

CITIES FOCUS ON DOWNTOWN STRENGTH

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Whitefish City Hall construction nears completion in this May 8, 2017 file photo. (Brenda Ahearn/Daily Inter Lake)



In 1964, singer Petula Clark turned the song “Downtown” into an unlikely international hit. A downtown booster group could have penned the lyrics.

Fifty-four years later, Clark’s song could describe continued efforts in Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls to crank up the volume in their downtowns.

This fall, Kalispell celebrated the collaborative effort that yielded the Glacier Rail Park, a project proponents say is destined to transform the city’s downtown by ultimately removing railroad tracks cutting through town.

Kalispell City Council also unanimously embraced a new Downtown Urban Renewal Plan that sets the stage for creation of a tax-increment finance district to pay for varied infrastructure improvements in the city’s heart.

In Columbia Falls, the ongoing revitalization of Nucleus Avenue and vicinity continued, with new businesses, new condos and more.

Restaurateur Pat Carloss purchased and remodeled a former bar on Nucleus Avenue and opened the Gunsight Saloon in June.

Next door, Compass Construction owner Bill Goldberg created condos above retail space with his Columbia Quest project.

Goldberg’s company has tackled other projects on Nucleus Avenue, including condos and retail next to the Columbia Bar and condos in the former Davall Building.

Just off Nucleus Avenue, Compass Construction built the “Glacier Courtyards” condos for developer Mick Ruis, who has played a key role in Columbia Falls’ revitalization and been involved in a host of projects on Nucleus Avenue and elsewhere.

One of his largest projects was the \$7 million Cedar Creek Lodge, which he sold to Xanterra Parks and Resorts in 2017. The three-story, 64-room hotel was the first sizable lodging facility to be built in Columbia Falls.

Meanwhile, Greenway Capital of Missouri has launched construction of 200 apartments at the end of Bill’s Lane in the Mosquito Flats neighborhood.

In Whitefish, phase two of Depot Park’s master plan was completed, nearly doubling the size of a key community park and opening views to the north and east.

The Central Avenue reconstruction project in Whitefish added a block of expanded retail and commercial space and yielded an enhanced streetscape.

Whitefish Mayor John Muhlfeld and City Manager Adam Hammatt said the project “helped catalyze redevelopment of several properties and we anticipate further expansion of the downtown district in 2019.”

One of the biggest projects in downtown Whitefish over the past decade was the construction of a new \$16 million City Hall and adjoining three-story parking garage that opened in 2017, keeping local government offices in the downtown corridor and providing 200 parking spaces.

Whitefish has added a significant number of hotel rooms to its inventory, with the Hampton Inn and Firebrand Hotel opening in 2016, followed by TownePlace Suites by Marriott in 2017.

Whitefish also continued efforts to provide affordable housing.

In November, the Montana Board of Housing awarded \$6.75 million in federal tax credits to Whitefish, paving the way for development of an affordable housing apartment complex on Edgewood Place. As proposed, the complex will provide 38 dwelling units for families in three buildings on the north side of the railroad viaduct in Whitefish.

As 2018 drew to a close there were two announcements that appear to promise regional benefits.

First, the city, Flathead County and business leaders learned in early December that \$12.75 million from a federal grant fund will allow expansion of a section of the U.S. 93 bypass around Kalispell.

The Montana Department of Transportation will widen a roughly 2-mile section of the bypass from two lanes to four and the Foy's Lake roundabout will be removed and replaced by an interchange.

Flathead County Commissioner Pam Holmquist described the federal grant as “a wonderful early Christmas present for Flathead County as we continue our efforts to make the alternate route a true bypass.”

Then, in mid-December, Glacier Park International Airport announced that American Airlines plans to offer three new daily flights serving the airport this summer.

U.S. Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester both celebrated the news of the new flights.

In early October, the 42-acre, \$21 million Glacier Rail Park celebrated a grand opening. Officials predicted the project would help transform downtown Kalispell by relocating two businesses to the park that relied on service from railroad tracks that cut through a swath of downtown.

The rails will then be removed and replaced by a multi-use trail, a change officials believe will stir revitalization along the former rail corridor.

The project resulted from work that included a unique partnership with the city of Kalispell and the Flathead County Economic Development Authority.

At the time, Kim Morisaki, business development and marketing director for Montana West Economic Development, described the city and the economic development authority as “hand-in-glove partners” that had brought the project forward.

Montana West Economic Development, a private nonprofit, provides staff for the Flathead County Economic Development Authority.

CHS Mountain West Co-op launched quickly into construction of replacement facilities at the rail park.

Northwest Drywall did not.

Jerry Meerkatz, president and chief executive officer of Montana West Economic Development, said Northwest Drywall moved the site where the company’s new building will rise a short distance because of geotechnical issues at the original location.

And he said the company’s owners decided not to pour concrete during cold weather.

Pamela Mower, general manager of Northwest Drywall, said this fall that construction at the new site likely would begin in April, with an anticipated goal of completing work by October 2019.

Early projections estimated the railroad tracks would begin coming up during the summer of 2019.

Meerkatz said that’s more likely to happen now during the summer of 2020.

In Columbia Falls, crews broke ground in October for a project that will create a fishing pond surrounded by a walking trail. The Flathead Land Trust, with a \$100,000 grant from the LOR Foundation, worked with the city and others to come up with the idea of a fishing pond at the River’s Edge park along the Flathead River.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks committed to help fund part of the project and to stock the pond annually with westslope cutthroat trout.

The new pond is slated to open during the summer.

Meanwhile, Columbia Falls is considering the pros and cons of a resort tax.

A growing population and an increase in tourism traffic are beginning to strain emergency services, officials say.

Columbia Falls estimates that a 3 percent resort tax could conservatively yield an additional \$450,000 in revenue each year. The tax focuses on goods and services, such as hotels, motels, vacation rentals, RV parks and campgrounds, as well as fast foods, restaurants, alcohol and other luxury items.

Columbia Falls would have to be classified by the state Department of Commerce as a resort city to be able to levy the tax.

The region's ongoing transformation reflects the influence of tourist dollars, as well as the impact of seasonal residents, along with people who move here intending to stay and Flathead Valley natives who frequently experience mixed feelings about all the changes wrought by popularity.

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