

OPINION: TIGER grant will let downtown roar again

By Brent A. Campbell and B.J. Grieve | Posted: Sunday, March 20, 2016 8:00 am

Downtown Kalispell has long served as the economic and financial hub of the Flathead Valley. The recently awarded TIGER grant will provide critical investment in civic infrastructure to strengthen Kalispell as the leader in the economic resurgence in the Flathead Valley.

Strategic investment in public infrastructure should strive to leverage 5-7 times the private sector investment in redevelopment and economic growth. In other words, the roughly \$10 million dollar TIGER grant combined with the additional \$11 million contributed by BNSF, the city of Kalispell and the Flathead County Economic Development Authority, strategically directed, will spur \$100 million to \$140 million in private sector investment in Kalispell. This will create hundreds of permanent jobs in the Flathead and provide for the future growth of the local economy.

The objective is to use the TIGER trail project as a catalyst for downtown redevelopment and to strengthen Kalispell as a great place to live, work and own a business.

Montana's current economic resurgence is based in part on the notion that entrepreneurs and business owners can live and work where they vacation. Factors influencing the decision to start a new business venture include community livability, work force skills and availability, and the quality of education available.

Many former Montana residents are making important life change decisions and moving back to Montana to start a new business venture. Communities with attractive livability factors that accommodate an active daily lifestyle and high quality cultural environment will be the place these people choose to start their new businesses and invest their assets.

A vibrant downtown Kalispell will complement the existing commercial growth that has occurred in north Kalispell. Kalispell is becoming a retail trade center and the downtown plays an important role in complementing and building on the retail trade center status.

Strengthening the downtown Main Street, Core Area and Kalispell Center Mall as an entertainment and shopping destination will draw visitors and residents to enjoy the unique character and charm downtown has to offer. Urban housing downtown will provide important lifestyle choices for residents who want to live close to work and the places they play.

Urban trails play an important role in community livability, desirability and revitalization. Reorganization, consolidation and relocation of the remaining industrial land uses in downtown will improve economic efficiency and reduce transportation costs. Conversion of the outdated industrial rail spur to an east-west trail system that connects downtown and the mall to the Woodland Park and the Conrad Sports Complex will be a unique and attractive amenity for residents and visitors.

Trails are a proven economic boost for local real-estate. According to a 2006 Portland, Maine, publication, “adjacent trails can add as much as 15 percent to the value of a home.” The National Association of Home Builders and the National Association of Realtors verify that new home buyers rank walking, jogging, and bike trails as the second most important community amenity.

The trail and subsequent redevelopment will give a desirable community in the heart of beautiful Northwest Montana even more value by strengthening the urban core and providing bike and pedestrian connections to important destinations in the east and west. It will also create a regional shopping hub for the central part of Kalispell that will be distinct from retail on the north side of town.

The National Main Street Center’s four-point approach to downtown revitalization includes organization, design, promotion and economic restructuring. The TIGER grant provides the important financial investment to accommodate the re-organization of land uses as well as the subsequent economic restructuring and redesign of blighted areas of the downtown.

Kalispell has huge potential to be the trade center hub for Northwest Montana. Community leaders in Kalispell have crafted a well thought out plan to achieve this goal and now they have obtained the funding to put it in place. The Flathead Valley and all of Montana’s economy will significantly benefit from their leadership and this investment.

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