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Whitefish Dreams Big with Downtown Plan

By Lynnette Hintze, The Daily Inter Lake

Imagine, if you will, strolling through a lush town square in front of the Whitefish train depot, heading west to a pedestrian underpass beneath the viaduct.

On the other side of Wisconsin Avenue, a scenic manmade extension of the Whitefish

River — the Whitefish Landing — awaits visitors who want to picnic along the water or paddle a canoe to the river. Pedestrians could stroll along the new water link on an elegant trail called the Whitefish Promenade.

Visitors would be able to stay at new downtown hotels and shop at 140,000 square feet of new retail space.

These are a few of the ambitious dreams to be unveiled Thursday in the new Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan. A public hearing on the plan begins at 6 p.m. at Whitefish City Hall, and is the first step in the adoption process.

Drafted by Portland consulting firm Crandall Arambula, the plan's purpose is to provide a framework for strategic investment and decision-making that will guide downtown Whitefish for the next 20 years and beyond. Public meetings during the past two years have provided consultants with plenty of input. If approved, the downtown plan would become part of Whitefish's new growth policy.

Priority projects

While the 65-page plan includes lavish amenities such as Whitefish Landing, which



This ARTIST'S RENDITION of the proposed Great Northern Square, superimposed on an aerial view of downtown Whitefish, shows the current Park Side Federal Credit Union Park as a crucial open space in the proposed downtown master plan. The two-story building in the upper right corner is a proposed new City Hall. In the upper left corner, a multilevel parking structure is proposed north of the O'Shaughnessy Center. Graphic courtesy of Crandall Arambula.

may or may not happen, it also provides a blueprint of priority "catalyst" projects that are expected to play out during the next few years. Those include public parking structures, a new City Hall, Central Avenue improvements and the development of Great Northern Square.

The city spent \$3.8 million last year to buy the 1.8-acre Credit Union Park next to the Whitefish train depot. This green space would become a focal point

of the downtown area, even more so than it is. It would be called Great Northern Square, and a portion of the park could be the site of a new City Hall.

The plan outlines two options for the relocation of City Hall. One is on the southeast corner of the park; the other is just north of the Whitefish Library. Both options include a parking structure north of the library that would include 100 spaces for city parking, 25 for the library, 10 for long-term Amtrak parking and 65 spaces for railroad replacement parking. Railroad parking now available west of the depot would be relocated to the proposed structure.

Space that now offers parking on the depot's west side appears to be targeted for landscaping and decorative trees.

The cost of the priority projects is \$21.9 million. A breakdown of that total includes \$3.6 million for a new City Hall, which will be financed with \$3 million from the sale of the old City Hall and the rest in tax-increment revenue. The parking structure would cost \$1.6 million and also depends on tax-increment revenue.

A new emergency-services facility for police and fire departments would be outside of the downtown area, but is included in the plan

with a \$3.5 million price tag. A general-obligation bond is one way of paying for the emergency-services building, but the city also is seeking federal grant money for a multipurpose center that could multiple government agencies.



Central Avenue's streetscape would cost \$2 million. Resort-tax revenue could be earmarked for this project, the plan suggests.

Among the most ambitious projects on the priority list is a massive \$9.7 million three-story retail and parking complex that would span the east half of the block along Spokane Avenue between First and Second streets, where Big Mountain Tire now operates. The city already owns most of that property.

The complex would house 28,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space, two upper levels of parking for 220 cars and underground parking for about 90 vehicles. Funding would be split, with private developers paying about \$5.6 million and the government chipping in \$4.1 million.

Other parking structures could be built at the existing City Hall site, the O'Shaughnessy Center parking lot and at Central Avenue and Third Street. The plan suggests options for retail parking of 740 vehicles and provides 200 spaces for civic parking.

Priority projects are outlined with a five-year buildout ending in 2010.

Transportation

The downtown master plan is designed to dovetail with the state Department of Transportation's rebuild of U.S. 93 through Whitefish. The state's preferred alternative for that project includes turning Spokane Avenue into a northbound one-way street between Seventh and Second streets, and shifting Baker Avenue into a southbound one-way street.

However, the downtown plan suggests preserving two-way traffic on those collector streets in a "contra-flow" configuration that could allow two lanes of traffic going one way and one lane going the other on those particular streets.

Raised intersections that would put the street at sidewalk level at high-volume intersections such as Central Avenue and Second Street are suggested as a traffic-calming device.

Other suggestions in the plan include removing Railway Street between Baker and Lupfer avenues and creating a new road on railroad property on the north side of

the proposed Whitefish Landing. "These are broad-brush concepts," Whitefish Public Works Director John Wilson said.

Pedestrian access would be enhanced throughout the downtown area. A Wisconsin Avenue underpass is suggested to link the Great Northern Square with Whitefish Landing. It would cut under the viaduct on the north side of the O'Shaughnessy Center.

The Whitefish Promenade is proposed as a multiuse trail encircling the downtown area, running along the Whitefish River on the west and Spokane Avenue on the east.

Whitefish Landing

As consultants considered residents' suggestions to incorporate the natural surroundings into the downtown area, they conjured up the idea of a man-made waterway from Whitefish River that would begin north of Miles Avenue, running along railroad property to the north end of Lupfer Avenue.

"Redevelopment of the underutilized Burlington Northern property west of Wisconsin Avenue provides a tremendous opportunity to create a unique waterway experience, resort or housing development and promenade," according to the plan.

The landing would include a 25-acre resort development of hotels, rentals and high-density residential development.

"The city doesn't propose to be the lead" on projects such as these, Wilson said. Rather, private developers would shape the project.

Getting access to railroad property and environmental cleanup could be challenges. The historic roundhouse also is situated in the project area, and there likely would be public sentiment to save it, Wilson speculated.

Ideas such as the Whitefish Landing are "new and bold," he added.

The downtown master plan and detailed maps are available on the city's Web site, www.whitefish.govoffice.com.

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