oils, liquefied natural gas, and petroleum coke. Rail also plays a vital role in supporting Montana's agriculture sector, with cereal grains such as wheat and barley ranking second by weight and first by value. Additional top commodities by weight include nonmetallic mineral products and natural sand. In contrast, by value, refined goods like foodstuffs (e.g., oils, flours, sugars) and wood products significantly contribute despite lower volumes due to their higher value per ton. Between 2012 and 2019, Montana experienced an 11% increase in rail carloads and a 33% rise in total rail tonnage. The state's only international rail crossing at Sweetgrass connects the BNSF Sweet Grass Subdivision with the Canadian Pacific Railroad at the Sweetgrass-Coutts border, facilitating access to Canadian markets. At least one train enters the U.S. daily through this crossing, with annual totals ranging from 300 to 500, and container traffic has surged since 2014, surpassing pre-2008 recession levels. However, Montana's 1,350+ public at-grade highway-rail crossings pose safety risks and can lead to traffic delays. To address this, the 2016 Montana Rail Grade Separation Study identified ten high-priority crossings—seven in Billings, Bozeman, Belgrade, and Helena—for potential grade separation based on traffic volumes, train speeds, and bridge clearance. MDT pursued federal funding actively to ensure these improvements will be implemented. The pipeline network is crucial for transporting crude oil, hydrocarbon gas liquids, natural gas, and other petroleum-related products to local and global companies. About 80% of this infrastructure comprises natural gas pipelines, forming an essential corridor from Canada to the Central and Midwestern U.S.A. A visible gap remains

between Missoula and Thompson Falls after a section of the abandoned Yellowstone Pipeline was removed in 2019, now reportedly served by rail. While pipelines are privately owned, they are regulated by the Montana Public Service Commission and PHMSA for safety and environmental standards. Northwestern Energy operates 38% of Montana's intrastate pipelines, and WBI Energy Transmission manages 13% of its interstate system. Most pipeline traffic is domestic, with 59% of volume remaining in-state, while imports make up 41% and exports less than 1%. Crude petroleum accounts for one-third of pipeline tonnage and 45% of its total value, followed by gasoline and fuel oils, which are lower in weight but higher in value. Coal and petroleum products represent over half of pipeline tonnage and 30% of value. Pipelines also transport water for industrial, energy, and residential purposes, though these flows are not captured in federal commodity tracking systems.

Montana's aviation network comprises 126 public-use airports, including 13 commercial service airports and 106 general aviation airports. Billings-Logan International Airport is the primary air cargo hub, handling 66% of the state's air freight tonnage in 2019, followed by Great Falls International Airport with 29%, which is also designated as a federal foreign trade zone. Together, these two airports manage 95% of Montana's air cargo. Air cargo volumes grew 34% between 2017 and 2020, driven by population growth and e-commerce. Most cargo is inbound (66%), with 29% outbound and under 10% moving within the state. Air transport is favored for its speed and mainly for high-value goods such as chemical products, machinery, precision instruments, electronics, and pharmaceuticals—many of which support Montana's industrial and consumer markets. Montana's broader freight system relies heavily on intermodal connections, particularly transload facilities that allow freight to shift between truck, rail, and air transport based on cost and efficiency. Notable facilities include those in Libby, Billings, and key airports like Missoula, Bozeman, and Great Falls. BNSF has upgraded or added seven facilities in Montana since 2019 and has certified rail-served industrial sites in Libby, Shelby, and Great Falls, all of which are linked to national freight corridors like the Strategic Rail Corridor Network and the National Multimodal Freight Network. Montana also plays a key national defense role through infrastructure connected to STRAHNET, including Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, which relies on I-15, US 87, and Great Falls International Airport to maintain secure and efficient logistics. The base is integrated into the Great Falls Metropolitan Planning Organization's Long Range Transportation Plan, ensuring military freight needs are addressed.

Additionally, around 40 transit operators serve Montana's rural and aging population, though freight movement by transit is limited. Some intercity providers, such as Jefferson Lines and Salt Lake Express, may carry small freight. Amtrak's Empire Builder also contributes to freight movement by offering express services for time-sensitive goods like flowers, fish, and medical supplies along the Hi-Line corridor, adding modest but valuable capacity to the state's multimodal freight network.

The MDT collaborated with stakeholders to identify concerns within the freight transportation system. The most significant issue was that finding and retaining new workers in freight-related industries was hard. High competition in the demand for wages and benefits is a



possible reason for this issue. Besides, truck parking shortages forced truck drivers to park in unauthorized places such as highway shoulders or ramps, causing safety concerns on the highway. Other problems, such as narrow widths, restrictive height, and weight limits, are critical problems for outdated bridge infrastructures. Similarly, limited capacity at-grade rail crossings contributed to congestion and delays. Stakeholders also noted the profound impact of extreme weather events—such as blizzards, wildfires, floods, and dust storms—which can reduce visibility, threaten high-profile vehicles, and trigger road closures due to landslides or rockfalls. In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020, MDT received roughly \$351 million in revenue, primarily from state fuel taxes and federal funding. Following a fuel tax increase effective in 2017—the first since 1994—Montana’s gasoline tax rose from 27 to 31.5 cents per gallon, with further scheduled increases through 2023. Special fuel taxes followed a similar schedule. That same year, MDT issued over 68,000 commercial motor carrier permits, generating an additional \$7 million in revenue. Despite these efforts, funding challenges persist, particularly in covering maintenance work not eligible for federal aid and meeting federal matching requirements with available state funds. Safety remains a central focus for MDT, especially for commercial vehicle operators. From 2015 to 2020, there were 6,512 crashes involving commercial vehicles in Montana, including 109 fatalities. Roughly one-third of these incidents occurred in the state’s most populous counties—Flathead, Gallatin, Missoula, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone. Weather conditions and wildlife were contributing factors in about 28% of crashes. The highest density of fatal crashes occurred along significant freight routes, including I-90, I-15, I-94, and US 93, with 5% of all commercial vehicle crashes resulting in fatalities or serious injuries.

In Montana's freight transportation system, extreme weather events and road closures are critical factors to decrease the safety of trucks. However, growing demand—fueled by economic expansion and evolving federal regulations such as Hours of Service (HOS) requirements mandating rest periods—has outpaced the availability of designated parking along key freight corridors. As a result, drivers are often forced to park in unauthorized or unsafe areas or risk violations and fatigue-related accidents by driving beyond legal limits. The MDT is actively working to expand truck parking capacity. Compounding the issue is a nationwide driver shortage that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the American Trucking Association reported a record shortfall of 80,000 drivers, with projections suggesting the shortage could exceed 160,000 by 2030. Contributing factors include the high median age of long-haul drivers (46), low female participation (4.5–6.6%), the demanding lifestyle, competition from better-paying industries, and stringent hiring standards.

Meanwhile, Montana’s freight industry is expected to experience significant growth through 2050. Based on Freight Analysis Framework Version 5 (FAF5) projections using 2017 data, total freight volume—excluding through traffic—is forecast to increase by 32%, from 179 million tons in 2017 to 236 million tons by 2050. Regarding value, freight is expected to rise by 81%, from \$84 billion to \$152 billion. This growth spans all directions—outbound, inbound, and intrastate—and highlights strong demand across the system. Pipelines and trucks, the dominant modes by weight in 2017, will continue to lead, with pipeline freight expected to grow by 47% and trucking by 51%. Though air freight represents the smallest volume by weight, it is projected to double, driven by rising demand for fast, high-value delivery.

In contrast, rail and other transport modes are expected to decline by an average of 21%. By value, trucking remains the leading mode and will continue to dominate through 2050, while air freight will double in value despite its small share of volume. These trends emphasize investing in resilient, multimodal freight infrastructure to support Montana's growing freight demands.

The FHWA's Freight Analysis Framework (FAF) forecasts significant growth in commercial truck movements across Montana, with I-90—Montana's busiest freight corridor—expected to see the most significant increase in annual truck trips by 2050. This route is a vital connection between Montana's inland ports and trans-loading facilities and coastal ports in Washington. Other key corridors, such as I-15, I-94, and US 2, are also projected to experience growth due to their strategic links to Canada, Midwest industrial hubs, and parallel rail infrastructure. By 2050, Montana's top ten commodities by weight will essentially mirror current trends, with coal, petroleum products, and crude petroleum leading, though coal demand is expected to decline by 64%. At the same time, the value of commodities like crude petroleum will remain high.

In contrast, others such as live animals/fish, pharmaceuticals, and plastics/rubbers are anticipated to rise significantly in rank due to demographic shifts—particularly the growing 50–59 age group, which increases demand for pharmaceuticals. Among the 42 commodity groups identified in FAF5, the fastest-growing by weight are largely consumer-driven, transported by truck, rail, and air. Nationwide trends like e-commerce and energy diversification have also reshaped freight movement, with direct-to-consumer delivery models reducing reliance on retail stores and increasing shorter freight trips. This shift has placed added pressure on local roads and driven demand for faster shipping, leading to greater use of air cargo and the development of distribution hubs closer to population centers.

Energy diversification is reshaping freight dynamics in Montana, particularly as coal production—a long-standing cornerstone of the state's economy and national rail freight—declines due to low natural gas prices and the growing adoption of renewable energy sources. As coal output decreases, railroads are shifting focus toward transporting higher-value goods and expanding markets through intermodal container services and rail-served industrial developments. Renewable energy projects boost freight activity because of the transportation needs of turbines and blades. However, the freight demand from these sites significantly drops once operations begin. The government is expected to use these resources to alter freight patterns within all transportation modes and infrastructure planning. The U.S. Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) aims to boost domestic production and enhance U.S. competitiveness. For Montana, the agreement introduced changes to the grading and pricing of dairy and wheat products. These adjustments are expected to increase U.S. exports or reduce Canadian imports by shifting relative costs. The agreement includes phased timelines, such as expanding tariff-rate quotas (TRQs) on milk products beginning in year six, with gradual annual increases over thirteen years, and improved pricing for U.S. dairy exports starting in the first year. These provisions are intended to create a smoother transition and avoid sudden disruptions in trade and freight flows.

Agricultural shipping methods in Montana are evolving with the increased use of containerization, which allows products like grain to be transported efficiently across multiple modes—truck, rail, and ship. While container shipping is more expensive than bulk transport, it offers advantages for high-value, packaged, or processed goods, particularly in lower-volume or widely dispersed markets. This method is explored in Montana for crops, potentially improving shipping options and market access. At the same time, since the advanced alternative fuel technologies are expanding rapidly, gasoline and diesel fuel are shifting to electricity in the transportation field. Though electric vehicles are currently more common among passenger cars, companies such as Volvo Trucks, Daimler (Freightliner), and Tesla are developing electric freight trucks. However, Montana's cold winters and mountainous terrain present challenges—battery range drops significantly in low temperatures, and charging is slower, making long-haul electric freight transport difficult. Rail electrification is also progressing, with systems like overhead catenaries and dual-mode locomotives being tested, alongside innovations in battery-powered and hydrogen fuel cell trains by companies like BNSF and Union Pacific. Hydrogen fuel is especially promising for heavy-duty freight due to its quick refueling and high power output. Demonstration projects, including those in Los Angeles drayage operations, are underway and may influence future infrastructure development and retrofitting efforts. At the same time, Montana is cautiously exploring connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs). Though the state has no laws explicitly permitting or prohibiting their use, House Joint Resolution No. 10 (HJ10) established a committee in 2021 to study their legal, regulatory, and economic implications. As national interest in CAVs grows—especially in freight—Montana is considering their potential to reduce human-error-related crashes, congestion, and emissions while improving safety and efficiency. A project at Yellowstone National Park in 2021 used electric, driverless shuttles for visitor transport, offering insights into how autonomous technologies might enhance future passenger and freight mobility.

Montana has stepped up several innovative movements in freight delivery and transporting technologies. For example, drones or UAVs created new customer delivery methods for small-scale freight. They offer fast service and are flexible for last-mile deliveries. At the same time, MDT implements ITS to improve safety, efficiency, and real-time responsiveness on the state's roadways, such as traffic cameras, adaptive signals, and communication tools to optimize traffic flow and boost response time. The Montana Statewide Regional ITS Architecture, last updated in 2021, provides strategic guidance for deploying these technologies. MDT's focus includes traveler safety, incident response, roadway maintenance, commercial vehicle operations, and integrated data systems. MDT developed systems like the electronic Permit, Audit, Registration, and Tax (ePART) platform to streamline freight processes, which speeds up vehicle credentialing and permit issuance. Montana also uses PrePass, an automatic vehicle identification and weigh-in-motion system that allows compliant trucks to bypass stations, saving time and fuel costs—over 666,000 hours and 3.2 million gallons of fuel since 1997. Drivewyze, another ITS solution, enables similar bypass capabilities through real-time verification of safety and compliance records. These advancements reflect Montana's commitment to modernizing freight transportation through technology.

Montana continues implementing advanced technologies and systems to ensure efficient and safe freight movement statewide. At heavily trafficked weigh stations, MDT employs ramp screening tools such as license plate and USDOT number readers, OCR software, and integrated safety databases to identify high-risk vehicles for inspection, allowing enforcement efforts to focus effectively. Real-time road condition updates are provided through the MDT Traveler Information System, which includes a toll-free 511 phone service, a mobile app, a traveler website, RWIS stations, highway advisory radios, variable message signs, and snowplow-mounted cameras that update every half mile during operation. These tools support informed route planning by delivering data on weather, road conditions, incidents, construction, and load limits. MDT also enhances construction zone safety through its Work Zone Safety and Mobility Policy by developing a Transportation Management Plan during pre-construction to mitigate construction-related impacts on freight. Collaboration with other agencies and using plans like the Emergency Operations and Disaster Plan and TIMS ensures coordinated detours, emergency routing, and timely route restoration. These initiatives align with the FAST Act's NHFP objectives, which aim to improve freight efficiency, safety, infrastructure maintenance, technology use, and environmental impact mitigation. The IJA builds on these goals by expanding freight plan requirements, extending planning horizons, and increasing the frequency of updates. Based on state laws and constitutional constraints, Montana commits that vehicle fees and fuel-related taxes will be utilized directly for highway construction, maintenance, and safety enforcement, bringing a resilient and reliable freight transportation system.

The Montana Code Annotated outlines motor carrier size and weight regulations under MCA 61-10 and enacts the Multistate Highway Transportation Agreement through MCA 61-10-1011 to promote consistency in freight movement across member states. Although the agreement does not directly affect freight investment, it supports improved highway operations, vehicular safety, and law administration.

The Administrative Rules of Montana enforce commercial motor carrier laws to ensure safety and compliance, such as regulating commercial motor vehicles, driver safety programs, and oversize or overweight permitting to reduce conflicts and enhance roadway mobility. Montana's strategic transportation direction is further shaped by TransPlanMT and the long-range TransPlan21, which establishes a 20-year policy and action framework for transportation planning. It integrates stakeholder and public input to support safety, economic vitality, and environmental stewardship. The plan emphasizes MDT's mission of achieving zero fatalities and serious injuries through a collaborative safety approach. Freight trends and travel patterns are continuously monitored to guide investments that improve reliability, mobility, and connectivity. TransPlan21 promotes context-sensitive solutions that enhance intermodal access and linkages between producers and markets. Environmental goals are embedded through compliance and sustainable design. At the same time, efficient business practices and workforce development are prioritized to maintain a cost-effective, high-performing transportation system supporting Montana's long-term freight mobility.

Through collaboration with public and private stakeholders and subject matter experts, MDT identified key freight system needs, including infrastructure conditions, freight mobility,

network reliability, and commercial vehicle safety. The Montana Freight Plan focused on five main goals: 1. improving safety for operators and the public, 2. Enhance resiliency and efficiency by maintaining infrastructure 3. Plan project management to enhance system reliability 4. Enhance environmental management 5. Prepare for natural events to support network resiliency. Commercial motor vehicle safety is a top priority, reflected in MDT's CHSP and CVSP, which emphasize human behavior, enforcement, and data-driven strategies. MDT also deploys safety technologies like dynamic curve warning systems, active warning devices, and 360SmartView for real-time inspection and risk identification. Montana leads the nation in rest area availability, offering ample truck parking per vehicle miles traveled and considering public rest areas and private truck stops to support safe rest for operators and travelers. Despite this, challenges persist, including unauthorized parking on non-interstate NHS routes. MDT has responded by upgrading existing rest areas, incorporating parking needs into corridor studies, and working with freight stakeholders.

Additionally, MDT is developing a parking availability system to alert drivers of open spaces, supported by NHFP funding and the 2022 ITD grant. This includes installing stall detection systems at the Columbus I-90 Westbound and Homestake I-90 Eastbound rest areas—the first in the state—with plans to expand to more sites. These efforts aim to enhance safety, reduce illegal parking and emissions, and deliver a unified platform for truck parking information across Montana and neighboring states.

The MDT prioritizes maintaining a state of good repair for pavements and bridges by applying appropriate treatments at optimal times. Montana's extensive road network includes over 73,000 center lane miles, with over 12 billion vehicle miles traveled annually—over half concentrated on just nine percent of the NHS. Freight mobility and safety are closely tied to pavement quality, as poor conditions lead to delays, increased incidents, and potential damage to cargo and vehicles. MDT implements treatments such as crack sealing, overlays, resurfacing, rehabilitation, rut-filling, chip sealing, and widening to enhance pavement performance. Rigid pavements are selectively applied in regions with harsh conditions, such as mountain passes. To address wear caused by heavy commercial vehicles, MDT uses a pavement management system to prioritize upgrades and reinforce high-volume routes with thicker pavements and polymer-modified materials. NHS pavement designs apply the highest reliability factor to accommodate varying loads and environmental conditions over time. For instance, bridges often face limitations because the outdated infrastructure is not designed for modern vehicles, causing chokepoints for OS/OW loads, delays, and safety concerns. MDT addresses this through tools like the Bridge Structure Management System for prioritization and permitting, the Bridge Load Posting Program to prevent structural damage, and updated bridge designs with higher load ratings. Dynamic message signs notify drivers of restrictions, while ABC methods and pre-cast components accelerate replacement. Bridge bundling further improves project efficiency, allowing the state to modernize multiple structures simultaneously and support safe, efficient freight movement.

The MDT separated two types of mobility issues: recurring and non-recurring. Recurring issues are predictable problems such as limited capacity, malfunctioning signals, or seasonal

traffic surges. On the contrary, the non-recurring issues cannot be predicted. Weather events, infrastructure failures, special events, and oversized loads are good examples. Although all Montana highways are vulnerable to non-recurring disruptions, certain areas—such as Billings during significant events—experience greater impacts. While recurring freight mobility challenges are limited, they are concentrated in small, localized zones with insufficient capacity. MDT uses the Level of Service index from the Highway Capacity Manual to monitor traffic performance, with LOS B targeted for the Interstate System and LOS C for principal and minor arterials. The most significant freight mobility challenges are seen in urban centers like Billings, Bozeman, Missoula, and Great Falls, where infrastructure struggles to keep pace with demand. The MDT applied strategies on infrastructure, institutions, and finances to reduce congestion and delays. For the infrastructure strategies, they improve resiliency and safety, enhance trade gateways, and adopt new technologies. For the institutional solutions, they smoothen coordination with jurisdictions, integrate public and private efforts, leverage data tools, and strengthen workforce planning. The financial strategies maximize federal funds, pursue new funding sources—including discretionary grants—and explore public-private partnerships to support critical freight infrastructure improvements.

Non-recurring congestion has impacted economic vitality in Montana, prompting MDT to enhance its response and recovery capabilities. MDT negotiated with IIA to support traffic control during accidents by collaborating with the Montana Highway Patrol and implementing an emergency operations and disaster plan to respond to unpredictable roadway situations. MDT deploys about 700 maintenance personnel in winter, applying de-icing agents and sand as guided by its Winter Maintenance Service Guidelines. Incident management teams establish detours and perform swift repairs following infrastructure failures like rockfalls, floods, and fires while clearing debris, securing evacuation routes, and coordinating public communication during wildfires or flooding events. To minimize delays for oversized and overweight loads, MDT offers an online permitting system and route planning tools, and it uses a Work Zone Safety & Mobility Toolbox to deliver real-time travel information during construction. Freight movement in Montana also faces geographic challenges, particularly in the west, where mountain passes, tunnels, and snow sheds create costly and restrictive conditions for rail operations. Although bottleneck data for carriers like BNSF and MRL is proprietary, BNSF continues to invest in infrastructure upgrades such as positive train control and grade crossing maintenance. Freight-related congestion remains relatively low but can increase during seasonal surges from agriculture, timber, and mining, which cause backups at transloading and processing sites on non-NHS routes. Private sector strategies to ease these pressures include expanding truck parking, extending facility hours, and coordinating with rail providers. Delays at weigh stations are mitigated through bypass technologies like PrePass and Drivewyze. Border crossings with Canada occasionally experience delays, often due to passenger traffic. However, MDT partners with customs and Canadian authorities to optimize operations and maintain joint weigh station agreements. At-grade rail crossings remain a source of vehicle delay, with grade separation projects identified in cities such as Billings, Bozeman, and Helena. MDT also emphasizes environmental stewardship in freight planning by working to reduce negative impacts on communities, wildlife, and the climate through regulatory compliance and collaborative initiatives.

Air pollution in Montana is often exacerbated by weather inversions that trap pollutants in urban areas, prompting regulatory and incentive-based responses from public agencies. Cities such as Missoula, Bozeman, Helena, and Red Lodge have implemented plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through regulations and voluntary community actions. To further support these goals, MDT is developing a Carbon Reduction Program. Although Montana ranked among the ten states with the lowest emissions in 2020, the state remains committed to maintaining air quality by addressing human-caused pollution through collaborative programs. MDT works with state and regional partners to meet air quality standards, fulfill non-attainment area conformity requirements, and prioritize NHFP projects that reduce emissions and congestion. Strategies include deploying technologies that improve freight flow, reduce idling, and minimize delays. MDT also manages the CMAQ program, with designated funds going to Missoula and additional funds supporting high-impact projects statewide, such as purchasing air monitoring equipment and optimizing traffic signal timing. MDT is advancing an integrated air quality planning process in partnership with the Department of Environmental Quality and regional planners to align transportation strategies with emissions reduction objectives. Corridor planning studies conducted by MDT help identify environmental and infrastructure issues, such as in the 2016 Rail Grade Separation Study, which led to a Belgrade project to reduce emissions from commercial vehicle idling. MDT ensures project compliance with environmental standards outlined in Chapter 42 of its Environmental Manual and supports DEQ-administered programs funded by the Volkswagen Environmental Mitigation Trust, targeting NO<sub>x</sub> reduction through cleaner vehicle technologies—projects prioritized under the NHFP further support emission cuts by easing commercial vehicle delays. MDT also implements advanced technologies such as automated permits, weigh station bypass systems, ramp screening, and intelligent transportation systems like synchronized traffic signals to improve freight mobility and minimize air pollution from stop-and-go vehicle operations.

During the expansion of the Interstate Highway System and other roadways, communities increasingly identified highway traffic and construction noise as major environmental concerns. As part of the environmental review process, MDT or its consultants must assess whether a noise analysis is required and if predicted levels could cause impacts. Suppose noise impacts are identified in federal-aid projects. In that case, MDT must consider reasonable and feasible abatement strategies, such as creating buffer zones, adjusting vehicle restrictions or speed limits, selecting alternative pavement types, and incorporating acoustical and engineering considerations like topography, drainage, and safety. When design modifications are insufficient, noise barriers—such as walls or earth berms—may be installed within the project's right-of-way or easements. MDT also addresses stormwater runoff, which can carry pollutants into nearby water bodies. The Environmental Services Bureau supports pollution prevention and water resource protection through engineering, construction, and maintenance initiatives, with goals including erosion control, regulatory compliance, training, and program management under MS4 permit requirements. MDT has also taken steps to minimize the impact of freight transportation on wildlife and the environment, introducing a Wildlife Accommodation Process during the 2019–2020 biennium and forming partnerships with key stakeholders to improve wildlife safety and connectivity. In the 2021–2022 biennium, MDT advanced these efforts by enhancing project awareness, cooperating with regulatory agencies, applying contextual methodologies, reusing

materials, and managing aquatic mitigation banks. For the wildlife-sensitive designs, including fencing, longer bridges, detection systems, signages, culverts, vegetation management, and dedicated crossing structures, MDT aligned with NEPA and MEPA to ensure environmental planning, analysis, and transparency across project development and system maintenance. Also, they prioritized transportation network resiliency to ensure swift recovery from extreme weather events.

MDT has addressed extreme weather conditions due to climate and geographic challenges. In winter, they maintained operations workforce. Also, they executed road load restrictions during severe weather and implemented emergency protocols for disaster retrieval. For instance, after the 2021 West Wind Fire destroyed critical infrastructure in Denton, MDT established a detour within two days and began reconstructing damaged bridges. MDT's Rockfall Asset Management Program helps prioritize mitigation efforts based on historical data and risk analysis, monitoring over 10,000 center-line miles. MDT enhanced winter maintenance methods to provide real-time updates and route alternatives with advanced technologies. Wind-driven wildfires on the Great Plains and dust storms in rural areas also disrupt freight and passenger travel. MDT activates its Emergency Operations and Disaster Plan to coordinate swift responses, working with local, tribal, and federal partners when necessary, including FEMA.

MDT focuses on rapid emergency response, durable infrastructure design, winter operations, and public communication to strengthen system resiliency. Performance measures are critical in tracking progress, ensuring compliance with federal law, and maintaining safe, efficient freight movement. MDT sets and monitors safety, reliability, pavement, and bridge targets across its transportation programs. Under the CHSP, MDT works with safety partners to reduce fatalities, serious injuries, and non-motorized incidents. The CVSP focuses on lowering fatal truck crashes per 100 million VMT. Though crash data can vary from year to year, long-term trends show a decline. Reliability measures—such as system performance and TTTR on the NHS—remain central to MDT's goals. In 2020, Montana's interstate system achieved 99.9 percent reliability and a TTTR index 1.23, exceeding federal benchmarks. MDT reviews performance targets biennially and quadrennially, with current data indicating consistent success in meeting its objectives.

Asset management performance is a key component of MDT's infrastructure strategy, with Px3 supporting long-term improvements aligned with performance goals. The focus areas—pavement, bridge, and safety—are essential for efficient freight movement and network resiliency. Pavement condition is especially critical, given the impact of heavy trucks. MDT collects annual data through its Pavement Management System to maintain or improve ride indexes across major highway systems. Federal reporting on pavement and bridge conditions occurs biennially and quadrennially, guiding efforts to reduce lifecycle costs and preserve infrastructure. Safety remains a core priority: cut fatalities and injuries by half by 2030. These performance measures influence project selection and investment decisions to maintain a reliable and safe transportation network. MDT's freight strategy follows the National Multimodal Freight Policy. It is reflected in the Montana Freight Plan, which aligns with the broader goals of TranPlanMT. Freight is integrated into subject-specific plans, with safety efforts led by the



CHSP, Montana's adaptation of the federally mandated SHSP. Updated every five years, the CHSP promotes strategic safety improvements through education, enforcement, emergency response, and engineering. It sets measurable goals, supports local and tribal needs, and fosters interagency collaboration. With a Vision Zero target, the CHSP aims to reduce severe traffic incidents from 952 in 2018 to 476 by 2030, and recent data shows encouraging declines. The 2020 update also highlighted the need to monitor automated technologies, ensuring planning supports the public and freight operators.

The CVSP complements the CHSP by focusing on trucking and freight safety, outlining Montana's goals, strategies, and performance measures for CMVs through the MCS Division, and submitting to FMCSA for approval. Supported by MCSAP funding, Montana has experienced a sustained reduction in CMV crashes over the past 16 years through real-time inspections and educational initiatives. MCSAP is administered jointly by MCS, MHP, and FMCSA to mitigate CMV and hazardous materials incidents. Additional safety programs include HSIP and RHGCP, which apply federally guided, data-driven approaches to address safety concerns such as rail crossing protections, over-height detection systems, and curve speed warnings for large vehicles. MDT also enhances freight movement and traveler safety through the Montana Rest Area Plan, which evaluates services, parking availability, and projected demand to guide rest area improvements. The plan follows AASHTO spacing guidelines and identifies highway segments exceeding recommended distances as candidates for upgrades or new facilities. The 2019 update reviewed facilities constructed since 2000 and outlined future priorities. MDT collaborated with stakeholders throughout the planning process and established the Statewide Rest Area Prioritization Plan Committee, which uses asset management principles and data-driven analysis to inform decisions. Funding is directed toward rest areas along high-volume routes to ensure maximum benefit within budget constraints.

Effectively managing transportation assets in Montana requires a performance-based, data-driven approach due to limited resources and a vast network of approximately 13,000 centerline miles of MDT-maintained roads. MDT employs Px3, a funding strategy prioritizing pavement and bridge improvements on the NHS and Primary Highway System, aligning with statewide goals in TranPlanMT and federal performance requirements related to pavement and bridge conditions, travel time reliability, and freight movement. Complementing Px3 is MDT's TAMP, a risk-based framework guiding investment decisions to meet short- and long-term infrastructure goals. MDT also uses the STIP to identify and prioritize multimodal projects across highways, rail, and aviation, developed through coordination with state, federal, and local stakeholders. MDT collaborates widely to support freight movement at multiple levels. In-state partnerships include working with inland ports in Shelby and Butte, bolstered by programs like the Montana Essential Freight Rail Loan Program and support for federal funding. Regionally, MDT engages in the North/West Passage Corridor and the Western States Freight Coalition while contributing to the WBWG with Canadian agencies and the Great Northern Corridor Coalition to enhance freight links from the Pacific Northwest to the Great Lakes. Locally, MDT works with MPOs in Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula to develop LRTPs and TIPs that incorporate freight needs, aligning federal projects with community priorities. MDT also partners

with local jurisdictions to implement removable signage for oversized loads, advancing freight mobility, system efficiency, and long-term economic strategies.

The MDT actively collaborates with key stakeholders, such as the Montana Trucking Association (MTA), representing over 300 companies, including trucking firms, passenger carriers, and construction businesses. MTA participated in stakeholder engagement during the development of the Montana Freight Plan, providing input on infrastructure improvements that impact the freight industry. MDT also works closely with private sector developers through the Systems Impact Action Process (SIAP), which coordinates project reviews to assess and mitigate transportation impacts from significant developments, including railroad crossings, pipelines, and oversized vehicle transportation. SIAP provides a single point of contact for private developers and ensures that any significant impacts on the transportation system are addressed through approved mitigation measures before project permits are issued. At the federal level, MDT leverages the NHFP to fund projects that enhance freight mobility on Montana's portion of the NHFN, primarily Interstates I-15 and I-90. NHFP supports goals such as congestion reduction, safety improvement, infrastructure resiliency, environmental sustainability, and system reliability. Montana currently lacks designated critical urban or rural freight corridors but continues to evaluate potential designations during periodic freight plan updates. Projects eligible for NHFP funding must be included in the state's Freight Investment Plan and meet criteria under federal law. From 2016 to 2020, MDT received approximately \$65 million through the FAST Act, and under the IIJA, Montana is expected to receive \$74 million between 2022 and 2026. NHFP-eligible projects are scored and prioritized based on how well they align with national freight goals, including increasing capacity, safety, and connectivity and improving operational efficiency and reliability. Examples of recent and upcoming NHFP-funded projects include the Wolf Creek rehabilitation on I-15, the Johnson Lane Interchange reconstruction on I-90, and bridge replacement projects such as the I-90 Structures at W Alberton and the Gore Hill Interchange on I-15. These investments are crucial to maintaining Montana's freight infrastructure and supporting state and national multimodal freight policies. The Freight Investment Plan also includes illustrative projects eligible for NHFP funding should additional funds become available.

### **3.2.5 Current and Future Projects from MDT**

#### **3.2.5.1 Median High-Tension Cable Rail<sup>xii</sup>, Fencing Improvement, and Resurfacing on I-15**

According to MDT's active project map<sup>xiii</sup>, a variety of planned projects aim to enhance transportation resilience by addressing safety, infrastructure condition, and other critical factors.

The MDT launched a four-phased project to install median high-tension cable rail on Montana's Interstate 15 (I-15). The cable rail prevents vehicles from crossing into oncoming traffic, reducing crashes and collisions. The website report shows that the Bozeman and Butte phases have been completed. Coral Construction Company installed 40 miles of cable rail on I-90 from Three Forks to the Bear Canyon Exit in Bozeman by November 2023 and completed the Butte phase in November 2024, installing 18 miles on I-15 from the Buxton Interchange to Butte Hill and 14 miles on I-90 from the Anaconda Interchange to two miles east of the MT 375 and Continental Drive Exit. The Missoula phase began in September 2024 under Poteet Construction.

It will add 48 miles of cable rail on I-90 between Wye and Bearmouth and three miles at the Quartz Flats Rest Area, with completion expected in 2026, pending weather and material availability. Construction updates will resume in spring 2025. The Helena phase on I-15 is the final stage, but its start date has yet to be determined.

Two safety and maintenance projects are planned along Interstate 15 (US 287) in the Great Falls District of Montana. The first, Resurface Project 10238000, was awarded for construction in 2025 with a contract amount of \$1,996,497. Located in Lewis and Clark County between reference markers 189.910 and 200.430—extending from the county line near Broadwater County to the Lincoln Road Interchange—the project will apply a scrub seal to rejuvenate the existing asphalt and add a protective rock chip layer. Construction is anticipated in 2024 or 2025, contingent on market conditions and funding availability. The second project, SF189 HLNA HT MEDIAN CABLERAIL (9796000), is a safety improvement currently in the design phase, with construction anticipated in 2030. This project spans Jefferson and Lewis & Clark Counties from reference markers 174.000 to 204.000. It will install high-tension cable rail in the median of I-15 between the Jefferson City and Lincoln Interchanges. Final limits and details will be determined during project development with input from MDT’s Safety and design teams.

At the same time, two upcoming projects are planned along Interstate 15 (US 287) near Helena in Lewis and Clark County, within the Great Falls District. The first, I-15 Fencing – Helena Area (Project 10307000), replaces fencing along I-15 between reference markers from 195.000 to 219.000 to enhance roadside safety and control access. The second, Lincoln Road Interchange – North (Project 10380000), is a resurfacing project scheduled for construction in 2028 with an estimated cost of \$4.1 million. The project begins just north of the Lincoln Road Interchange and ends at the entrance to Wolf Creek Canyon. It will apply a scrub seal to rejuvenate the pavement surface and extend the life of the roadway.

The Wolf Creek – North & South Rehabilitation Project (7617000) was awarded in 2022 with a construction cost of \$39,193,090. Located along I-15/US 287 in Lewis and Clark County between reference markers 222.000 and 229.100, the project addresses long-standing structural issues caused by frequent freeze-thaw cycles and increasing truck traffic through the Wolf Creek Canyon. The gravel base on the highway has deteriorated and needs to be replaced with more durable materials. Consequently, the project was to decrease maintenance costs and improve safety.

### **3.3 EXIST ISSUES WITH THE TRACK, LOCATE WASH-OUTS, AND EVALUATE THE NECESSITY OF REMEDIATION**

#### **3.3.1 Discussion of the Great Falls-Helena rail line**

According to the discussion of the Great Falls-Helena rail line <sup>xiv</sup>, the railroad has abandoned since the mid-80s, used for car storage, and was covered with dirt. Possible reasons are the grade was too old to use it and high elevation resulted in lack of use. The railroad is 600 feet higher than Mullan Pass, and has no sidings long enough to hold modern freight trains.

Although the rail can reactivate as a one-way empties-only route to reduce congestion on Mullan Pass, the congestion didn't reach the point. The purpose of the rail is mainly for passengers and local-freight route instead of heavy freight route. Washed out location in Great Falls-Helena line is located at the north of Ulm. The Great Falls to Ulm segment approximately ten miles of level track just north of Helena are used for container car storage.

Another discussion about the current condition of line from Helena to Great Falls <sup>xv</sup> showed that the line has eaten by the Missouri River into the road bed. The cost for repairing an erosion issue would be arduous and expensive. Further issues in the discussion included: bad washouts at Sieben Siding, small landslide near Dearborn, sliding Hillside south of Cascade near Tintinger Siding, and sinking Fill at Antelope Butte east of Ulm.

From the discussion of the slip-out location between Great Falls and Helena railroad in Ulm <sup>xvi</sup>, there is a sinkhole 10 miles south of Great Falls, causing the line to go out of service, and it has not been fixed since July 2001. The slip-out is easily visible from the bridge over the Missouri River at the north end of the town. From the slip-out location and walked down approximately 110 feet, the track and ties were missing. Besides, a long string of empty spine cars must be removed, approximately 10 miles south of Great Falls. Although the slip-out in Ulm was one of the reasons for the BNSF to abandon the line between Great Falls and Helena, BNSF might be concerned about other potential environmental issues that would affect the operation of trains.

From the 2010 Montana State Rail Plan <sup>xvii</sup>, the article pointed out a location that have riverbank stability problems on the Great Falls-Helena track near Ulm. The location is on the west of Great Falls approximately 14.2 miles, storing cars in this segment since 2010.

### **3.3.2 2017 Updated to Multi Hazard Mitigation Plan**

According to the 2017 Updated to Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan <sup>xviii</sup>, 56 railroad accidents happened near Great Falls in Cascade County from 1990 to 2016. Most of the problems are caused by derailed cars each year, causing significant delays, hazards, or other problems for drivers. Also, railroad-related hazards such as toxic spill contamination and vehicle collisions threaten Cascade County residents. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), over 80 percent of public railroad crossings do not have lights and gates, and 60 percent of all railroad accidents occur at these unprotected crossings.

#### **3.3.2.1 Hazardous Materials**

Cascade County does not have land use regulations to limit construction near facilities, transportation routes, or sites for storing hazardous materials. Even though the U.S. Department of Transportation regulates the transportation of non-radioactive hazardous materials (HAZMAT), central Montana currently has no designated HAZMAT routes, allowing these materials to be transported through Great Falls and Cascade County. The government might need to focus on controlling hazardous materials with regulations.

### 3.3.2.2 *Wildfire*

Wildfire is also an important risk on the Great Falls-Helena rail line. Low rainfall, high temperatures, low humidity, thunderstorms, high winds, and lightning cause the fire season. According to reports in Cascade County, over 60 percent of fires are caused by lightning. Another majority of fires were caused by farm equipment. Between 1992 and 2012, 70 fires burned over 6,337 acres in the county. The National Weather Service (NWS) proposed several warnings, advisories, and restrictions to reduce fire risk and prevent during high to extreme danger periods. The following criteria are:

- Fire Weather Watch
- Red Flag Warning
- Fire Warning
- Dense Smoke Advisory
- Stage 1 Fire Restriction
- Stage 2 Fire Restriction

Fire Weather Watch is aligned with the Red Flag Warning. The Fire Weather Watch will be implemented in the next 24 to 72 hours when Red Flag conditions occur. Red Flag Warning means when weather conditions that could sustain extensive wildfire activity and meet one of the following criteria in conjunction with “Very High” or “Extreme” fire danger:

- Sustained surface winds or frequent gusts of 25 mph or more
- Exceptionally hot, dry conditions with relative humidity below 20%
- Forecasted dry thunderstorms during an extremely arid period
- Any anticipated weather shift that could lead to a significant impact on fire danger

A Red Flag Warning is issued when Red Flag conditions are anticipated within the next 12 to 24 hours. Local officials may issue a Fire Warning when a wildfire or structure fire spreads to a populated area. The warning will inform people to evacuate to the direct area in the fire’s path as recommended by officials according to state law or local ordinance. A dense Smoke Advisory will be implemented while the widespread visibilities are less or equal to 0.25 miles for a few hours or more due to smoke. Stage 1 Fire Restriction and Stage 2 Fire Restriction account for the restriction of using fire without a permit. Similarities and differences will be explained below.

Stages 1 and 2 have similarities in fire restrictions, smoking restrictions, torch use, and engine restrictions. Fire restrictions prohibit open fires, campfires, and stove fires, but Stage 1 allows some exceptions. In smoking restrictions, both restrict smoking to enclosed vehicles, buildings, developed recreation sites, or areas cleared to at least three feet in diameter. Both torch use prohibits welding, acetylene, or other torches with open flames. Internal and external combustion engines require a properly installed and maintained spark-arresting device in engine restrictions.

The differences will be showed in Table 5:

<b>Category</b>	<b>Stage 1 Restriction</b>	<b>Stage 2 Restriction</b>
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<b>Fire Use</b>	Fires, campfires, and stove fires allowed with a permit in designated areas (Forest Service developed campsites/picnic grounds)	No open fires, campfires, or stove fires allowed under any circumstances
<b>Smoking</b>	Allowed in an enclosed vehicle/building, a developed recreation site, or a barren three-foot cleared area	Same, but specifies the area must be cleared to mineral soil

*Table 5: Differences between Stage 1 and 2 Restrictions*

Wildfire issues can be mitigated by comprehensive land use planning, housing development design, fuel management, and public education. Medium, high, and extreme wildland-urban interfaces (WUI) are required to follow exceptional design standards, including:

- **Access and Evacuation:** Roadside vegetation is maintained to ensure roads can serve as escape routes and fire breaks. Minimum two routes to provide multiple escape options and access for emergency vehicles
- **Building Density Requirements:** Reduce building densities in areas with steep slopes or dense forest growth to mitigate fire hazards
- **Vegetation Management:** Making guidelines for a comprehensive vegetation management plan to reduce fuel loads and fire risks. The guidelines included creating defensible space, establishing fuel breaks and green belts, and ensuring ongoing maintenance
- **Water Supply:** Ensure a water source for fire-fighting is available and maintained as part of the defensible space. Also, the water supply system should follow requirements such as including fire hydrants or storage tanks
- **Fire Protection Covenants:** Property owners should uphold fire protection measures, including maintaining fire protection water supplies, defensible spaces, driveway access routes, and fuel breaks

Wildfires are influenced by climate variability, local topography, and human activities. Climate change can impact multiple aspects of the wildfire system, including rising temperatures, prolonged hot and dry conditions, and stronger winds that accelerate fire speed reaching residential areas. Wildfire smoke also influences air quality and public health. Recent studies suggest that smoke waves will become longer, more intense, and more frequent, raising concerns about ecosystems, economic stability, and public health.

### ***3.3.2.3 Severe weather and drought***

Due to climate change, severe weather hazards have become more and more intense in recent years. The mean annual precipitation has been below average, and the mean annual temperatures have been above average for the past five years. Although severe storms are unfamiliar, thunderstorms, hailstorms, high winds, heavy snow, freezing rain, and sleet still occur. Severe weather conditions occurred from November through April in Cascade County. Snow, extended cold, and high wind occurred during these months. From May to October, thunderstorms, wind, hail, lightning, tornadoes, and microbursts occurred each year, resulting in drought. Further details will be elaborated on in the next paragraph.

In winter, storms bring straight-line winds well over 50 mph, potentially destroying property and killing livestock and people. Four storm types are sleet, ice storms or freezing rain, heavy snowfall or blizzards, and low temperatures. Blizzards are common to align with blowing snow and low visibility. Characteristics of severe winter storms are decided by the amount and extent of snow or ice, air temperature, wind speed, and event duration, creating conditions to disrupt essential regional systems. From the perspective of temperatures, when temperatures drop to 30 below zero, combined with high winds, roads may become impassable, utilities may fail, and access to rural homes can be severely restricted, influencing emergency services, businesses, vehicular accidents, and flight disruptions.

NWS provided a warning and advisory criterion for winter weather in Cascade County. The criteria for reacting to the severe winter weather conditions are categorized below:

- Winter Storm Watch: It will be issued to inform the public with 12 to 48 hours of advance notice when snow accumulation of 6 inches or more in 12 hours or 8 inches or more in 24 hours and sustained or frequent wind gusts of 25 to 34 mph. The wind gusts sometimes reduce visibility to 0.25 miles or less for 3 hours or more.
- Winter Weather Advisory: It will be issued when a combination of winter weather conditions may lead to significant impacts
- Winter Storm Warning: Same as Winter Storm Watch, but it will be issued when conditions are occurring, imminent, or highly probable
- Blizzard Watch: It will be issued 12 to 48 hours in advance to warn of potential blizzard conditions, including sustained winds or frequent gusts of 35 mph or more significant and visibility reduced to less than 0.25 mile due to falling or blowing snow for at least 3 hours
- Blowing Snow Advisory: It will be issued when visibility intermittently drops to 0.5 miles or less due to blowing snow
- Blizzard Warning: Same as Blizzard Watch, but it will be issued when conditions are occurring, imminent, or highly probable
- Freezing Rain Advisory: It will be issued when ice accumulation makes roads and sidewalks slippery, but significant damage is not expected
- Ice Storm Warning: It will be issued when significant and damaging ice accumulation is occurring imminent or highly probable
- Snow Advisory: It will be issued when 2 to 5 inches of snow is expected within 12 hours
- Sleet Advisory: It will be issued when sleet accumulation is expected to create hazardous conditions
- Heavy Snow Warning: It will be issued when 6 inches or more of snow in 12 hours or 8 inches or more in 24 hours is expected
- Wind Chill Watch: It will be issued 12 to 48 hours in advance for potential wind chills of -40°F or colder with wind speeds of 10 mph or higher lasting 6 hours or more
- Wind Chill Advisory: It will be issued when wind chills range from -20°F to -39°F, with wind speeds of 10 mph or higher lasting 6 hours or more
- Wind Chill Warning: It will be issued when wind chills reach -40°F or colder, combined with 10 mph winds and precipitation

For severe summer weather, a severe thunderstorm produces wind gusts of 58 mph (50 knots) or higher, hail of at least 1 inch in diameter, or tornadoes. The storms can cause intense downbursts, lightning, and microburst winds. Strong winds may occur in thunderstorms when weather conditions are favorable. Tornadoes are the most concentrated and violent atmospheric storms, forming a rotating vortex of wind and strong vertical motion, causing widespread devastation. Although tornadoes may cause devastating damage to the people, it is uncommon in Cascade County and will be confined to a small area. A microburst is a highly localized column of rapidly sinking air that generates damaging, straight-line winds at the surface. Microbursts are similar to tornadoes; however, microbursts have divergent wind patterns, which is dangerous to aircraft because of sudden and intense low-level wind shear. Table 6 compares these three types of severe summer weather in Cascade County:

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Thunderstorm</b>	<b>Tornado</b>	<b>Microburst</b>
<b>Definition</b>	A storm with lightning, thunder, strong winds, rain, and sometimes hail.	A rotating column of air extending from a thunderstorm to the ground, capable of extreme destruction.	A sudden, localized downdraft of air that produces intense, straight-line winds.
<b>Wind Speed</b>	Can exceed 58 mph (50 knots) in severe cases.	Can reach up to 300 mph in the most violent storms.	Can exceed 100 mph in extreme cases.
<b>Wind Pattern</b>	Can produce straight-line winds, gusts, and downbursts.	Rotating, cyclonic winds with strong updrafts and downdrafts.	Downward burst of air that spreads outward in all directions.
<b>Size &amp; Scale</b>	Can cover large areas, up to hundreds of miles.	Usually small, concentrated (hundreds of yards to a few miles wide).	Very localized (typically 1-2.5 miles in diameter).
<b>Formation</b>	Develops when warm, moist air rises, cools, and condenses into clouds.	Forms from severe thunderstorms with strong wind shear and vertical motion.	Forms when cold air rapidly sinks within a thunderstorm, hitting the ground and spreading out.
<b>Damage Potential</b>	Can cause flooding, lightning damage, wind damage, and hail impact.	Capable of extreme destruction, leveling buildings and uprooting trees.	Can knock down trees, damage structures, and pose a severe risk to aircraft.
<b>Duration</b>	Can last from minutes to several hours.	Usually lasts a few minutes, though some persist longer.	Short-lived, typically 5-15 minutes.
<b>Danger to Aviation</b>	Moderate to high due to turbulence, lightning, and wind shear.	High risk due to violent winds and unpredictable movement.	Extremely high risk due to sudden wind shear near the ground.

*Table 6: Comparison of severe summer weather in Cascade County*



The NWS provided advisories to warn the public about the severe summer weather. For each type of summer weather, the NWS explained the advisories below:

- Hazardous Weather Outlook: Alert the public of potential severe weather in the area from 1 to 7 days in advance
- Severe Thunderstorm Watch: It will be issued when conditions are favorable for severe thunderstorms within the next several hours. The severe thunderstorm watch will remain in effect for 4 to 6 hours
- Severe Thunderstorm Warning: It will be issued when Doppler radar detects or the public reports a thunderstorm with 58 mph or higher wind gusts and/or hail at least 1 inch in diameter. Usually valid for 30 to 60 minutes
- High Wind Watch: It will be issued when the potential of sustained winds of 40 mph or more or gusts of at least 58 mph for an hour or longer. The High Wind Watch does not include timing, location, or intensity
- High Wind Warning: Same as High Wind Watch, but includes timing, location, or intensity
- Tornado Watch: It will be issued within several hours when conditions are highly favorable for tornado formation. The Tornado Watch will remain in effect for 4 to 6 hours
- Tornado Warning: It will be issued when Doppler radar detects or the public reports a tornado. Usually valid for 15 to 45 minutes

Dry weather may cause a drought, which impacts economic hardship, deprives people of their livelihoods, and weakens local economies. The effects of drought became more severe over time as moisture-dependent activities suffered. Non-irrigated croplands faced the highest risk as drought conditions persist. Typical disasters are received from a Presidential Disaster Declaration; however, droughts are declared by the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture. Since the assistance is limited, the funds are often taken as low-interest loans or Conservation Reserve Programs (CRP) to graze the livestock. Severe droughts can exacerbate other hazards, such as range fires that threaten agricultural industries and wildlife habitats.

The NWS outlines warnings and advisories related to drought conditions below:

- Blowing Dust Advisory: It will be issued when blowing dust reduces visibility to 0.25 and 1 mile, with winds of 25 mph or higher.
- Dust Storm Warning: It will be issued when blowing dust reduces visibility to less than 0.25, with sustained winds of 25 mph or higher
- Heat Advisory: It will be issued when heat index values are expected to reach 105°F or higher for at least three consecutive days
- Heat Warning: It will be issued when high temperatures are forecasted to exceed 105°F, with nighttime lows remaining above 80°F, for three or more consecutive days

For future development, the State of Montana has adopted the 2012 International Building Code (IBC) for constructing buildings that can withstand a constant wind velocity of 75

mph, three-second gusts of 90 mph, and a minimum snow load of 30 pounds per square foot. However, the IBC did not apply to single-family residences.

Montana follows the 2012 International Residential Code (IRC) for one—and two-family residences and townhouses. Cities, counties, and towns have the option to become certified to enforce local jurisdictions. The City of Great Falls is certified for building code enforcement, while Cascade County does not have building departments. As a result, it lacks enforcement capabilities to ensure compliance with state building codes.

Climate change poses a significant challenge concerning severe weather and drought. The frequency of extreme weather events has increased over the past century. A warming climate is expected to intensify drought conditions. According to the National Climate Assessment, rising surface temperatures accelerate evaporation and increase plant transpiration rates. Unless these higher evapotranspiration rates are offset by increased precipitation, regions will experience drier conditions and a higher drought risk. In addition, population exposure and vulnerability to severe weather and drought are likely to grow. Extreme weather events will lead to increased risks to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, young children, and individuals with weakened immune systems, creating a favorable environment for disease-carrying organisms during droughts, causing more significant structural damage from stronger winds and hailstorms, threatening farming sustainability while changing temperatures and precipitation patterns. From the economic perspective, decreased agricultural productivity may impact farming and ranching communities, while regions dependent on tourism could suffer revenue losses. Water-based recreational areas may also experience declines in visitors due to drought.

In conclusion, climate change is a critical effect of severe weather and drought. Rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, and increased exposure to extreme events pose significant threats to public health, property, agriculture, and economics. In the following years, effective risk management and adaptation strategies will be required to mitigate these challenges.

#### **3.3.2.4 Communicable diseases**

Communicable diseases caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites are one of the risks in Cascade County. There are three ways to transmit the diseases: person-to-person contact, animal-to-human transmission, animal-to-animal transmission, and indirect transmission through contaminated surfaces. Infectious disease outbreaks could have severe economic and agricultural consequences that disrupt the food supply chain locally and beyond. The greatest threat to public health and economic stability is contagious diseases. Since infection rates can surge when an epidemic occurs, leading to isolation measures, quarantines, and even mass fatalities, preparedness and response strategies are essential to mitigate the impact of communicable diseases in Cascade County.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) identifies three categories of biological agents or diseases. The first one is Category A: The U.S. public health system and primary healthcare providers must be prepared to address various biological agents, including pathogens rarely seen in the United States. (Tetra Tech Inc., 2017) The following reasons are why high-priority agents are organisms that pose a risk to national security.

- Highly contagious or easily transmitted among populations
- High mortality rates lead to severe public health crises and widespread panic
- Have the potential to disrupt social and economic stability
- Require specific measures for public health preparedness

Category B and C are the article's second and third-highest priority agents. Category B can be spread easily, causes moderate illness rates but low fatality rates, and requires improved CDC diagnostic capabilities and enhanced disease monitoring. Category C are emerging pathogens that could be engineered for widespread dissemination in the future because of widespread availability, ease of manufacturing and distribution, and high potential for severe illness, fatalities, and significant public health consequences, in 2012 to 2016 data for Cascade County, 2583 influenza cases in the Cascade County with total 80 fatalities across the State. According to the Montana Department of Livestock, losses to the livestock population would be devastating due to diseases and could have an economic impact.

Diseases pose a direct threat to the population, plants, and animals in Cascade County. The population can influence vulnerability at risk of contracting infectious diseases. The urban city will spread rapidly compared to the county's more rural area. Since high tourism and visitor traffic in Great Falls, new diseases would cause the risk of outbreaks in the local population. The severity of disease impacts depends on mortality rate, infection rate, contagiousness, and population movement. Because of unpredictability, Cascade County is considered to have a potential risk of communicable diseases across all areas. From historical reports to individual infectious diseases, the diseases are classified as "highly likely" hazards: a probability of a global communicable disease outbreak affecting Cascade County. From historical data from the 1918 influenza pandemic, infection rates in the U.S. reached 28% of the population (Billings, 1997), 35% from the World Health Organization record. A similar event in Cascade County would severely impact local healthcare resources, especially in the case of bioterrorism-related outbreaks, where no vaccine or containment measures may be available. While the 2014 Ebola outbreak and Zika virus transmission affected parts of the U.S., the likelihood of Ebola reaching the region is low, and the Zika virus is unlikely to spread locally and will primarily affect individuals traveling to or returning from Zika-affected regions; however, effective containment, response strategies, and public health measures still crucial in managing potential outbreaks.

Environmental conditions influence many prevalent human infections. For example, some infectious diseases spread by mosquitoes are restricted in warm climates. Additionally, climate conditions shape the distribution of other species necessary for disease transmission, limiting where infections can occur. However, rising temperatures contributed to the expansion of insect-borne diseases, and the prediction for full infections is still complex. For instance, increased waterborne infections will cause diarrheal illnesses, heavy rainfall events, and warmer temperatures, causing pathogens to spread more rapidly. The primary impact of climate change on communicable diseases will be on human populations. Insect and waterborne infections linked to higher temperatures and flooding could increase public health risks, particularly for young children, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups.

### **3.3.2.5 *Transportation accidents***

Transportation accident hazards include highway, railroad, and aircraft accidents. Cascade County has approximately 104,000 passenger automobiles and trucks operating within the region. These vehicles travel 1,700 miles of county-maintained roads, secondary highways, and light-duty roads and 375 miles of state-maintained highways, including primary highways such as Interstate 15 and its frontage roads. Great Falls is a major transportation hub, with approximately 30 interstate carriers providing transport services across the United States and Canada.

Highway accidents occur due to distracted driving, driver fatigue, drunk driving, speeding and aggressive driving, and adverse weather conditions. Montana also has a high rate of vehicle collisions with wildlife. Although there is no history of mass casualty accidents involving school buses or tour buses in Cascade County, severe weather conditions increase the risk of accidents.

BNSF Railway Company provides freight rail service to Cascade County. According to the article, rail service is the second-largest freight transport method in the region. Agricultural products and supplies, large bulk manufactured goods, and lumber are a significant portion of freight shipments. However, Great Falls is no longer on a central rail mainline connecting the South, Midwest, and West Coast due to the 1972 merger of the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy lines. According to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), Cascade County recorded 56 railroad accidents, 21 involving railcars carrying hazardous materials damaged from 1990 to 2016. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) reports that 60 percent of all railroad accidents occur at unprotected or passive crossings. Notable railroad accidents in Cascade County are Belt train derailment and explosions in 1976 and a fatal train-vehicle collision near Vaughn in 2015; both accidents caused severe consequences to businesses, homes, and overpass.

While major derailments and collisions are relatively rare, the historical incidents indicated that the potential for catastrophic damage and loss of life when accidents occur could be prevented through infrastructure improvements, rail safety measures, and continued monitoring to reduce risks associated with rail transportation in the county.

The Great Falls International Airport serves as the primary public airport in the region. According to the Federal Aviation Administration data, between 1980 and 2016, 10 fatalities in Cascade County were caused by aircraft accidents. Federal disaster or State emergency declarations did not exist to associate with the Transportation Accident hazard in Cascade County.

Since privately owned vehicles serve as the primary mode of transportation for individuals in Cascade County, frequent highway accidents are caused by severe weather conditions and high speeds. Railroad-related hazards are also a significant risk to Cascade County residents; more than 80 percent of public railroad crossings lack lights and gates, and approximately 60 percent of all railroad accidents occur at unprotected crossings. The MHMP

Planning Team rated the probability of future highway and railroad accidents as "highly likely," while aircraft accidents are classified as "likely" in the article.

### ***3.3.2.6 Flooding and Dams failure***

Flooding is a natural occurrence caused by excess water from snowmelt and heavy rainfall overflowing onto adjacent floodplains. Three types of flooding can impact Cascade County.

- Flash Floods: short-duration torrential rainfalls or cloudbursts over small drainage areas, leading to sudden and intense flooding
- Ice Jam Flooding: when floating ice accumulates at a stream obstruction, causing water to back up and flood upstream. If the ice jam breaks, it can trigger flash flooding downstream.
- Dam Failure Flooding: If a structural failure occurs within a dam's inundation zone, areas inside this zone are at risk of severe flooding

Flooding is also one of the costliest natural disasters in the U.S.; 90 percent of all property losses from natural disasters come from flooding, resulting in an average of 150 deaths annually. Floodwaters sweep away individuals, causing most fatalities, and sediment-laden water inundation caused property damage. Fast-moving floodwaters can wash away buildings, sweep vehicles downstream, and damage critical infrastructure. Additionally, basement flooding can lead to significant structural damage. There are four types of seasonal flooding factors:

- Chinook Winds (March-April): Warm, dry winds gust up to 100 mph, rapidly melting snow and causing flooding while the ground remains frozen and unable to absorb water
- Heavy Snowmelt (May/June): Rainstorms combine with heavy snowmelt, increasing water flow and causing flooding
- High-Intensity Summer Rainstorms (July-August): Intense rainfall leads to flash floods and urban flooding
- Ice Jams (Winter-Early Spring): Ice formations obstruct river flow, such as the Missouri River from Craig to Hardy, creating flood risks

The NWS provides forecasts, watches, and warnings for heavy rain and flooding to mitigate flooding risks and prevent natural disasters to people, infrastructures, and properties.

- Flash Flood Watch: It will be issued when conditions are favorable for flash flooding, but it does not guarantee that flash flooding will occur
- Flash Flood Warning: It will be issued when flash flooding is imminent with rapidly rising water levels leading to inundation within less than six hours
- Flood Watch: It will be issued when conditions are favorable for flooding, but flooding is not yet sure to occur.
- Flood Warning: It will be issued when flooding is expected to occur more than six hours after the triggering event

Flooding in Great Falls has historically been caused by rapid snowmelt combined with heavy rainfall in the Sun River and Missouri River Basins, leading to both rivers overflowing

their banks. Cascade County has experienced widespread flooding in several years. Many of these events required evacuations and caused extensive property damage. The recurring flood events required flood mitigation, emergency preparedness, and infrastructure improvements.

Great Falls is located east of the confluence of the Sun and Missouri Rivers and is protected from flooding by dams. However, west areas of the Missouri River lie within the Sun River floodplain and are safeguarded by a levee system. Two artificial structures adjust water levels in Great Falls.

- Black Eagle Dam (Missouri River): Removable flashboards to help reduce floodwater constriction during a flood and build for power production
- 6th Street Bridge & Interstate 15 (Sun River): Create minor flow restrictions by reducing the floodwater conveyance area

The Missouri River floodplain near the Cascade is susceptible to ice damming during most winters. However, due to limited development in the floodplain, the risk of catastrophic flooding remains relatively low. Most of the flood-prone land is currently used for agriculture and grazing, reducing the impact of potential flooding events. However, areas beyond the east bank of the Missouri River remain at higher risk of flooding (Town of Cascade Growth Policy, 2011).

The main concern for project stakeholders is flash flooding in wildfire-affected areas. When moderate to heavy rainfall occurs over burned landscapes, ash, and debris can be washed into streams and rivers, contaminating domestic water supplies for subdivisions and private property owners. Watershed protection and erosion control are required to prevent post-wildfire flooding.

Dam failures can occur due to seismic activity, poor maintenance, extreme weather, and flow conditions. The consequences of a dam failure are similar to riverine or flash flooding, with potential impacts extending far beyond the immediate downstream area. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) National Inventory of Dams (NID) maintains records of dams nationwide, assigning hazard ratings for emergency management planning. High, significant, and low ratings are based on the potential loss of life and property damage in the event of failure rather than the actual condition or likelihood of failure. The Department of Emergency Services (DES) maintains a comprehensive library of Emergency Action Plans (EAPs) for high-hazard dams across Montana. Cascade County DES also retains copies of EAPs for local high-hazard dams. In addition, North Western Energy updates inundation mapping for Missouri River dams annually and revises EAPs regularly to improve emergency response planning. Three types of dam hazard potential are elaborated below:

- Low Hazard Potential: Dam failure is not expected to result in any human life loss. Any losses would be limited to the owner's property.
- Significant Hazard Potential: Dam failure is not expected to cause human life loss but has the potential to cause economic losses, environmental damage, and disruptions to critical infrastructure. Rural or agricultural areas have a higher chance of causing significant hazards but may be near populated regions with critical infrastructure.

- High Hazard Potential: Dam failure would likely result in loss of human life

Cascade County has five high-hazard dams and several significant and low-hazard dams. The last recorded dam failure in Cascade County occurred in 1908 when Black Eagle Dam was intentionally breached. However, no federal disaster declarations have been issued for dam failures in Cascade County.

High-hazard dams pose the greatest risk to life and property in the event of a breach, especially downstream of the dams in Cascade County and Great Falls. To ensure preparedness, DES maintains EAPs for high-hazard dams and conducts regular exercises with dam owners and emergency response personnel to improve coordination and response strategies in the event of a dam failure.

Flood Protection and levees have been planned and constructed in Cascade County. For example, two levees have been constructed along the Sun River to provide flood protection at Vaughn and West Great Falls. These flood control structures help protect millions of dollars in property from flood damage. A levee system exists along the Sun River near Great Falls, developed in response to persistent flooding issues at the junction of the Sun and Missouri Rivers. From the Great Falls flood protection project before the 1975 Presidential Flood Disaster, the city would not have experienced flooding (USACE, 1976; USACE, 1979). However, the West Great Falls Levee has not been officially certified. In 2011, the West Great Falls Levee District, Cascade County Commissioners, and the City of Great Falls signed a Provisional Accreditation Levee (PAL) agreement. Two key conditions of the PAL agreement are:

- Complete data and documentation must be submitted within 24 months of signing.
- FEMA will revise the Digital Flood Insurance Rate Maps (DFIRMs) to redesignate landward areas if certification is not achieved.

Although the PAL designation expired in 2013, it remains accepted until the area is remapped. Homeowners in the levee-protected zone can purchase Preferred Risk Flood Insurance Policies. In 2015 and 2016, the USACE inspected the levee, rating it as an outstanding designation (Mares, personal communication, 2016). The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) promotes effective floodplain management to help local governments minimize flood-related property losses in Cascade County and the City of Great Falls. The City of Great Falls Public Works Department collected LIDAR data for the Sun and Missouri Rivers, extending one mile beyond city limits. However, no LIDAR data exists for other rivers and streams in Cascade County.

Cascade County enforces a Floodplain and Floodway Management Ordinance to comply with the Montana Floodplain and Floodway Management Act and ensure NFIP participation requirements are met. These ordinances regulate land use in all identified 100-year floodplains within local jurisdictions. Any 100-year floodplain or floodway construction requires a permit from the Floodplain Program Administrator.

The City of Great Falls has floodplain zoning regulations, prohibiting construction within the floodway but allowing development in the fringe, provided structures are elevated or flood-proofed to at least one foot above the one percent annual chance flood elevation.

According to the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Cascade County and Great Falls have three and one repetitive loss properties, respectively. A repetitive loss property is any insured building with two or more NFIP claims over \$1,000 within any rolling 10-year period since 1978. No severe repetitive loss properties exist in Cascade County. On the other hand, the City of Great Falls Floodplain Administrator reported that three of the repetitive loss properties are located in the Skyline Park Addition, and the stormwater drainage issues caused flooding. However, all flood-related issues for these properties have been successfully mitigated.

The NFIP's Community Rating System (CRS) rewards local flood protection efforts by offering discounts on flood insurance premiums. Cascade County and the City of Great Falls participate in the CRS program. Each community holds a CRS rating of 8, which qualifies property owners for a 10 percent discount on flood insurance premiums. CRS discounts range from 5 to 45 percent, incentivizing communities to implement flood protection measures that save lives and reduce property damage.

Based on the frequency of past flood events, the probability of flooding in Cascade County is expected to occur less than once yearly but more than once every 10 years. In the event of a dam failure, advanced warning may be possible, allowing time for public evacuation and emergency response efforts. As a result, the potential impact on the population is considered moderate. The MHMP Planning Team assessed the probability of a high-hazard dam breach in Cascade County. It indicated that while not frequent, an event remains a realistic risk requiring ongoing preparedness and monitoring.

The City of Great Falls Growth Policy recommends developing a coordinated stormwater management plan, adopting a Capital Improvement Program to fund drainage infrastructure improvements, and incorporating sound stormwater management practices into new land development regulations and site plan reviews. Future regulations should encourage innovative solutions to reduce runoff from parking lots and other impervious surfaces, helping to minimize flood risks and improve water management throughout the city.

Climate changes influence the amount and timing of snowmelt, which are critical for water supply and flood control. More mountainous areas contribute to peak storm runoff, increasing the frequency of high-intensity floods. Several projects are created to analyze it:

- A declining snowpack and accelerated snowmelt led to increased runoff and flooding
- Greater storm intensity, resulting in more direct runoff and flash floods
- Changes in watershed vegetation and soil moisture, altering runoff and recharge patterns
- Shifting erosion patterns, which could modify river channels, increase sedimentation behind dams, and impact water quality and habitats
- More post-wildfire floods, increasing sediment loads, and further degrading water quality



With these hydrological changes, a one percent annual chance that flood may occur more frequently increases community flood risks. To account for these evolving conditions, planners should enhance flood protection standards for dams, bypass channels, levees, storm drains, and local sewer systems.

Dams are engineered based on assumptions about a river's flow behavior. Precipitation, runoff, and snowpack may significantly impact a dam's designed safety margins (freeboard). If freeboard is diminished, dam operators may be required to release larger water volumes earlier in a storm cycle, increasing flood risks downstream. While climate change does not raise the probability of catastrophic dam failure, it may heighten the risk of design failures, stressing flood protection infrastructure.

Three types of vulnerability of population, property, and critical facilities in the following:

- **Flood Hazard Exposure:** As runoff patterns shift, flooding may occur in areas previously unaffected, increasing risk to communities and facilities that were not historically vulnerable
- **Dam Failure Exposure:** Climate Change is not expected to significantly alter the exposure or vulnerability of populations and infrastructure to dam failures
- **Infrastructure Adaptation:** Flood protection systems may require modifications to withstand additional stress from increased runoff, sedimentation, and shifting flood patterns. Dam owners and operators may need to adjust maintenance and operational strategies to address changing hydrographs and sediment loads.

By proactively addressing these challenges, water resource managers, engineers, and policymakers can reduce flood risks, enhance dam safety, and strengthen community resilience to climate change.

### **3.3.3 Mitigation strategies from 2017 Updated to Multi Hazard Mitigation Plan**

From the DMA 2000 requirements, Cascade County has implemented various hazard mitigation activities to protect its assets and residents from natural and human-made threats. Efforts include continuously updating emergency response resource lists for hazardous material incidents and conducting wildfire fuel mitigation projects in areas such as Gore Hill, Fort Shaw, Monarch, and Neihart, supported by federal funding. The U.S. Forest Service has also undertaken hazardous fuel reduction projects, while local fire departments promote wildfire awareness and improve firefighting capabilities through new equipment, training, and water source databases. Severe weather preparedness measures include upgrading school windows with shatter-proof glass, enhancing snow removal services, providing public education on storm awareness, and requiring buried power lines in new subdivisions. Transportation safety has been improved through ongoing emergency response training, recruitment of EMS volunteers, discussions on railroad underpass reconstruction, and safety enhancements at railroad crossings. Flood mitigation efforts include levee maintenance, public education on flood insurance, debris removal, levee security upgrades, construction of drainage improvements, and rehabilitation of the Belt sewer system. Multi-hazard preparedness initiatives include enhancing emergency

communications with new radio repeaters, establishing emergency shelters, identifying and supporting residents with special needs, equipping schools and critical facilities with NOAA weather radios, assigning rural addresses for emergency response, evaluating backup locations for the Dispatch Center, implementing the Code Red reverse 911 system, installing a new cell tower in Sun River, and securing a generator for the Emergency Operations Center to ensure continuity of operations. These ongoing efforts reflect Cascade County's proactive approach to disaster mitigation and preparedness.

The Cascade County's mitigation strategy followed FEMA guidelines for local mitigation plan development, incorporating DMA 2000 regulations (44 CFR 201.6), the Local Mitigation Planning Handbook (2013), Integrating Hazard Mitigation into Local Planning (2013), Identifying Mitigation Actions and Implementing Strategies (FEMA 386-3), and Mitigation Ideas: A Resource for Reducing Risk to Natural Hazards (2013). The approach involved reviewing and updating mitigation goals and objectives, assessing existing mitigation capabilities, evaluating past and ongoing mitigation activities, identifying appropriate county and local strategies to address risks from natural and man-made hazards, and developing an implementation strategy that prioritizes mitigation projects.

The hazard mitigation goals and objectives aimed at reducing or preventing long-term vulnerabilities to identified hazards. According to CFR 201.6(c)(3)(i), a hazard mitigation strategy must include a description of goals designed to minimize long-term risks. In this plan, goals serve as broad, long-term policy statements that define the intended benefits of mitigation efforts and provide a benchmark for measuring success. In 2017 MHMP update, the Planning Team refined goals for each hazard in 3.3.2, ensuring one goal for each hazard profile in the plan along with a general all-hazard goal. Mitigation objectives from the original PDM Plan were revised to align with FEMA's Local Mitigation Planning Handbook (March 2013), categorizing objectives under Public Education and Awareness, Property Protection, Prevention, Structural Measures, Natural Resource Protection, and Emergency Services.

Cascade County's hazard mitigation goals and objectives build on the community's existing capabilities, leveraging resources from local, regional, state, and federal partners along with the expertise of county and municipal staff who enforce zoning, building codes, subdivision regulations, and floodplain ordinances. The county's mitigation strategy includes programs addressing capital improvements, wildfire mitigation, stormwater management, and the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) compliance. The goals focus on reducing the impacts of hazardous material incidents, wildfires, severe weather, drought, communicable diseases, transportation accidents, flooding and dam failures. Objectives include implementing prevention, property protection, structural, and public education projects, as well as enhancing emergency service capabilities and supporting mapping, analysis, and planning efforts. Specific mitigation actions target reducing hazardous material risks through prevention and emergency response improvements, wildfire risk through property protection and public awareness, and severe weather impacts through structural upgrades and education. These efforts collectively strengthen Cascade County's ability to mitigate risks, protect assets, and enhance community resilience.

The NFIP plays a key role in reducing flood risks by providing affordable insurance to property owners and encouraging communities to adopt and enforce floodplain management regulations, helping minimize flood damage to new and existing structures while mitigating the socio-economic impact of disasters by promoting risk insurance. Additionally, the NFIP Community Rating System (CRS) serves as a voluntary incentive program that rewards communities for implementing floodplain management practices that exceed NFIP requirements. By meeting CRS goals—reducing flood losses, ensuring accurate insurance rating, and increasing public awareness of flood insurance—communities benefit from discounted flood insurance premiums, reflecting the reduced risk achieved through proactive mitigation efforts.

Cascade County possess various administrative and technical capabilities to support and implement hazard mitigation projects, leveraging expertise from community planners, engineers, floodplain managers, GIS personnel, emergency managers, and financial and legal professionals. The County collaborates with local and regional planning partners, including the City of Great Falls to administer the NFIP and depend on county support for broader mitigation efforts. The County and the City of Great Falls have comprehensive policies and programs that support hazard mitigation, including growth policies, subdivision regulations, and zoning that recognize hazard areas. All jurisdictions participate in the NFIP, but only the City of Great Falls enforces local building codes. Technical capabilities vary across jurisdictions, with the County and the City of Great Falls having emergency managers, public works engineers, GIS mapping capabilities, floodplain administrators, and community planners, whereas smaller towns have more limited resources, often relying on planning boards or county assistance for mitigation planning. The Cascade County Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) and the Great Falls Preparedness Program are dedicated to protecting property and the environment by mitigating, preventing injury, and saving lives. The DES Coordinator oversees emergency management and Homeland Security activities, including a full-time coordinator and an administrative assistant, with funding split between the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) program and the County general fund. The City of Great Falls also has a dedicated emergency manager funded entirely by the city. Additionally, the Cascade County Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) plays a vital role in community safety by identifying and mitigating potential hazards, cataloging resources, and providing education and coordination for hazard materials planning. While the LEPC does not operate during emergencies, it works proactively to enhance preparedness. The committee comprises representatives from businesses, local government, emergency responders, and citizen groups in Great Falls.

The Cascade County Planning Division and the City of Great Falls Planning and Community Development Department oversee land use management, zoning, and development regulations to support sustainable growth and hazard mitigations. Fire protection services in Cascade County and Great Falls focus on prevention, suppression, and education, with fire departments divided into multiple divisions. Rural Cascade County relies on a volunteer fire protection system, supported by agencies. Additionally, the Montana Air National Guard and Malmstrom Air Force Base maintain fire departments for their respective locations. The City of Great Falls also provides fire and emergency medical services to county fire districts. Coordination among these entities is facilitated by the Cascade County Rural Fire Council,

fostering operational collaboration, enhancing communication, and ensuring mutual aid agreements between local fire districts, neighboring counties, and state and federal fire agencies.

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Forestry Division is responsible for planning and implementing forestry and fire management programs across the state, collaborating with local, tribal, state, and federal partners to ensure wildfire protection on state and private lands. The Fire and Aviation Management Bureau provides leadership, coordination, and resources for Montana's wildland fire services, focusing on fire prevention education, training programs for DNRC and local personnel, equipment development and maintenance, and fire support programs that offer financial and technical assistance for fire assessment, GIS, radio systems, and equipment upkeep. The U.S. Forest Service also participates in planning activities for public lands within Cascade County. Additionally, FireSafe Montana, a private non-profit organization, coordinates a statewide coalition to increase fire safety awareness and preparedness. By promoting the establishment of local FireSafe councils, the organization educates communities on wildland fire threats, motivates residents to adopt Firewise practices, and provides access to resources and expertise to improve property resilience. Through public outreach efforts, including informational materials, newsletters, special events, and collaboration with federal, state and local fire mitigation initiatives, FireSafe Montana actively reduces wildfire risks and enhances community safety.

The National Fire Prevention Association's (NFPA) Firewise Communities Program promotes wildfire safety by encouraging homeowners to take individual responsibility in preparing their properties for wildfire risks. As a key component of the Fire Adapted Communities initiative, Firewise connects communities with resources for wildfire education, planning, and mitigation, with sponsorship from the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters. The program emphasizes proactive measures, urging neighbors to work together to reduce wildfire threats and enhance property resilience. Similarly, the NOAA Weather-Ready Nation (WRN) Program recognizes organizations committed to improving national readiness and resilience against extreme weather, water, and climate hazards. WRN Ambassadors, which include government agencies, nonprofits, academic institutions, and private businesses, collaborate with NOAA to strengthen public preparedness by promoting WRN messages, engaging in partnership opportunities, sharing success stories, and educating employees on workplace preparedness. Through these programs, communities are empowered to take proactive steps in mitigating risks from wildfires and severe weather events, fostering a culture of safety and resilience.

Cascade County funds mitigation projects through local budgets, appropriations, and federal and state grants. FEMA offers several hazard mitigation funding opportunities, typically requiring a 10-25% local cost share. The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) provides post-disaster funding for flood-proofing, structure elevation, and hazard-prone property acquisition, requiring a FEMA-approved Hazard Mitigation Plan. The Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) Program funds flood risk reduction measures for NFIP-insured properties, covering 75% of project costs and 25% from non-federal sources. The Pre-Disaster Mitigation Competitive (PDMC) Grant Program is an annually funded nationwide program providing up to

\$3 million for mitigation projects without requiring a disaster declaration. The Fire Management Assistance Grant Program supports wildfire response efforts on non-federal lands, covering 75% of eligible costs with rapid approvals within 72 hours. Additionally, the Fire Prevention and Safety Grants (FP&S), part of FEMA's Assistance to Firefighters Grants, fund public and firefighter safety initiatives, with eligibility extended to fire departments, tribal governments, and nonprofit organizations. These programs, administered through Montana DES, provide critical financial resources to support Cascade County's mitigation and emergency preparedness efforts.

Cascade County has access to various federal and state funding opportunities to support hazard mitigation, wildfire prevention, emergency preparedness, and community resilience. The Wildland Urban Interface Community and Rural Fire Assistance Program provides grants for local fire protection training, planning, and mitigation. The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act funds Firewise Community activities such as wildfire assessments and mitigation projects. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Rural Fire Assistance Grants and the BLM Community Assistance Program offer financial aid for firefighting equipment and wildfire mitigation efforts in rural areas. FEMA's Fire Management Assistance Program provides cost-sharing for wildfire response, while the Community Facilities Loans and Grants through the USDA support essential public services. The General Services Administration's Surplus Property Program, the Hazardous Materials Emergency Preparedness Grants, and Homeland Security Grants also aid for emergency response and infrastructure protection. The Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) fund public improvements, such as post-disaster rebuilding and flood mitigation. The Volunteer Fire Assistance Program and Western States Wildland Urban Interface Grant Program provide financial aid for wildfire prevention, while Hazardous Fuel Reduction Grants support fuel reduction near national forests. The Renewable Resource Grant Program funds projects that conserve and protect natural resources. These programs mitigate hazards, improve emergency response, and build community resilience in Cascade County.

The Planning Team conducted a comprehensive review of mitigation actions from the 2011 PDM Plan, assessing completed projects and determining necessary revisions for the 2017 mitigation strategy, carrying out through team discussions in early 2017, ensured alignment with FEMA's Local Mitigation Planning Handbook (2013) by incorporating a range of mitigation action types. These include prevention projects (regulatory measures influencing land use and construction), property protection projects (structural modifications or relocations to reduce hazard risks), structural projects (modifications to public and private infrastructure to withstand hazards), natural resource protection (preserving and restoring ecosystems to mitigate hazard impacts), education and awareness programs (public outreach on hazard mitigation strategies), emergency service projects (enhancing preparedness through training and equipment acquisition), and mapping, analysis, and planning projects (developing mapping tools and planning documents for mitigation implementation). The Planning Team prioritized initiatives that address vulnerable properties, strengthen NFIP participation, enhance public awareness, and support countywide and regional mitigation capabilities will benefit these strategies.

Due to financial and time constraints, Cascade County prioritizes mitigation actions based on their cost-effectiveness and potential impact, ensuring the most critical projects are addressed first. In compliance with 44 CFR 201.6.c.3iii, the county conducted a qualitative benefit-cost review to assess and rank mitigation projects based on population and property protection, project feasibility, and cost. The evaluation categorized each project as high, medium, or low priority using a cost-benefit scoring matrix. Projects protecting more than 50% of the population or over \$500,000 in property received a high ranking, while feasibility was determined based on the availability of technology and ease of implementation. Cost was assessed in tiers, with projects exceeding \$500,000 ranked high and those under \$100,000 ranked low. The overall prioritization helps guide funding decisions, ensuring resources are allocated efficiently to maximize life and property protection.

The Cascade County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (MHMP) outlines a comprehensive strategy to reduce the risks and impacts of various hazards affecting the county and its municipalities. The MHMP Planning Team identified, reviewed, and assigned responsibility for implementing projects to relevant county, city, and town departments, with additional support from local, state, federal, and regional agencies. Each project was given an implementation timeline, categorized as "ongoing" (part of existing emergency programs), "short-term" (1-2 years), "mid-term" (3-4 years), "long-term" (5+ years), or "Year 1-5" (covering the entire planning period). The Cascade County DES (Disaster and Emergency Services) Coordinator oversees mitigation project administration.

The plan includes six main goals, each addressing a specific hazard or risk factor, with corresponding objectives and projects. These goals focus on prevention, emergency response improvements, public education, structural enhancements, mapping, and planning.

1. Hazardous Material Incidents

- Developing alternative hazardous material routes to prevent exposure in populated areas.
- Enhancing first responder training and acquiring containment equipment.
- Conducting public education programs on hazardous material awareness and response.

2. Wildfire Risk Reduction

- Offering grants to landowners to create defensible space around properties.
- Continuing wildfire education programs for the public.
- Recruiting and training volunteer firefighters and obtaining firefighting equipment like 4WD tenders.
- Conducting fuel treatments along evacuation routes and improving fire response planning.

3. Severe Weather & Drought Preparedness

- Installing shatterproof windows in schools and critical facilities.
- Promoting severe weather spotter training and drought response programs.
- Encouraging utility companies to bury power lines in high-risk areas.

4. Communicable Disease Mitigation

- Supporting public health education programs.
  - Encouraging immunizations and collaboration between public health agencies and healthcare providers.
5. Transportation Accident Prevention
    - Conducting mass casualty incident exercises for emergency responders.
    - Recruiting and training EMS volunteers.
    - Working with railroads to improve crossings and redesign unsafe underpasses.
  6. Flooding & Dam Failure Prevention
    - Re-certifying levees in key locations.
    - Educating homeowners about flood insurance.
    - Removing floodway debris, installing river gauges, and improving drainage systems.
    - Conducting structural improvements, such as resizing culverts and constructing dikes to prevent flood damage.

Each project was ranked based on its benefit-cost ratio, county priority, and expected jurisdictional impact. Some projects involve infrastructure improvements, such as constructing firebreaks, storm drains, and flood control systems, while others focus on education, planning, and response training. The mitigation plan emphasizes collaboration between local governments, emergency services, and the community to enhance resilience against disasters.

The Cascade County MHMP includes a structured plan maintenance process to ensure it remains an active and relevant document. The plan is monitored, evaluated, and revised every five years or more frequently of major disasters, project completions, new mitigation needs, or shifts in funding availability. The Cascade County DES Coordinator oversees the review process, ensuring mitigation activities are assessed and integrated into existing planning mechanisms. The Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) will conduct quarterly reviews of different hazard profiles, evaluating emerging risks, completed projects, and mitigation priorities to determine if early updates are needed. After a major disaster, the plan will be reassessed to confirm the relevance of mitigation actions and identify necessary revisions to improve community resilience. Three years after adoption, the DES Coordinator may apply for a FEMA planning grant to initiate the next update (2022), with a proposed one-year timeline for completion. Once FEMA approves the updated plan, it will be submitted to the Cascade County Board of Commissioners and municipal councils in Great Falls, Belt, Cascade, and Neihart for adoption. The updated plan will be publicly available on the county website, and stakeholders will receive notifications. Since the 2011 PDM Plan, several mitigation projects have been completed, while others remain ongoing. The LEPC prioritizes projects based on hazard severity and funding availability, and the Cascade County DES Coordinator tracks mitigation progress, although the 2011 plan lacked a structured monitoring process. Under the 2017 MHMP, agencies responsible for specific projects—such as fire councils, public works departments, and levee districts—coordinate with the LEPC to discuss challenges, successes, and opportunities. Evaluations assess whether goals align with current risks, resources are sufficient, actions remain cost-effective, and implementation challenges exist. Individual projects are monitored by the

implementing department or grant administrator, with HMGP and PDMC projects overseen by the DES Coordinator and fire-related projects managed by the Cascade County Fire Department, USFS, BLM, or DNRC. Progress is tracked through a central database with quarterly reports submitted to federal agencies. The MHMP Planning Team continuously evaluates project implementation, ensuring necessary adjustments during updates. Cascade County may also measure mitigation success by participating in the STAR Community Rating System, which helps local leaders assess sustainability, set goals, and track progress. Through plan revisions and amendments, Cascade County will integrate hazard mitigation projects into existing plans, regulations, and ordinances. The MHMP will be incorporated into future updates of emergency operations plans, growth policies, zoning and subdivision regulations, floodplain management plans, and transportation strategies. Partnering with state agencies, local governments, and organizations aims to promote disaster-resistant building codes, allocate resources for mitigation projects to develop incentives for citizens and businesses to participate in hazard mitigation efforts. Growth policies in Cascade County, the City of Great Falls, and the Towns of Cascade and Neihart will be updated to ensure high-hazard areas are prioritized for low-risk development. Additionally, staff responsibilities will be expanded to include mitigation planning—the Planning Director will participate in the LEPC, the GIS Manager will manage and update spatial hazard data, and the DES Coordinator will oversee outreach activities, funding efforts, project implementation, and MHMP updates. A master file will be maintained to track damage reports, mitigation progress, and meeting records. The Board of County Commissioners and the City of Great Falls Emergency Manager will regularly review progress on integrating mitigation strategies into local planning efforts to ensure ongoing risk reduction and disaster preparedness.

**3.4 THE NUMBER OF TUNNELS REQUIRING UPGRADES AND ESTIMATE THE COSTS INVOLVED IN REACTIVATING THE RAILROAD**

**3.4.1 Montana Branch Line Study Phase II – Other At-Risk Lines**

To achieve a break-even operational level for the branch line, at least 2,400 carloads must be transported annually between Great Falls and Helena at a rate of at least \$500 per carload. The estimated track and structure maintenance cost on the branch line is approximately \$4,445 per mile. To support operations, the rail line requires two locomotives in active use and one as a backup. Leasing these locomotives is recommended, with rental costs ranging from \$75 to \$100 per day.

It is advised to hire an external contractor for locomotive maintenance. Given that two locomotives will be used three days per weekday, annual expenses for parts and labor per locomotive are estimated at \$17,000.

General and administrative costs include salaries for a general manager overseeing all administrative functions, two employees for train operations, and four-track maintenance personnel. All positions are required to be full-time and non-union. The estimated total cost for general and administrative expenses—including utilities, legal and accounting services, insurance, and property taxes—is projected to be \$135,000 annually.

<b>PROJECTED INCOME STATEMENT</b>		
	<b>YEAR 1 – YEAR 4</b>	<b>YEAR 5 – YEAR 10</b>
<b>ACQUISITION PRICE</b>	-	-





<b>LONG-TERM DEBT</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>OTHER LIABILITIES</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES</b>	\$99,355	\$99,355	\$99,355	\$99,355	\$98,271	\$98,271	\$98,271	\$98,271	\$98,271	\$98,271
<b>STOCKHOLDERS EQUITY</b>	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000
<b>RETAINED EARNINGS</b>	\$4,647	\$9,294	\$13,941	\$18,588	\$31,035	\$43,482	\$55,929	\$68,376	\$80,823	\$93,270
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES AND EQUITY</b>	\$169,002	\$173,649	\$178,296	\$182,943	\$194,306	\$206,753	\$219,200	\$231,647	\$244,094	\$256,541
<b>DEBT TO EQUITY RATIO</b>	143%	134%	126%	119%	102%	91%	81%	74%	67%	62%

Table 8: Projected Balance Sheet from Montana Branch Line Study Phase II – Other At-Risk Lines

PROJECTED CASH FLOW										
CASH PROVIDED FROM OPERATIONS	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5	YEAR 6	YEAR 7	YEAR 8	YEAR 9	YEAR 10
NET INCOME	\$4,647	\$4,647	\$4,647	\$4,647	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447
DEPRECIATION	\$13,000	\$13,000	\$13,000	\$13,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
OTHER	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447
DECREASE (INC.) IN WORKING CAPITAL										
RECEIVABLES	(\$100,000)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PAYABLES	\$99,355	-	-	-	(\$1,083)	-	-	-	-	-
OTHER CURRENT ASSETS/LIAB	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	-645	-	-	-	(\$1,083)	-	-	-	-	-
CASH PROVIDED FROM OPERATIONS	\$17,002	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$11,364	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447
EXPENDITURE FOR PROPERTY	(\$65,000)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
INCREASE IN STOCKHOLDER EQUITY	\$65,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
REDUCTION IN LONG-TERM DEBT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
INCREASE IN LONG-TERM DEBT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
INC/DEC IN CASH \$(65,000)	\$17,002	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$17,647	\$11,364	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447	\$12,447
CASH-BEGINNING OF THE YEAR	-	\$17,002	\$34,649	\$52,296	\$69,943	\$81,306	\$93,753	\$106,200	\$118,647	\$131,094
CASH-END OF THE YEAR	\$17,002	\$34,649	\$52,296	\$69,943	\$81,306	\$93,753	\$106,200	\$118,647	\$131,094	\$143,541
NPV OF OPERATIONS: 10 YEARS	\$49,750 Cash from Operations									
@ 12% DISCOUNT RATE	\$44,420 Inc/Dec Cash									
IRR AFTER 10 YEARS	25%									
ACQUISITION PRICE	-									
PROJECTED CARLOADS	\$2,400									
AVE REVENUE/CAR	\$500									
NET LIQUIDATION VALUE (YR 1)	-									
VALUE OF RAILROAD YEAR 10	\$103,725									

Table 9: Projected Cash Flow from Montana Branch Line Study Phase II – Other At-Risk Lines

### 3.4.2 2,016 Montana Rail Grade Separation Study

#### 3.4.2.1 Estimate Cost For Railroad-Highway Crossings In Carter Drive, Helena

The following estimate cost was based on the anticipated order of magnitude conceptual estimate of Preliminary Engineering (PE), Construction Engineering (CE), Interest During

Construction (IDC) <sup>2</sup>, right-of-way <sup>3</sup> and 25 percent contingency is \$27,800,000 (2015\$). Table 6 showed the estimate cost for Carter Drive with underpass option.

#### 3.4.2.1.1 Carter Drive Underpass Option Estimate Cost

<b>Carter Drive Components</b>	<b>Cost (\$)</b>
Road Work	\$2,444,000
Railroad Work	\$4,330,000
New Structure(s)	\$4,026,000
Hydraulics	\$400,000
Utilities	\$1,000,000
Miscellaneous Items	\$600,000
Mobilization (18%)	\$2,200,000
Contingencies (25%)	\$3,800,000
Preliminary Engineering (15%)	\$2,800,000
Construction Engineering (15%)	\$2,800,000
Right-of-Way	\$826,000
IDC (10.37%)	\$2,600,000
<b>Total Cost (2015\$)</b>	<b>\$27,800,000</b>

*Table 10: Carter Drive Underpass Estimate Cost*

#### 3.4.2.1.2 Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) For Carter Drive Underpass Option

The following analysis considered travel time, safety, vehicle operating costs, environmental (emissions), and pavement maintenance at Carter Drive. The methodology is consistent with the guidance of the DOT Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery or TIGER Discretionary Grant program. The BCA results estimated total benefits over a 20-year analysis period for Carter Drive. Tables 8 and 9 showed Benefit categories and BCA results for Carter Drive, and Figure 3 showed undiscounted benefits for the Carter Drive grade separation plan.

Problems from the result in Figure 3 were not captured with empirical data and constraints in conducting a highly detailed analysis of each crossing. Other constraints could be considered, such as improved access to first responders and travel time reliability, and the result will be less accurate each year.

Due to the high volumes of vehicles and trains, the Carter Drive at-grade railroad crossing was regarded as a priority location for enhancing traffic flow. An under-crossing of the railroad was recommended at this location to increase vehicular and non-motorized safety. The project could align with the long-range vision for the Carter Drive corridor in the 2014 LRTP project.

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<sup>2</sup> IDC

<https://www.fe.training/free-resources/project-finance/interest-during-construction-idc/>

<sup>3</sup> Right-of-Way

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right\\_of\\_way](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_of_way)

<b>Benefit Category</b>	<b>Total Undiscounted Benefits (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 3% (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 7% (2015\$ M)</b>
Travel Time Savings	\$1.31	\$0.91	\$0.60
Improved Safety	\$0.64	\$0.45	\$0.29
Vehicle Operating Cost Savings	\$0.08	\$0.06	\$0.04
Reduced Environmental Costs	\$0.01	\$0.01	\$0.01
Avoided Operations and Maintenance Costs	\$0.36	\$0.26	\$0.18
Reduced Pavement Damage Costs	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2.40</b>	<b>\$1.69</b>	<b>\$1.12</b>

*Table 11: Benefit Categories for Carter Drive Grade Separation*

<b>Benefit Category</b>	<b>Total Undiscounted Benefits (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 3% (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 7% (2015\$ M)</b>
Total Benefits (\$2,015 M)	\$2.40	\$1.69	\$1.12
Total Costs (\$2,015 M)	\$28.04	\$27.16	\$26.10
Net Present Value (NPV)	-\$25.63	-\$25.47	-\$24.98
Return on Investment (ROI)	-91.42%	-93.78%	-95.71%
Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR)	0.09	0.06	0.04
Payback Period	N/A	N/A	N/A
Internal Rate of Return (IRR)	-16.58%	-19.01%	-22.02%

*Table 12: BCA Results of Carter Drive Grade Separation*

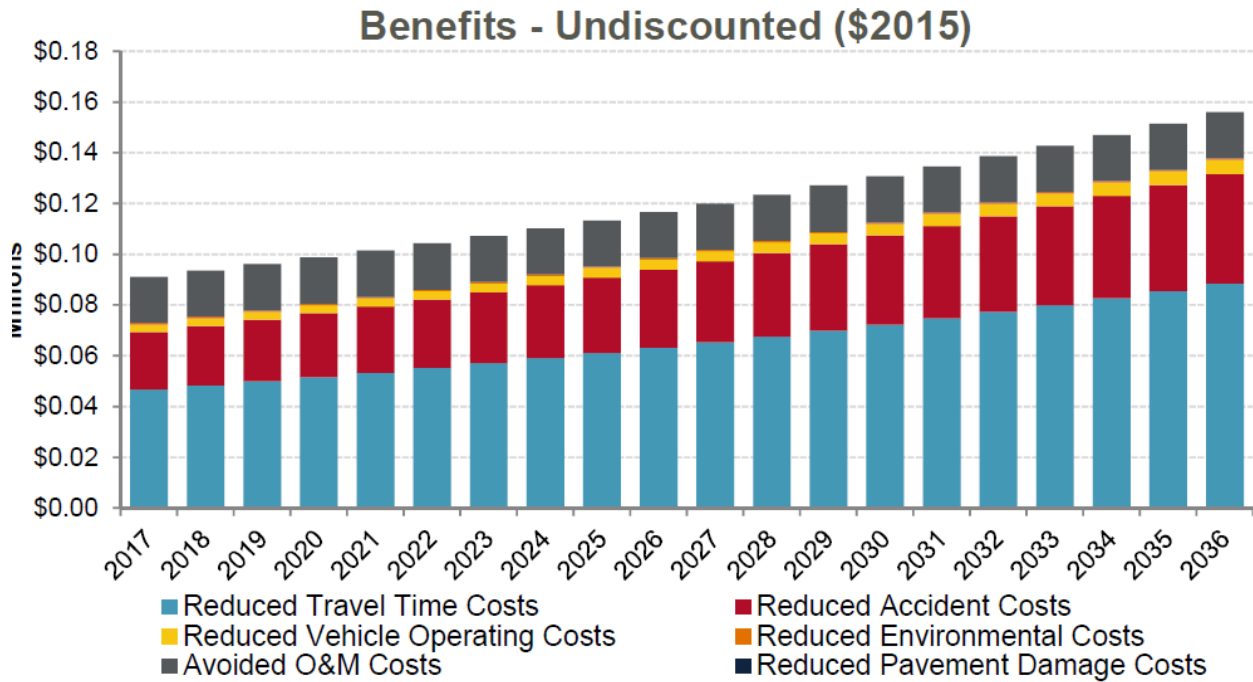


Figure 8: Undiscounted Benefits for Carter Drive Grade Separation

### 3.4.2.2 Estimate Cost For Railroad-Highway Crossings In Montana Avenue, Helena

#### 3.4.2.2.1 Montana Avenue Underpass Option Estimate Cost

The following estimate cost was based on the anticipated order of magnitude conceptual estimate of Preliminary Engineering (PE), Construction Engineering (CE), Interest During Construction (IDC), right-of-way and 25 percent contingency is \$29,600,000 (2015\$). Table 10 showed the estimate cost for Montana Avenue with underpass option.

Montana Avenue Components	Cost (\$)
Road Work	\$5,705,000
Railroad Work	\$1,446,000
New Structure(s)	\$3,249,000
Hydraulics	\$500,000
Utilities	\$1,500,000
Miscellaneous Items	\$600,000
Mobilization (18%)	\$2,200,000
Contingencies (25%)	\$3,800,000
Preliminary Engineering (15%)	\$2,900,000
Construction Engineering (15%)	\$2,900,000
Right-of-Way	\$2,000,000
IDC (10.37%)	\$2,800,000
<b>Total Cost (2015\$)</b>	<b>\$29,600,000</b>

Table 13: Montana Avenue Underpass Estimate Cost

### 3.4.2.2.2 Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) For Montana Avenue Underpass Option

The following analysis considered travel time, safety, vehicle operating costs, environmental (emissions), and pavement maintenance at Montana Avenue. The methodology is consistent with the guidance of the DOT Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery or TIGER Discretionary Grant program. The BCA results estimated total benefits over a 20-year analysis period for Montana Avenue. Tables 11 and 12 showed Benefit categories, BCA results for Montana Avenue, and Figure 4 showed undiscounted benefits for the grade separation plan.

<b>Benefit Category</b>	<b>Total Undiscounted Benefits (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 3% (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 7% (2015\$ M)</b>
Travel Time Savings	\$9.37	\$6.62	\$4.42
Improved Safety	\$2.79	\$1.97	\$1.32
Vehicle Operating Cost Savings	\$0.13	\$0.09	\$0.06
Reduced Environmental Costs	\$0.10	\$0.08	\$0.07
Avoided Operations and Maintenance Costs	\$1.09	\$0.79	\$0.54
Reduced Pavement Damage Costs	-\$0.03	-\$0.02	-\$0.01
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$13.45</b>	<b>\$9.53</b>	<b>\$6.40</b>

*Table 14: Benefit Category of Montana Avenue Grade Separation*

<b>Benefit Category</b>	<b>Total Undiscounted Benefits (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 3% (2015\$ M)</b>	<b>Total Benefits Discounted at 7% (2015\$ M)</b>
Total Benefits (\$2,015 M)	\$13.45	\$9.53	\$6.40
Total Costs (\$2,015 M)	\$29.84	\$28.91	\$27.78
Net Present Value (NPV)	-\$16.39	-\$19.38	-\$21.38
Return on Investment (ROI)	-54.92%	-67.04%	-76.97%
Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR)	0.45	0.33	0.23
Payback Period	N/A	N/A	N/A
Internal Rate of Return (IRR)	-6.39%	-9.12%	-12.48%

*Table 15: BCA Results of Montana Avenue Grade Separation*

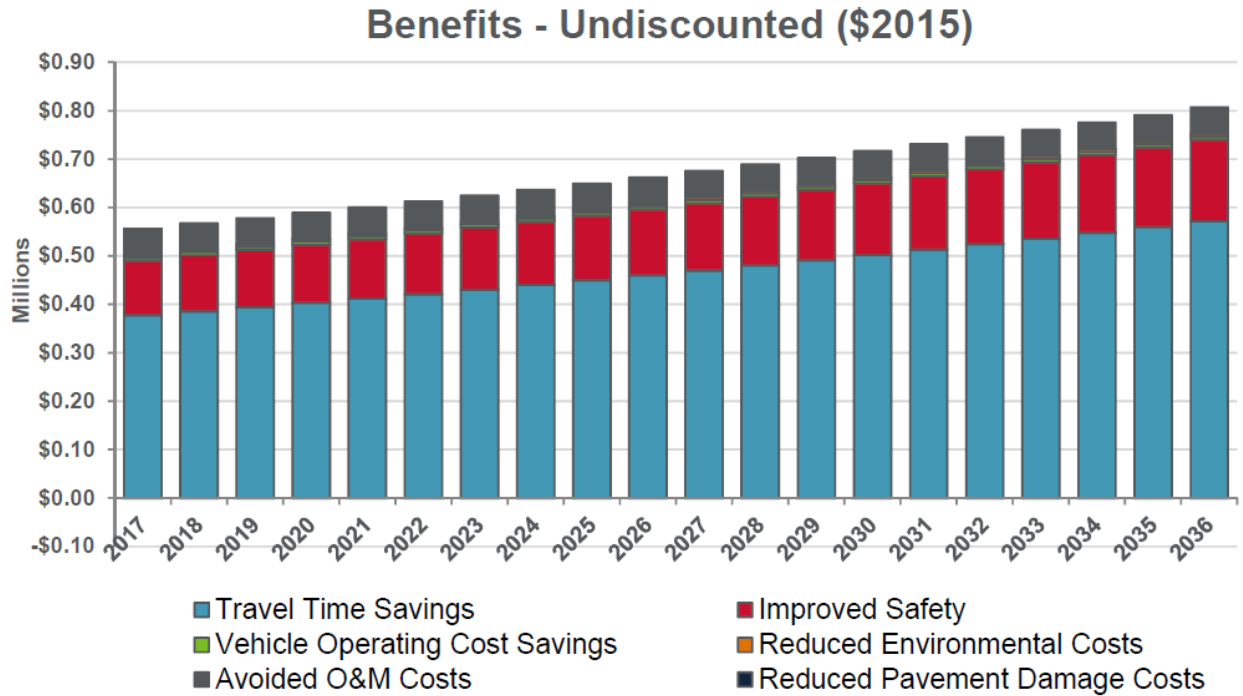


Figure 9: Undiscounted Benefits for Montana Avenue Grade Separation

Problems from the result in Figure 4 were not captured with empirical data and constraints in conducting a highly detailed analysis of each crossing. Other constraints could be considered, such as improved access to first responders and travel time reliability, and the result will be less accurate each year. Although the funding currently cannot fund the proposed improvements, the results help analyze current and future conditions for the crossing solution.

Montana Avenue is also regarded as a priority location for research. According to a review of existing conditions, published documents, and consideration of public sentiment, an undercrossing solution is recommended for this location. Further information within this section should consider how the funding becomes available, a progression plan of the project, and the environmental impacts of significance level under NEPA/MEPA during project development.

### 3.4.3 Financial Analysis in Greater Helena Area LRTP – 2014 Update

The LRTP implement a variety of recommend street improvement projects, which include two types of projects: major street network (MSN) and county road network (CRN). Since we focused on the railroad reactivation plan between Helena and Great Falls, we only considered the improvement MSN projects. MSN projects means large, robust road reconstruction projects that take time to develop, are costly, and are needed to meet existing or future capacity demands (MDT, 2014). Committed projects which are relevant to the railroad in MSN will listed in the table below.

Project ID	Location	Problem	Recommendation	Estimate Cost	Other Project References
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MSN-2	Montana Avenue – Railroad Grade Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vehicle delay</li> <li>• Traffic congestion</li> <li>• Poor air quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A fully separated underpass crossing (See 3.1.6.5)</li> </ul>	\$21,780,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSN-14</li> <li>• MSN-15</li> <li>• BL-31</li> <li>• SUP-5</li> </ul>
MSN-21	Benton Avenue – MRL Railroad Crossing to Custer Avenue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing traffic volume result in congestion on Benton Avenue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement 0.7-mile segment to provide appropriate driving lanes, shoulders and lighting</li> <li>• Consider pedestrian in the design and widen shoulders of bicycle lanes</li> </ul>	\$1,815,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PED-1</li> <li>• BL-29</li> <li>• MSN-23</li> <li>• SUP-3</li> <li>• SUP-24</li> </ul>
MSN-22	Henderson Street Railroad Crossing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrow roadway width</li> <li>• Lack of suitable vertical clearance</li> <li>• Poor roadway drainage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide at least 16.5 feet of vertical clearance</li> <li>• Incorporate road improvements to reach City complete streets standards</li> </ul>	\$2,904,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BL-20</li> <li>• SPOT-27</li> </ul>
MSN-23	Benton Avenue Railroad Grade Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic delay and operational problems on railroad crossing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement overpass or underpass crossing option based on the city’s demand (See 3.1.6.3)</li> </ul>	\$5,929,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PED-1</li> <li>• BL-29</li> <li>• MSN-21</li> <li>• SUP-3</li> <li>• SUP-24</li> </ul>

*Table 16: Recommendations for Railroad Crossing and Grade Separation in Helena*

### 3.4.4 2017 Updated to Multi Hazard Mitigation Plan

The plan presented several hazards and estimated potential costs in Cascade County and Great Falls. Hazardous materials are one of the risks in Cascade County and Great Falls. Since Great Falls is home to several extensive industrial facilities that generate, store, or transport hazardous materials and petroleum products through Cascade County, hazardous materials have risks of accidents, spills, or derailments through highways, pipelines, and railroads. In order to enhance safety in crude oil transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) issued an emergency order on February 25, 2014, to require the following restrictions for a series of crude oil train derailments:

- Shippers moving Bakken crude oil from the Williston Basin to test their product before transit to ensure proper classification.
- The use of more robust tank cars for highly flammable oil shipments.
- Prohibition of rail cars designed for less hazardous materials when transporting volatile crude oil.

In order to model the spatial distribution of hazardous material risks, a GIS-based analysis was conducted:

- Transportation routes (highways, major roads, and railroads) were mapped.
- TRI facility locations were overlaid on this dataset.



- A 0.25-mile buffer was applied around these routes and facilities to assess potential exposure zones.
- Building exposure was calculated by intersecting the hazardous material buffer with the MDOR parcel and critical facility GIS data.
- Population exposure was estimated by intersecting the buffer zone with U.S. Census block data.

Because of limited property damage estimates from past incidents, the values presented in Table 16 showed the estimated cost of exposure risk to hazardous material incidents instead of actual losses.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cascade County (Balance)</b>	<b>Great Falls</b>
<b>Residential Property Exposure \$</b>	\$402,495,883	\$4,691,105,943
<b># Residences At Risk</b>	2,935	10,736
<b>Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property Exposure \$</b>	\$133,811,952	\$1,395,432,061
<b># Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property At Risk</b>	419	1,646
<b>Critical Facilities Exposure Risk \$</b>	\$848,395,808	\$663,373,830
<b># Critical Facilities At Risk</b>	37	69
<b>Bridge Exposure \$</b>	\$140,446,775	\$16,933,895
<b># Bridge At Risk</b>	125	19
<b>Persons At Risk</b>	6,898	25,230
<b>Persons Under 18 At Risk</b>	1,579	5,778
<b>Persons Over 65 At Risk</b>	1,029	3,759

*Table 17: Estimate Cost of Hazardous Material Incidents in Cascade County and Great Falls*

The estimated cost of hazardous material incidents in Cascade County was based on GIS analysis. The hazardous area is 155,404 acres, including 14073 residences, 2138 commercial, industrial, and agricultural buildings, and 130 critical facilities.

Regarding wildfire risk and vulnerability in Cascade County, although the primary risks are related to structures and residents in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), most wildfire-related costs stem from firefighting efforts. Recently, climate trends have contributed to more severe wildfires. Stakeholders have also noted a significant increase in the size and intensity of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fires. Property damage from wildfires is often challenging to quantify. Most losses affect agricultural resources and forests rather than residential or commercial structures. As a result, wildfire severity is typically measured by acres burned and the cost of suppression efforts.

To analyze wildfire exposure, the Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan (MHMP) team utilized the County’s Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) WUI layer to classify risk zones up to four miles from interface communities with population densities greater than 250 people per square mile. The four-mile zones were divided into one-mile buffers, each assigned a WUI risk class.

In order to complete the vulnerability assessment, Geographic Information System (GIS) tools were used to overlay the wildfire hazard area with datasets containing information on critical facilities and property parcels from the Montana Department of Revenue (MDOR). U.S. Census estimated vulnerable populations based on the number of individuals per residence. The table estimates the exposure values and monetary structure values. These estimates do not account for additional property improvements or personal belongings that could be lost to wildfire. The comprehensive analysis highlights the significant wildfire risk across Cascade County. It underscores the need for proactive mitigation efforts, land use planning, and fire prevention strategies to reduce the impact of future wildfires.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cascade County (Balance)</b>	<b>Great Falls</b>
<b>Residential Property Exposure \$</b>	\$1,299,940,864	\$106,532,382
<b># Residences At Risk</b>	6,961	363
<b>Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property Exposure \$</b>	\$166,381,741	\$15,769,986
<b># Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property At Risk</b>	581	14
<b>Critical Facilities Exposure Risk \$</b>	\$717,190,781	\$66,481,888
<b># Critical Facilities At Risk</b>	53	12
<b>Bridge Exposure \$</b>	\$139,411,573	\$0
<b># Bridge At Risk</b>	177	0
<b>Persons At Risk</b>	16,359	853
<b>Persons Under 18 At Risk</b>	3,733	195
<b>Persons Over 65 At Risk</b>	2,429	127

*Table 18: Estimate Cost of Wildfire in Cascade County and Great Falls*

Severe summer and winter weather events in Cascade County reported damages from the SHELDUS and NCDC databases. The SHELDUS dataset includes all loss-causing or deadly events from 1960 to 1975 and from 1995 onward. The NDCD dataset includes sporadic damage figures incorporated when they represent unique damaging events. From the datasets, although snowfall rarely shuts down Cascade County communities, extreme winter weather can pose significant challenges, such as hazardous road conditions that lead to motor vehicle accidents. Most accidents involve passenger vehicles, but commercial trucks carrying materials or school buses transporting vulnerable populations remain a serious concern. Extended severe winter weather conditions require the following essential services could be severely impacted:

- Transportation and communication networks
- Energy supply
- Shelter supplies and heating
- Medical care access
- Food availability and preparation

- Sanitation and waste management

Local government resources could become quickly overwhelmed, and mutual aid or state assistance may be challenging due to the regional impact of extreme weather events. The American Red Cross is in Cascade County and is prepared to provide emergency shelter during severe weather events. These services are coordinated through pre-determined sheltering agreements, ensuring they meet national standards for disaster response. Table 19 presents the estimated cost of severe summer and winter weather events.

	No. of events	Period of Record (Yrs)	Frequency	Damage	Magnitude	Exposure	Annual Loss
Severe Summer Weather	70	56	1.25	\$18,518,794	0.00293%	\$9,016,974,972	\$330,693
Severe Winter Weather	89	55	1.62	\$1,215,702	0.00015%	\$9,016,974,972	\$22,129

*Table 19: Estimate Cost of Wildfire in Cascade County*

Windstorms and microbursts threaten tree-covered areas, exposed properties, critical infrastructure, and above-ground utility lines. Severe hailstorms can cause significant damage to buildings and vehicles, though they rarely result in fatalities. Nationally, hailstorms cause nearly one billion dollars in property and crop damage annually, with peak occurrences aligning with agricultural seasons. The National Drought Mitigation Center tracks indemnity payments for drought-related losses at the county level. The NOAA Paleoclimatology Program has analyzed historical drought patterns using tree rings, lake sediments, archaeological records, and historical documents to understand long-term drought frequency in the United States. Their research suggests that droughts as severe as the 1950s have occurred several times per century over 300 to 400 years. A similar drought could be expected approximately once every 50 years. More extreme droughts have occurred in North America within the last 500 years, with an estimated probability of one every 500 years. Table 20 presents drought damages from 1989 to 2014 in Cascade County.

Year	Cascade County
1989	\$8,887
1990	\$51,752
1991	\$166,478
1992	\$2,117,438
1993	\$0
1994	\$367,452
1995	\$379,512
1996	\$881,542
1997	\$16,389
1998	\$847,255
1999	\$1,167,417

2000	\$2,341,370
2001	\$5,911,633
2002	\$3,545,118
2003	\$2,359,867
2004	\$788,425
2005	\$90,566
2006	\$180,381
2007	\$133,687
2008	\$394,037
2009	\$682,224
2010	\$0
2011	\$35,995
2012	\$2,683,806
2013	\$480,870
2014	\$241,308
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$25,873,409</b>

*Table 20: Estimate Cost of Drought Insurance Claims in Cascade County from National Drought Mitigation Center, 2016<sup>4</sup>*

The flood hazard area was analyzed by intersecting it with the critical facility database, the Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) structures shapefile, and the Montana Department of Revenue (MDOR) cadastral database for building valuations. The estimated vulnerable populations used the NRIS structures shapefile and U.S. Census data, indicating an average of 2.35 individuals per structure; 22.5 percent is under age 18, and 17.4 percent is over age 65. Table 21 presents the estimated cost of flooding in Cascade County.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cascade County (Balance)</b>	<b>Great Falls</b>
<b>Residential Property Exposure \$</b>	\$114,923,448	\$92,198,951
<b># Residences At Risk</b>	662	318
<b>Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property Exposure \$</b>	\$5,214,547	\$3,420,803
<b># Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property At Risk</b>	39	6
<b>Critical Facilities Exposure Risk \$</b>	\$86,828,071	\$32,110,966
<b># Critical Facilities At Risk</b>	6	7
<b>Bridge Exposure \$</b>	\$93,227,824	\$7,974,774
<b># Bridge At Risk</b>	41	4
<b>Persons At Risk</b>	1,555	747
<b>Persons Under 18 At Risk</b>	356	171
<b>Persons Over 65 At Risk</b>	231	111

*Table 21: Estimate Cost of Flooding in Cascade County and Great Falls*

<sup>4</sup> Source: National Drought Mitigation Center  
<http://drought.unl.edu/Planning/Impacts/DroughtIndemnityData.aspx>

GIS analysis indicates that 87,369 acres—approximately 5 percent of Cascade County—are within the dam inundation hazard area. This area includes 6,450 residential structures, 940 commercial, industrial, and agricultural buildings, 53 critical facilities, and critical facilities and bridges within the dam inundation zone. Table 22 presents the estimated cost of dam failure in Cascade County and Great Falls.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Cascade County (Balance)</b>	<b>Great Falls</b>
<b>Residential Property Exposure \$</b>	\$433,839,391	\$931,597,349
<b># Residences At Risk</b>	2,513	3,810
<b>Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property Exposure \$</b>	\$39,896,496	\$527,304,977
<b># Commercial, Industrial &amp; Agricultural Property At Risk</b>	170	721
<b>Critical Facilities Exposure Risk \$</b>	\$840,641,796	\$301,844,790
<b># Critical Facilities At Risk</b>	18	28
<b>Bridge Exposure \$</b>	\$107,266,202	\$14,020,357
<b># Bridge At Risk</b>	54	12
<b>Persons At Risk</b>	5,906	8,954
<b>Persons Under 18 At Risk</b>	1,353	2,050
<b>Persons Over 65 At Risk</b>	881	1,334

*Table 22: Estimate Cost of Dam Failure in Cascade County and Great Falls*

### **3.5 POTENTIAL FINANCIAL PARTNERSHIPS THAT COULD SUPPORT THE REACTIVATION EFFORTS**

#### **3.5.1 Greater Helena Area LRTP – 2014 Update**

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) managed a Montana Rail Freight Loan Program (MRFL) – a revolving fund to encourage projects for construction, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of railroads and related facilities in the State and implements MCA 60-11-113 to MCA 60-11-115. According the website on LAWS <sup>xix</sup>, MCA 60-11-113 to MCA 60-11-115 have the following meaning:

- **MAC 60-11-113:** Short title. Sections 60-11-113 through 60-11-116 may be cited as the "Montana Essential Freight Rail Act".
- **MAC 60-11-114:** Purpose. (1) Montana's railroad branch lines provide critical transportation to Montana businesses and communities. These lines are especially important to Montana's agricultural and wood products industries that rely on railroads to transport Montana products to national and international markets. The branch lines are also critical to efforts to increase or expand businesses that process Montana commodities into more valuable products. (2) A state rail funding program will provide Montana with an important tool to help preserve and enhance Montana's branch lines. (3) The purpose of sections 60-11-113 through 60-11-116 is to provide low-interest loans to railroads, cities, counties, companies, or regional rail authorities for the purposes provided in 60-11-120 to preserve or enhance cost-effective rail service to Montana communities and businesses.
- **MAC 60-11-115:** Revolving loan account -- statutory appropriation -- rulemaking. (1) There is a revolving loan account to be administered by the department. Any interest or income that is earned by the account and loan repayments must be deposited into the revolving loan account unless revenue bonds are issued to fund a loan, in which case the loan repayments must be deposited in the debt service account. The department may request the board of investments to issue revenue bonds, as provided in 60-11-117 through 60-11-119, for the purpose of providing funds for a loan. (2) The department may make loans from the account pursuant to 60-11-120. (3) Funds in the account that are deposited pursuant to former 49 U.S.C. 1654 must continue to be managed as local rail freight assistance program funds. Any additional federal funds received for local rail freight assistance programs or for railroad projects must be deposited in the account. (4) There is statutorily appropriated, as provided in 17-7-502, to the department up to \$2 million annually for the purposes of making loans pursuant to 60-11-120. (5) Loans may not be made if the loan would cause the balance in the account to be less than \$500,000. (6) The department may adopt rules to implement 60-11-113 through 60-11-116.

Loans aimed to rehabilitation and improvement of railroads and attendant facilities, including sidings, yards, buildings, and intermodal facilities. Rules to apply loans should have 30

percent loan-to-value match in rehabilitation and improvement assistance projects, and 50 percent match in facility construction assistance projects. Eligible applicants for the loans required to integrate with the railroad transportation system in the State, include railroads, cities, counties, companies, and regional rail authorities, and demonstrate that they will implement cost-effective strategies to bring economic benefits on rail service to Montana communities and businesses.

### ***3.5.1.1 Local Funding Sources***

The following funding sources are from the local governments of Helena to finance transportation improvements, and satisfy specific transportation functions in the city and county.

- **Special Revenue Funds:** Revenues with legally restricted for a specific purpose to benefit transportation system
- **SID Revolving Fund:** A fund for improving special districts in need of additional funds. It is available to bond repayment with the adjoining landowners to receive the benefit for the improvement
- **Gas Tax Apportionment:** The apportion of State gasoline taxes provide a revenue. In 2,014, the amount of state gas tax apportionment was \$554,354. The revenue used for reimbursing expenditures in construction, reconstruction, repair, and maintenance of streets
- **Street Maintenance Assessment:** The assessment fund maintenance activities on public roadways generate revenues.
- **Helena Parking Commission:** Revenues which is coming from monthly lease rental payments and meter collections will help to fund parking improvements in the downtown area

### ***3.5.1.2 Future Potential Funding Sources***

The following funding sources generate funds to improve transportation system from different types of taxes and fees.

- **Local Sales Tax:** A funding source from local governments to initiate option taxes for transportation improvements
- **Wheel Tax:** Revenue which is from a tax per wheel or vehicles licensed to support transportation network improvements
- **Local Option Motor Fuel Tax:** Funds generate from increasing taxes for the construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and repair of public streets and roads.
- **Excise Taxes:** A substantial revenue from goods or products with excise tax to generate local funds
- **Development Impact Fees:** A fee generate from the developers to improve transportation network.
- **Value Capture Taxes:** Taxes from businesses which will bring benefit for transportation system. For example, cash flow management will implement for current revenue instead of introducing new sources to use the funds wisely.

The LRTP ensured a stable financial support from sources from 2015 to 2035 to fund transportation projects. Table 15 showed the sources and revenue for the LRTP.

**Table 10.1: Projected Funding (Estimated)**

<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Current Account Balance</b>	<b>Current Annual Allocation (2015)</b>	<b>Projected Annual Allocation (per year)</b>	<b>Revenue Projection 2025</b>	<b>Revenue Projection 2035</b>
NHPP – NH, IM *	\$0	\$350,000	\$350,000	\$3,500,000	\$7,000,000
HSIP Safety *	\$0	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$1,000,000	\$2,000,000
STPU – Urban	\$2,456,071 <sup>(a)</sup>	\$1,043,290	\$1,050,000	\$10,500,000	\$21,000,000
STPS – Secondary *	\$0	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
STP – Bridge *	\$0	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$1,000,000	\$2,000,000
RRS – Railroad *	\$0	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
UPP – Preservation *	\$0	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$2,500,000	\$5,000,000
TA		\$50,000 <sup>(b)</sup>	\$50,000 <sup>(b)</sup>	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
MACI -State Disc.		\$100,000	\$100,000	\$1,000,000	\$2,000,000
State Fuel Tax (City)		\$554,354	\$555,000	\$5,550,000	\$11,100,000
State Fuel Tax (County)		\$274,965	\$275,000	\$2,750,000	\$5,500,000
SID's / RID's <sup>(c)</sup>		VARIES	VARIES	VARIES	VARIES
FTA Sec. 5311		\$636,000	\$636,000	\$6,360,000	\$12,720,000
FTA Sec. 5310 **		\$10,000	\$10,000	\$100,000	\$200,000
Other (Private, Bonds, TIF, CBDG, etc.) Local Transit Mill Levy		\$250,000	\$250,000	\$2,500,000	\$5,000,000
<b>TOTAL<sup>(d)</sup></b>				<b>\$38,260,000</b>	<b>\$76,520,000</b>

Notes: Although MAP-21 only provides for Federal funding through FFY2015, 2025 and 2035 projections are based on continuance of current levels of funding unless otherwise noted. It is important to note that the projected funding estimates are based on the best information available at this time and that there is no guarantee that these funding sources will be available beyond MAP-21. Estimated Federal fund allocations do not include amounts of any required local matching funds. Federal revenues, local revenues and local and state matching funds are held constant and do not inflate over time due to uncertainty with federal transportation program reauthorization. Accordingly, future year allocation for year 2025 and 2035 are based on current annual allocations being projected out to the future. Reevaluation of revenue estimation may be necessary as part of a future LRTP update if a trend of shorter authorizations continues.

<sup>(a)</sup> Only STPU – Urban is a set funding allocation; current account balance (01/2015) per MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section.

<sup>(b)</sup> The TA (Transportation Alternatives) funding program does not have a set allocation. For purposes of estimating, an annual allocation of \$50,000 was identified, assuming Helena would be successful in procuring some of the statewide TA available funding.

<sup>(c)</sup> Local SID/RIDs (Special / Rural Improvement Districts) are primarily available for “local” road projects and not on Major Street Network roadways.

<sup>(d)</sup> Totals given are not entirely available for “road” projects. For example, totals presented include FTA funds (available for transit), which are not available for road or intersection construction activities, per se.

\* Estimates from MDT are based on historical obligation figures with input from district.

\*\* 5310 administered by MDT for qualified providers.

*Table 23: Funding sources and revenue from 2014 LRTP*



## 4 REFERENCE

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Cover page picture credit: Justin Franz / MTFP

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<sup>xv</sup> Condition of line from Helena to Great Falls

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