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## City presented with grand vision for downtown

By Richard Hanners

As proposed by Portland, Ore.-based planning consultants Crandall Arambula, the plan calls for adding 140,000 square feet of retail space to the 175,000 square feet of existing or renovated space, three parking structures with 545 short-term and 312 long-term spaces, and 298 additional residential units. The amount of new office space is yet to be determined.



The consultants presented the latest version of the plan last week in a fourth and final public meeting. Among the highlights of the proposal:

- Whitefish Landing, a man-made channel running east from the Whitefish River all the way to the Baker Ave. viaduct, would be constructed on land currently owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe. The “water amenity” is intended to connect the downtown area to Whitefish Lake by canoe or small water craft.
- A planned-unit development with a resort complex or additional housing could take up the remainder of the reclaimed railroad property. As presented by Crandall Arambula, at least three bridges would cross the man-made river channel and connect the PUD to downtown.
- Two downtown locations for a new City Hall are suggested — on Spokane Ave. directly across from the railroad depot and next to the proposed Great Northern Square, or two blocks south on the corner of Spokane and Second St. across from Central School.
- Three new downtown parking structures. One would take the place of the existing City Hall and would offer 28,000 square feet of retail space on the ground level and two upper parking levels with spaces for 220 cars.

- A second structure along Spokane Ave. between First and Second streets would have the same design. Long-term parking for 280 cars would be provided by a three-story structure next to the O’Shaughnessy Center.

- Streetscaping on Second St., Central Ave. and other

downtown streets would enhance use by pedestrians and could include new lighting and possibly covered sidewalks. Tree-lined promenades would be built on Spokane Ave. and along the Whitefish Landing and Whitefish River.

- Great Northern Square would replace the existing Parkside Credit Union park. Drawings show a curved street on the north end, active and passive gathering areas, and possibly an interactive fountain. A pedestrian underpass beneath Baker St. near the viaduct would connect the square to the Whitefish Landing promenade.
- Downtown lodging could be a major change for Whitefish. Besides a large resort complex at Whitefish Landing, Crandall-Arambula also suggest a four-story “boutique” hotel with 36 rooms at Central Ave. and First St.
- Recognizing recent redevelopment of the historic Railway District on Lupfer and O’Brien avenues, the planning consultants propose a “vertical mix” of housing and office space above ground-floor retail as a way to maintain the district’s character.

These and other ideas evolved over the past year as plans to rebuild the downtown portion of U.S. Highway 93 spurred the city and Heart of Whitefish, a downtown business association, into developing a master plan for the downtown area. Responses collected from those who attended the four public meetings reflect the process.

About 40 people attended the initial meeting on Nov. 18 last year. Top issues and concerns included preserving downtown retail with a mix of uses, increasing parking, promoting pedestrian and

bicycle use, and addressing traffic downtown and on U.S. 93. Other concerns included preserving the town's character, preserving residential areas and moving City Hall.



participants supported proposals for streetscaping Central Ave., improving transportation on Second St. and the Baker Ave. viaduct, and construction of a Whitefish Promenade.

A second public meeting on Jan. 27 drew about 140 people, and public input changed somewhat. Top issues and concerns continued to include enhanced or expanded retail and increased parking, but expanded downtown lodging and providing a waterway connection to Whitefish Lake were new.

One participant cited state tax records claiming there are 1,500 hotel rooms in Whitefish and none had 50 percent occupancy rates. Others claimed improvements downtown could increase occupancy rates.

Most participants at the second meeting wanted to keep City Hall downtown and supported an "enhanced couplet" design for U.S. 93, with one-way traffic on Spokane and Baker avenues and a new truck route on Karrow. Truck use downtown drew emotional responses.

The response to the Whitefish Landing idea was generally supported, with some even calling for damming the river downstream and regulating Whitefish River. Others wondered if the money could be better spent on a U.S. 93 bypass or reclaiming the railway property, and some worried about pollution in the river and use by motorboats.

Two more public meetings were held March 23 and 24, and 79 response ballots were collected. Most

There was a noticeable difference of opinion on where to put City Hall downtown, with 49 percent favoring the site by Central School and 37 percent favoring locating a new City Hall building on Great Northern Square across from the railroad depot.

There was also growing opposition to the Whitefish Landing idea. While some called it "great," others said it was too costly or posed contamination problems. Some flat out said they wanted the river left alone.

The fourth and final public meetings were held June 14 and 15. Participants discussed ways to provide public transportation, protect "hardware-type stores" downtown, preserve historic structures and create design guidelines.

One participant called for maintaining nightlife downtown, claiming it was "a big draw for skiers, golfers, etc." Another had "major reservations with the Whitefish Landing and the potential effects on the Whitefish River drainage." A much smaller landing with a long green belt might be more appropriate, the participant said.

Now that a downtown master plan has been drafted with citizen involvement, it will be up to city and state highway officials to see that it's implemented. Funding for these projects could come from public sources or private developers. Now that the vision part is completed, money and politics will likely drive the process.