

Pathways, parks at the heart of Kalispell plans

By KATHERYN HOUGHTON Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Friday, August 26, 2016 6:05 pm

A slower-paced, more people-friendly downtown may be in the future for Kalispell.

That was the scene Kalispell Planning and Building Director Tom Jentz depicted Thursday afternoon during an open house that outlined the city's plans for redevelopment.

"Imagine a downtown with access to parks and shops ... instead of the feeling of a highway going through town," Jentz said.

He said the city's core currently largely resembles its industrial background.

Train tracks pass directly through downtown, isolating the heart of Kalispell from the rest of the city. And empty concrete borders U.S. 93 traffic that funnels past often unused shopfronts.

More than a century after the tracks were laid, city officials are working to redevelop the city's core to meet the business and community needs that have developed over the last several decades.

The Core Area Plan was adopted by the city in 2012 and set in motion plans to remove the railroad tracks from downtown, reconnect disjointed streets and build a pathway system linking pedestrians to shops and parks.

The key element of the plan is creating a rail industrial park in the old McElroy and Wilken gravel pit between Whitefish Stage Road and Office Max.

"More businesses means bringing more taxes and money back into Kalispell," Jentz said. "This has been a 25- to 30-year process ... and we hope to see it come together in the next two to five years."

IMAGES of the city's train tracks juxtaposed with envisioned city walkways played on a TV screen in City Hall on Thursday as planners outlined starting ideas for the project.

Senior Planner Jarod Nygren flashed through the images as several people watched.

"This walkway is an idea we pulled from Louisville," he said in explaining one slide. "You can see space for walkers and bikers right along shops, lighted sidewalks and art along the trail."

An online map showed a computer-animated image of the railroad bridge that crosses over U.S. 2 with people walking over a footbridge with an arch bearing the words, "Kalispell Welcomes You."



Kalispell pedestrian bridge

This artistic rendering depicts what the railroad overpass over U.S. 2 would look like after it is converted to a pedestrian bridge as part of Kalispell's redevelopment project.

A proposed pathway would connect the west side of Woodland Park to the envisioned path that would replace the tracks leading toward Depot Park and past Kalispell Center Mall.

Kalispell has received a \$10 million federal transportation grant to propel the massive project.

Jentz said that provided the needed money to spark the project and drew attention to the upcoming industrial rail park. Jentz said since the grant was announced, the city has been approached at least once a month by developers evaluating the city.

Now that the funding is in place, it's time to get into the details, he said.

To ensure the city receives the money, planners have to complete an environmental survey that pulls from community response.

Jentz said so far the city has received roughly 200 Core and Redevelopment comments that are going toward the city's environmental survey, which he said is set for completion in September. After the survey is complete, the city has five years to spend the federal money and finish the project.

For now, businesses are gearing up to relocate to the new rail park. CHS is first in line and will move its grain elevator and fertilizer plant to the new rail park, with a tentative construction start date next summer.

City officials hope to begin removing railroad tracks next spring. Shortly thereafter, the city plans to build the new pathway system.

“This isn't just a city project,” Jentz said. “This is businesses and residents who are excited to see this finally start to unfold. This is a really exciting time to be in Kalispell.”

For an interactive online map of the city's Core Area Plan, visit <http://arcg.is/1Pem4gs>.

To contact the Kalispell Community Development Department, call (406) 758-7713.

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