

# Whitefish Pilot

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## Mayor says state of city is 'strong'

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Whitefish Pilot

Whitefish is a booming city with more commercial and residential growth occurring every year, along with that it experiences a spike in population in the summer months from visitors and residents alike.

The mountain town with a population of roughly 6,500 quickly turns into 25,000 in the summer and tourism numbers show that about 600,000 visitors spend at least one night in Whitefish, according to the city.

Mayor John Muhlfeld recalls moving to Whitefish more than two decades ago to find what seemed at the time like a "ghost town."

"We are a much different community today," he said. "We

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are dealing with the complexities of a large city. It presents challenges for our police, for our fire, for our ability to provide timely services to the community — we are a very unique community in that respect."

Muhlfeld gave a state of the city speech last week to a crowd of about 75 at City Hall. City Manager Adam Hammatt followed with a short update of each city department.

Muhlfeld referenced the Pilot's survey seeking the top issues facing the community and the resulting package of stories published in the Pilot's Feb. 20 edition. He noted that the top community issues that rose to the top were not a surprise — growth and sustainability, tourism, taxes and affordability, water quality and open space, affordable housing, and transportation and infrastructure.

"We do have a clear plan and we do have a vision for how this community will grow," Muhlfeld said. "We're making great strides to address the issues facing the city. The state of the city is strong."

### Growth

According to estimates based upon 2.5 percent annual growth, Whitefish could have a population of more than 8,000 residents by 2025, and more than 12,000 by 2040.

"We're showing a 50 percent increase of residents by 2035, and of course that's right around the corner," Muhlfeld said. "We're certainly growing and there's no way to avoid that."

Muhlfeld said there's little doubt that the city is impacted by tourism and thus it is planning for how to manage the future of tourism here by creating a Sustainable Tourism Management Plan. The city has partnered with the Whitefish Convention and Visitors Bureau to establish a strategic vision for the future.

"We understand the longterm economic benefit of the Whitefish recreation and tourism industry lies with visitors and in our ability to align their needs with that of Whitefish's residents," he said.

He pointed out that visitors, who eat in the restaurants, shop in retail stores and stay in hotels, contribute substantially to the local resort tax, which creates a tax rebate back to property owners.

Visitors and increases in residential population also require planning for preserving open space and access to recreation.

Muhlfeld pointed to successes in preserving open space surrounding the city in Haskill Basin and the Whitefish Lake Watershed conservation easements that include a combined 16,400 of protected working forestland.

"For a small commu-

nity we have made great strides for conservation," he said. "Recreation has truly been a conduit for many of these successful projects."

Along with that, he said, Whitefish has become a model for those traveling for recreation opportunities. The Whitefish Trail system has resulted in more than \$6 million being infused into the local economy, according to a study by Headwaters Economics.

### Affordable housing

Growth in population and second homeowners, however, has had a significant impact on affordable housing. Roughly half of year-round workers in Whitefish commute in to town for their job, according to a 2016 housing needs assessment.

City Manager Adam Hammatt said he has made working to provide affordable housing for the community his top priority since joining the city about two years ago.

"Affordable housing issues are tough and if we want to tackle the problems we have to do that head on," he said. "We're moving things forward and I'm excited about our efforts."

The Whitefish Legacy Homes Program, which would require 20 percent of all new development to be deed-restricted as affordable, is set to go before City Council in May.

Muhlfeld said the issue of affordable housing has been a concern since at least 1987 when the city adopted its urban renewal plan, which set the framework for the city's tax increment finance district.

"Literally 31 years ago we recognized that providing and encouraging affordable housing for our service workers, our nurses, our firefighters, our school teachers would be paramount to preserving the fabric of this community," he said.

Some successes have already occurred that will lead to housing. The Whitefish Housing Authority received low income housing tax credit from the state Board of Housing to construct a 38-unit apartment complex on Edgewood Place called Alpenglow Apartments.

The city also plans to partner with the housing authority on a 34-unit affordable housing project on its snow lot downtown.

### Water Quality

Potential and confirmed impacts from aquatic invasive species, septic leachate and wastewater and nutrient loading all could have negative effects on Whitefish Lake.



“The health of Whitefish Lake is directly related to the health of Whitefish,” Muhlfield said. “We lose the lake, the economy suffers.”

The city has since 2013 been partnering with Whitefish Lake Institute to prevent the entry of aquatic invasive species in the lake through boat inspections and monitoring in the watershed.

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The institute in a 2012 study also found several hot spots with septic contamination around the lake as a result of failing septic tanks. Muhlfield said the city continues to work with homeowners in outlying areas around the lake to encourage them to connect to the city’s wastewater system, including by agreeing to defer annexation to neighborhoods who agree to connect.

“This is sincerely about protecting the lake,” he said. “We have ongoing work relating to water quality.”

The Haskill Basin conservation easement, in addition to protecting land for recreation, also provided protection for the city’s water source in Second and Third creeks in Haskill.

### City Departments

Hammatt shared some facts pertaining to various city departments.

- Projects before the Planning Department include work on the Highway 93 South corridor plan, a downtown parking plan and future

work is set to look at transportation.

- The Parks and Recreation Department is planning for improvements at Depot Park, Armory Park and creating new parking of 24 spaces near City Beach.

- The Whitefish Community Library is

the sixth largest library in the state with 57,000 items and more than 200 programs. The library has issued more than 10,000 library cards to patrons.

- Since the city’s resort tax began in 1996 it has collected over \$40 million providing a total of \$10 million of that in tax

credits to property owners and \$20 million for infrastructure.

- The Fire Department in 2018 responded to 1,900 calls, which is a 31 percent increase since 2011.

- The Police Department responded to 12,500 calls last year and has 17 full-time officers.