

Background on the Downtown Infrastructure Improvement

From the Heart of Whitefish 3-09

Over the past six weeks, a movement to derail the Downtown Infrastructure Improvement Plan has gained momentum, with organizers working hard to muster support from community members and downtown businesses to significantly alter and stop the beautification portion of the construction project. These people are well meaning, and are clearly motivated by a desire to preserve what we all value so much in our community - its unique character, its authenticity, its historical significance. Many of these people were not involved in the early conceptual process that created the plan, and are unaware of its background, including the thousands of hours of public process, guided by expertise from consultants who specialize in vitalizing and preserving historical communities. They seem to not know about this investment of time and money from a broad cross-section of the community, which brought the project to the point of commencement. They are determined to put a stop to it.

At the last Council meeting, Toby Scott presented commentary which was inaccurate in several ways. We would like to start by addressing his comments. The Heart of Whitefish does NOT consist of just eleven individuals. It is NOT a special interest group.

The organization has 35 dues-paying members, and it is responsible for a number of projects which have clearly benefited Whitefish. HOW is the sponsor of the enormously successful Downtown Farmer's Market on Tuesday evenings during the summer. HOW pays for and cares for the flower and evergreen barrels. HOW was a partner with the City of Whitefish to commission the Downtown Master Plan which was adopted by the City Council in 2002 and received support from a majority of the community members who were involved enough to attend the numerous public meetings which resulted in its creation (the infrastructure improvement project is a priority catalyst project of the Master Plan). HOW is committed to protecting, preserving and enhancing the economic vitality of our beautiful downtown - not to destroying it! It is a group of volunteers, and includes individuals whose families have run businesses in Whitefish in time spans marked by generations rather than years. To accuse them of being selfishly motivated is not just unfair, it is wrong.

One thing that defines our community is the passion of the people who care about it. We may not always agree on what the best course of action might be, but we have always been able to work together and get things done to the betterment of our community. The evidence is everywhere - the Wave, the Library, the O'Shawnessy Center, the Ice Den, our state-of-the-art Middle School Auditorium. It would be easy to take these projects for granted... but behind each was a group of people who worked tirelessly to craft a project which enhanced our community. And every one of these projects survived the objections of people who sincerely believed that the projects

were not doable, affordable, or a benefit to our community. The downtown beautification project is no different.

We are at a critical juncture. The project is ready to go out for bid. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have already been spent in the design and pre-implementation of the plan. Compromises were made all along the way to accommodate this same group of people who are bringing last-minute objections back to the table. The compromises were not enough to satisfy them. They won't be happy until the beautification project is completely abandoned. Will the Whitefish community allow them to dictate this outcome?

This project will not change the basic character of Whitefish... it will simply enhance what we already have and assure a pedestrian-friendly environment. It will encourage the kind of investment in our downtown which will assure its economic vitality so that the businesses we all rely on can remain downtown.

It would be a shame to see this project die as a result of the objections of this highly vocal minority. Let's not let that happen. Yes, there is an economic recession (which actually makes the construction project cheaper). Yes, there is uncertainty and inconvenience in any major project. But we can work together to assure that this project doesn't mean businesses must fail when the streets are under construction. Whether we get a beautification project or not, the streets are going to be torn up. Now is the time to remain visionary and continue working to improve our community - to invest for the future so that Whitefish doesn't become just another dead, boarded-up downtown. It's up to us to make sure that it doesn't happen.