

Opinion | *Reporter's Notebook*

Trail of Transormation

This is shaping up to be a big year for the Kalispell Parkline Trail

BY MYERS REECE // FEB 4, 2021

On Aug. 22, 2017, surrounded by a crowd of 200 people that included local, state and federal leaders, Mayor Mark Johnson called the groundbreaking of the Glacier Rail Park, part of the ambitious Kalispell Core and Rail Redevelopment project, “truly a transformative moment.”

“This is the moment in history 50 years from now we will look back on and realize the pain and sacrifices we made were well worth the effort,” Johnson continued.

While it would have been nice to wake up the next day and see the entire trail system in place with rows of shimmering new businesses lining the corridor, that’s obviously not how these kinds of historic undertakings work.

Fast forward a few years, the rail park is finished and full of tenants, but the railroad tracks through town still sit in place, an extended waiting period that came on the heels of a years-long planning process, plus many more years of discussion. Taken altogether, it’s been a long time since the ball first got rolling.

In other words, while I believe that Johnson’s talk of a “transformative moment” will prove prescient, the early stages of transformation, from bureaucracy to Brownfields to bulldozers, take a lot longer than a ceremony, and aren’t nearly as fun.

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But the fruits of our patience and officials' persistence in ushering in the transformation are about to become far more visible and tangible this year. Not only will the tracks be pulled up, but the trail itself is expected to be started and completed within the calendar year.

City officials, as well as state and federal leaders such as U.S. Sens. Jon Tester and Steve Daines, have long touted the economic and community benefits of the Parkline Trail and Glacier Rail Park. The rail-served industrial park provides a relocated home for CHS and Northwest Drywall, in addition to Northern Plastics Inc.

The trail corridor has been attracting development interest since the project was first set in motion, and its appeal is only growing as the process moves forward. In addition to economic considerations, the revitalization will provide broader lifestyle benefits such as improved walkability and scenery by sprucing up a stretch of city that needs it.

The corridor is generally defined as running from the Appleway and Meridian Court areas to the edge of Evergreen in the east, as well as Washington Street to the north and First Street to the south, but the primary area of redevelopment focus is right along the railroad tracks.

Last week, crews completed cleanup of the former CHS grain elevator property, now owned by Mick Ruis, with other developers exploring opportunities elsewhere along the corridor. I anticipate robust investment and diverse development in the years to come, at a brisk pace.

Communities evolve. They even transform. As with anybody, I feel ambivalence, at times trepidation, regarding some changes enveloping the Flathead Valley, but for the Parkline Trail and its potential ripple effects I harbor optimism and eagerness.

Assuming trail construction proceeds on schedule, I predict that in the future we'll look back at 2021 as a watershed year for downtown Kalispell and the city at large — a transformative moment indeed.

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