

Wisconsin Ave. corridor plan ready for review

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The Wisconsin Avenue corridor plan is finally making its way in front of the Whitefish Planning Board.

The plan looks at how the corridor, which has seen yearly increases in traffic and use, should continue to develop over the next two decades, examines future land uses, motorized and non-motorized transportation, infrastructure, economic performance and potential improvements.

The corridor boundary is from the Edgewood Drive and Wisconsin Avenue intersection north of the viaduct down to the Houston Drive/Big Mountain Road intersection of East Lakeshore Drive.

A steering committee of community members, appointed by City Council, held

See Review, A6

Review

from A1

monthly public meetings to provide overall guidance to the project team creating the plan. To gather public comment, the committee invited anyone interested to attend meetings or open house events, and offered online comment forms and one-on-one interviews for those with questions on the corridor.

The completed plan will go before the Whitefish Planning Board for a public hearing on Jan. 18.

Background

As the primary link between downtown Whitefish and two main destinations — Whitefish Lake and Whitefish Mountain Resort — the use of the corridor has been growing rapidly.

In 2016, Wisconsin Avenue saw average daily traffic of 11,500 vehicles, a figure that is expected to grow, according to the plan.

Between 2000 and 2014, population in the corridor doubled while population downtown increased just 30 percent, and the number of housing units in the corridor increased by 150 percent during the same 14-year period.

And as Whitefish Mountain Resort continues to boom, with a record-high 346,000 skier visits last year, the small state highway running through the corridor will likely continue to pack with vehicles full of eager skiers and snowboarders.

The 2007 city of Whitefish growth policy described the need for a future plan that "must address the mix of uses and the transition to residential both east and west of the roadway" as well as "address connections to the adjacent residential neighborhoods, orientation and connections to the new bike route, scale issues, landscaping/screening, and circulation/access."

Applied Communication has worked with Robert Peccia and Associates, GSBS Richman Consulting, the Wisconsin Avenue steering committee and the city planning office to develop the Wisconsin Avenue plan.

Economic Performance and Land Use

The plan states that trends of significant growth in investment in the corridor, including more seasonal rental and commercial development, are expected to continue. Public input submitted to the steering committee has shown a desire to maintain the character of the corridor while allowing new development that doesn't detract from the strength and potential of downtown Whitefish.

The economic performance goals for the corridor are to "improve the overall economic performance of the corridor and Whitefish by encouraging a balanced mix of development — residential, resort, retail, office, and restaurant to serve residents and visitors" and to "focus development opportunities along the corridor to support rather than compete with downtown."

With current zoning, about 600,000 square feet of residential, resort and limited commercial development could still occur along the corridor, and while public comments regarding the economic development of the area showed support for new developments, one of the biggest possible development projects has been met by public backlash.

When an early draft of the plan was presented at an August open house, a group of concerned neighbors met in the conference room adjacent to the City Council Chambers inside City Hall to discuss a proposed lodge near Big Mountain Road.

Early plans for a lodge at the East Lakeshore and Big Mountain Road intersection emerged in March. The development

is planned for three properties owned by Krumholz Lodge owner Joe Gregory — two lots adjacent to Big Mountain Road on the east and west sides of the road totaling almost 27 acres and an 11-acre lot south of East Lakeshore Drive.

A resort lodge would likely be located in the southern property, which includes 700 feet of lake frontage on Whitefish Lake, while along Big Mountain Road, resort residential properties would be on the west property and ancillary or administrative buildings to the east. Though Gregory has talked about the potential for a project no formal plans for development have been filed.

Other potential development areas in the corridor include the abandoned trailer park off Edgewood Drive, the northwest corner of Skyles Place and Wisconsin Avenue and the gravel pit across from Alpine Village Market, the last of which is waiting for a Council decision on a 102-unit housing development this month.

With regard to land use, the plan wants to "encourage compatible development that contributes to overall livability, meets evolving market demands, and mitigates impacts to the environment," as well as "integrate land use and transportation improvements that result in a pedestrian/transit/bike friendly corridor and reduces the need for vehicle trips."

Environment/Water Quality

With water quality as one of the top concerns for the corridor, the plan sets out to "protect water quality, stream stability and natural processes that preserve aquatic habitat and wildlife habitat" and "preserve the natural landscape, scenic views and forested character of the corridor."

To accomplish this, recommendations include minimizing human disturbances and practices that degrade water quality, adopt best management practices, change future developments to preserve open space, incorporate native vegetation and firewise designs, restore natural stream flows, and discourage new public marinas or developments that would increase motorized watercraft usage.

A 2007 Whitefish Lake Institute study looked at gasoline constituent loading and motorized watercraft densities on the lake and found that lakeshore properties in the Wisconsin Avenue corridor have the highest concentration of docks and motorized watercraft. As a result, "public health could be compromised" and "aquatic life located in shoreline areas associated with heavy boat traffic and boat storage/staging areas area a increased risk of deleterious acute and/or chronic effects."

Residential and Urban Design

The design and planning for the area is a challenge because of the diversity of what already exists along the corridor, according to the plan. Right now there is a mix of established single-family neighborhoods, multi-family housing, older single family homes and resort residential areas with short term rentals.

Likewise, the southern half of the corridor is characterized by older, single-family homes and low- to mid-density residences interspersed with offices and local businesses. Further down the road the corridor becomes more forested lots, with larger residential parcels.

Public input has shown a priority on preserving established neighborhoods while recognizing that in-fill developments may represent major development opportunities that could address some of the need for workforce housing.

According to the plan, "new residential development should be compatible with existing community character in terms of scale and urban design and should mitigate potential impacts through buffers, landscaping, transportation improvements and site planning."

The plan sets out to "provide for the diverse housing needs within the corridor while protecting community character and neighborhoods through compatible residential developments" and "new residential developments should incorporate design elements to promote walkability, sustainability and vibrant neighborhoods."

Likewise, public input showed a desire to maintain the corridor's existing character while creating an inviting atmosphere for visitors.

Transportation

Wisconsin Avenue is busy and getting busier.

According to the plan, traffic in the corridor is increasing at an annual growth rate of 3.9 percent and will continue to rise alongside increased development and visitation at Whitefish Mountain Resort.

According to the Whitefish Transportation Plan, traffic projections also indicate that, without any improvements, several segments of the corridor will experience unacceptable levels of congestion and delay.

Furthermore, without any adjustments to the roadways, traffic from future developments will likely spill over into neighborhood roads.

The plan sets out a need for "a connected, efficient, safe, accessible and attractive transportation system to accommodate all modes of travel" and "infrastructure in the corridor will have adequate capacity to accommodate future growth."

As part of this, the plan envisions adding to Wisconsin Avenue a 12-foot center turn-lane between two 12-foot normal traffic lanes, along with bicycle lanes and pedestrian sidewalks. The plan also calls for a satellite public safety/fire station near the Big Mountain Road intersection.

Implementation

The corridor plan sets out 14 action items to help implement the ideas and strategies formed in the steering committee. These include:

- Review land use regulations for future right of way acquisitions
- Evaluate options for road widening and improvements along Wisconsin Avenue
- Identify options to expand transit and park-n-ride lots
- Identify options for calming traffic on

Colorado Avenue

- Study storm water management issues at Viking Creek
- Adopt tree preservation guidelines
- Study the feasibility of emergency services facilities near Big Mountain Road
- Amend the architectural review standards to include new key development areas
- Form a Wisconsin Avenue business group
- Develop gateway treatment designs
- Implement recommendations from the bicycle-pedestrian master plan

- Coordinate with development code revisions to include the plan's policies
- Analyze the best use for a city-owned lot north of Reservoir Road
- Review Lakeshore Protection Regulations to address concerns about the practice of "pyramiding."

To view the draft proposal or to leave comments, visit <http://www.cityofwhitefish.org/planning-and-building/long-range-plans.php>.