

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP TOUTS 2018 SUCCESSES

December 13, 2018 at 5:00 am | By HEIDI GAISER The Daily Inter Lake

Montana West Economic Development celebrated a year of success at its annual meeting for members and supporters in Kalispell Wednesday.

President and Chief Executive Officer Jerry Meerkatz highlighted the organization's leadership in notable community projects in 2018. These included the organization's new management of Glacier Airline Enhancement and Retention Outreach (AERO), which added commercial flight options to the Flathead Valley, and the completion of the infrastructure for Glacier Rail Park off Whitefish Stage Road in Kalispell.

"The amount of change in the [rail] park is incredible," Meerkatz said of the \$21 million project. "As a team we've grown to love the gravel pit. It's a high-quality industrial site, the best of the best."

CHS Mountain West Co-op's fertilizer plant is expected to open in the rail park as early as March and construction has begun on new grain elevators as well. And though Northwest Drywall and Roofing Supply not long ago predicted its facility would be completed in October of 2019, Meerkatz said recent progress might allow the company to move in next summer.

In 2019, Meerkatz said Montana West Economic Development will focus on marketing land for the rail park, continue efforts to bring more flights to Glacier Park International Airport, drive conversations in valley-wide broadband development and work with Montana Procurement Technical Assistance Center to secure more government contracts for local businesses.

In the latter area, Meerkatz praised Doug Bolender for his work as government contracting adviser to Montana West. Bolender met with 299 clients in 2018, with 97 of those receiving 282 separate awards for \$19 million worth of contracts. Meerkatz also credited Kim Morisaki, business development and marketing director for MWED, for her contributions in 2018. He said Morisaki met with more than 150 businesses looking for advice and support during the year.

Montana West processed 17 new loans to local businesses in 2018, providing a total of \$1.1 million in financial assistance.

"We were able to affect the hiring of 46 new individuals and retain 68," Meerkatz said.

Molly McCabe of Bigfork gave a presentation on why investors should take advantage of the Opportunity Zone that surrounds Kalispell's downtown area. McCabe, who founded the strategic real estate advisory firm Hayden Tanner, touted the Opportunity Zones created by Congress in 2017 as a way to channel investment into previously neglected areas.

"In this area, I think it's huge," she said. "There's opportunity here. Why invest where your money is going somewhere else when it can stay local?"

The new Montana West Economic Development board of directors was confirmed at the meeting. They are: Matt Baldwin, managing editor of the Daily Inter Lake; Kellyn Brown, editor in chief for the Flathead Beacon; Becky Christiaens, vice president of administration and finance for Flathead Valley Community College; RG Dickey, project manager and community development director for Swank Enterprises; Ben Haag, vice president for First Interstate Bank; Ryan Jones, project manager for Morrison and Maierle; and Joyce Saisbury-Dickson, finance manager for Nomad GCS.

The new executive committee includes Don Rich of Cornerstone Wealth Management (chair); Jason Spring, Kalispell Regional Hospital; Jason Williams, Flathead Electric Cooperative, (vice chair); Ty Weber, Kalispell Regional Healthcare; Thomas Moody, Northwestern Energy; and Dennis Beams, Glacier Bank.

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