



Helena Vigilante Runners

Promoting health, fitness, and community through group training runs, races, and events in the greater Helena area.

PO Box 663

Helena, MT 59624

www.vigilanterunning.org

January 31, 2024

Re: UPN 9803000

To Whom It May Concern at the Montana Department of Transportation, Great Falls Office:

The Helena Vigilante Runners (HVR) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that represents 150+ runners in the Helena area. We have a 15-member Board of Directors that meets quarterly. HVR's purpose is to promote health, fitness, and community through group training runs, races, and social events in the greater Helena area.

The Helena community is highly supportive of runners and is home to a world-class trail system. The growing number of urban trails such as Centennial Trail, the Custer Avenue trail, and others allow for expanded transportation options and enhanced connectivity of urban and the open space/rural trail network.

HVR is providing comments on the proposed upgrades to the Benton Avenue ("Benton") pedestrian crossings. Benton is a busy street and one of the major north-south hubs for vehicle traffic. In addition, it contains a railroad crossing in close proximity to the pedestrian trails. The current structure of the pedestrian trails parallel and perpendicular to Benton creates unnecessary safety hazards, with pedestrians forced into crossing Benton multiple times at unmarked or unlit locations, and pedestrian access across the railroad tracks on only one side of Benton. At rush hour (or during any event at Carroll College), it is difficult to get across Benton, and the railroad crossing distracts drivers in the vicinity of these pedestrian crossings.

The recently built "North Benton" trail starts at the corner of Benton and Custer, then runs south along the east side of Benton until it ends approximately *one block before* joining with the Batch Field parking lot. The Batch Field parking lot connects to the "Nature Park" paved trail system to the east. Approximately two blocks further south on Benton – across the train tracks – is the Centennial Trail paved path that connects with Centennial Park and Memorial Park (and the Walking Mall and downtown Helena via the Euclid tunnel) to the east. The key concept is that there are multiple urban paths and parks along the east side of Benton.

This is where our main concern lies. Currently, to connect all of these trails on the east side of Benton, one must cross Benton twice – once north of the railroad tracks at an unmarked location with no signal, lights, or traffic signs – and once again south of the railroad tracks at another crossing with minimal safety features. This creates unnecessary risk for pedestrians.

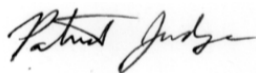
The best safety feature for a pedestrian crossing of a busy street is to eliminate it altogether. HVR believes there are several steps that could be taken to substantially reduce pedestrian

crossings of Benton. To improve safety for the running/biking/hiking community in Helena, the HVR Board of Directors recommends the following improvements to the Benton pedestrian crossings:

1. Extend the North Benton trail south to connect to the Batch Field parking lot along the east side of Benton. This will provide connectivity between two major trail systems (North Benton trail and the Nature Park Trail) and will improve pedestrian safety by not forcing them to either navigate along the shoulder of Benton for a block, or cross Benton twice at unmarked locations. HVR notes that this step is simple – it represents adding approximately 100 yards of trail across a field with no street crossings, and as such MDT should consider carrying out this step sooner than 2025.
2. Extend this same trail further south along the east side of Benton from the Batch Field parking lot to connect to Centennial Trail just south of the railroad tracks/concrete plant. Further, trucks entering and exiting the concrete plant should be limited to one approach from Benton rather than the uncontrolled approach that currently exists. This will provide a safe and complete connection for three separate trail systems all along the east side of Benton and will eliminate the need (and associated risks) for pedestrian/bike crossings for those wishing to connect these systems.
3. Improve any pedestrian trail crossings of Benton with better lighting/markings. As part of this, HVR also recommends that the curb at any existing or future Benton crossing is modified to be a perpendicular “ramp-style” access instead of a curbed access (the current crossing south of the railroad tracks has a curb; HVR members have witnessed pedestrians, bikes, and strollers struggle with it).

These improvements will substantially reduce the number of pedestrian crossings along a busy street, provide enhanced pedestrian crossings of the railroad tracks, and improve lighting and safety at the crossing. They will increase the safety of the pedestrian/vehicle interface and HVR strongly endorses these suggestions.

Sincerely,



Patrick Judge
President, Helena Vigilante Runners

