

CITY'S CORE PLAN GETS ATTENTION AT CONFERENCES

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Kalispell's ambitious core area revitalization plan is getting some broader attention as city staffers talk about its creation at state, regional and national planning conferences.

Community and Economic Development Manager Katharine Thompson talked about the plan at the National Brownfields Conference in Atlanta in May.

Kalispell leveraged its existing Brownfields program and a pilot Brownfields planning grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to undertake the extensive two-year planning and outreach process.

Thompson is in Philadelphia this week to present the plan at the International Economic Development Council's annual conference.

Creative redevelopment strategies are a key issue coming out of the recession, especially for smaller cities such as Kalispell trying to leverage activities, opportunities and relationships, Planning Director Tom Jentz said.

Jentz presented the core area revitalization plan to the Montana Association of Planners in September. He heads down to Lake Tahoe later this month for the Western Planner annual conference.

The goal of the planning process was not for city staffers to create a plan. The goal was to develop a community-supported vision for revitalizing Kalispell's original industrial and commercial core, Jentz said.

That involved significant public outreach. City planning staffers met one-on-one with more than 60 percent of the landowners in the planning area, held open houses, formed steering committees and mailed out newsletters.

"We went out to the community and they told us in no uncertain terms, 'Do not turn your back on this area.' They wanted redevelopment," Jentz said.

Some of the revitalization plan's goals are better trails and sidewalks, more green space, better street connectivity, a program to scrape blighted properties, and dense mixed-use development.

The biggest goal is pulling out the railroad tracks that split the area in two.

That would free up a large swath of the city center for a new linear park and redevelopment. That goal got the city working with the Flathead County Economic Development Authority. The organization had a federal grant to buy land for a new rail park and settled on the former McElroy and Wilken gravel pit on Kalispell's east side.

The planning process also coincided with a significant expansion of the West Side Tax Increment Financing District as a tool to help foster private and public investment.

Kalispell is still working to implement some of the core area revitalization plan's recommended first steps and to remove the railroad tracks. But seeing the vision, some private developers have gotten moving.

The city has seen \$7 million in redevelopment activity in the planning area. That includes the rail park acquisition, development of Depot Place senior apartments, the renovation of the Loading Dock building and Brannigan's Pub and several other smaller projects, Jentz said.

"That's not bad for the first year and a half out and running. We're kind of excited about that."

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