

I. PROJECT OVERVIEW



A. Background

In 2007, the City of Whitefish adopted a Growth Policy with the following description of a corridor plan for Wisconsin Avenue.

“This plan must address the mix of uses and the transition to residential both east and west of the roadway. It must also address connections to the adjacent residential neighborhoods, orientation and connections to the new bike route, scale issues, landscaping/screening, and circulation/access.”

Wisconsin Avenue is the primary link between downtown and two major recreational destinations -- Whitefish Lake and Whitefish Mountain Resort. This two-lane, state-maintained, secondary highway includes a paved, separated bike and pedestrian path. The average annual daily traffic count for 2016 was 11,500 vehicles, but traffic volumes are only expected to increase as the corridor continues to grow, raising concerns that congestion and public safety issues will become more pronounced.

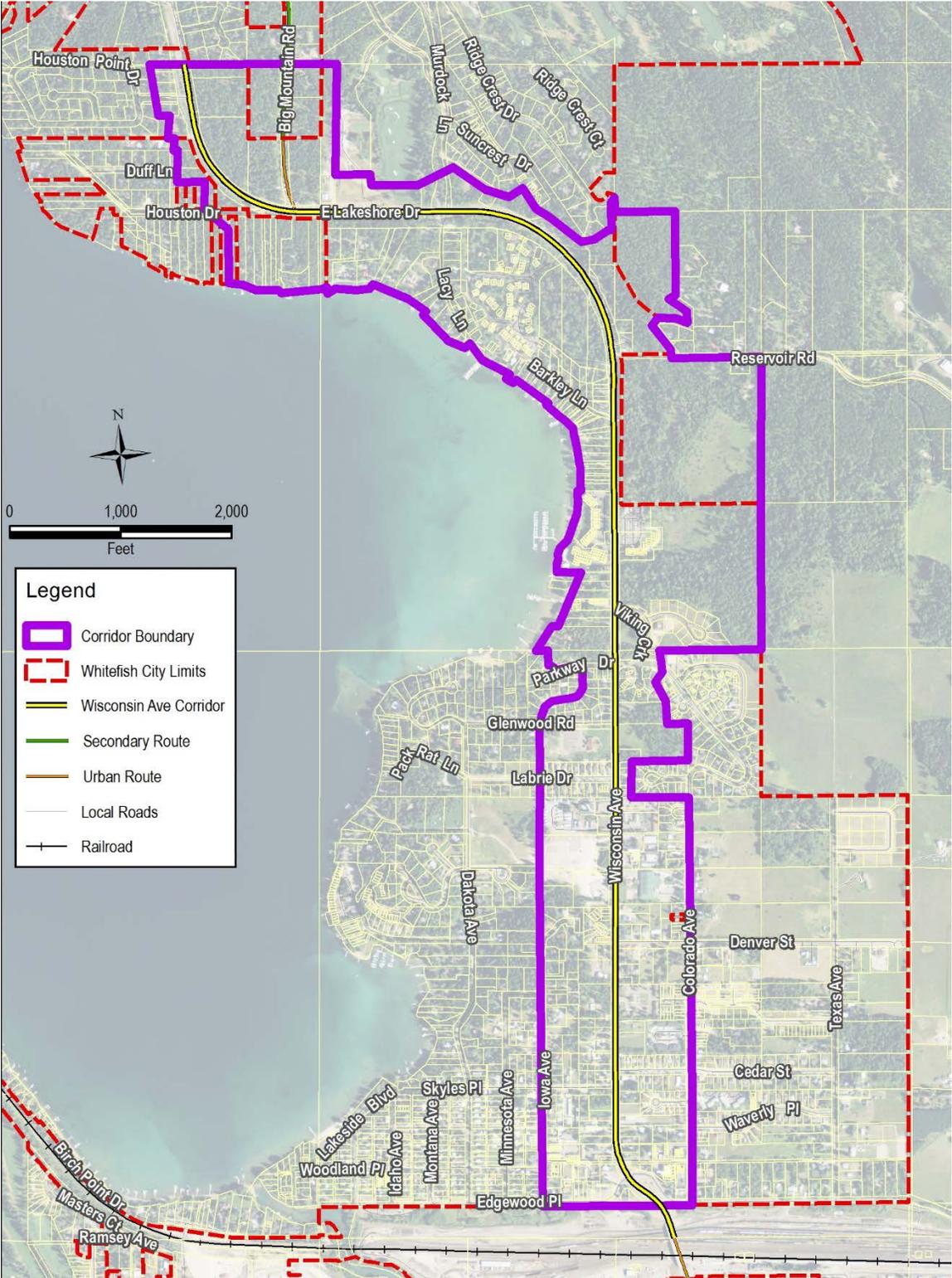
Land use within the study area is a mix of neighborhood commercial, offices, multi-family, single-family, resort residential, resort business and institutional uses. The southern portion of the corridor is transitioning from single-family to office and multi-family uses. In addition, there is significant potential for development of large vacant tracts and redevelopment of residential lots that are being assembled into larger parcels. The northern portion of the corridor is characterized by low-density development and open space. This plan encourages development that is complementary to the existing mix of uses while maintaining the neighborhood scale and character in different parts of the corridor.

Just as important is the study area’s location within the Whitefish Lake watershed. As storm water and snow melt run-off within the study area flows into Whitefish Lake, it is critical that development does not diminish water quality. The creation of a wetland preserve around Viking Creek and the establishment of a major conservation easement adjacent to the corridor are examples of efforts to improve the overall ecological function of the watershed.

The purpose of this corridor plan is to provide a decision framework that harnesses market forces, maximizes the City’s infrastructure investment, protects the environment, helps meet the city’s housing needs and maintains community character. The planning horizon is 10 to 20 years.

B. Study Area

Map 1.1: Wisconsin Avenue Corridor Boundary

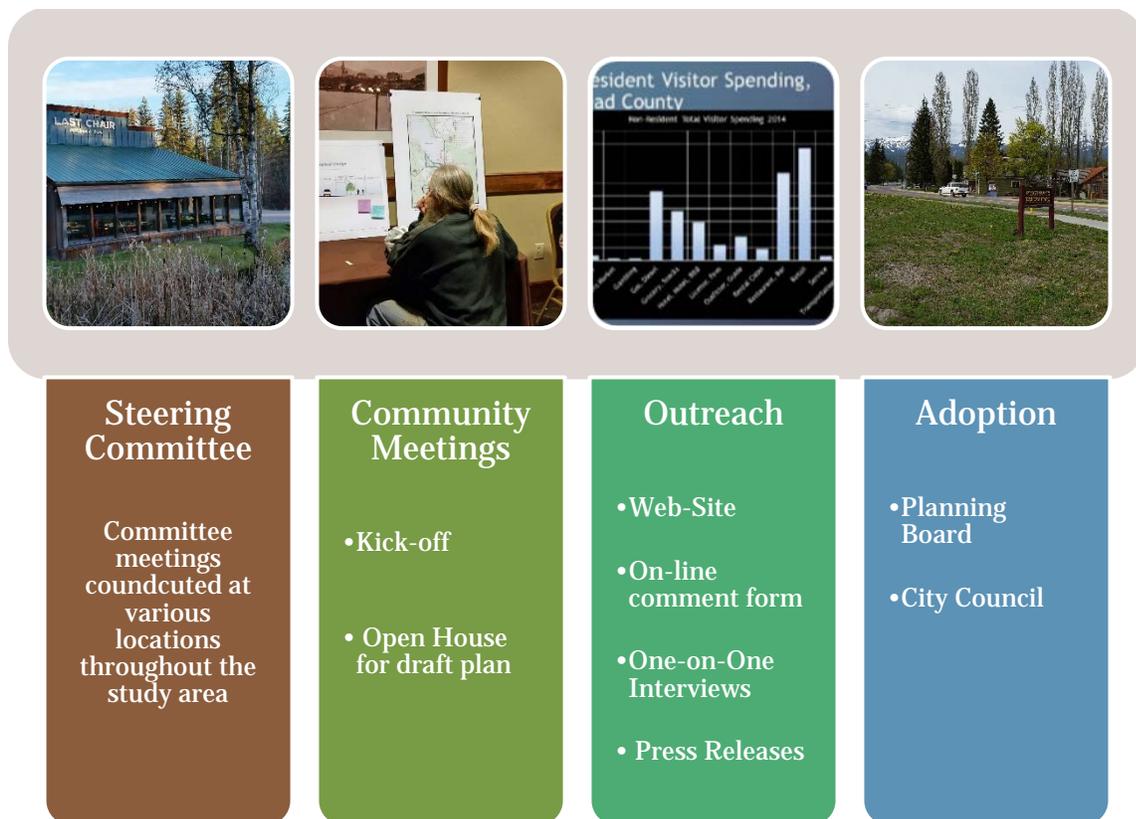


C. Planning Process

This corridor plan was developed through a community driven process designed to engage citizens, homeowners, business owners, public agencies, and other stakeholders in the planning effort. Throughout the process, the community was involved in formulating the vision for the corridor and in developing the goals, policies, and actions to guide future development along Wisconsin Avenue. Public participation strategies included the following:

- City Council appointed a Steering Committee of community members to oversee development of the plan. The Committee held monthly meetings to provide overall guidance to the project team.
- To facilitate public involvement, meetings were conducted at various locations within the study area.
- Meeting notices, minutes, and draft documents were posted to the city’s web site.
- A list-serve was maintained to provide regular updates to the public via e-mail.
- Citizens were invited to attend and participate in the Steering Committee discussions.
- Two community meetings were conducted as part of the planning process.
- An on-line comment form was developed to supplement input from meetings sessions.

Figure 1.1: Public Input



D. Related Planning Documents

Montana law requires that a neighborhood plan be consistent with the growth policy. Additionally, there are multiple planning documents, analyses, infrastructure plans, and special studies that lay the foundation for successful neighborhood plans. Long-range plans can be downloaded from the city web site at <http://www.cityofwhitefish.org/planning-and-building/long-range-plans.php> . Documents relevant to planning policy and actions in the Wisconsin Corridor include:

1. Growth Policy - 2007

Below are relevant goals and polices as excerpted from the 2007 Growth Policy:

“Future Land Use Goals:

1. Preserve and enhance the character, qualities, and small town feel and ambience of the Whitefish community through an innovative and comprehensive growth management system.
2. Preserve, enhance, and manage environmentally sensitive areas such as river and stream banks, steep slopes, wetlands, forested areas, and critical wildlife habitat.
4. Preserve and protect scenic vistas and view sheds. *(Note: No work has been done to date to specifically identify important or “image setting” view sheds.)*
5. Protect and preserve the special character, scale, and qualities of existing neighborhoods while supporting and encouraging attractive, well-designed, neighborhood compatible infill development.”

“Future Land Use Policies:

- 3G. Plan for healthy, efficient, and visually attractive corridors along major transportation routes through the community.
5. It shall be the policy of the City of Whitefish to encourage and support sustainability in land use planning so that the needs of the present are met while ensuring that future generations have the same or better opportunities.
6. The City of Whitefish shall give priority to infill development over Growth Policy amendments that would redesignate land to Urban or Suburban.
7. Waterfront development, including roads, utilities, and trails, shall not be allowed to degrade water quality, illegally or otherwise improperly alter natural streambanks and lakeshores, destroy riparian vegetation, degrade riparian wildlife habitat.
10. The City of Whitefish shall facilitate the formulation of corridor plans for all major transportation corridors in the community.
12. Encourage land owners to consult with professional foresters on the proper silvicultural and forest management techniques for hillsides and environmentally sensitive areas.

13. All waterfront structures shall be appropriately set back from the waterfront to preserve views, minimize adverse environmental impacts, preserve the aesthetic qualities of the lake or river front, meet sanitation requirements, and protect water quality.

14. All road construction associated with waterfront development and/or occurring in waterfront areas shall be monitored. Excessive clearing, hillside cutting, and the creation of spoil banks, which adversely affect views, destabilize hillsides, cause erosion, or increase surface runoff, shall be avoided or effectively mitigated.”

2. Whitefish Transportation Plan – 2009

The Transportation Plan guides decisions about future improvements for the transportation network. The plan recommends a typical multi-modal cross-section for Wisconsin Avenue but notes, “Due to inherent funding limitations, long-term prospects for complete reconstruction is somewhat limited. A series of smaller scale, incremental projects are warranted. This typically would involve the addition of left-turn bays, bus pullouts, pedestrian crossings and future traffic signals.”

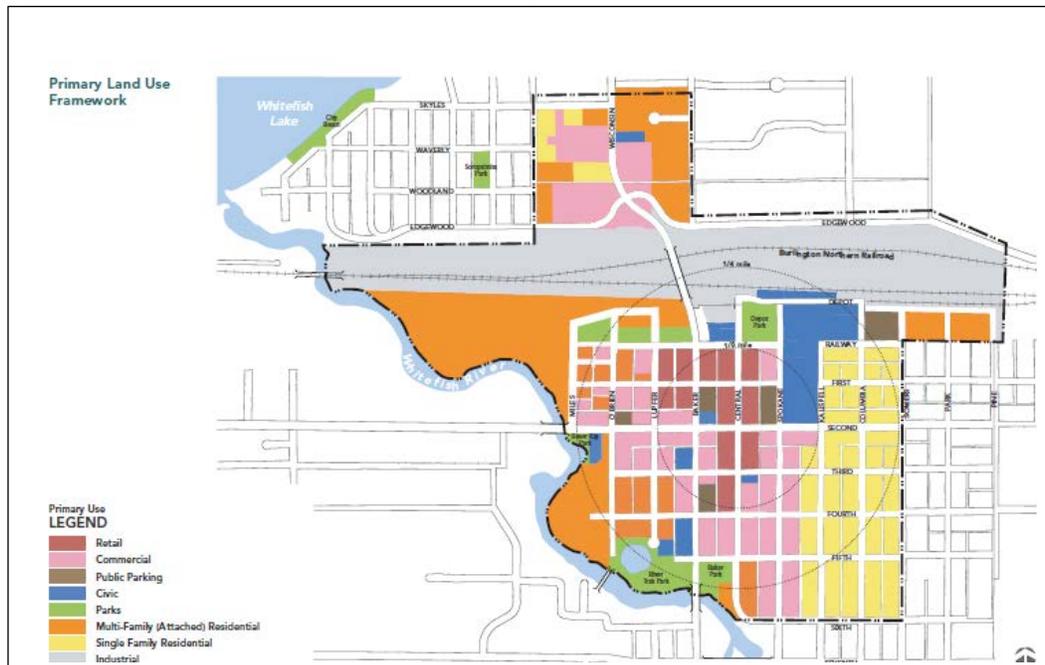
3. Connect Whitefish, Bicycle-Pedestrian Master Plan - 2016

The plan recommends a network of trails and other improvements to achieve a connected system of well-maintained bicycle and pedestrian facilities. According to the plan, “These facilities will link key destinations inside and outside of town and will be safe, convenient and comfortable for both recreation and active transportation.” Within the study area, the plan proposes wayfinding signs and three interconnected network routes (Wisconsin Ave. Trail, City Beach Loop, and Edgewood Loop). The plan also recommends safety improvements at various crossings along Wisconsin Ave.

4. Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan - 2015

The 2015 Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan updates the original plan adopted in 2006. Among the key purposes of the plan is to, “Strengthen the connection between commercial parcels along Wisconsin Avenue and north of the railyard with the downtown core.” The master plan study area extends north of the railroad tracks along Wisconsin Ave. to Skyles Place and recommends a land use mix that, with a few modifications, is generally consistent with this Wisconsin Corridor plan. The proposed Whitefish Promenade connects the study area to the downtown through signage, landscaping, and trail/pedestrian improvements.

Figure 1.2: Downtown Master Plan – Whitefish Land Use Framework



5. Neighborhood Plans

The following neighborhood plans were adopted by reference in the Growth Policy and may provide additional guidance for development in those areas.

- Big Mountain Neighborhood Plan (2006) - Big Mountain Ski Resort has since been renamed Whitefish Mountain Resort. It is a privately owned, full-service, ski resort and provides an important recreational amenity for the community. Winter recreation primarily includes alpine skiing and cross-country skiing. Summer recreation includes hiking, bicycling, and new attractions such as an alpine slide and zip lines.
- Iron Horse Resort Neighborhood Plan (1996) - The Iron Horse Resort encompasses 826 acres located approximately two miles north of Edgewood on the east side of Wisconsin Ave. The neighborhood plan includes a private 18-hole golf course, clubhouse, residential units, and conservation/open space. At build-out the neighborhood plan allows for approximately 350 dwelling units. As part of the plan a 60-acre conservation easement and trail easement in the southeast portion of the property was created in lieu of parkland dedication.

6. Whitefish Area Water Resources Report: A Status of Whitefish Lake Watershed & Surrounding Area-2015 (<http://www.whitefishlake.org/publications.php>)

This report was prepared by the Whitefish Lake Institute and was funded through a grant from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). It describes the watershed, compiles data and benchmarks for planning, and includes a watershed restoration plan. The plan recommends new policies, local government action, research, education, and habitat protection. Included are specific recommendations for Viking Creek, which is in the Wisconsin Corridor study area.

7. Whitefish Area Workforce Housing Needs Assessment - 2016 (<http://whitefishhousing.com/>)

This study was part one of an effort to address affordable housing needs in the community. Phase one documented the local housing needs while phase two will use this information to develop specific housing goals, priorities, and programs. The report concluded that due to a number of factors typical in resort communities, there is an inadequate supply of affordable rental housing and homeownership opportunities to meet the housing needs of the local workforce.

8. Whitefish Highway 93 West – Corridor Plan

This plan for the U.S. Highway 93 corridor west of downtown Whitefish was adopted in 2015. It includes the following new land use designation that can also be applied in the Wisconsin Corridor study area.

- Resort – Commercial

9. Community Wildfire Protection Plan – Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan (<http://flathead.mt.gov/oes/>)

The study area for this plan is within the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) in and around Whitefish. Recommendations include fuel reduction, education regarding “Firewise” practices, improvement of fire fighting capabilities, and identification of WUI issues during subdivision review.

10. Regulatory/Design Standards

In addition to the planning documents, the Whitefish Zoning Regulations, Whitefish Building Code, and Whitefish Architectural Review Standards were reviewed as part of the planning process.

E. Guiding Principles

Guiding principles represent overarching values that provide direction to public officials throughout the 20-year planning horizon. The guiding principles recognize that community systems are interdependent and often have mutual goals. Identifying these common principles facilitates coordination among agencies so they can develop integrated solutions that result in a functional and vibrant corridor. The guiding principles for this corridor plan are:

1. **Neighborhood Character** – The design of new development, transportation improvements, signage, and other construction should be consistent with the unique scale and architectural style of the corridor and surrounding neighborhood. Urban design features should enhance vistas, reflect local culture, and should be scaled to pedestrians.
2. **Mobility** – The corridor should have safe and efficient mobility options for all modes of transportation and for citizens and visitors of all physical abilities. Optimizing mobility should be an integral component of both transportation and site planning for the corridor.
3. **Vitality** – Create an environment where local businesses and entrepreneurs thrive and that encourages pedestrian activity, social interaction, and a variety of activities, shopping and dining opportunities, and events. Foster safe and vital residential areas that provide year-round housing to meet the needs of the Whitefish work force.
4. **Linkages** – Provide visual and transportation linkages to downtown, Whitefish Lake, Whitefish Mountain Resort and the new Haskill Basin Trailhead. Recognize the linkage between the corridor to environmentally sensitive areas and water quality as well as linkages to the broader transportation and economic systems in the community.

Figure 1.3: Guiding Principles

