



LIKE I WAS SAYING

# That 'Watershed Moment' is Here

The historic core of the city is getting the attention it has long deserved

BY KELLYN BROWN

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**I**t was bound to happen. After all, I heard it numerous times over the last decade or more: “Downtown Kalispell has good bones.” As someone who works in an office here every weekday, I tend to agree.

Yet for several years, after a new business moved to the city’s core or a historic building was restored, momentum appeared to stall. Redevelopment and investment were happening, but slowly and in fits and starts. Meanwhile, the commercial district on the town’s north end continued to boom. More fast-casual dining! More retailers! Old Navy!

Downtown fought for attention by hosting parades, art walks and other community events. Residents still showed up in throngs even if only to admire the area’s good bones. But that may — finally — be changing. A number of confirmed and potential projects are beginning to transform the heart of the city.

It was just five years ago that construction was completed on the north end of the U.S. 93 Alternate Route, or Kalispell bypass. Diverting traffic around the core area

would confirm its status as a destination rather than a thoroughfare. In theory.

New businesses did begin moving in, but others appeared to take a wait-and-see approach. An ambitious plan to build a rail park and replace railroad tracks cutting through downtown with a sprawling multi-use trail was underway. The excitement was palpable. The city manager said Kalispell receiving the grant to pay for the project was a “potentially watershed moment.”

But a few years passed. And you could understand why some people wondered out loud if renderings of this “transformative” development would ever become a reality.

Well, it has.

The Glacier Rail Park is completed and now all its lots are sold. The city signed a contract this week with Sandry Construction to build the Kalispell Parkline, the two-mile linear park that will replace the railroad tracks downtown. No one is waiting and seeing to invest in the area anymore.

Since CHS moved to the new industrial park, local developer Mick Ruis bought its former property with plans for a mix of commercial and residential use. The historic grain silos will remain onsite.

Compass Construction bought both the 80,000-square-foot KM Building on First Avenue East and the former Alpine Lighting building on Main Street. There are big plans for the KM, including a new restaurant and bar that are already in the works. The Cardinal Hardware building that has sat vacant for several months has also been purchased.

What was steady downtown redevelopment is about to greatly accelerate. Kalispell will become a much more navigable and walkable city with formerly disjointed streets reconnected and a path connecting to the trail network that reaches both Kila and Somers. Density is expected to increase with several opportunities for residential living. There is also talk of building a parking garage.

The historic core of the city is getting the attention it has long deserved because of the persistence of community leaders and a city council that stuck with the Kalispell

Parkline project despite having to dip into reserves to pay for rising material and labor costs. That watershed moment has finally arrived.

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