

Wetlands at the Viking Creek project will be preserved in perpetuity. The Averills' plan was unanimously applauded at a recent planning board meeting. Constance See / Whitefish Pilot

Kudos bestowed on Wisconsin project

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Approval of Phase 1 of the Viking Creek project was anything but typical for the Whitefish City-County Planning Board last week.

Many members of the board and the audience recalled the packed rooms and long hours of contentious testimony that accompanied the past project proposed for the site on Wisconsin Avenue — Boardwalk At Whitefish.

This time, the room was mostly empty and praise was heaped on the "collegial cooperation" between "greenies" and the Averills, the new owners of the 40-acre site where Viking Creek washes through 30-plus acres of wetlands that will be preserved in perpetuity.

Bill Leonard, the general manager of the Whitefish Water and Sewer District — the original water-quality watchdog group for the Whitefish area — recalled playing in the wetlands as a youth.

He said the Water and Sewer District board long recognized the importance of the wetlands area in protecting Whitefish Lake.

"We were the adversaries of the Averills back then," Leonard said, noting that his board also recognized the Averills were more reasonable about protecting water quality than later developers.

At one point in the 1980s, the 40-acre site had been approved for 450 units, Sean Averill noted in a PowerPoint presentation.

The site continued to be a lightning rod for concerned environmentalists, especially after Aspen, Colo.-based developer Bob Bowden proposed the Boardwalk project.

The solution to successfully developing the site was to position 17 single-family lots on 8.8 upland acres at the south end of the site where they caused the least impact, Averill said.

The sale of those homes, which will be built on helical piers after much of the existing fill is removed, rather than standard foundations, financed the purchase of the entire 40 acres.

Besides gifting about 30 acres of wetlands to the Whitefish Lake Institute for preservation in perpetuity, the Averills promised to provide \$110,000 for wetlands restoration and construction of low-impact pathways so the public can enjoy the Viking Creek area.

If that's not enough money for trails, the developer will come up with more, Dan Averill said. Money for ongoing wetlands monitoring and other work will come from homeowners dues and annual fundraisers.

The Averills will also benefit by moving the spa in their Lodge At Whitefish Lake across the street to a new building that will provide thirty 750-square-foot hotel rooms and possibly a skybridge linking the two lodge buildings.

The Averills opposed city staff's recommendation against an access road for the subdivision on Wisconsin Avenue, saying members of the general public would have to enter on Colorado Avenue and drive through the subdivision to access the wetlands.

They also asked that the requirement for a 25-foot wetlands buffer be eliminated because of the site's unusual circumstances.

"We are preserving more land than we are impacting," Sean Averill said.

Joe Malletta, representing the Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, described the group's efforts to fight the Boardwalk project.

Unable to come up with \$2 million to purchase the site outright, the group initiated a "collegial conversation" with the Averills about what to do with the site.

"This was a case of a very green group talking with the developer," Malletta said, noting that the end result was "the best proposal for the community."

Amy Chadwick, of Watershed Consulting, who has worked with Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands ever since the Boardwalk project, will oversee restoration of the wetlands, including removing old roads and culverts and replanting native plants.

"As a wetlands scientist, I would not support this plan if I didn't see a public gain," she said.

Margaret Murdock, who put about 200 acres of adjacent land in a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy, said she appreciated the effort to find middle ground for the site, but she had one concern.

"Keep the water moving or we'll have a big cesspool to the east of here," she said.

The planning board unanimously approved Phase 1 of the Viking Creek project with some changes — the access on Wisconsin Avenue was allowed, and 25-foot wetland setbacks will not be required.

The project will go to the city council on July 16.