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WETLANDS PROJECT WINS COMMUNITY APPROVAL Working Together: The Lodge at Whitefish Lake

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By Bill Schneider, 8-31-07

A lot of business people and government leaders haven't learned this yet, but working together almost always works better than working against each other. And there is no better example than the upcoming expansion of the Lodge at Whitefish Lake.

Referred locally as "the wetlands project," a recent collaborative effort between the lodge owner and local environmentalists will soon result in some extremely valuable real estate being managed for its public resources such as wildlife and water quality instead of its private worth as condos or trophy homes.

Last week, I spent a night at the luxurious Lodge at Whitefish Lake and had dinner with owner Brian Averill at the lodge's equally luxurious restaurant, the Boat Club. Over dinner, we talked about the evolution of the collaborative project.

Averill is not the type of guy who boasts, but his lodge has been a roaring success. Only two years old now, the lodge already needs to expand to meet demand.

Trouble is, the lodge is located in a sensitive watershed and wildlife area, which makes expansion controversial. During the initial construction, in fact, the lodge made the front pages when workers came to work in the morning and found grizzly tracks through freshly poured concrete slab.

The Averill family owns more than enough land for the expansion--37 acres of pricey real estate adjacent to the lodge, just across Wisconsin Avenue, now used for overflow and employee parking. That's where Averill wants to put the 30-room expansion and build a picturesque skywalk (patterned after a railroad trestle to play on the railroading heritage of Whitefish) over busy Wisconsin Avenue to the main lodge building.

A few years ago, former owners of the land proposed a huge development called the Boardwalk Project on this same site, but this high-density development ran into serious opposition in the community because of fears it would damage the still-pristine waters of Whitefish Lake and destroy key wetland habitat. A citizens group, Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, formed to fight the Boardwalk Project. After a heated debate, the developers dropped the project and sold the land to the Averill family.

Then, the Averills, the Friends group, and another local nonprofit, the Whitefish Lake Institute, sat down together and came up with a plan that addressed everybody's needs.

Here's the deal. The lodge gets its 30-room unit and 17 single-family lots to sell and help finance the entire project. In exchange, the Averills will permanently devote most of the acreage, 30 acres, to open space to protect the watershed and wetland habitat. In addition, the lodge promises funding to hire a consultant to monitor the project, do some rehab work on Viking Creek, which flows through the area and under Wisconsin Avenue, and to build interpretive trails.

All parties agree that the Whitefish Lake Institute will manage the land.



Brian Averill, owner of The Lodge at Whitefish Lake. Photo by Bill Schneider. BELOW: The trestle-like skywalk soon to be built over Wisconsin Avenue.



Those 30 acres combined with two existing conservation easements adjacent to it create a fairly large area of productive open space, about a 180 acres total, smack in the middle of perhaps the hottest real estate market in Montana, if not the entire New West.

“This is how we can do this together,” Averill explained. “We need additional guest rooms, but we are only developing seven acres, and 30 acres will become open space.

“This is our way of helping the community,” he adds, “and I wish more developers would think like this.”

And this is not idle talk by a developer who only wants to make money because the community buys the idea. At public hearings on the wetlands project, Averill points out, not one person objected to the plan, even former foe of developing the area, Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, which supports the new plan.

“Dan (Brian’s father) has been very open with us,” said Jim Colla of Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, recently in a *Whitefish Pilot* article. “He shared everything, and we feel that this is an excellent plan.”

“This is pretty big when you consider that 30 of the 37 acres will be permanently protected,” agrees Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute.

He explained that the three parties (Averills, Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, and the Whitefish Lake Institute) simply “sat down and hammered out a deal that worked for everybody”

In his phone interview with *NewWest.net*, Koopal added, “I think this is a good example of how developers and environmental groups can come together and come up with an acceptable plan for both development and environmental purposes.”

Koopal also detailed the ecological significance of this area, calling it “the kidney of Whitefish Lake” because it works to filter out pollutants and excessive nutrients before they seep into the pristine waters.

The local planning board and city council liked the idea, too, especially the collaborative approach that served all parties, and quickly approved the plan.