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## **CHAPTER 1:** Introduction and Background

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Whitefish is a vibrant, scenic, and engaging western community in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Located in one of the fastest growing areas of Montana, it is experiencing growth and identity issues that are increasingly common in our rural western communities. Perhaps the most visible symptom of growth and livability concerns is the impact to the area's transportation system. Due to many constraints, transportation infrastructure is not keeping pace with the growth that drives it. Because of this historical pattern, many rural communities are at a cross roads in that transportation systems are in need of improvements, however they are increasingly in need of sensitive improvements that focus on certain amenities of value.

Whitefish is an example of a community that prides itself on livability, character, sensitivity to the environment, and creating a sense of place for its citizens and visitors. These issues can be manifested through a variety of components, but the transportation system is one such area that is in need of attention as the community continues to grow. Planning for the future transportation system is an endeavor that, although not simple, can allow the community to handle its growth in a sensitive manner and still serve the needs of the traveling public.

Whitefish is also somewhat unique in that the predominate transportation issues in the community are largely driven by their seasonal tourism traffic in the summer months (especially July and August). Summer peak traffic is large and causes a variety of intersection and corridor issues, especially in the downtown area. One theme that is contained within this Transportation Plan is that the community should strive to reduce the dependence on private automobile travel wherever possible. Programs and options for doing this should extend to the occasional summer visitor that may want to spend less time in their vehicle and more time experiencing the joys and attributes of the Whitefish community. Transportation issues identified within this document are not necessarily related to "commuter-type" traffic issues, which is also unique to the community of Whitefish.

Although there presently does not exist a comprehensive "citywide" Transportation Plan for the Whitefish community, there has been some community transportation planning completed in segments. Several previous studies have analyzed transportation needs in the community. These include the following:

- Whitefish Growth Policy (2007 Update);
- Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan;
- Southeast Whitefish Transportation Plan;
- South Whitefish Transportation Planning Project;
- Whitefish Traffic Operations Study;
- Whitefish Transportation and Storm Drainage Master Plan (RPA 1998); and
- US Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West Environmental Impact Statement;

It is the intent of this Transportation Plan to serve as a guide for the future of the Whitefish area transportation system. The Plan describes the existing system, and identifies large and small improvements for the transportation network. The recommendations made in this

document cover all modes of transportation, including travel by private vehicle, public transportation, foot and bicycle modes. Recommended projects are intended to relieve existing problems and prepare the Whitefish transportation system to meet future needs.

This Plan also includes a detailed discussion of transportation demand management strategies including the methods that will provide the greatest benefit to the Whitefish area. Traffic calming is also addressed in detail, including a comprehensive list of available measures, along with recommendations of methods most likely to benefit the Whitefish community.

## 1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

Transportation issues have been elevated in the past few years. The community has had several important master planning projects in process and/or completed. Because of the focus on community planning, coupled with the heightened awareness of growth and transportation impacts, it was decided that a comprehensive Transportation Plan should be assembled in the community. Although the Transportation Plan can be viewed as a “fresh look” at transportation issues, it also will serve to assemble appropriate recommendations from all the previous planning efforts and incorporate them into one succinct document. The community has changed over the years, and growth issues seem to dominate local newspapers and media attention. Managing growth is an important component of the ongoing Whitefish *Growth Policy (2007 Update)*. Providing amenities that keep people in the community is a quality of life issue.

Another reason that has necessitated the development of the Transportation Plan has to do with the issue of Wisconsin Avenue. The City of Whitefish has been collecting funds for eventual improvements to this roadway for several years under the “Urban Highway System (STPU)” funding program. To date, the City has a balance of \$773,006 and continues to be allocated \$117,074 on an annual basis from the Federal and State. Since this available money will not be enough to fund a full corridor reconstruction project, the intent was for this Transportation Plan to offer incremental improvements along the corridor to satisfy safety and operational needs until which time a major project could be contemplated.

Perhaps the biggest catalyst for undertaking this Transportation Plan effort was the recent completion of the Whitefish *Downtown Business District Master Plan*. This important planning document “...*identifies opportunities to increase the vitality of the downtown business district*”. This master plan has a transportation component, and outlines the direction the community would like to head for its transportation system within the downtown core. The Plan was prepared around the same time as the *Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Re-Evaluation* of the US Highway 93 corridor that was being completed by the consulting firm of WGM Group (Missoula, Montana). This parallel project was assessing the recommendations for traffic flow provided in the early 1990’s via the *US Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)*. This document set forth a direction for transportation improvements for the downtown core. The conclusions reached by WGM Group were that the preferred alternative provided for in the original EIS was no longer suitable based on traffic operations parameters (turning movements, geometry, turning vehicles), as well as based on community

preferences and changes over the past decade. This did cause community and State planners to step back and question how best to proceed with public money expenditures.

It was then decided that due to the heightened relevance of the recent *Downtown Business District Master Plan*, and due to the conclusion that the original preferred alternative from the 1993 EIS may no longer be appropriate, that additional study of the downtown US Highway 93 corridor would be warranted. This was to be in the form of a “Pre-NEPA” corridor study. NEPA stands for the National Environmental Protection Act, and is the Federal legislation that guides the development of transportation projects and the subsequent expenditures of Federal money for such projects. Rather than opening up a formal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process to examine the downtown core, the Pre-NEPA studies allow greater flexibility in examining options for a roadway system.

To complete this Pre-NEPA corridor study, Robert Peccia & Associates was retained in January of 2007. It was decided that before detailed work on the downtown corridor could commence, though, a parallel project of completing the community-wide Transportation Plan should be entertained. This document is the result of that effort, and looks at the greater community and its transportation needs, absent of a detailed look at the downtown core. The downtown Pre-NEPA corridor study is thus contained in a separate, companion document and is referenced as such herein.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that there is substantial design work being completed in the community for the US Highway 93 (Whitefish-West) corridor. This project is currently in the design phase and encompasses US Highway 93 west of the downtown proper. The project is being guided by a Citizens Working Group (CWG), and the need for the project is well documented to improve safety, operational characteristics, and increase connectivity in the community. Issues still being resolved are the character of the roadway (urban, transitional and/or rural), how to handle the needed utilities, and the high cost of right-of-way to accommodate the necessary improvements.

## 1.2 STUDY AREA

All transportation plans begin by defining the study area. Sometimes this study area follows governmental boundaries such as city limits, but most often they include land outside city limits in which future growth is seen as likely to occur. The *Transportation Plan* study area boundary follows the City’s 2007 Growth Policy study area boundary.

For Whitefish, the study area boundary includes the entire City limits of Whitefish, as well as a substantial portion of unincorporated lands surrounding the City. These lands include the area surrounding Whitefish Lake, the Big Mountain Resort area, as well as additional areas that are developing and/or forecast to develop over the planning horizon of the study (i.e. the year 2030)

The study area boundary was developed for two primary reasons. First, to include land where recent growth has occurred or is anticipated to occur in the foreseeable future and

second, to incorporate a study area boundary that matches other recent and relevant City of Whitefish studies (i.e. the City of Whitefish Growth Policy).

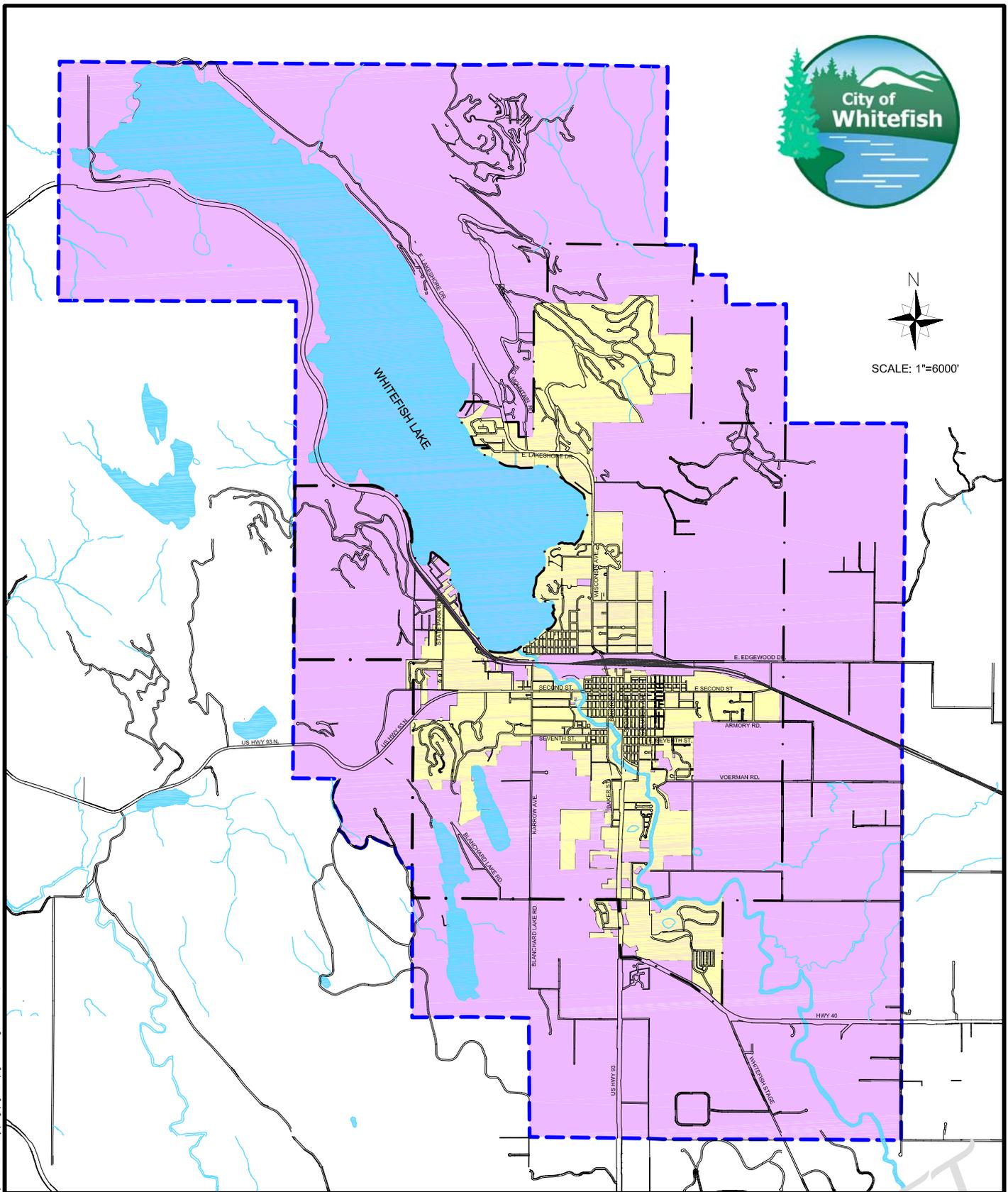
It should be recognized that there are many other areas that are not formally included in the study area boundary that will exhibit development patterns affecting the area transportation system. These areas include, but are not limited to, south along US Highway 93 and east along Montana Highway 40. These are not included in the study area due to both funding and jurisdictional constraints, however cursory attempts at land use forecasting will be made to evaluate overall transportation impacts through the travel demand modeling process.

The study area includes all outlying land that will develop during the next 20 years (2030) on the outskirts of Whitefish, as well as areas where transportation issues are expected to impact or influence the City's community and growth needs.

The study boundary is shown on **Figure 1-1** and has been used for all aspects of the *Whitefish Transportation Plan*. This study boundary includes all of the major employers in the area, and includes all of the land that may be used for employment centers in the next twenty years. It also includes developing residential land uses in the area, and those areas likely to increase the housing supply in the future and subsequently add traffic onto the transportation network. Again, the study area boundary for this Transportation Plan follows the planning area boundary used in the recently adopted Whitefish *Growth Policy*.



SCALE: 1"=6000'



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Notes:  
1. Study Area Boundary follows current Growth Policy Update Plan Boundary.

	TRANSPORTATION PLAN BOUNDARY
	CITY LIMITS
	WATER
	URBAN BOUNDARY

### Whitefish Transportation Plan (2007)

Figure 1-1  
Study Area  
Boundary

DRAFT

### 1.3 TRANSPORTATION PLANNING, GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES

An excerpt from the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) “Transportation Planning Handbook”:

*“...early in the planning program, the goals and objectives for community growth and development should have been identified. Community development goals will likely have been prepared as part of the comprehensive planning program (i.e. Growth Policies). An effort to prepare community development goals as part of the transportation planning process is necessary only if such goals have not already been prepared.”*

*The future transportation system will be designed to serve the future community so the transportation goals should follow logically from the comprehensive goals for community development (i.e. Growth Policies). Support for the transportation plan, be it political or financial, will depend on the community recognizing that the transportation plan is an inherent part of and a necessity for realizing the community development plan.”*

**Goals** – a purpose or need that should be attained to address a transportation issue.

**Objectives** – a specific method or activity that is designed to achieve an identified goal.

#### 1.3.1 Community “Transportation Related” Goals and Objectives

##### Whitefish Growth Policy

- Provide an efficient and effective transportation system to serve the present and future needs of the Whitefish area.
- Integrate transportation and land use planning so that choices of transportation modes are optimized.
- The City shall explore support of improved public transit, both in the city, and inter-city, through support of the expansion of existing systems and support for new enterprises, using capital improvement planning, grants, and other means.
- The City shall be open and receptive to the use of alternative street standards that preserve and enhance the character and qualities of neighborhoods while still meeting general transportation and public safety needs.
- The community shall encourage sustainability in all aspects of the transportation system so that the needs of the present are met, while ensuring that future generations have the same or better opportunities.
- Through integrated community planning, transportation system enhancements, and a viable non-motorized transportation system, work to reduce the Whitefish community’s carbon footprint.

##### Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan

- Ensure the Highway 93 improvements enhance and support downtown businesses.
- Accommodate increasing traffic volumes without degrading downtown businesses and the retail environment.
- Locate new parking facilities to support downtown businesses and retail.

- Strengthen alternative transportation modes to reduce traffic congestion, including pedestrian, bicycle, and transit.

#### Flathead County Growth Policy

- Maintain safe and efficient traffic flow and mobility on county roadways.
- Develop a quality transportation network to meet the present and future needs of the public.
- Identify and support alternative modes of transportation.

#### Big Mountain Neighborhood Plan

- Create an entrance to Big Mountain at the intersection of Big Mountain Road and the Day Lodge Road. The entrance may include a staffed information building with a destination accommodations desk.
- Maintain adequate parking for the day skier/visitor.
- Develop parking in the Village for the new and existing accommodations.
- Develop a trail system and facilities on the lower mountain that provide and support a variety of opportunities for hiking, walking, biking, cross country skiing, trail riding, etc.
- Off Mountain housing would be served by the SNOW bus to reduce traffic volumes on Wisconsin Avenue and Big Mountain Road and reduce parking needs at the mountain.

### **1.3.2 Goals**

The Transportation Element of the *Growth Policy Update* includes the following goals.

- Provide an efficient and effective transportation system to serve the present and future needs of the Whitefish area.
- Integrate transportation and land use planning so that choices of transportation modes are optimized.
- The City shall explore support of improved public transit, both in the city, and inter-city, through support of the expansion of existing systems and support for new enterprises, using capital improvement planning, grants, and other means.
- The City shall be open and receptive to the use of alternative street standards that preserve and enhance the character and qualities of neighborhoods while still meeting general transportation and public safety needs.
- The community shall encourage sustainability in all aspects of the transportation system so that the needs of the present are met, while ensuring that future generations have the same or better opportunities.
- Through integrated community planning, transportation system enhancements, and a viable non-motorized transportation system, work to reduce the Whitefish community's carbon footprint.

### **1.3.3 Policies**

In order to achieve the Goals, the following policies are needed to guide decision-making and address issues within the community.

- It shall be the policy of the City of Whitefish to support non-motorized transportation through community planning and capital improvement planning and programming.
- The City shall seek ways to reduce the community's carbon footprint through efficiencies in the transportation system, reduction of vehicle miles traveled, and through promoting non-motorized transportation.
- The City shall be open and receptive to the use of alternative street standards that preserve and enhance the character and qualities of neighborhoods while still meeting general transportation and public safety needs.
- The community shall encourage sustainability in all aspects of the transportation system so that the needs of the present are met, while ensuring that future generations have the same or better opportunities.

### **1.3.4 Objectives (Recommended Actions)**

These objectives (recommended actions) are designed to provide measurable milestones regarding transportation planning and to assist in achieving the goals and policies as stated above.

- Make construction of new sidewalks and pathways a priority in areas where they do not currently exist.
- Plan for through, continuous streets to the extent possible. When cul-de-sacs are appropriate due to ownership, topography, or other constraints, ensure that a future street extension can be made via a right-of-way dedication, or at the very least, a pedestrian connection.
- It is highly recommended that no additional land in the Monegan Road area be designated for urban or suburban development until such time as an additional east-west connection is made available.
- Through the community-wide transportation plan, explore possibilities for an additional grade separated crossing of the BNSF rail facilities.
- The City shall make the provision of sidewalks, pathways, and other non-motorized transportation facilities part of a concurrency program and policy.
- The City shall research and develop a set of alternative "neighborhood sensitive" designs for local residential streets.
- The City shall develop a menu of traffic calming measures for use on residential collector streets.
- Through the community-wide transportation plan, the City shall assess the need and feasibility of a highway by-pass to alleviate through traffic in the downtown area.
- Continue support for federal funding that will keep Amtrak passenger service operating in Montana.
- Continue to support agreements with Eagle Transit and the Snow Bus, and encourage them or other enterprises to expand existing services to provide daily and year-round public transportation options in Whitefish.

- Coordinate with the Montana Department of Transportation in developing corridor studies for state highways within the planning jurisdiction.
- Explore alternative vehicular routes to the Whitefish Mountain Village.

## 1.4 PREVIOUS TRANSPORTATION PLANNING EFFORTS

In the course of data collection, past plans and studies were obtained. From the review of these documents, applicable issues were incorporated into this Whitefish Transportation Plan. The contributing documents are as follows:

- Whitefish Growth Policy (2007 Update)
- Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan;
- Whitefish City-County Master Plan (2020);
- Big Mountain Neighborhood Plan;
- Whitefish Zoning Map;
- Southeast Whitefish Transportation Plan;
- South Whitefish Transportation Planning Project;
- Whitefish Traffic Operations Study;
- Armory Park Master Plan;
- Whitefish Transportation and Storm Drainage Master Plan (RPA 1998);
- Whitefish Stormwater System Utility Plan (HDR 2006);
- Whitefish Wetlands Delineation Study (currently underway);
- US Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West Environmental Impact Statement;
- Eagle Transit Transportation Development Plan Update (2006 Update);
- Flathead County Growth Policy;
- Flathead County Zoning Regulations;
- Flathead County Subdivision Regulations;
- Kalispell Area Transportation Plan (2006 Update);
- Kalispell Area Transportation Plan (1993 Update);
- Miscellaneous Traffic Impact Studies (Flathead County & City of Whitefish) to include “Bridgewater TIS”, “Boardwalk TIS”, and “Wisconsin TIS” completed by Abelin Traffic Services in the year 2006;
- City of Whitefish Engineering Standards;
- Flathead County Road Standards;
- School Bus Routes;
- Postal Routes;
- Fire District Maps;
- Whitefish Deaconess Hospital “Sub-area” Plan;
- Locally adopted master plans, public facility plans, and related development regulations;
- Official Code of the City of Whitefish;
- Montana Department of Transportation STIP and other Local Planning Documents
- U.S. Bureau of Census data; and
- City building permits, County location and conformance permits, and utility records.

## 1.5 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The primary goal of the communications program for the Whitefish Transportation Plan was to keep the public informed and involved in the project. A second goal of the process was to integrate the opinions and issues identified by the public, as a result of the program, into the project approach and methodology, wherever feasible. The methods that were used to achieve these goals included: guidance from the Project Oversight Committee (POC); feedback from the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC); outreach to key constituencies (i.e. general public); education of decision-makers (i.e. City Council); project newsletters (two total); news releases; and public events. Below is a brief summary of some of the project outreach activities utilized during the projects development:

### 1.5.1 Summary of Program Components

#### ○ Project Oversight Committee (POC)

A project oversight committee (POC) was established to oversee the development of this transportation plan. The POC met face-to-face on two occasions, with the majority of oversight completed via regular, conference call meetings. The regular conference call meetings occurred on the first and third Wednesdays of each month, and generally ran between 9:30 am and 10:00 am.

Membership was composed of individuals as noted on the acknowledgements page of this document, and generally included representatives from the Montana Department of Transportation, the City of Whitefish, and the Federal Highway Administration. The POC was the principal guiding force behind this Transportation Plan.

#### ○ Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC)

The CAC was set up for this project under the charge of acting as a sounding board to the Consultant team developing the community Transportation Plan as they develop recommendations and identify solutions for the community's transportation system. The CAC was asked to look at the "bigger picture" regarding comprehensive transportation needs and issues in the larger community. The CAC was an advisory group and was not in a position to formally "endorse" the resulting Transportation Plan. The overarching role of the CAC for this project was to:

- Help identify critical issues relating to the transportation system in the Whitefish study area boundary, including the US Highway 93 urban corridor.
- Represent the diverse interests of the Whitefish community.
- Review project deliverables & comment as appropriate.
- Convey other citizen input that may be received to the Consultant team.

The CAC met for a total of four (4) times over the course of the project, with the last interaction (i.e. 4<sup>th</sup> meeting) focused on the downtown US Highway 93 corridor study.

### ○ **Public Meetings**

Three formal public meetings were held during the study process. The first meeting was held at a time when the data collection process was nearing completion. This meeting focused on informing the public about the current transportation problems that had been identified to date, and receiving public comment on which issues should be addressed in the Plan. A variety of key issues were identified. The issues generally fell within four categories: 1) the need to plan for future growth; 2) to relieve traffic congestion; 3) to improve traffic safety; and 4) to provide alternatives to the automobile. Specific problem intersections and roadway corridors were identified and presented at this first meeting.

The second public meeting was held after the analysis of the existing transportation system was completed. Additionally, the effects of population growth on traffic volumes and transportation infrastructure were discussed. Where and potentially when future land use changes (i.e. growth) were also defined and discussed. Again, the public had the opportunity to give their opinions on transportation system issues in the study area, as well as any other concerns they might have.

The third public meeting was held after the draft Transportation Plan document was completed, and gave the public the opportunity to review the draft document in its entirety, including a thorough review of recommended projects that not only offered mitigation measures to solve existing transportation issues, but also measures to accommodate future growth issues.

The first two public meetings were held in the Whitefish City Council chamber, while the third public meeting was held at the O'Shaughnessy Center.

### ○ **Other Public Outreach Activities**

Formal and informal meeting and presentations occurred many times over the course of the project. These are specifically listed in **Table 1-2** later in this chapter.

### ○ **Public Hearing (Not yet completed)**

One public hearing was conducted near the completion of this planning process to obtain formal public comment on the draft document before the City Council. The public hearing covered all elements of the draft and significant additional time for public comment was provided after the public hearing closed. After reviewing the comments received at the public hearing, the POC met with the consultant to provide comments and direction in revising the draft document, and developing the final version of the Plan.

### ○ **News Releases**

Television and newspaper articles were used several times during the planning process to help keep the public informed. These news releases generally were issued prior to public meetings (and the public hearing), to generate interest in the process, and to encourage participation by the public.

### ○ Internet Access

The results of the traffic studies and analyses conducted during the study process were made available to the public on the Internet website. As sections of the report and graphic displays became available, they were posted on the web site for public review and comment. This enabled the public to stay abreast of the developments occurring during the planning process. It also provided an opportunity for the public to submit comments.

### ○ Project Newsletters

One (1) project newsletter was created and distributed that announced the project. The newsletter was sent by mail to everybody in the 59903 zip code area. This equated to a total of 7,500 newsletters being distributed. They were also made available at all public meetings and presentations made through the outreach program.

## 1.6 COORDINATION SUMMARY

The following tables (**Table 1-1** thru **Table 1-2**) summarize all of the coordination that occurred over the course of this planning project. They encompass all formal and informal meetings, including but not limited to Project Oversight Committee (POC) meetings and workshops, formal public meetings, and others.

**Table 1-1**  
**Summary of POC & CAC Activities**

Date	Agency or Individual
10/17/06	POC Scoping Meeting
01/30/07	POC Kick-off Meeting
02/07/07	POC Conference Call
02/21/07	POC Conference Call
03/07/07	POC Conference Call
03/21/07	POC Conference Call
04/04/07	POC Conference Call
04/17/07	CAC Meeting No. 1
04/18/07	POC Conference Call
05/16/07	POC Conference Call
06/06/07	POC Conference Call
06/20/07	POC Conference Call
07/16/07	CAC Meeting No. 2
07/18/07	POC Conference Call
08/01/07	POC Conference Call
08/15/07	POC Conference Call

09/05/07	POC Conference Call
10/03/07	POC Conference Call
10/17/07	POC Conference Call
11/07/07	POC Conference Call
11/21/07	POC Conference Call
12/05/07	POC Conference Call
12/19/07	POC Conference Call
01/02/08	POC Conference Call
01/08/08	CAC Meeting No. 3
01/16/08	POC Conference Call (tentative)

**Table 1-2**  
**Summary of Public Outreach Activities**

Date	Agency or Individual
03/23/07	City of Whitefish – Engineering Dept.
04/16/07	Public Meeting No. 1
04/16/07	City Council Presentation No. 1
05/16/07	City of Whitefish / Glacier NP
05/24/07	Resource Agency Meeting No. 1
05/30/07	USFWS Coordination Meeting
07/11/07	Eagle Transit
07/12/07	US Highway 93 Business Owner
07/13/07	Whitefish School Superintendent
07/17/07	City of Whitefish – Streets Dept.
07/17/07	US Highway 93 Beautification Committee
07/17/07	Public Meeting No. 2
09/25/07	MDT/City Meeting on Screening
01/10/08	Public Meeting No. 3
01/17/08	Planning Board Work Session (tentative)
??/??/??	Planning Board Public Hearing (?)
??/??/??	City Council Public Hearing (?)