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Accessibility Report Card for Missoula, Montana: Missoula's GPA is 3.32 – Earning a "B"

University of Montana Rural Institute
scholarworks-reports@mso.umt.edu

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Preliminary Report June 2011

Accessibility Report Card for Missoula, Montana

Missoula's GPA is 3.32 – Earning a “B”

Community infrastructure – both public and private – influences the quality of life and the health of citizens. For people with disabilities, physical accessibility is a critical aspect of infrastructure. Nonetheless, community planners often lack reliable information for assessing accessibility. Therefore, we are developing standard assessments of access¹ that city planners can use to identify areas in need of improvement.

To determine a town's accessibility, we rate parking location and signage; safety and accessibility of route to the business' entry; parking accessibility; and the accessibility of a business' entry, door



Missoula scored 3.32 out of 4 for a grade of B.

and doorway, and interior. We previously assessed the accessibility of Montana towns with a population between 2,500 and 10,000. This report summarizes accessibility in Missoula.

Observations of Missoula Businesses' Accessibility

During the spring and summer of 2010, we observed 297 randomly selected businesses. Random selection allows us to generalize our findings to other similar businesses in Missoula.

¹ While derived, in part, from the Americans with Disabilities Act Access Guidelines, these results do not represent judgments of regulatory compliance for the city or any business. Rather, these observations assess the degree to which access goals are achieved using nine key elements of access for customers with disabilities.

The University of Montana Rural Institute

RTC
RURAL
Research and Training Center on
Disability in Rural Communities

RTC:Rural
52 Corbin Hall
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
Toll free: 888.268.2743
Fax: 406.243.2349
TTY: 406.243.4200
rtc rural@ruralinstitute.umt.edu
rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu
Alternative formats available

Graph 1:
Accessibility Report Card, Missoula, MT



Missoula’s Overall GPA

Graph 1 shows Missoula’s accessibility for each of our observed categories. The combined average of all variables for the entire city of Missoula was 3.32 on a four-point scale, a grade of B (83%), which is a substantially higher than that achieved by smaller cities in Montana.²

The most accessible features in Missoula were the safety and accessibility of the route maintained by a business from a private parking facility to its entry and the accessibility of the interior of businesses. The lowest infrastructure score was parking maintained by the city.

Southgate Mall, Downtown, and Other Area Locations

We examined businesses by locations: Southgate Mall, downtown, and other locations. Graph 2 presents the average access scores of the businesses by location. Overall, businesses located in Southgate Mall were significantly more accessible than those located in other areas of the city. While Missoula averaged 3.32 on our 4-point scale, businesses at Southgate Mall averaged a rating of 3.81 and a score of 95% for a grade of an A.



Businesses in Southgate Mall scored an A (3.81 rating, 95% score).

² In another study, we assessed 226 randomly-selected businesses in rural communities around Montana. Combining accessibility ratings across nine categories of accessibility, these small cities and towns achieved an overall accessibility rating of 2.66 on a 4-point scale. Statistical analyses showed significant relationships between accessibility ratings and the economic status of a community.

In terms of parking location and signage, a business scored 4 if the handicapped parking space closest to the business was within two city blocks and designated by an upright sign and by ground painted indicators. Close to 75% of the 49 downtown businesses were served primarily by city parking in a standard space within two city blocks and indicated as a handicapped parking space by an upright sign. Of the 15 businesses located in other areas and served by a city parking space, one business had both upright and ground indicators plus a marked area for a ramp, seven (46.7%) were served by designated parking in a standard parking space, and another seven (46.7%) were served by a standard parking space without any designators. Across the categories of businesses, city maintained parking in “other areas” contributed the most to a lower rating. Overall, however, these “other areas” were more accessible than downtown.

City and private routes to entry.

To score 4 for parking accessibility, the space must be designated and signed with a dedicated area to lower a ramp and a dedicated access point to a sidewalk or direct path to the business. A high percentage, 64% (32) of the downtown businesses exposed customers who use a mobility device, such as a wheelchair, to danger while on route to the business (e.g., they entered into the pathway of traffic). The businesses located in other areas were directly opposite with just 38% (8) of the businesses served by a route that exposed the individual to danger.

Four of the observed downtown businesses were served by a private parking lot. One hundred percent (26) of the observed businesses in Southgate Mall were served by a designated parking space, indicated by a ground and upright sign, and with a marked ramp area. Results for the businesses located in other areas were mixed. Parking for 42% (83) was in a designated space with a marked ramp area, both an upright sign and ground indicators, and a dedicated pathway to the business. But 25% were served by parking in standard spaces only.

No matter how they were examined, 90% of the businesses accessed by a private route had a clear, accessible, and safe route to the business.

Graph 2:
Missoula Business Accessibility



Business interiors.

The results for the entire city show the main aisles and majority of side areas are accessible for 86% (252) of the 293 businesses evaluated.

Chains and Independent Businesses

We also compared the level of accessibility of businesses classified as either a member of a chain or as independently owned and operated. Overall, members of chains were significantly more accessible than independent businesses.

Business entries.

Of the chains, 96.4% had a level entry compared to 81.6% of the independent businesses. Almost 11% of the independents had entryways with thresholds that exceeded 2 inches; 5.9% had entryways with thresholds from 0.5- to 1-inch, steps to the door, a steep ramp, no or a narrow landing, or an unreachable handle or knob for a person in a wheelchair.



Door and doorway accessibility.

Most businesses had accessible doors and doorways; however, 22.8% (38) of the independents had doors that presented obstacles such as a round-handled door knob, a thumb lever, a handle too high or low for a wheelchair user, a heavy pull or push weight, inadequate space between an outer and inner door, or a glass push door without a push plate.

Business interiors.

The interior of chains tended to be more accessible than independent businesses for a person using a wheelchair, scooter, or walker. Interior access was limited for a higher proportion of independents (14.2%) than for chains (5.5%).

"Safety and accessibility" of the routes to a business was the highest scoring feature.

Observations and Recommendations

The level of accessibility in Missoula is high and speaks well of the efforts of business owners and the city. Missoula business owners should be recognized for their achievements in creating an accessible city.

The City of Missoula could enhance its overall accessibility score by focusing on improving the accessibility of parking in the downtown and "other areas."

The city and interested groups might create an award to recognize the best accomplishments in public and private infrastructure annually.

Interested organizations, agencies, and individuals might form a committee to provide education about visitability and to assist in setting "accessibility infrastructure" priorities.

For additional information please contact:

Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities,
The University of Montana Rural Institute, 52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812-7056;
888-268-2743 or 406-243-4562; 406-243-4200 (TTY); 406-243-2349 (Fax);
<http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>.

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