

RAIL TOUR HIGHLIGHTS FUTURE KALISPELL TRAIL

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Railcars ride along the track during a tour of the Kalispell Core Area on Thursday. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

Plans to rip up the railroad tracks that bifurcate downtown Kalispell and construct a pedestrian corridor in their place have been inching forward for months.

On Thursday, those plans got a lift on a pack of old railcars the city recruited to show interested residents what the path would look like from the ground.

Representatives from Alta Planning, KLJ Engineers and the Pacific Railcar Operators led tours using old railcars to give area residents a chance to visualize the route they will soon be opening up to pedestrians.

The railcar operators were at the end of a tour around the state and donated their time and equipment to ferry people along the tracks. The tiny cars previously were used for transporting railway workers to and from job sites and for track inspections. Some cars held only one driver and one passenger, though the big ones held as many as four passengers.

In the head car sat Joe Gilpin with Alta Planning, the firm the city hired to complete plans on the \$4 million Kalispell Trail and Complete Street Project as part of the larger \$20 million Core + Rail TIGER project. City planners expect the project will spur redevelopment and transform downtown Kalispell. Earlier phases involved the design and construction of the Glacier Rail Park on the eastern edge of the city.

Thursday's tour began at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce and stopped at places deemed "opportunity areas," where property boundaries and zoning could allow for redevelopment in whatever way the city and surrounding property owners deemed fit.

The first opportunity area on the tour was on the northern border of Woodland Park, where Gilpin said they hoped to integrate the park with the trail system. He said there would be opportunities to establish a sledding hill or even an amphitheater at the new area.

"Is this the nicest side of Woodland Park?" Gilpin asked the two dozen people assembled. "We're hoping that one day it might be. From here back to the road crossing could be completely different in 10 years."

After the operators lifted the cars, swiveled them around and put them back on the tracks, the group began going back the other direction.

A short drive from Woodland Park featured an old, tall concrete slab covered in graffiti. Gilpin said they've had conversations about leaving the slab in place, as many new parks featured built-in graffiti walls, both to encourage artistic expression and to reduce the temptation of people putting graffiti on surfaces where it would be less welcome.

The railcar procession brought the tour through town, honking on its way through intersections, all the way to the space beyond the west end of the Kalispell Center Mall. Gilpin said the site near the grain elevators would be purchased by the Flathead County Economic Development Association so that the land they sit on could be repurposed and integrated into public or commercial space.

The railcar tours were the cap to several days of organized events aimed at residents who wanted to learn about the project and express opinions about how it should be completed.

Gilpin and Mary Stewart out of Alta's Portland, Oregon office, met with locals at breweries, City Council meetings and other places throughout town to solicit the feedback.

During the week they synthesized those comments into some central themes and concepts that they will present today from 3:30 to 6 p.m. at the old children's Herberger's store in mall. There, Flathead residents will get to see some of the fruits from the week of "deep dive" information gathering sessions, and have one last chance to lobby the planners face to face with the ideas they would like to see come to life in redevelopment project.

The process of turning the feedback into concrete plans will continue into the coming months. The hope, according to Stewart, is that the project will be ready to go to bid in the fall of 2019.

If all goes according to plan, work could start as early as that spring and be concluded by the fall of 2020.

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