

Posted Thursday, April 26, 2007

Block-sized development plan unveiled

By RICHARD HANNERS, Whitefish Pilot

Residents who have wondered about the giant hole dug at Spokane Avenue and Third Street and all the buildings disappearing across the downtown block across from Whitefish Middle School can now get their questions answered.

Great Northern Ventures presented conceptual designs for their Block 46 redevelopment project to various stakeholders last week.

"We think we need to get the approval of citizens ahead of the planning process," said Paul Johannsen, who heads up the local development team.

As presently considered, the mixed-use project will include:

- * About 10,000 square feet of commercial space along Spokane Avenue, with a main attractor business at the site's northwest corner. There will be no Starbucks, Johannsen said.
- * Twelve to sixteen 1,000-square-foot "condotels" -- short-term rental units that will be purchased individually by investors who can also use them, typically in the shoulder seasons.
- * Forty to 44 larger condominiums sold as fractional family-ownership, perhaps as one-eighth shares.
- * Twelve to 16 permanent residences along Kalispell Avenue that have been characterized as "brownstone walk-ups."
- * Four penthouse units on the third floor, set back from Spokane Avenue to provide space for decks and vegetation. Johannsen said the developers might seek a variance so they can exceed the 45-foot height restriction by perhaps three feet.
- * An internal courtyard with 30,000-35,000 square feet of open space linked to city streets by alleys.
- * Underground parking with sufficient spaces for employees and residents -- beyond the current zoning requirement. Three elevators will be available for residents.
- * Two on-site affordable housing units for Block 46 employees.

Not Western enough?

Great Northern Ventures began meeting with downtown merchants, neighbors and local architects last week, seeking input on how the project could look, Johannsen said.



Several buildings remain at the Block 46 redevelopment site, including Whitefish Title Services and several homes along Kalispell Avenue, back of photo. Photo by gravityshots.com

"We recognize the impact this will have on Whitefish," Johannsen said. "There's never been a whole city block developed at one time in Whitefish."

That point was recognized by Richard Atkinson, who said the Block 46 project will set the standard for whatever comes along next downtown. He noted that two more city blocks are slated for redevelopment.

Johannsen said he agreed. "We need to set the bar high enough for subsequent development," he said.

Atkinson offered criticisms of the conceptual design, saying the retail along Spokane Avenue "looked like Seattle" and the overall design "is not Western enough." "I cringe when I hear 'brownstone,'" he said.

Architect David Koel, of CTA Architects, in Kalispell, said the emphasis on brick or stone had to do with maintenance. He said board-and-batten is hard to keep up.

Other comments from last week's public meetings supported the conceptual design. One person noted that Whitefish is not a cowboy town but a railroad and logging town. Others liked the European feel and how the project conserved space.

Green, green, green

One of the project's goals can be summed up as remediation, recycle and green design, Johannsen said.

Cleaning up the former Stacey Oil site was a big undertaking. Working with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, the initial remediation plan called for digging eight feet down and removing 2,500 cubic yards of contaminated soil.

Instead, digging ended 23 feet down after the excavator could reach no further. About 10,000 cubic yards was hauled away.

"DEQ said they were happy to see one of the largest sources of contamination in downtown Whitefish removed," Johannsen said.

Additional remediation work will take place at the north end of Block 46, where two gas stations once operated on Second Street. Johannsen said reports indicate groundwater flows away from the Spokane and Second intersection in all four directions.

Three houses on Kalispell Avenue will be “recycled” by moving them to new sites in Whitefish and including them in the city’s affordable housing program. Other Block 46 houses on Kalispell are substandard and will be demolished, Johannsen said.

Green design will also be incorporated into the project, which will seek to attain the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green-building rating. Points can be scored by use of vegetative roofs and more efficient mechanical systems, among other things.

Johannsen said the Block 46 project could be built in four phases over four to five years to lessen construction impacts. A traffic study is not yet completed, and several people last week asked how delivery trucks will access the new commercial space.

Great Northern Ventures will submit their planned-unit development to the city planning department in two to three months, Johannsen said.

A major hurdle will be relocating a main sewer line that lies in the path of the project’s underground parking garages. “The city has told us it’s OK to move it, but we can’t build over it,” Johannsen said.

The men at top

Great Northern Ventures’ three principals include Johannsen, Mark Kvamme and Richard Fuld. In addition to the Block 46 project, the group developed the 1,275-acre Homestead project on Star Meadows Road.

Johannsen is a fourth-generation Montanan with 25 years experience in financial services. A Whitefish resident for the past 10 years, he recently worked as president of First Interstate Bank and has served on several community boards.

Kvamme has been a part-time resident of Whitefish for 10 years and has donated to many local causes.

A Berkeley graduate with a degree in French economics and literature, Kvamme made his fortune as a partner in Bay Area-based Sequoia Capital, which financed Google Inc., Yahoo Inc. and more recently YouTube. He also owns a dirt-bike racing team called MDK.

Richard Fuld Jr. is currently chairman and CEO of Lehman Brothers Holding Inc. and lives in New York City.