

Opinion | *Reporter's Notebook*

Transforming Kalispell

Recognizing the patient, grassroots toiling that turned the Kalispell trail project and rail park into a reality

BY MYERS REECE // DEC 26, 2019

Tom Jentz, the longtime and now retired Kalispell planning director, said in an interview upon his retirement that his proudest accomplishment was helping the Kalispell Core and Rail Redevelopment become a reality.

Mind you, that was a carefully thought-out assessment from 34 years of public service in the Flathead Valley, a career that featured countless endeavors that shaped the very fabric of the region. It's fair to say Jentz thinks the rail park and urban renewal project is a big deal. That's because it is.

In reflecting upon 2019 and looking forward to 2020, the Kalispell Core and Rail Redevelopment — which features both the newly filled 43-acre Glacier Rail Park and the forthcoming Kalispell Trail that will replace the railroad tracks — is unavoidably a foremost topic of conversation.

While we have a story this week and will have another next week that touch on various components of this multi-faceted

undertaking, I'd like to take a moment here to recognize

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the patient, grassroots toiling that transformed a concept, at one time akin to a pipe dream, into a reality taking shape before our eyes.

In the journalism business, we write stories about ideas big and small that meet a wide variety of fates. Many never get off the ground. Others launch but get stalled along the way. The larger ambitions are inherently prone to a series of ups and downs, victories and setbacks, twists and turns. Few with the scope of this project achieve the ultimate triumph of ribbon cutting.

The Beacon has written about the core redevelopment and rail park concept for most of the newspaper's existence, and to track its evolution from community conversations to grant funding to groundbreaking has been a refreshing exercise in documenting the power of collaborative hard work and relentless optimism.

Yet, the decade we've covered it is but a small piece of the project's historical pie. As Jentz and others have noted, Kalispell had been hoping for such a rail-to-trail makeover for decades, while business leaders were simultaneously seeking a rail-served industrial park in the valley. A lot of stakeholders saw vast potential, so — imagine this — they got together, worked as a diversely sprawling team and made it happen.

Jentz is giddy about the amount of potential investment over the next five years along the trail corridor, based off the interest he heard through his job and his professional expertise. Since that part of the conversation was off the record, I won't divulge the precise figure, but it's the type of eight-figure money that can impact the very character and trajectory of a town.

Clearly, Jentz's optimism about the project hasn't waned since he told the Beacon in January 2018: "This will be a truly transformative project." Officials with Montana West Economic Development are similarly bullish about investors lining up in 2020 and beyond.

The transformation of railroad industrial hubs into modern urban centerpieces with trails, parks and development is a model with an extensive and ever-growing track record across the country, especially effective in industry-transitioning areas like ours where visitors and residents alike increasingly seek outdoor-lifestyle amenities.



The railroad, for all the good it brought us over the last century-plus, complicated basic city functions like infrastructure expansion and traffic-flow improvements, while hampering development along its corridor, which city officials have long called blighted. But now the railroad is ushering in a new century of opportunity, through both its relocated presence and repurposed absence.

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