

Posted Thursday, October 11, 2007

Warn that historic downtowns across the U.S are being 'eroded' by new development

By RICHARD HANNERS, Whitefish Pilot

"Under no conditions will a fourth floor be allowed."

That's the recommendation of Portland-based planning consultants Crandall Arambula, the people the city of Whitefish hired to draft its Downtown Master Plan.

"Whitefish's downtown is unique and fragile," George Crandall and Don Arambula said in their Sept. 26 letter. "It cannot be duplicated; however, it can be destroyed by new development that is out of scale with existing buildings."

The consultants presented a three-point recommendation:

- Limiting building heights "to the code intent of a two-floor expression along the street."
- Strictly enforcing the setback requirement above the second floor.
- And not allowing a fourth floor under any conditions.

The consultants first came to Whitefish in 2003 to start work on the Downtown Master Plan, which was adopted by the city council last year.

In what appears to be a policy contradiction, Crandall and Arambula's Downtown Master Plan calls for a four-story "boutique" hotel on the empty lot just north of the Craggy Range restaurant. Now the consultants want to preserve Whitefish's small-town profile.

"The unique historic downtown includes mostly one- and two-story buildings," Crandall and Arambula said in their Sept. 26 letter. "In Whitefish, building facades have a uniform vertical scale -- narrow and tall. Existing building codes recognize the critical nature of the two-story height."

Current city code sets the maximum building height at 45 feet and requires a 20-foot setback from the street right-of-way for any portion of a building above 35 feet or two stories, whichever is less, "in order to mitigate the aesthetic impact of additional height from the street."

In addition, uninhabited portions above 35 feet must be set back at least 30 feet from portions of an adjacent building above 35 feet.

Developers for two downtown projects have presented plans that call for buildings with four floors -- Great



Northern Ventures' Block 46 project, between Spokane and Kalispell avenues south of Whitefish Middle School, and International Capital Partners' The Offices At Cobblestone project at the former Truby's restaurant site.

"These proposals take a very creative approach to code interpretation, ignoring the code intent to limit the apparent

building height to two floors," Crandall and Arambula said.

The consultants warned that historic downtowns across the U.S. "are being eroded" by new development that is not consistent with neighborhood character.

"New buildings are often too tall, too massive or out of character with the existing historic architecture," they said. "The resulting visual chaos creates an environment that is not attractive to local residents, visitors or investors."

In Santa Fe, N.M., a tourist town similar to Whitefish, with mostly one- or two-story buildings and a few three-story buildings, several four-story buildings have appeared in recent years, they said.

"Business owners were now hearing visitors say, 'Santa Fe is starting to look like every other community. I'm not coming back,'" they said. "Santa Fe's leaders realized that the city was at a 'tipping point.' By allowing new buildings to be over three stories, they were destroying the special character that had made the city successful."

Great Northern Ventures' Block 46 project encompasses an entire city block. The plans were presented to public meetings, but no plans have officially been submitted to the city.

The mixed-use project calls for penthouse units on the fourth floor, set back from Spokane Avenue to provide space for decks and vegetation. Paul Johannsen, who heads up the local development team, told the Pilot in April they might seek a variance so they can exceed the 45-foot height restriction by perhaps three feet.

International Capital Partners' first proposal for the three-lot Truby's site was called Lofts At Cobblestone. It was designed by Whitefish architect Chad Grover, who is also the chairman of the city's Architectural Review Committee.

Faced with stone and wood, with three heavy timbered-gables and a large stone chimney above the center gable, the building “would be well placed in a neighborhood like Iron Horse or at the gateway to Big Mountain, but was out of place and overwhelming” for downtown, the committee concluded in turning down the plan in July.

Grover’s reply to the committee was that there was a fundamental conflict between the Downtown Master Plan, Whitefish City Master Plan, zoning regulations and architectural design guidelines “because they don’t provide clear direction on what is considered acceptable.”

International Capital Partners’ second proposal came from Heller Manus Architects of San Francisco. Building materials for the mixed-used building would include cedar-stained board-and-batten and black powder-coated metal window frames, roofing and canopy posts.

From Central Avenue, the building would be divided into thirds, with the predominantly glass-faced center portion rising up three stories. The flanking street-side portions would symmetrically rise up two stories and then set back for about 10 feet, with trellises covering the balcony areas.

A fourth floor would be set back about 10 feet from the front of the third floor and top out at 45 feet. A stairshaft would project above the fourth-floor roof to reach the 53-foot mark.

The Heller Manus design has been reviewed by the Architectural Review Committee, which remains concerned about the proposal’s height, city planners said.