

Group aims to save Wisconsin wetlands

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Ever since the public first heard last year about plans to build 167 condominiums and a lakeshore lodge on 41 acres of land bordering Wisconsin Avenue, neighbors and others concerned about wetlands have stood up to protest the plan.

Now opponents to the Boardwalk at Whitefish project have organized into a group called Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands with the goal of protecting wetlands there and even across the city.

Spokesperson Joe Malletta said about 20-30 people are affiliated with the group. He said the impetus to create the group originated with Mike Koopal, at the Whitefish Lake Institute, and from a comment made during a city planning board meeting last year.

"Nick Palmer, who was the planning board chairman at the time, asked opponents at the hearing what the developer should do with the property if he didn't build his project," Malletta said.

What the Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands want to do is to permanently protect the project site — on both sides of Wisconsin Avenue. That means buying out the developer.

"We want to make him whole," Malletta said.

How that can be done is in the discussion stage. Malletta said the first step is to assess the value of the property. After that, the group can look to grants, fund-raising and even the city's interest in protecting open-space to raise the needed money.

A compromise of some sort is also possible, Malletta said. Some development on the 38 acres east of Wisconsin Avenue might be acceptable, but not in the wetlands areas, but the group is also concerned about portions of the project east of Wisconsin Avenue.

"The group is concerned about land north and south of the Lodge at Whitefish Lake," Malletta said.

The group recently made its first official engagement with the city about their interest in permanently protecting the Boardwalk site. They presented city manager Gary Marks with a list of eight questions that will help the group understand the value of the property.

Several questions focus on zoning. It's been a mystery to Boardwalk opponents and current city planners how the site was zoned differently than provided for in the Flathead County master plan. The group has also asked about the city's interest in inventorying wetlands and securing bonding for acquisition of open space, as well as about Whitefish Lake water quality, geology and

hydrology, and control of noxious weeds.

Malletta said the group expects a response from the city in four to six weeks. He said the group has a hydrologist and an attorney working with them.

Development proposals for the site go back at least to 1992, when P & D Land Enterprises, owned by Peter Longcroft, a Canadian, and Dan Averill, who later developed the nearby Lodge at Whitefish Lake, asked the Whitefish City-County Planning Board to change the zoning for part of the site from RB-2 to RB-1 to allow development of 64 condominiums. Two years later, P & D withdrew its application to the Army Corps of Engineers after the plan met with strong public opposition.

In September last year, Whitefish developer Bayard Dominick and Lake Cabins Development presented plans to build a "world-class master-planned resort" on the 41-acre site. The Boardwalk at Whitefish project called for 167 residential units connected to a hotel, a restaurant and a health club east of Wisconsin and a 95,000-square-foot, 55-foot high lodge by the lake.

Dominick later left the project altogether.

The proposal went before the planning board three times under new rules established just for large controversial projects such as Boardwalk. By February this year, modified plans called for 70 condominium units east of Wisconsin and a lodge with 34 units and a spa by the lake, but owner Bob Bowden announced his decision to withdraw his planned-unit development application for the project.

Bowden, who operates an Aspen, Colo.-based development company, told the Pilot at the time that he hadn't made any definite plans for the site. He said he moved to the Flathead in January to focus his attention on the Boardwalk project and had been working with a team of planners and the city on a "daily" basis, "bouncing ideas off staff" and "totally submerging" himself in the project.

Bowden, however, had other problems at the time. On Feb. 15, members of the Northwest Drug Task Force charged Bowden with possession of cocaine after a search of his condominium in the Slopeside project on Big Mountain. Bowden is the developer behind the 24-unit Slopeside duplex townhome project near Chair 6.

As for Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands, Malletta said they're considering expanding their interest to protecting wetlands across the city and changing their name to Friends of Whitefish Wetlands.