

Whitefish year in review

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Growth was the number-one story of the year in 2005, and it continued to be on everyone's mind this year.

The city's growth policy process kicked off in April, and city planners added up the numbers for 36 subdivisions recently platted in Whitefish — 755 single-family homes, 298 condos, 176 townhomes and 28 cabins slated for construction.

All that growth costs the city money. In August, the city council adopted a five-year plan for its water, sewer and stormwater utilities that totaled about \$26 million. Consultants told councilors the city needs to set water and sewer rates high enough to pay for upkeep or the city will be forced to deal with expensive capital projects all at once.

In response, city councilors began to look at creative ways to finance the infrastructure, including impact fees and a real estate transfer tax.

Other top stories of 2006 included:

The city's intent to regulate impacts on stormwater runoff raised concerns among the development community and led to at least one lawsuit against the city.

Councilors got a first look at a long-awaited stormwater utility plan and its \$1.6 million cost in February. In April, councilors approved an urgency ordinance intended to allow developers to move ahead on projects within special drainage study areas established by the utility plan.

But creation of a permanent stormwater ordinance got hung up after William and Theodora Walton sued the city when their plans to build a home on a steep slope overlooking Whitefish Lake were rejected.

Since then, the scope of the ordinance has expanded to include larger setbacks along streams and wetlands. Developers and conservationists continue to face off on the age-old question of property rights versus resource protection.

City councilors approved a downtown master plan in March, a bold plan that could change the look of downtown Whitefish, create 140,000 square feet of new retail space, and address the city's needs for parking and new city offices.

There were two setbacks, however. In July, Montana Department of Transportation engineers announced re-construction of U.S. Highway 93 through downtown Whitefish could be delayed beyond its 2010 start date. The highway project was the impetus for the downtown plan.

Money and parking problems were the focus of a late-November city council workshop, where city manager Gary Marks reported funding could not be found for a \$12 million parking structure across from the middle school.

Construction of North Valley Hospital's new facility is headed toward a March opening. In June, the hospital announced The Aspen Group, of Phoenix, had negotiated a \$6.4 million purchase price for the current hospital site.

A sticking point in the purchase is the city's long-term transportation plan, which calls for 13th Street becoming a major arterial, running through part of the site.

A 94-year-old school building was re-dedicated as Whitefish Middle School. Voters approved a \$10.2 million bond issue for project in 2003. The old Central School was mostly torn down and replaced with two pods.

A \$7 million state-of-the-art performing arts center in the school's auditorium is expected to reach completion in September 2007.

Kim Anderson, a school principal for 12 years, was named Montana's top middle school principal, and Whitefish High School history teacher Gary Carmichael was selected as Montana's 2007 Teacher of the Year.

The death of former Supreme Court justice and Whitefish attorney Frank B. Morrison Jr. on Jan. 8 caught the community by surprise. He was returning to Whitefish with his wife Sharon from work in Edmonton, Alberta, when he collapsed at Sea-Tac Airport.

Morrison moved to Whitefish in 1969, where he set up a law practice on Wisconsin Avenue. He was a prominent community leader, promoting local theater and helping found the Whitefish Lake Institute, a watchdog organization aimed at protecting water quality.

Vice President Dick Cheney made two visits to the Flathead. The first was a fund-raiser for Sen. Conrad Burns on Aug. 16 at the Lodge at Whitefish Lake. The second was a more public showing less than a week before election day at the Majestic Valley Arena.