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## Council approves downtown master plan

By RICHARD HANNERS, Whitefish Pilot

The Whitefish City Council pushed ahead on a proposed Downtown Master Plan on Monday, but residents should not be surprised by the speed with which things are moving.

"The plan is moving at a deliberate pace," city manager Gary Marks told the Pilot. "There's been 16 months in the planning phase."

The plan for the downtown is a visionary document, he pointed out, but "too often, government does studies, then puts the result on a shelf and nothing ever happens."

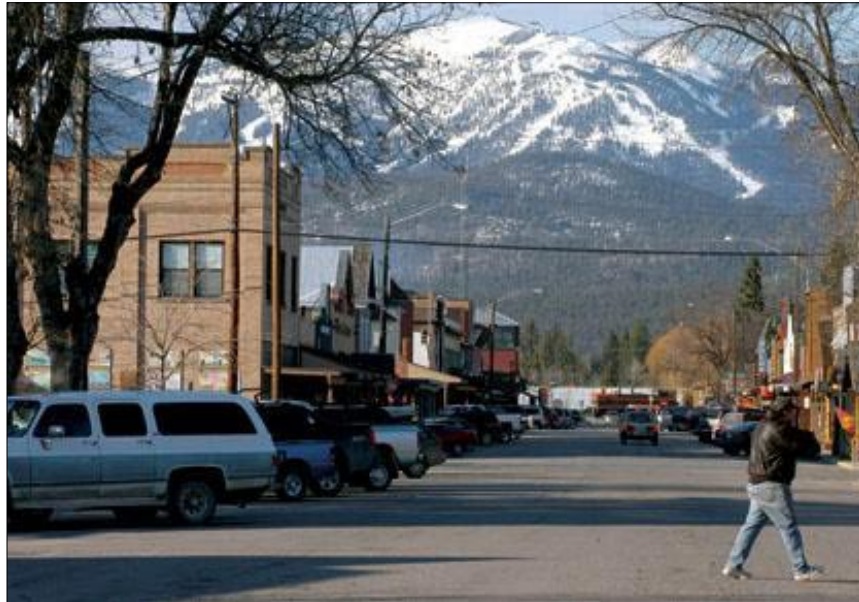
Marks said community forums held in the past 16 months allowed a broad cross-section of residents and downtown stakeholders a chance to contribute ideas and build a consensus on downtown issues. "In my 15 years as a city manager, I have never seen or participated in a process so extensive and inclusive of public participation," Marks said.

According to Portland-based planning consultants Crandall Arambula, about 40 people showed up for the Nov. 18, 2004 forum, and about 140 people attended the Jan. 27, 2005 forum. The consultants collected 79 ballots at the third forum, on March 23-24, 2005, and 10 ballots at the fourth forum, on June 14-15 last year.

City councilors on Monday approved four measures to move the downtown planning process ahead:

- Adopting the Downtown Master Plan itself as a neighborhood plan for the city's new growth policy.
- Designating 1.05 acres of land between the city library and the railroad depot as the site of the new City Hall. About half the land is currently owned by BNSF Railway and the rest is city land.

Marks said he's seen significant support for locating the new City Hall downtown, but "I've seen zero support for Option A, putting the City Hall on depot park land."



Chandler Melton / Whitefish Pilot  
Central Avenue has been moved up to third place on the resort tax priority list for street reconstruction as the city moves forward to implementing the new Downtown Master Plan.

Funding for the \$3.6 million project could come from the sale of the current City Hall site and use of tax-increment financing funds, Marks said.

- Moving Central Avenue up to the number three position on the priority list for street reconstruction using resort tax funds.

"The only reason Central Avenue has not been near

the top of the street reconstruction priority list is we've been waiting on a comprehensive plan for the downtown area," public works director John Wilson told the council.

Wilson said water mains, storm sewers, most of the sidewalks and much of the roadway itself are more than 80 years old. The \$2 million project would involve underground infrastructure and paving from Railway Street to Fifth Street in 2008-2009.

Peter Elespuru, a member of the Resort Tax Committee, told the council he had concerns about earmarking all the city's street and infrastructure money for two years to Central Avenue. He also wanted to know if some of the resort tax money would be used for streetscaping -- landscaping, signage and special curbs.

"The resort tax is our only source of money for rebuilding Whitefish streets, and there hasn't been enough to do all the work that's needed," he said.

Elespuru suggested using resort tax money to match funding from other sources. Councilor Cris Coughlin asked if the downtown businesses would accept a 1 percent hike in the resort tax if the additional money was earmarked for Central Avenue, but Marks indicated that would not go over well with the businesses.

Wilson said it makes sense to invest that much resort tax money in the Central Avenue project because downtown businesses generate most of the resort tax revenue.

Mayor Andy Feury pointed out that if the downtown plan creates 140,000 square feet of new retail space, that could add about \$700,000 to the \$1 million in resort tax money projected for this year.

Marks told the Pilot Central Avenue is “the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

- Extending the consulting agreement with Crandall Arambula, which drafted the plan for the city and downtown merchants who organized under the name Heart of Whitefish.

Marks said that over time, Crandall Arambula will become “owner’s representatives” helping to oversee implementation of the downtown plan.

Heart of Whitefish chair Gary Stephens called the consulting firm “a perfect fit” for Whitefish because they “understand small towns.” He suggested creating a steering committee to help in getting the plan implemented.

Triggered by the upcoming U.S. Highway 93 reconstruction project, which threatens to divide downtown, the ambitious plan calls for creating 140,000 square feet of new retail space, on top of 175,000 square feet of existing or renovated retail space downtown, along with 298 additional residential units and 740 new parking spaces in four retail/parking structures -- some up to 45 feet high.

As suggested by Crandall Arambula, several catalyst projects could be set in motion to spur on the rest of the downtown makeover. The consultants suggested first building a three-story retail and parking structure at Second Street and Spokane Avenue with space for 220 vehicles. The second priority project would be reconstruction and streetscaping of Central Avenue.

The third catalyst project suggested by Crandall Arambula would be more complex -- relocating City Hall and building a second retail and parking structure at the City Hall’s present location. Altogether, the consultants estimated \$76 million in private investment potential for the downtown plan.

While downtown merchants support the proposed plan, they have had different ideas on how the catalyst projects should proceed. According to a letter Stephens sent the city council Nov. 6, the business organization unanimously agreed that the first priority should be the Central Avenue reconstruction, followed by a redesign of Second Street.

Stephens said the parking structure at Second and Spokane should be third on the priority list, that the new City Hall should be located between the library and the depot, and zoning downtown should “preclude” office space in order “to encourage a continuous shopping environment in the central downtown area.”

During the Feb. 2 planning board hearing on the proposed plan, Stephens and Heart of Whitefish vice chair Jan Brunk said they wanted to give the City Hall redevelopment a higher priority in order to address congestion in the growing historic railway district. Parking was needed on Baker more than over on Spokane, they said.

Marks told the Pilot there are logistical reasons for building the Spokane parking structure first -- parking along Central Avenue will be eliminated once major reconstruction work begins there, so additional new parking will be needed downtown. But before a parking structure can be built at the current City Hall site, a new City Hall and a new emergency services building will both need to be constructed.

Marks also said the city has signed a sales contract for the site at Spokane and Second. Much of the land has already been cleared of buildings. The tire company leasing space from the landowner, R & R Developing, must relocate, and the city is still negotiating with R & R Developing about soil and groundwater contamination at the site (see separate story).

Nonetheless, Marks said, work on the Spokane Avenue parking structure could take place in 2007-2008.

He also clarified the role of the city in the downtown plan. Resort Tax money is already earmarked for replacing old infrastructure, but it’s “not my direction” to use other city tax funds or to raise water and sewer fees to help pay for refurbishing downtown.

Furthermore, the plan is “primarily a vision document,” he said, and “each city-led project will be reviewed and ultimately approved by the city council based on their merits as appropriate at the time.”

Specific details -- such as who will pay for certain streetscaping elements on Central Avenue -- have not yet been worked out, he said, and zoning changes will have to be reviewed by the planning board and approved by the city council.

