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Kalispell plans industrial rail park to foster economic growth

FLATHEAD COUNTY

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KALISPELL, Mont. - The Montana West Economic Development Agency hosted its 13th annual economic forecast meeting at Flathead Valley Community College.

Economists are predicting a 1.6-percent employment growth in 2015, and say they see no sign of a recession.

The three Flathead municipalities -- Columbia Falls, Whitefish and Kalispell -- talked about the current projects that foster future growth.

NBC Montana found out what the City of Kalispell is working on.

"The tracks are a blighting influence. While they once brought life to the City of Kalispell, now they're strangling the city of Kalispell," said Tom Jentz, the director of Kalispell city planning.

r Jentz is talking about the railroad tracks that run through downtown Kalispell.

"We have over 20 acres of vacant land along the tracks right now," he said. But the land is not accessible.

"The access we have across the tracks today are all we're ever going to get. So our focus is to pull the tracks out opening up significant amount of new developable land in our downtown area," Jentz said.

That's why the City of Kalispell is working on a project to create an industrial rail park. It would remove all the tracks in town, and move several industrial businesses, like the Cenex grain elevator, and put them in an area with an accessible railroad.

"We're looking at a 40-acre site and the idea is to put four to 10 rail users in that park," said Jentz.

Jentz says having the railroad tracks present is restricting development and, in turn, restricting growth.

"The Kalispell Center Mall owns land to the north on the other side of the tracks but they don't have easy access because the tracks are there. The tracks separate them from potential future development, and that's just one example," said Jentz.

Jentz says he looks at removing the tracks and opening up land as an opportunity for retail businesses and houses to move in, which together create construction jobs. The city also claims it's a win for the businesses in the industrial park.

"It brings in base industrial jobs. Those are good-paying jobs; those are jobs that bring in outside money to our communities," said Jentz.

Final designs for the multi-million-dollar park will start to be picked within the month.

As for Whitefish and Columbia Falls, both are working on projects to build hotels to foster growth in their towns.

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