

County seeks \$2.25M for complete streets

By Michael Polhamus | Posted: Wednesday, July 2, 2014 4:30 am

The county is putting a \$2.25 million “complete streets” specific-purpose excise tax initiative before voters this year, and supporters say it’s not asking for much.

Complete streets, they say, merely give people on foot and on bikes a fair shot at making it safely from one place to another. The intent is not to exclude drivers, proponents claim, just to make sure drivers aren’t prioritized to the exclusion of others.

The monies would go toward the design of numerous complete streets in the town of Jackson, but not to their actual construction.

“It’s not as if we’re asking the community to do something all that extraordinary,” Jackson Hole Community Pathways Director Brian Schilling said. “The ability to move around your community safely and comfortably is a pretty basic right.”

Such an ability would serve more than the town’s athletes and outdoors-minded individuals, Schilling said.

“There are lots of folks who are either young or old, folks who have mobility problems, and there’s the average person who doesn’t want to feel like they’re taking their lives in their hands just to walk downtown,” he said. “A lot of visitors to Jackson aren’t extreme athletes, and even extreme athletes deserve a little respect when they’re trying to get around.”

Complete streets include more than just superficial improvements, Town Administrator Bob McLaurin said.

“A complete street accommodates all users — peds, cars, bikes — and below the surface there’s water, sewer, storm sewer,” McLaurin said. “There are a bunch of different components to a street.”

Such a street in town would probably resemble those like South Cache and Redmond, he said.

Some residents don’t appreciate the change in focus those roads represent, McLaurin said.

“Because [the streets] all have a 60-foot right-of-way, the lanes tend to get smaller,” he said. The lanes on Redmond shrunk to just 11 feet wide as the result of recent alterations, for instance.

“People critical of complete streets think those are too small,” McLaurin said. “People in favor say it helps to slow down traffic — they make it safer for bikes and peds.”

The streets whose completion the SPET funds will design are those identified by the town’s 10-year capital improvement program, McLaurin said.

“We have a 10-year CIP that identifies projects 10 years out,” he said. “That sort of guides our construction for the next 10 years.

“That is a very dynamic list. Councils change, priorities change,” but the CIP remains “a road map for the projects we think we need.”

Complete streets are high on that list of projects, McLaurin said, although they’re a more mundane goal than projects like the Snake River pathway bridge.

“If you build a pathway ... that’s like a kitchen remodel,” he said. “This is a lot like fixing your foundation or your roof.

“It’s not sexy, but it’s critical to maintaining this community’s economy and the quality of life we have.”

Part of that quality of life includes giving people choices, Schilling said.

The philosophy behind building complete streets, he said, includes “recognizing that we aren’t going to prioritize a single mode of transportation over all other modes to the extent it’s not safe to take those other modes.”

The town lacks a dedicated funding source for projects like these, Schilling said, and so its government must ask voters to support such efforts.

“A complete street in Jackson will include accommodations for drivers, for pedestrians, for cyclists, for transit, so if you think those things are important, you might be likely to support the initiative,” Schilling said.