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Whitefish plan passes initial hurdle

By Lynnette Hintze, The Daily Inter Lake

An ambitious downtown master plan got unanimous approval from the Whitefish City-County Planning Board on Thursday. It's the first hurdle in adopting the plan as an amendment to the new growth policy being drafted for Whitefish. The City Council will have the final say on the downtown plan.

The council chambers were filled to capacity with citizens anxious to hear the details of the plan drafted by Portland consulting firm Crandall Arambula. Consultants have worked with Whitefish community leaders for nearly two years.

The fact that there was little public testimony at the hearing was perhaps an indication the plan already had gained community support.

With the potential for roughly \$85 million in private and public investment, the plan provides a framework for priority projects and potential amenities that could be built in downtown Whitefish over the next two or three decades.

The Heart of Whitefish, a nonprofit group of downtown business and civic leaders, got the ball rolling about four years ago, soliciting pledges from local businesses to help pay for the consultant fees. The plan cost \$177,353, of which the city paid \$141,670, a community development block grant contributed \$15,000 and the Heart of Whitefish raised \$20,683.

Consultant George Crandall pointed out early on in the process that both public and private enterprise would drive the plan.

"The public needs to spend money up front to stimulate private investment," he said. "For every dollar spent in public money, \$7 or \$8 in private stimulation should be generated."

Crandall said the plan at full buildout would offer opportunities for about \$76 million in private investment.

The city would invest more than \$9 million on projects such as a new City Hall at \$3.6 million; new emergency-services facility at \$3.5 million; Central Avenue improvements at \$2 million and parking garage on the current City Hall site at \$1.6 million. City costs would be offset by the sale of the current City Hall site and city property at the corner of Spokane and Second Street to private developers who would develop retail space at those locations. The city would contribute to parking garages built on top of retail stores.

Part of the impetus for completing a downtown master plan now was the state's pending rebuild of U.S. 93 through Whitefish. Community leaders feared that if they didn't offer ideas of how they want traffic funneled through

the downtown area, the state would eliminate on-street parking on Second Street (U.S. 93) to create a four-lane thoroughfare that would essentially split the downtown in half.

Instead, the downtown plan calls for retaining two-lane traffic on Second Street and creating raised intersections as a traffic-calming device.

SOME PLANNING board members embraced the plan more than others.

"I can't wait to see us get started," said board member Martin McGrew, who compared the downtown plan to the home in Whitefish he's been remodeling for a decade.

There's a tendency to want to do everything at once, McGrew said, noting that good advice he received from a carpenter was "you start in a corner and work your way back."

"Stay with your vision, but get started, and it'll be something you want to come home to," he said. "Remember that it evolves, it changes."

Planning-board member Lisa Horowitz called it an "exciting" plan but worried it could take away from Whitefish's small-town character if things become too "prettied up and nice."

"It does feel like an urban solution," Horowitz commented, reminding the audience that this is still the Rocky Mountain West and the plan needs to reflect that.

Horowitz made the motion to approve the plan but not the land-use designations suggested for various development areas. The board concurred.

Moving the plan forward without land-use designations shouldn't hamper it, City Manager Gary Marks said, because those designations would be addressed as development occurs.

The plan suggests changing the industrial zoning along the railroad corridor to general resort business and high-density multi-family residential to accommodate far-reaching plans for a manmade water channel off the Whitefish River that would be called Whitefish Landing. The landing would include a 25-acre resort development of hotels, rentals and high-density residential development.

Projects such as the Whitefish Landing would be driven by private, not public investment, Marks stressed.

The plan envisions a pedestrian underpass beneath the Wisconsin Avenue viaduct that would connect the landing with Great Northern Square, where Credit Union Park is now located.

Board member Kerry Crittenden wasn't keen on the landing idea.

"We used to call those things sloughs," he said.

Several Heart of Whitefish members testified about the merits of the plan. Gary Stephens said it protects Whitefish's primary economic engine — tourism — and expands the tax base. The plan calls for 140,000 square feet of new retail space.

"We wanted a plan that just didn't sit on the shelf," Stephens said.

Consultants acknowledged some points still need to be tweaked, such as the idea of cutting off about five feet of the width of Central Avenue by widening sidewalks.

And not everyone supported the grand vision. A young couple who just bought a house on Railway Street said they don't want their view of the railroad and Big Mountain swallowed by multistory condominium buildings.

Susan Wagner said she believes the heart of Whitefish is the people, not the buildings, adding that she doesn't want a "new and improved" Whitefish. She wants it just the way it is.

Features editor Lynnette Hintze may be reached at 758-4421 or by e-mail at lhintze@dailyinterlake.com