



INFRASTRUCTURE

# On the Rise

Developers have bold plans for Kalispell's core area, with an emphasis on mixed-use projects designed to create attainable housing and promote downtown commerce

BY MYERS REECE

MAY 26, 2021



Downtown Kalispell on May 19, 2021. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

**M**ick Ruis can see the future of Kalispell taking shape. The rest of us will be able to get a good view of it, too, when we're eating dinner on top of a 100-foot grain silo.

Ruis, a developer with an extensive track record in downtown Columbia Falls and Whitefish, is turning his attention to Kalispell, where he bought the former CHS grain elevator property on Center Street and Fifth Avenue West.

Ruis left the concrete grain silos standing and recently revealed that he's going to build a bar and restaurant on top of the historic structures, surrounded by 230 residential units spread across the property and an adjoining 5-acre parcel he purchased.

Crews will be moving dirt this summer, with underground work to be completed before winter. Starting next spring, Ruis said above-ground construction should move swiftly, as he has been stockpiling materials in warehouses he owns to counteract shortages, with the expectation of finishing the entire project by the end of 2022.

"Next March, we'll go vertical and be ready to rock and roll," Ruis said last week. "We're full steam to get this going. We're not dragging our feet."

Like other developers, Ruis is bullish on the prospects of Kalispell's core area revitalization, centered around the transformative Parkline Trail, which is now underway with crews expected to begin pulling up the railroad tracks this week.

"How fun is this going to be?" he said. "You go out your door and you can literally take a 10-mile walk and go to shops and feel safe and not worry about getting run over. It's a really cool concept. I can't wait to see what it's going to be like five years from now."

"I look at Kalispell as a sleeping giant that's just been laying there getting ready to be built out," he continued. "It's a beautiful place. There's so much land available there

compared to Whitefish, and the city is just wonderful to work with. We look forward to being a partner and getting this corridor going.”

The restaurant will be perched atop the silos, while the bar will be one level lower, cut into the silos’ upper sections. Patrons will enjoy expansive views of the valley and surrounding mountains. Jackola Engineering & Architecture is designing the project for Ruis Construction.

Mick Ruis’ plan for the former CHS grain elevator property. Rendering courtesy of Jackola Engineering and Architecture

Elsewhere in downtown, a face familiar to Ruis, Bill Goldberg, is making a similar leap from Whitefish and Columbia Falls to Kalispell. Ruis and Goldberg have worked together on a number of projects in the north valley and have now separately staked claim to property in the heart of the county seat.

Goldberg, who own Compass Construction, purchased the KM Building last year, followed by Main Street’s Montgomery Ward building, which is most commonly associated with Alpine Lighting. Goldberg also bought Rockwood Ranch on Three Mile Drive, where he plans to build 400 to 500 units, although his focus will be

downtown. He's been part of 16 projects combined in downtown Whitefish and Columbia Falls.

Density was a central theme at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce's May 18 Growth Summit. It's an attractive concept among municipalities and developers as a way to better utilize either existing developed areas or smaller footprints of open space, which is at a premium with skyrocketing land costs and population growth. It's one of the most prominent bottom-line-shifting tools available to keep prices down.

The appeal of that approach is evident not only in the design plans of Kalispell core area developments, but also in the many hundreds of multi-family housing units recently built, under construction or in the planning stages throughout the city and valley, typically featuring multi-level complexes that build up rather than out.

In downtown Kalispell, a guiding philosophy behind new density and infill development will be "live-work," with multi-use projects that incorporate retail, offices and housing. One of the Growth Summit's speakers was Molly McCabe, the CEO of HaydenTanner, a strategic advisory and development firm. McCabe is planning a mixed-use development along the Parkline Trail corridor.

Although McCabe is still ironing out the specific details, she said the project will involve both commercial and residential, with a mix of affordable and market-rate housing and an emphasis on supporting local retail.

"We believe in density; we believe infill is important," McCabe said. "We believe in curating the types of uses here so we can have a really vibrant community downtown. I'm excited to be moving forward on this."

"We're trying to create livable, walkable space locally," she added.

Goldberg is repurposing portions of the KM Building, which will ultimately feature a restaurant and multiple bars, in addition to its upstairs units. He also has plans to build a multi-story residential structure on the south end of the KM Building, and has locked up two other sites to do the same there.

"My real goal is to get residential units downtown," he said.

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Goldberg said Kalispell is attractive right now for both its development potential and environment, fostered by proactive and accommodating community leaders. Further contributing to that welcoming atmosphere, Goldberg said, are lower impact fees, tax-increment financing dollars and, especially, the ability to build higher than three levels, which is the maximum in Whitefish, where land prices are daunting.

While Goldberg said he has no intention of bringing a skyscraper to Kalispell, the ability to build a level or two taller helps offset other high costs, such as elevated material prices.

“With a four-story or five-story building, you start seeing a really dramatic impact on the bottom line,” he said.

Those bottom-line considerations make a major difference when trying to build attainable housing, which is a central goal of both McCabe and Goldberg.

“Affordable housing is going to be the topic for a lot of people for a long time,” Goldberg said. “If we can get the density, then we can create more affordability.”

Cara Lemire, whose family renovated the historic Sherman Building and recently purchased the former Cardinal Hardware store, points to people like Goldberg and McCabe, as well as others, as catalysts in a coalescing effort to address attainable housing.

“If we want Kalispell to grow,” Lemire said, “we can’t be pushing out the multi-generation families that have lived here forever, and also families can’t move back home without attainable housing.”

Ruis, Goldberg, McCabe and Lemire are all excited about the accumulating momentum in reinvigorating downtown Kalispell, with Goldberg pointing out that development efforts for years shifted to the north end of town and are now circling back to the city core.

“You took some of that activity out (of downtown). How do you get it back?” Goldberg said. “That’s what everybody’s doing here. Seeing that now, I know that activity will bring more activity. People we work with in other communities are already saying, ‘Bill, how can we get involved in the projects in Kalispell?’”

“I feel very fortunate to be part of that transition back,” he added, “and the timing for me is perfect.”

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