

The future of Whitefish, Montana

Just another strip mall sprawl town...

...or a vibrant and healthy downtown.



the decision



For nearly 30 years the policy of Whitefish has been to promote an economically healthy and vibrant downtown through zoning policies that promote downtown retail growth over retail strip mall sprawl. This Monday, August 2nd, the Whitefish City Council will decide whether to change this long-held policy and allow strip mall and other shopping development out on the “Whitefish strip.”

The impacts of the decision made by the City Council on Monday will have long lasting impacts on how Whitefish will develop in the future. Will it continue as a town with a distinct and economically healthy downtown, or will it become just another retail strip mall and sprawl town?

your voice

Speak out this Monday, Aug 2nd at 7:10 pm at City Hall

The background

At the behest of developers, the City Council has sought to change the wording of the WB-2 zoning district, which encompasses the Highway 93 strip leading into town. The original rationale was apparently to bring a handful of non-conforming small retail businesses which have sprung up along the strip into compliance with the zoning laws. The reason that these businesses have located there is that the City has not been enforcing its existing zoning.

However, instead of fixing the enforcement problem, the proposal is instead to change the zoning out on the strip to allow for shopping mall and retail strip mall development. This change is not only short-sighted, but has potentially lethal consequences for our downtown. **It is akin to saying that because some people break the speed limit, we should simply take down all speed limit signs!**

Considerations

- ▶ The recommendations being presented to the City Council will permit almost any kind of small retail, including retail strip malls, on the Whitefish strip. Strip development creates a negative visual impact at the entry to Whitefish.
- ▶ Strip malls will encourage the entry into our community of formula stores which are not owner operated.
- ▶ The community stands to lose its identity as the downtown, owner-operated businesses are replaced by out-of-area owners.
- ▶ The City stands to lose significant revenue from tourist dollars as Whitefish loses its small town character and becomes less attractive to visitors.
- ▶ Property values downtown will suffer. Investors will question the value of investing in the downtown.
- ▶ There will be additional traffic congestion on Highway 93 South, as there is no frontage road access to businesses.
- ▶ More strip development will likely follow beyond Highway 40. All of this will cannibalize and weaken the vitality of our downtown.
- ▶ Every small downtown business lost creates a gap in the continuous retail frontage which is so critical to the success of neighboring businesses. As buildings board up, adjacent businesses and buildings lose value. Once this trend begins, it is nearly impossible to reverse.

Why can't we have it both ways? (small retail both downtown and on the strip?)

You don't have to look far to know that many of the communities surrounding us are experiencing declining downtowns because of pressure from retail strip mall sprawl. Small retail businesses need to locate adjacent to other small retail establishments — otherwise, they lose the positive drawing power and pedestrian shopping appeal — the synergy that is created when they locate in close proximity to one another. **Time after time, all across North America, downtowns have been cannibalized by retail strip malls. Not surprisingly, strip mall developers have been telling the City Council this won't happen in Whitefish, without providing any supporting evidence. We are supposed to just take the strip mall developers at their word. The surprise though, is that many Whitefish City Council and Planning Board members are believing them.** Their trust in the strip mall developers is a contradiction to the lessons we can take from thousands of communities across North America. Time after time, these lessons demonstrate the destructive impact of retail strip malls on a town's downtown.

What's right about the current zoning?

It is working! The WB-2 Zone was created to allow for an area in which larger businesses that needed a large footprint, more square footage and additional parking could locate or relocate. Many of the most successful 93 South strip businesses originated from downtown locations and moved to the strip AFTER they outgrew their downtown site.

It is not too late to save our downtown, but unless you speak up this Monday, pressures from retail strip mall developers will win out.

be heard!

Please come to the City Council meeting Monday, August 2 at 7:10 PM at City Hall and tell the Council why you are:
1) **OPPOSED to the changes proposed for the WB-2 Zone.**
2) **IN FAVOR of a mechanism to ENFORCE existing zoning.**



Heart of Whitefish is dedicated to maintaining the downtown vitality of Whitefish.

Heart of Whitefish Board ▶

Ian Collins
Rhonda Fitzgerald
Marilyn Nelson
Rick Nelson
Pat Carlross

Cris Coughlin
Chris Schustrom
Gary Stephens
Nancy Svennungsen
John Kramer

While it is most effective for you to come out and speak in person, you can also send emails to the City Council by emailing: nlorang@cityofwhitefish.org