

Core area measures approved

By JIM MANN

The Daily Inter Lake

Measures to advance creation of an industrial park on the east side of Kalispell and to jump start the city's core area plan were unanimously passed by the Kalispell City Council Monday night.

The two related changes are considered vital to the economic future of central Kalispell

The council voted to annex the 40-acre area east of Whitefish Stage Road that used to be occupied by the McElroy & Wilken gravel pit. The land is owned by the Flathead County Economic Development Authority, which is pursuing plans to turn it into a rail-served industrial park.

Creating the park and investing in its infrastructure are prerequisites to relocating two businesses

currently served by rail that are in the core area, Northwest Drywall and Cenex Harvest States. The park would also be promoted as a location for other business ventures, with a heavy industrial zoning that was also approved by the council Monday.

The park is a key component of implementing the Kalispell Core Area Plan, which would open up central Kalispell to the possibility of new development.

City Planner Tom Jentz outlined highlights in the plan for the council, saying that the first priority is removing the BNSF railroad tracks between Meridian Road and the Woodland Park area.

That would clear the way for an east west trail system and "green park" area at the city's center, allow for more parking and sidewalks. And it would

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allow north-south street extensions, where they are needed, to complete streets that are currently blocked by the rail tracks.

The council also voted to recognize the core area trail project as being eligible for West Side Tax Increment District funding. Jentz said it's estimated that about \$4 million would be used, and those funds would serve as a "match" for the city to qualify for federal transportation grant funds.

An overall goal is to

make the core a more attractive area for businesses to locate.

"This is the equivalent of putting up a sign that says, 'open for business,'" said council member Phil Guiffrida. "The wind is at our back right now so we have to go as hard as we can to make this a reality."

Council member Jim Atkinson noted that although there was no public comment in support or in opposition to the measures, there is substantial support for the core area plan from

property owners within the area.

In a subsequent interview, City Manager Doug Russell said the council's actions, and a city delegation's recent visit to Washington, D.C., will combine to greatly strengthen an application the city will be submitting in the next week for a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant.

The grant would be used for design and infrastructure development of the industrial park, while

the related TIF matching funds would be used for the core area trail project. One way or another, the city will continue pursuing those goals, Russell said, "but the TIGER grant will speed it up by years."

Russell said he understands that only 4 percent of applications for the grants are successful. Last year, the city of Kalispell made it through the first cut but did not receive the grant in the end.

"It's a very competitive program," he said.

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