



Patrick Cote/Daily Inter Lake

Wetland Nature Trail

Mike Koopal, director of Whitefish Lake Institute, stands on one of three bridges at the new Wetland Nature Trail Thursday afternoon in Whitefish.

destruction of fragile vegetation,” Koopal said, adding that the trail alignment is situated to protect wildlife habitat.

A remote camera documenting wildlife in the area recently has captured photographs of a white-tailed deer, a cow elk that has been raising a calf there the past two years, a mountain lion and a fisher.

Interpretive trail signs are being developed and will be installed prior to the July 13 grand opening. Until then visitors are asked to use only designated trails and refrain from following wildlife trails and service paths through the restoration area.

The preserve is a pivotal drainage area that filters runoff from Big Mountain as it continues to Whitefish Lake. The Institute monitors the wetlands for water quality, wildlife value and public education and awareness.

The 30-acre conservation preserve was a gift to Whitefish Lake Institute in 2007 from Dan Averill and sons Sean and Brian, partners in The Lodge at Whitefish Lake, as the Averills sought approval for lodge expansion on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue. The family also pledged \$110,000 toward wetlands restoration.

The wooded area has been in the limelight for more than two decades as development proposals came and went.

Dan Averill owned the property in the early 1990s and planned to develop the eastside property with a mix of commercial and residential units. He eventually pulled his application amid public concerns about wetlands development and wildlife habitat.

In 2001, Averill sold the property to Hines, the resort development company that planned a \$300 million buildout of Big Mountain’s village area but pulled out of that project in 2004.

Bayard Dominick and Bob Bowden, partners in the proposed Boardwalk development, bought the property from Hines when the resort corporation left Whitefish. In February 2006 Dominick stepped aside to let Bowden take the lead, but the project was scrapped, again amid controversy over the wetlands preservation issue.

Wetlands advocates argued Boardwalk was too big, too dense and too intrusive to a critical drainage corridor for Whitefish Lake.

Zoning on the property, which would have allowed up to 850 dwelling units, was a sticking point for past projects, too. Both planners and developers acknowledged the difficulties of that density on an area that’s about one third wetlands.

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Wetlands trail to open in July

By LYNNETTE HINTZE

A long-awaited nature trail through a high-profile wetlands area in Whitefish will open in July.

The Living Wetland Interpretive Nature Trail, located on 30 acres east of The Lodge at Whitefish Lake off Wisconsin Avenue, is the culmination of work done by the Whitefish Lake Institute and other project partners, Institute Executive Director Mike Koopal said.

Much of the trail work was completed last year, including the construction of boardwalks and three foot bridges across Viking Creek.

“The trail has been carefully designed to lead visitors through the wetland safely without