

Wisconsin wetlands preserved in perpetuity

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Nearly a year and a half after the controversial Boardwalk at Whitefish project was proposed along Wisconsin Avenue, the developers of the Lodge at Whitefish Lake have announced a new project that will preserve 30 acres of the critical wetlands there.

"We are doing this for Whitefish," Dan Averill said. "The community has been good to us. The wetlands are important to Whitefish, to the lake and to this part of Montana. We feel that we have reached an effective compromise that allows for economic development as well as environmental protection."

Averill and his sons Sean and Brian delivered their Viking Creek Project proposal to the city planning department on Monday. The Averills purchased 37 acres of land that was formerly part of the Boardwalk development, across Wisconsin Avenue from the lodge.



Thirty acres of wetlands along Wisconsin Avenue will be preserved in perpetuity thanks to the efforts of, left to right, Jim Colla, representing Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands, Sean Averill, representing his father Dan and brother Brian, of the Lodge at Whitefish Lake, and Whitefish Lake Institute executive director Mike Koopal. Chris Tucker / Whitefish Pilot

According to the plan, 30 acres will be gifted to the Whitefish Lake Institute in perpetuity, the lodge's current parking lot will be expanded less than half an acre for 25-30 additional hotel rooms and a spa, and 5.8 acres near Crestwood Resort will be subdivided for 17 single-family homes.

"Development of the 17 lots will help finance the project," Sean Averill said.

The Viking Creek Project emerged after months of discussions and consultation with members of the Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands and other environmental organizations. The Averills have pledged \$110,000 towards the restoration of the wetlands.

"Dan has been very open with us," Jim Colla said on behalf of the Friends of Wisconsin Wetlands. "He shared everything, and we feel that this is an excellent plan."

Colla said the Averills had also agreed to provide funding for his group to hire Amy Chadwick, of Watershed Consulting, or any other consultant to review the plan for environmental considerations and to design wetland mitigation and restoration. Chadwick will continue to monitor the project until it is completed.

"We worked in conjunction with Amy to develop the 17 lots in the area with the least environmental impact," Sean Averill said. "The 17-lot Viking Creek community will be single family residences with no connection to the Lodge and Whitefish Lake."

Whitefish Lake Institute director Mike Koopal said the institute's long-term hope would be to put the 30 acres into a conservation easement that would prohibit subdividing or development.

"We recognize the unique natural resource value of the Wisconsin Avenue wetlands, and we certainly have the willingness to accept this property as a gift," Koopal said. "The Whitefish Lake Institute's management approach for the area would be simple. We would protect the natural resource value of the area in perpetuity, while using it as an educational tool for the public."

The land is adjacent to extensive acreage already protected by The Nature Conservancy. Koopal said an interpretive trail could be created that would be accessed by the new Wisconsin Avenue bike path.

Dan Averill's first project at the site came in 1990 when he partnered with Sterling Investments, of Calgary. At the time, Averill was the owner of Marina Cay Resort and Sunset Point condominiums, both successful projects in Bigfork.

Plans for a second hotel on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue were developed in 1992 under the name P&D Land Enterprises, but the project was pulled in April 1994 before the Army Corps of Engineers had finished reviewing the application.

The Boardwalk at White-fish project that emerged in September 2005 was headed up by Bob Bowden, the Aspen developer behind the 24-unit Slopeside townhome development adjacent to Chair 6 on Big Mountain.

The project initially called for 167 units on both sides of Wisconsin Avenue, sparking protests from the community about density, traffic and impacts to wetlands.

Sean Averill said Bowden still owns parcels of land north and south of the Lodge at Whitefish Lake between Wisconsin Avenue and the lake.