

CORE AREA

**EXISTING SITE
CONDITIONS**

**CORE AREA NEIGHBORHOOD
EXISTING CONDITIONS
SEPTEMBER, 2012**

The Core Area Neighborhood bisects the heart of Kalispell stretching east-west approximately 2 miles extending 3 blocks either side of the Burlington Northern Railroad R/W. This neighborhood encompasses the historical rail-industrial center of the city. The boundaries include Washington Street to the north, Woodland Park and the eastern city limits to the east, First Streets East and West on the south and the western city limits on the west. The area contains 364 acres lying in 1,100 parcels. There are approximately 450 separate owners.

The purpose of this section is to document the existing conditions of the Core Area. The following report is divided into following sections for the purpose of discussion:

- Railroad R/W
- Street Connectivity
- Sidewalks and pedestrian connectivity
- Water and sewer line conditions
- Brownfield sites
- Blighted, deteriorated or vacant properties
- Land use patterns
- Residential ownership patterns

Burlington Northern Rail Road

The Burlington Northern (BN) Railroad is the defining feature through this neighborhood. The railroad was first established in Kalispell in 1892 when James J. Hill brought the Great Northern Rail road over Marias Pass and into the Flathead Valley en route to the Pacific. However, by 1904 the main route to the Pacific was moved north to Whitefish as Haskell Pass west of Kalispell proved to be too costly to maintain. From that point, rail service to Kalispell became of secondary interest as we were demoted to branch line status. Today, BN sub-leases this branch line from Columbia Falls to Kalispell to WATCO, a branch management firm out of Kansas City.

Kalispell's rail activity set the stage for the future growth of Kalispell and laid the industrial pattern of the Core Area Neighborhood. Lumber mills, a cherry warehouse and numerous gas and oil wholesalers were once located adjacent to or within a block of the tracks. These businesses, which numbered well above 50 in the past, all needed the railroad to operate. However, since the 1970's the land along the tracks has been slowly changing from industrial to commercial and residential uses. Today only three documented businesses use rail service. Cenex Harvest Grain operates a grain elevator on Center and 5th Street. This is the only rail-served grain elevator in

Flathead County. Northwest Drywall on Washington and 8th West operates a drywall supply and roofing materials business out of an existing warehouse/office building. A third business leases a surface parking area off of 5th Street West and receives building materials, primarily drywall products.

The condition of the tracks in Kalispell varies. Sidings are typically extremely old and occasionally unstable. As part of the tenant access agreements, users are required to systematically upgrade their sidings over time. A significant portion of the main line from First Avenue East to 5th Avenue West was rebuilt in 1986 with the development of the Kalispell Center Mall and associated rail re-alignment. Little else has been done to upgrade the tracks in the Kalispell area for some time.

Within the Core Area, BN owns the underlying railroad R/W as the tracks enter Kalispell on the east until 4th Avenue East. At that point, approximately 10 years ago the BN deeded the underlying railroad lands to the adjoining property owners while maintaining a 25 foot easement for rail service underlying all main and branch lines. This easement then extends westerly to 8th Avenue West where BN again maintains rail ownership. Where BN still owns the R/W, the ownership is typically 100 feet wide.

On the west side of Kalispell lies the terminus of the rail line ending in a “Y”. This feature allows trains leaving Columbia Falls to “turn around” before they head back to Columbia Falls. It should be pointed out that once a train leaves Columbia Falls heading toward Kalispell; it must traverse all the way through Kalispell and utilize the “Y” in order to turn around before it heads back to Columbia Falls.

Train activity is described as light at best in past years and never exceeds one train a day and more typically usage is one train a week.

Issues associated with the presence of the railroad:

- Tracks would indicate this area is still heavily industrial when the opposite is true. The change in land uses from industrial to commercial and residential make the need for the tracks obsolete.
- The small size of many of the lots abutting the railroad tracks makes it difficult to introduce new industrial uses that could take advantage of the tracks.
- The tracks have created many dead end streets in this area and have made vehicle and pedestrian access in and around the area along the tracks difficult and serve as a barrier to utility extensions.
- Safety factor with trains on poor tracks navigating through one of the busier areas of the city.

- Train traffic, especially when grain unit trains are delivered delay traffic in Kalispell.
- BN will not authorize any additional pedestrian or vehicle crossings over active tracks. In past years BN has closed 4 crossings leaving only 6 north-south crossings in the community (3rd, 4th and 1st Avenue East, Main Street, 5th Avenue West and South Meridian.) Normally, within the typical grid system of downtown Kalispell, one would expect to see upwards of 18 cross streets.
- Brownfields sites are associated with past railroad usage and past railroad tenants.
- WATCO will store empty rail cars on switch lines and the far south end of the tracks for revenue. This creates a blighting influence on immediately adjoining residences.

Street Connectivity

Local and regional traffic flows are extremely high in this area. US 2 and US 93 bisect this neighborhood both east-west and north-south. The intersection of these two US highways creates one of the busiest intersections in the Flathead Valley. Traffic pressures at this intersection cause people to find alternate routes taking side streets to avoid the main intersection. This further congests the Core Area Neighborhood. This phenomenon is further complicated by the limited number of north/south streets in the Core Area. Only six streets have full access north – south through the Core Area, limited by the presence of the BN tracks. They include South Meridian, 5th Avenue West, Main Street and 1st, 3rd and 4th Avenues East. These crossings are the sole way to move north and south within the Core area. By contrast the typical lot and block configuration developed north and south of Core Area would anticipate between 16 and 18 north/south connections along this 2 mile section. Even more critically, from 5th Avenue West to Meridian Road a distance of almost 2,400 feet there is no cross connection.

The lack of north/south street connections in this area funnels traffic into the six streets creating traffic congestion at the intersections and unduly burdening these particular streets. Constructing additional north/south streets in the Core Area would reduce congestion at existing intersections and provide increased vehicle, pedestrian and bicycle mobility in the area. Additional streets would also provide greater access to lots in the area, which are currently land locked or have severe access limitations, allowing for more redevelopment opportunities. Unfortunately, in recent years the railroad has closed 4 rail crossings at 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Avenues West. Further, it is BN policy not to grant any new rail or pedestrian crossings unless an existing crossing is closed.

The Kalispell Area Transportation Plan (2006 Update), under the Executive Summary, states that several major travel corridors will be pushed to their limits in the coming years. The major travel corridors experiencing heavy traffic volumes are US Highway 2 (Idaho Street), US Highway 93 (Main Street), Reserve Drive and Meridian Road. Three out of the four major travel corridors are within the Core Area Neighborhood.

Keeping future development in the urban renewal plan area from further impacting these travel corridors will require alternative street connections in this area. Creating additional north/south street connections will continue the existing street pattern providing multiple options to travel in and out of this area. This in turn will help to reduce vehicle traffic on Meridian Road and Idaho Street, two of the impacted travel corridors cited in the transportation plan.

Issues associated with current street connectivity:

- North-south connectivity limited to 6 routes where typically 12-18 routes should exist.
- Existing routes are carrying excess traffic furthering congestion in the Core Area.
- Major highway oriented traffic (US 2 and US 93) are utilizing existing side streets to avoid the Main and Idaho intersection further exacerbating traffic flow. New routes cannot be pioneered without BN approval (not expected), closure of an existing crossing (not advised) or actual removal of the railroad tracks.
- Large tracts of land are generally land locked or have extremely limited street access due to lack of north-south access roads and the presence of the BN R/W.
- Emergency services routes are circuitous and limited through this area because of the limited number of through streets and heavy traffic loads of existing streets and crossings

Sidewalks and Pedestrian Connectivity:

Planning department staff has conducted a sidewalk survey in the Core Area. On a positive note, sidewalks were installed by MDT in the summer of 2012 along both sides of Idaho extending from Main Street to the Meridian intersection as part of an upgrade to West Idaho. However, the results of the sidewalk survey show that roughly 115 blocks of sidewalk are still missing within the Core Area. The lack of sidewalks is specifically noted along significant portions of West Center Street, First Street West and streets and avenues north and south of the Center Mall. Other avenues and streets within the Core Area were found to have only sidewalks on one side of the street or contain long gaps in the sidewalk from block to block. This is also the case around the county fairgrounds adjacent to the Core Area where sidewalks are present on Meridian Road west of the fairgrounds and Idaho south of the fairgrounds but totally absent on the east and north sides of the property. Additionally the fairgrounds, which extends over 2,000 feet (6 city blocks north-south) serves as a barrier to through pedestrian travel.

This lack of sidewalks and complete pedestrian routes in this area makes it extremely difficult for pedestrians, especially the elderly and young, to navigate the streets in this neighborhood. The lack of sidewalks generally discourages walking in an area of the city where walking should be encouraged. Furthermore, north – south travel is extremely difficult due to the limited crossing over the BN tracks and further limited by the increased vehicle traffic that the existing crossings carry.

The Core Area negatively serves as almost a complete barrier to north Kalispell pedestrian and bike access traveling through. Woodland Park, the city's largest park complex is almost inaccessible by pedestrians traveling from the north through the Core Area. Likewise the retail services of the downtown and government services of the city, county and the Library are generally inaccessible from neighborhoods to the north for pedestrian and bicyclists because of the lack of existing continuous routes.

Issues associated with the pedestrian and bicycle connectivity:

- BN R/W serves as a barrier and limits the number of north- south crossings to 6 through the core Area.
- Specific bike access is non-existent. There are no bike lanes, bike trails or bike oriented facilities in the Core Area.
- There is a significant lack of continuous sidewalk routes through the Core Area, especially north-south routes.

- Heavy vehicular traffic on area streets and lack of established, continuous pedestrian and bike routes generally limit and discourage pedestrian and bike access in this neighborhood.
- The Flathead County Fairgrounds on the edge of the Core Area is a major impediment to pedestrian traffic and pedestrian access because of the lack of perimeter sidewalk and through access.
- Major services, public buildings (City Hall, Library) and Woodland Park are not directly linked to any pedestrian system.

Water and Sewer Lines

Information on water and sewer lines from the city public works department shows the vast majority of the proposed expansion area is served by water and sewer lines. However, the major issue with these lines is age and additionally for the water lines is the presence of dead end lines and a lack of a looped water system.

Water lines located along Washington Street and many of the avenues east and west of Main Street were installed between 1925 and 1930. These lines were constructed out of cast iron and concrete. The city's Water Facility Plan Update, chapter 6 Recommendations and the city's capital improvement plan, recommends that approximately 2% of the system's total water mains be replaced each year. The goal for this replacement plan is to achieve a 50-year turnover of existing pipes. The current water lines are in excess of 80 years old. Though water is still being delivered to the businesses and homes in this area maintenance costs are increasing, untimely breaks are occurring and the future costs and impacts to the service will only worsen.

In addition to aged water lines, the lines north of Center Street tend to dead end at the railroad tracks. The water in these dead end lines can become stagnant unless flushed. Creating a looped water system either with adjacent lines or allowing lines to extend across the railroad tracks alleviates the need to flush the lines and improves the fire flow within the pipes for the area.

The majority of sewer lines in the proposed expansion plan area are clay lines. The exact age of the lines is not known however they were most likely installed around the time when water lines were installed, between 1925 and 1930. The city has slip lined sections of the clay lines which seals the lines and gives additional longevity to the life of the line. However, not all of the lines in this area have been slip lined and certain older lines may be difficult to slip line because of jagged line configurations or dips in the line.

The other issue prevalent in the older clay lines is water infiltration into the lines. Groundwater entering these sewer lines increases the volume of water needing to be treated at the city's sewer plant. This increase can be substantial after heavy rains. Over the coming years as the city grows and the capacity of the sewer plant increases the infiltration of groundwater will further impact the plant's ability to accept and treat the raw sewage it was built for.

Issues associated with water and sewer lines:

- Aged water and sewer lines in the area. Many water and sewer lines are over 50 years old and, while still operating, may have surpassed their useful life span. This older infrastructure leads to more potential breaks needing more costly repairs.

- Relatively high infiltration rate of ground water into the city's sewer collection system. The increased ground water is then transferred to the city's water treatment plant for treatment. This is not an issue today as the plant has been expanded and can accommodate the influx of ground water however in the future as the plant's capacity is increased due to more development in the Kalispell area, treating ground water in addition to influent discharges from residential, commercial and industrial uses around the city will become a problem.
- Inadequate fire flows for hydrants to accommodate a mix of higher intensity land uses.
- Dead-end water lines are prevalent in the area. These lines should be looped to increase water pressure to hydrants and to adjacent properties to insure enough water pressure is present for redevelopment purposes.

Brownfield Sites

The term "brownfield site" means real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. Contaminants can include oil or gas found in the soil and placed there through a leaking underground storage tank or an historical use which dumped contaminant material on site. The presence of hazardous materials can require additional costs to clean the site up prior to new development or redevelopment of the property and this serves as a detriment to redevelopment.

The Core Area Plan boundary has a number of identified sites where leaking underground tanks have been found. The Department of Environmental Quality has identified 26 sites within or immediately adjacent to the proposed plan area.

There may be more potential brownfield sites based on the presence of the railroad tracks and the fact that this area historically was used for industrial activity such as oil and fuel storage. The known leaking storage tank sites and the history of industrial uses in this area have lead to perceptions in the community that many, if not all, properties within the Core Area are contaminated. This may or may not be the case however, this perception continues and will play a role in the unwillingness of property owners or developers to invest in redevelopment or new development in this area. This can lead to further deterioration of buildings and property and reluctance to reinvest.

The actual presence of hazardous substances including petroleum products can lead to contamination of the soil and possibly groundwater. This type of environmental contamination can lead to further reluctance to redevelopment of the property.

Issues associated with Brownfield sites:

- There is a perception that many properties within the core area are contaminated leading to a reluctance for further investment in those properties.
- Property owners are hesitant to have phase I and/or phase II assessments conducted on their properties for fear that they may be held liable for any contamination identified on the property. If contamination is identified there is also a concern that clean-up of the identified contamination will be substantial.

Blighted, Deteriorated or Vacant Properties

A survey of the Core Area shows 19 acres of vacant land and approximately 19 lots with vacant primary buildings. The number of vacant buildings is approximate and is based on a visual survey of the neighborhood, whether there appeared to be a business present in a particular building, the condition of the building and/or if the building was being advertised for lease or sale.

The vacant lots and buildings represent underutilized properties in an area located centrally in the city. These underutilized lots result in depressed values for the lot itself and potentially surrounding lots. The vacant buildings are typically metal sided, older buildings in need of maintenance and repairs. These buildings, if not maintained, begin to detract from the neighborhood and give the impression that the area is run down or otherwise not to be invested in. The vacant lots also give an outward appearance of an abandoned area of the city. This may lead to further disincentive to invest in the immediate area and reduce the commercial or residential viability of the neighborhood.

Issues associated with blighted, deteriorated or vacant properties:

- Deteriorating property and/or buildings that are unsecured pose a greater risk for vandalism. This leads to further deterioration of the property and could spread to adjacent properties. This could lead to a further disincentive for re-investment in the area.
- Many of the older, unused structures can become unsafe and pose a threat to the public's safety and general welfare. These unsafe buildings also pose significant cost for rebuilding or removal if the property is to be redeveloped.

The Flathead County Fairgrounds

The Flathead County Fairgrounds is an approximately 63 acre site with the existing West Side Urban Renewal Plan boundary on three sides of the property (north, south and west). The county fairgrounds are the largest single land use on the west side of Kalispell. Yet it exists as an aged, under-utilized facility. Because it is a significant land use in the area, its presence dictates to a great degree the character and future viability of the plan area.

The fairgrounds is located at a gateway entrance to our community and its very condition does little to move the community forward and conversely could well be holding back the future viability of the area. A specific issue defined in the West Side Urban Renewal Plan is that the present urbanized land use pattern in the area incorporates a haphazard and incompatible mix of uses. The identified goal to address this issue is to set a pattern of land use that incorporates sensitivity to neighboring uses.

The city council has adhered to this goal in the past through the adoption of the Kalispell Growth Policy and zone changes in the area, mainly along North Meridian Road. The zone changes have reflected the land use designations shown on the Kalispell Growth Policy Future Land Use Map and have taken into account the surrounding residential and commercial uses in the area. The goal of incorporating sensitivity to neighboring uses can be further implemented by including the fairgrounds property in the West Side Urban Renewal Plan boundary and working on the three issues listed above. This in turn will achieve a greater cohesiveness between the fairgrounds and surrounding commercial and residential development.

Issues associated with the Flathead County Fairgrounds:

- The majority of the fairgrounds property has chain link fencing topped with three strands of barb wire along the perimeter of the property. The outward appearance is more prison like giving the impression of excluding the community from the grounds especially the residential neighborhood immediately east of the fairgrounds.
- The majority of stables, grandstand, offices and smaller venue buildings are over 50-years old. The age of some of the buildings and quality of construction has led to a quicker deterioration of the structures and now require more than general maintenance to have them visually appealing to the public.
- The parking lots are gravel or dirt with the exception of the north parking lot, across West Wyoming Street, which is grass throughout most of the year turning to mud or dust during fair time. These parking lots do not meet city parking lot standards which require the lots to be paved. Paving the lots

prevents dust issues in the immediate neighborhood and tracking mud onto adjacent streets.

Land Use Patterns

The Core Area was once the center of industrial activity in the Kalispell community. Industrial uses included grain silos, bulk oil storage, a variety of warehouses and lumber mills. Over the last century many of the industrial uses have closed their doors, relocated or moved out of the city. In their place, retail commercial businesses have moved into the area including three grocery stores, a large indoor mall and high density housing. The Core Area is still the home to a grain elevator and bulk fertilizer plant as well as a wrecking yard, aged Quonset buildings, Flathead Electric Co-op substations, vacant warehouse buildings, etc. The presence of these uses, while once the mainstay of industry, are now quickly becoming the exception as the Core Area evolves.

In addition to several industrial sites, utility sites, whether they are well houses, lift stations, electrical utility sites, pumping stations or cell towers are located throughout the Core Area. The city operates one municipal site, a well house, in the Core Area. Flathead Electric Cooperative (FEC) owns and operates two utility sites within the Core Area. The first site is approximately 1.7 acres at the intersection of East Center Street and Woodland Avenue. The site is currently used for storage of materials. The second site is located at the southeast corner of 7th Avenue West North and West Washington Street. The site is slightly under ½ acre and is an active electrical substation.

Issues associated with land use patterns:

- Industrial type land uses, several of which still use the railroad tracks, are now the exception to the land uses in the core area creating possible incompatible uses with neighboring land uses.
- Outward design and appearance of the utility sites does not lend itself to neighborhood compatibility or neighborhood enhancement. These sites, while necessary, have not been incorporated into the fabric of the neighborhood.

Residential Ownership Patterns

The Core area contains approximately 180 single-family and duplex residential structures. A survey of ownership shows that approximately 57% are rental structures. The most common type of residential structure, by number, in the Core Area is a single-family detached house. Many of these houses are older homes having been constructed over 50 years ago.

In several parts of the area, this pattern of absentee ownership, while providing valuable rental housing opportunities, is actually a sign of things to come as rental properties typically receive less care and maintenance than owner occupied housing. While a mixture of housing type and occupancy creates a healthy neighborhood, a large abundance of older rental housing signals a disinvestment in the neighborhood. Poor housing rental stock also lends itself to greater turnover and less neighborhood stability.

There are several notable multi-family structures within the boundaries of the Core Area plan. The largest concentration of multi-family housing is located on the west end of the Core Area along Appleway Drive. Housing here consists of both market rate housing and subsidized housing for low-income families. The newest apartment building is located on the east end of the Core Area along East Center Street. Depot Place is a 40-unit senior apartment building for low income seniors.

There are several older motels on the east side of the district that provide long term stay opportunities. However, these motels have been located in this area for the past 50+ years. The motels still provide nightly rentals but have expressed interest in creating suites to accommodate longer stays, weekly or monthly instead of daily.

Issues associated with the residential ownership patterns:

- A significant portion of the housing stock may not be up to current building and fire codes making the units unsafe and a detriment as opposed to an asset to the neighborhood.
- A higher number of single-family and duplex units are rental housing. This increases the transient nature of families and individuals in the area and can lead to a lack of neighborhood investment both on the physical side (housing and lot deterioration) and the social side (knowing your neighbors; building stronger communities).
- A greater percentage of lower income and transient households tends to also bring issues needing greater assistance from the police and fire departments.

A concentration of lower income housing is something that should be avoided, with low income housing spread throughout the Core Area and larger community.