



Whitefish Transportation Plan Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93

RESOURCE AGENCY WORKSHOP
May 24th, 2007



6/8/2007

Introductions & Opening Remarks

- Robert Peccia & Associates
 - Traffic Engineers and Transportation Planners
 - Jeff Key, P.E. – Project Manager
 - Dan Norderud, AICP – Transportation Planner
- Montana Department of Transportation
 - Sheila Ludlow
 - Others present
- Agency Representatives



OVERVIEW OF WHITEFISH PROJECTS PLANNING AREAS AND PROCESSES

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Overview of Whitefish Projects

- Two (2) Distinct Projects underway in Whitefish
 - *Whitefish Transportation Plan*
 - *Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93*
- Cooperative efforts funded by MDT and the City of Whitefish

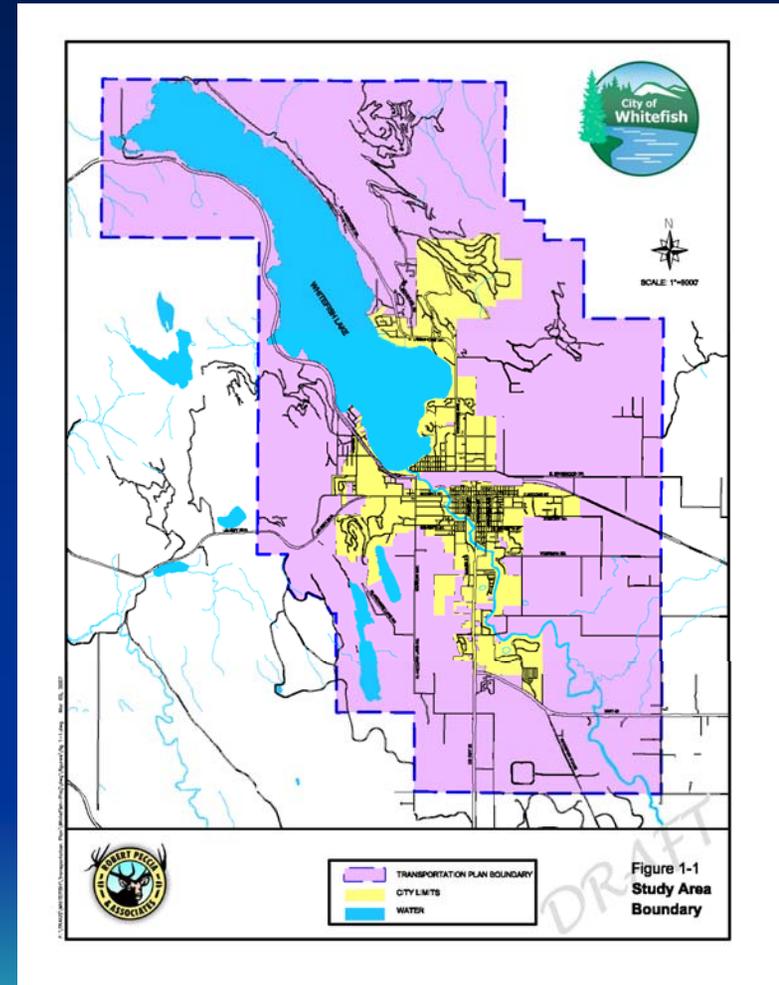
Whitefish Transportation Plan

- No comprehensive Transportation Study has been undertaken to date within the City and surrounding area.
 - Several “sub-area” transportation studies have been completed.
 - Land use changes and livability issues have heightened.
 - *Growth Policy Update* process is in motion.
 - The time is appropriate for a comprehensive transportation planning effort.



Whitefish Transportation Plan Study Area Boundary

Boundary same as the planning area
boundary for City's *Growth Policy Update*



Whitefish Transportation Plan Planning Process

- Transportation Plan will follow traditional methodology
 - **Inventory** the conditions and characteristics of the existing transportation system.
 - **Analyze** inventoried data to determine the relationships that affect development, transportation demand, and transportation system usage.
 - **Forecast** the future development patterns and the associated travel demand, supply and performance of the transportation system.
 - **Evaluate** the forecasts to determine needed transportation improvements.



Whitefish Transportation Plan

- Will assess the needs of the community's transportation system in a comprehensive manner, recognizing the diversity of users in the community
- Will focus on improving vehicular circulation and safety
- Will focus on identifying non-motorized amenities that make the community a livable place (bicycle, pedestrian, and transit)
- Will recognize the needs of future land use changes that inevitably will occur in the community
- Will be sensitive to prior processes and results
 - *Downtown Business District Master Plan*
 - *Previous Transportation Studies*
 - *US Highway 93 – Somers to Whitefish West FEIS and ROD*
 - *Current Growth Policy Update*
 - *Other community documents*



Overview of Projects

Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93

- MDT's "Whitefish Urban" design project identified after the Record of Decision issued for the Somers-Whitefish Final EIS in 1994
- FEIS/ROD identified necessary improvements to US 93 through Whitefish
 - The Preferred Alternative was determined to be a one-way couplet on Spokane and Baker Avenues with new connection across the Whitefish River at 7th Street
- Design work for Whitefish Urban project began in 2005 including a *Re-Evaluation* of findings and conclusions in the EIS as they relate to the project area and an adjoining Whitefish West project
- Preliminary evaluations suggest unexpected growth has changed traffic volumes and travel patterns within the community. Preliminary results indicate changed conditions from those evaluated in the original EIS
- Traffic analysis work done for the Re-evaluation showed the Preferred Alternative would not function as indicated in the FEIS/ROD.



Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93

- In late 2006, MDT and FHWA determined that additional studies and analyses of feasible alternatives are needed for US 93 through Whitefish.
- This resulted in a decision to do a community-wide Transportation Plan and take a new look at options for the US 93 corridor through Whitefish
- Corridor Study being developed within context of and concurrent with Whitefish Transportation Plan
 - Starts with a broad look at community's transportation needs and issues
 - Will determine existing and projected travel patterns to year 2030
 - Analyses will identify needed facilities and system improvements for community
 - Allows us to take a focused look at the US 93 Corridor through Whitefish

This approach allows for consideration of new and relevant information:

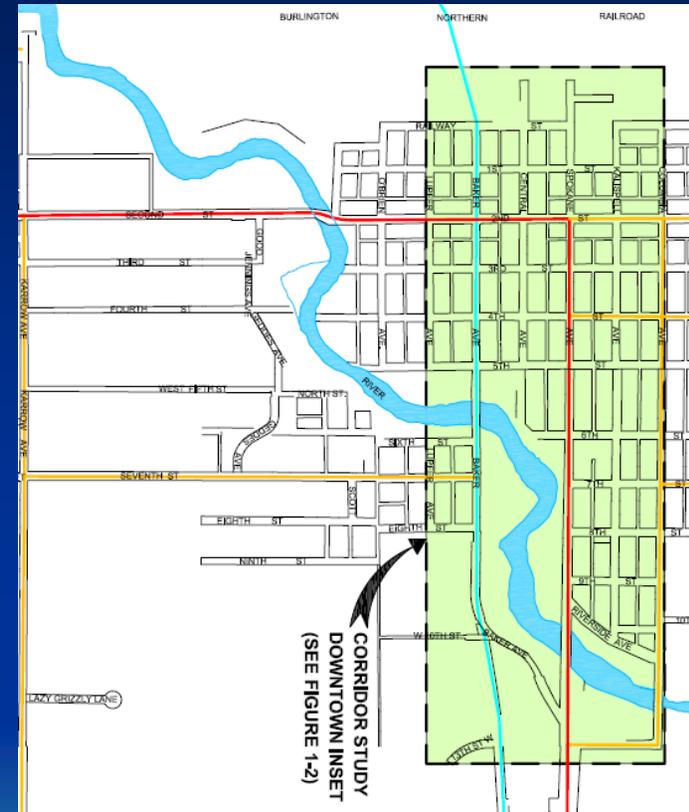
- Updated long-range land use/growth projections (i.e. *Growth Policy Update*)
- Recommendations from the *Downtown Business District Master Plan*
- Community goals and interests for US 93



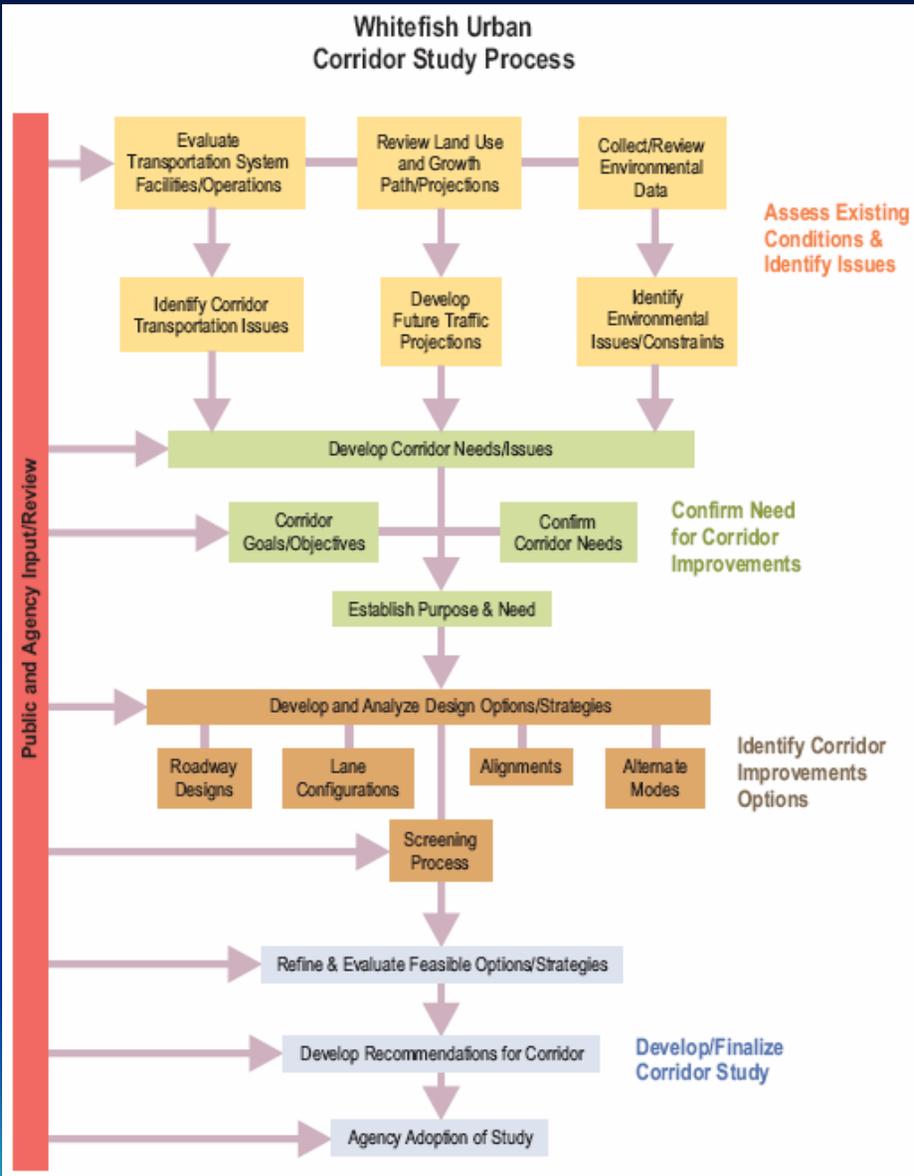
Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93

Study Area has more focused geographic scope -- includes limits of Whitefish Urban project and other areas affected by FEIS alternatives.

US 93 (Spokane Avenue) from 13th Street/Columbia Avenue north to 2nd Street and 2nd Street from Spokane Avenue to west of Baker Avenue (the beginning of Whitefish West project)



Urban Corridor Study Process



Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93

- Urban Corridor Study will be a “Pre-NEPA” Study
 - Not being completed in conjunction with a NEPA document
 - MDT/FHWA are not preparing an environmental document at this time
 - Corridor Study will be developed and documented in a manner consistent with NEPA
 - Developing a clearly articulated problem statement
 - Considering a range of alternatives and their potential impacts
 - Involving other agencies and the public
 - Providing sound technical analyses
 - Documenting the process and decisions made
 - Recommendations and supporting information from Corridor Study will be “folded into” the appropriate NEPA Process/Document (Supplemental EIS for Whitefish Urban?)

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Project Timeline

- Twelve (12) Month Project Schedule
- “Notice-to-Proceed” Issued ~ December 28th, 2006
- Four (4) Sets of Public Informational Meetings
- “Draft” Transportation Plan/Corridor Study (10/2007)
- “Final” Transportation Plan/Corridor Study (11/2007)
- Public Hearings for Transportation Plan between Draft and Final Versions

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Goals of Transportation Planning Effort

- Coordinate transportation planning with existing and future land use and community comprehensive plans
- Identify primary travel demands and improve regional transportation circulation
- Promote a safe, reliable transportation network
- Identify improvement priorities, strategies and policies
- Identify funding sources and implementation process for projects
- Identify a practicable feasible alternative for the US 93 Corridor in Whitefish



Goals of the Corridor Study / Combined Project Approach in Whitefish

- Allow agencies, local government, and the public to work together to develop solutions to community transportation needs and corridor issues
- Help resolve major planning issues before the start of project development
- Provide an opportunity to direct future development and minimize environmental, social, and economic impacts
- Help link land-use planning and transportation planning
- Provide opportunity to exploring alternate means to help meet transportation needs
- Be compatible with the NEPA principles and the NEPA process



CORRIDOR PLANNING vs. NEPA

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Corridor Planning and Corridor Studies

Definitions

CORRIDOR PLANNING - *A collaborative process for making transportation decisions and guiding major transportation investments within an established corridor area.*

CORRIDOR STUDY – *A detailed evaluation of an existing transportation system within a designated corridor including factors and issues affecting the system and recommendations for how the system should be changed to meet long-term transportation needs.*



NEPA and NEPA Process

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is a national policy for the protection of the natural environment and human health and welfare and is carried out by promoting efforts to prevent or eliminate damage to the environment.

NEPA requires:

- The objective and comprehensive analysis of a proposed action to determine its impacts
- Consideration of alternatives and mitigation measures that reduce identified impacts
- Disclosure and documentation of analyses and decision making process
- Involvement of the interested and affected public

From a transportation perspective:

- NEPA requires that alternatives be evaluated and decisions be made in the public's best interest based on a balanced consideration of the need for safe and efficient transportation.



TRADITIONAL “NEPA” APPROACH

- MDT or MDT with “Urban” area governments develop transportation plans identifying necessary long-range system improvements and potential projects on the state road system
- When funding is available, a preliminary design concept for a specific project is advanced, and a NEPA compliant environmental document is developed (Cat Ex, EA, or EIS)
 - Project limits based on logical termini
- Except for routine projects, the environmental review process can be controversial, costly, and take a significant amount of time
- Neutral approach to cost issues in plans can sometimes result in un-fundable and impractical Preferred Alternatives that cannot be delivered
- Undeliverable commitments can disenfranchise participants --- especially the public



CORRIDOR PLANNING APPROACH

A corridor is identified for analysis based on general need for improvements and coordination with FHWA and other agencies

Corridor Studies:

- Define transportation issues/problems in the corridor
- Provide a means of assessing a broad range of alternatives and considering their social, economic, and environmental effects at an early stage
- Provide a level of analysis that can supports informed and sustainable decisions on a project concept, narrowing the range of options remaining for consideration at the project stage
- Help identify cost-effective and feasible strategies for transportation investments
- Consider community concerns and values
- Can foster greater cooperation among agencies and other stakeholders and extend the participation of these parties through the NEPA process



CORRIDOR PLANNING APPROACH

Corridor Planning:

- Informs the NEPA process
 - Issues Identification and Purpose and Need
 - Alternatives Development
 - Identify and consider range of alternatives
 - Helps narrow down alternatives to be studied later during NEPA process
 - Technical analyses and information on impacts
- Helps reduce the cost of environmental process and speed project delivery
- Provides for early and continuous involvement of environmental, regulatory, resource agencies, local governments, and public
- Helps prioritize future transportation improvements based on financial feasibility
- Identifies corridor management strategies



Corridor Planning & NEPA Comparison

	Corridor Planning	NEPA
Funding	Corridor plans can use financial constraints as criteria for screening out alternatives for implementation. Recommendations help set priorities for funding and implementation.	Must remain neutral on project costs and require financial commitment for implementation once permits are issued
Regulation	Federal regulations for statewide and metropolitan transportation planning were issued in February 2007. 23 CFR 450.212 discusses planning products that can be forwarded from the pre-NEPA process to NEPA. Section 6002 of SAFETEA-LU and related FHWA guidance address transportation planning and the NEPA process.	Mandates environmental documentation (Cat Ex, EA, EIS) be prepared before actions are taken. Provides procedures and a regulatory framework for preparing and reviewing environmental documents and responding to comments.



Corridor Planning & NEPA Comparison

	Corridor Planning	NEPA
Agency Participation	23 CFR 450.212 requires the involvement of interested State, local, Tribal and Federal agencies.	Required. FHWA and MDT are joint lead agencies for transportation projects
Level of Analysis	Tailored to specific needs, environmental components give scan level detail and help identify sensitive areas for further analysis during project development and NEPA documentation	Requires comprehensive and exhaustive assessment



Corridor Planning and NEPA

Corridor Planning and NEPA have similar goals:

- Make decisions in the best overall interest of the community and use a collaborative process that incorporates technical analyses of alternatives and public input.
- Bring environmental considerations into agency planning and action. This is done by providing decision makers and other stakeholders with the information they need to understand potential environmental impacts of proposed actions.

Bottom Line:

Everybody makes better decisions when they have clear information about the consequences and trade-offs associated with taking any given course of action.



Corridor Planning and NEPA

Key Points to Remember:

- Corridor planning complements NEPA process and ensures important decisions are made at the appropriate level and all major issues including available funding are considered.
- Corridor studies can address broader issues than traditional environmental analysis such as land use planning, regional socioeconomic conditions, etc.
- The corridor planning process does not preclude the NEPA analysis if initial work identifies significant issues — the corridor planning effort is not wasted. It can be incorporated into the NEPA process.



ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

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The “Players”

- City of Whitefish
 - Project Oversight Committee
 - Citizens Advisory Committee
 - Land Use Advisory Committee
 - City Council
- MDT and FHWA
- Agencies
- Consultant Team
- The Public

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Public Involvement Activities

- **Monthly meetings with Project Oversight Committee**
- **Four Meetings with Citizens Advisory Committee**
 - First CAC Meeting held April 17
- **Four Public Informational Meetings**
 - First Public Meeting held April 16 – Scoping
- **Presentations to Whitefish City Council**
 - First Presentation held on April 16
 - Formal hearing on Transportation Plan
- **Public Outreach Efforts**
 - Newsletters
 - Community Travel Mode Preference Survey
 - Website/Toll Free line
 - Informal meetings

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EXISTING CONDITIONS IN THE CORRIDOR

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Corridor Overview

US 93 is on the Non-Interstate National Highway System (NHS) in Montana and functionally classified as a Principal Arterial

- Links the Flathead Valley with I-90 west of Missoula
- Serves as one of Whitefish's "main streets"

Street Configuration:

- South of 13th Street – 5 lanes
- Remainder of Corridor – 2 lanes

Traffic signal controlled intersections:

- Spokane Avenue and 13th Street
- Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street
- 2nd Street/Central Avenue
- 2nd Street/Baker Avenue

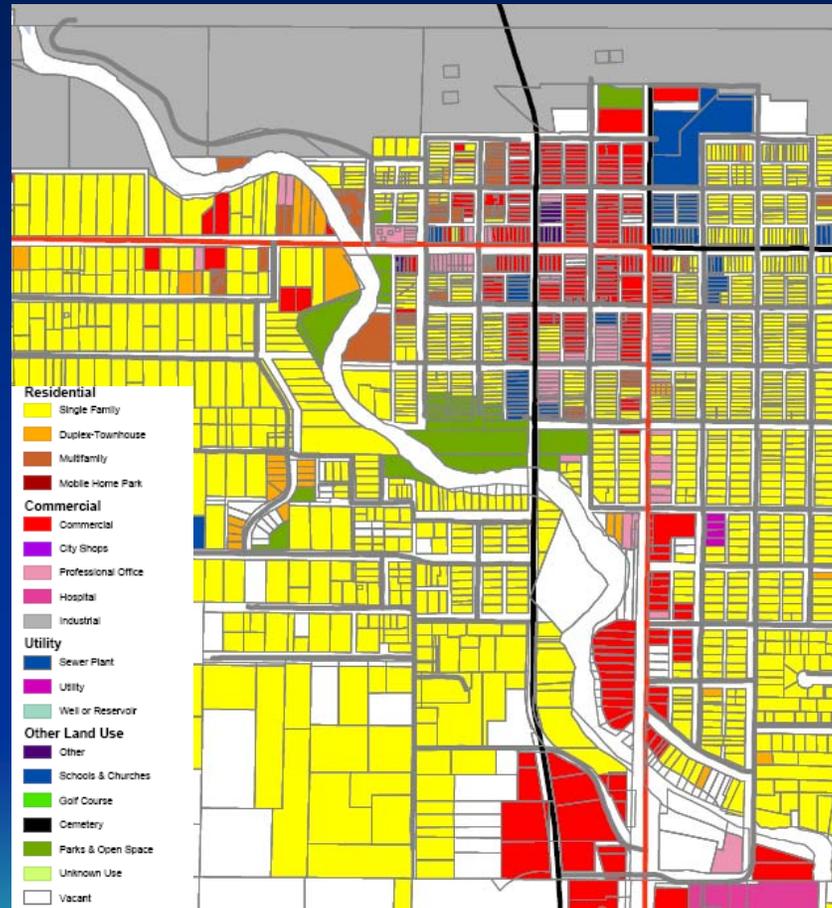
Existing Traffic Volumes (AADT):

- Spokane Avenue 17,450 to 10,400 vpd
- 2nd Street (Spokane to Baker) 7,800 to 9,740 vpd
- Large commercial motor vehicles accounted for 8-13% of traffic at time of Final EIS



Corridor Overview

2006 Existing Land Use



Notable Community Changes Since EIS

Substantial Community Growth

- The Whitefish area (like much of Flathead County) is experiencing rapid population growth and substantial new development
 - Prior to 2000 much of the County's growth occurred in rural areas
 - Between 1960 and 2000 County's population grew by nearly 130%
 - Flathead County's population has grown by about 12% since the 2000 Census
 - County's population projected to increase by more than 50% by 2030
- **The City of Whitefish's population increased by about 70% over the 1960-2000 period.**
 - Migration is a significant factor of this growth
 - 25% of the City's population moved in from out of state within 5 years of the 2000 Census
- **The City's population has increased by 40% since 2000 Census**
- The City's jurisdictional area (City and adjacent outlying areas) currently estimated to include about 11,500 residents
- **At current rate of development, the population of the jurisdictional area could increase by 6,000 residents within the next 10-15 years**



Notable Community Changes Since EIS

New Development and Land Use Changes

The local economy in the Whitefish area continues to shift from its historic base industries (agriculture, timber, and the railroad) toward tourist and retail activity and businesses and trades that support development and construction.

Natural amenities and recreational opportunities in area help drive this economic shift.

Current approved development projects could add 1,200 residential units to the community

Another 1,200 units could potentially be developed on vacant/undeveloped lands in area.



Notable Community Changes Since EIS

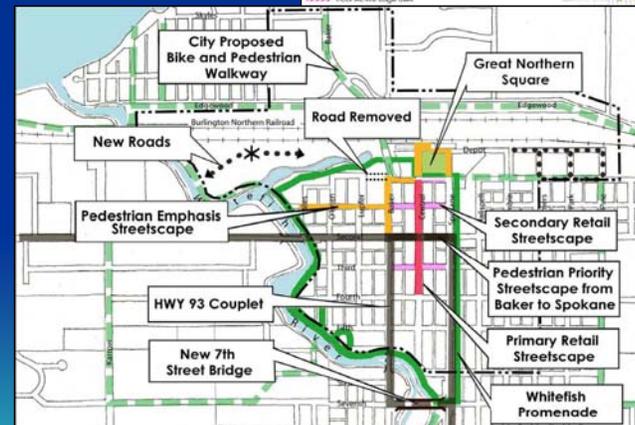
Downtown Redevelopment Plans

Whitefish City Council adopted the Downtown District Master Plan in early 2006

- Will guide the development of private and publicly-owned parcels in downtown
- Offers strategies for improving the appearance, function, and vitality of the downtown

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Ensure US 93 improvements enhance and support downtown businesses
- Strengthen alternative transportation modes to reduce traffic congestion
- Provide streetscape enhancements
- Add new downtown parking facilities



Notable Community Changes Since EIS

Community attitudes have been reinforced around several issues (not listed in any order):

- Livability issues and managing growth
- Importance of alternate transportation modes
 - Pedestrian and bicycle facilities are an essential and desirable element of the local transportation system
- Community aesthetics
- Environmental protection
- Preserving the community's character and "small town" feel



ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES AND ISSUES

(AGENCY INPUT REQUESTED AS WE GO THROUGH TOPICS)

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Air Quality

Whitefish area designated as a non-attainment area for PM-10 in 1993

- Primary sources of PM-10 (re-entrained road dust/residential wood burning)

Whitefish has an Air Quality Control District and an EPA-approved PM-10 control plan requiring following measures:

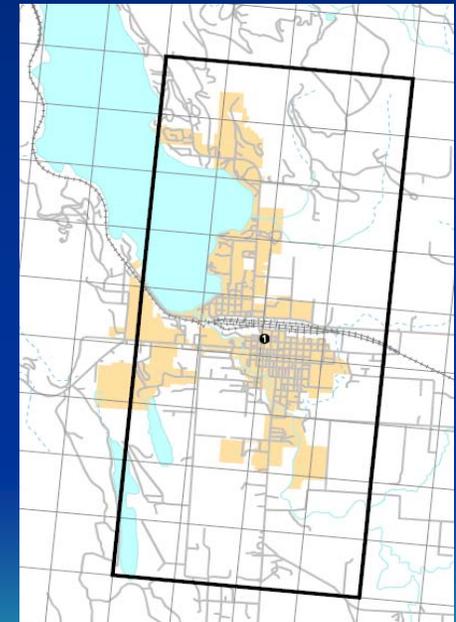
- On-going street sweeping programs
- Use of liquid deicers in place of winter road sanding
- New paving requirements

MDEQ currently monitors PM-10 and PM-2.5 daily

- Monitoring has verified PM-10 control efforts are effective

PM-2.5 is an emerging issue in Whitefish

- Stricter standards for PM-2.5 by reducing the 24-hour average for levels of fine particulates from 65 micrograms per cubic meter to 35 micrograms per cubic meter.
- MDEQ data showed PM-2.5 levels in Whitefish were nearly at the new 24-hr average over the 2002-2005 period



Mobile Source Air Toxics



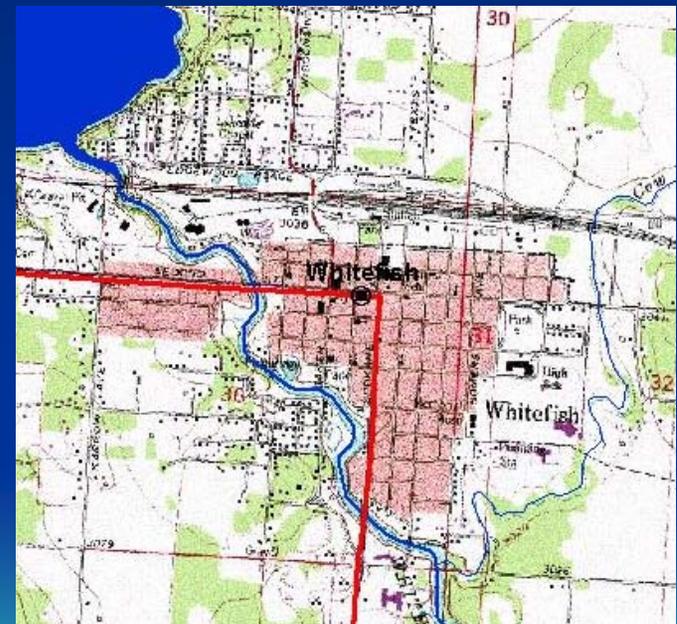
Water Resources/Quality and Floodplains

Surface Waters

- Whitefish River is only surface water in corridor
 - Flows from Whitefish Lake southerly through community
 - Within the Stillwater River Watershed – joins Stillwater River north of Kalispell
- Cow Creek joins the Whitefish River east of corridor

Water Quality

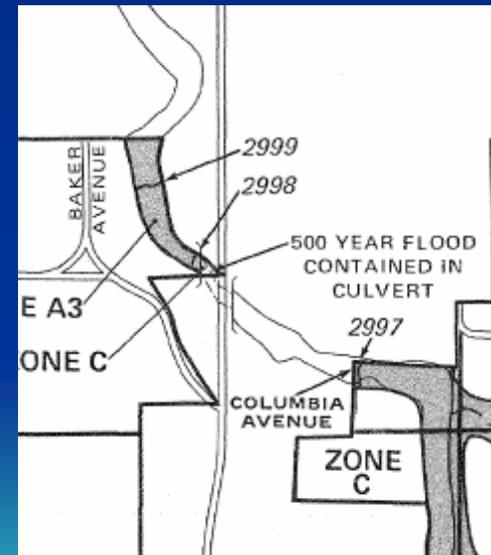
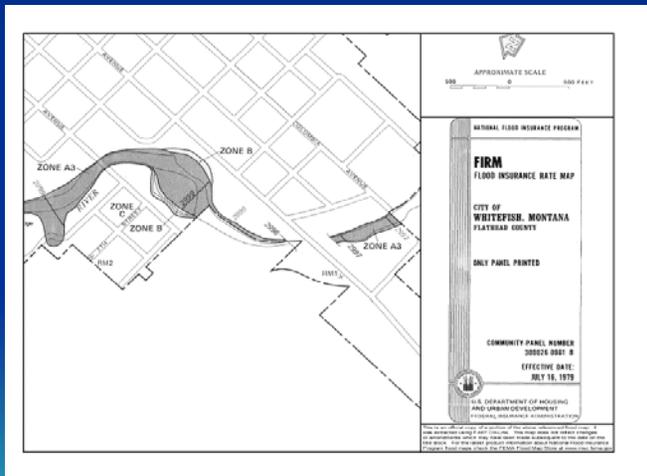
- Whitefish River is classified as B-2 water
- 2006 Integrated 305(b)/303(d) Water Quality Report lists Whitefish River as “impaired”
 - *does not fully support the aquatic habitat and coldwater fishery*
- A TMDL is required to address the factors causing the impairment



Water Resources/Quality and Floodplains

Floodplains

- FEMA-designated 100-year floodplains exist along the Whitefish River and Cow Creek
- Flathead County and the City of Whitefish have adopted floodplain regulations.



Threatened/Endangered Species

The *Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West Biological Resources Report (2006)* contains a Biological Assessment discussing species listed or proposed for listing by the USFWS including:

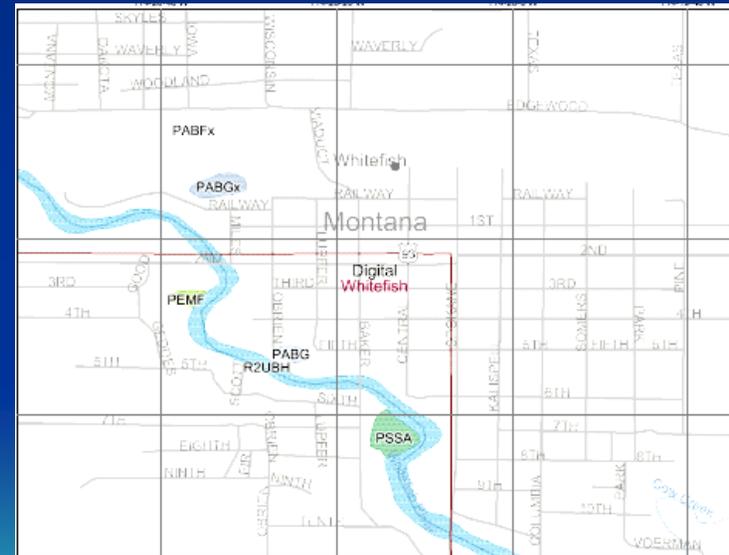
- Bald eagles
 - Gray wolf
 - Grizzly bear
 - Canada lynx
 - Bull trout
- Urban corridor contains little habitat and there is a low potential for the occurrence of bald eagles, gray wolves, grizzlies, and lynx.
 - Corridor does cross the Whitefish River where bull trout may be present. Bridge work could affect this species.



Wetlands

A new wetland inventory was conducted during 2006 and the findings are reported in the *Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West Biological Resources Report*.

- Only wetland sites within the Urban corridor were identified along the Whitefish River.
 - Primarily narrow wetland fringes along the river
 - Emergent/scrub-shrub vegetation



NWI map for Whitefish area

Wildlife and Fisheries

Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West Biological Resources Report updated information about this topic

WILDLIFE

- Riparian areas associated with the Whitefish River provides the primary habitat for fish and wildlife in the corridor area.
- White-tailed and mule deer observed along the river/migratory birds
- No critical wildlife habitat present in corridor area
- Common loons and LeConte's sparrow identified as wildlife species of special concern by Montana Natural Heritage Program

FISHERIES

- Few trout in river below Whitefish Lake due to warm summer water temperatures
- MFISH lists brook, rainbow and bull trout, whitefish ,northern pike, suckers and other warm water fish species as being in the river.



Cultural Resources

Work done for the 1994 EIS identified a variety of historic sites that were determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or that were contributing elements to potential historic districts—the Whitefish Historic Residential District and the Whitefish Historic Business District.

Cultural resources information for the Whitefish Urban project area was updated in August 2005. Major findings:

- The area where the Whitefish Historic Business District was proposed no longer qualifies to be a historic district.
- 8 new buildings were recorded—none are NHRP-eligible or contribute to the eligibility of the Whitefish Historic Residential District.
- The inventory verified that a substantial number of NRHP-eligible resources remain in the area of potential effect for the Whitefish Urban project.



Hazardous Materials

A Phase II Hazardous Materials Assessment was prepared for the Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West projects in 2005. Work included:

- Data base searches
- Drilling and sampling to verify the extent of subsurface contamination within the highway right-of-way
- Four locations along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street were identified as areas with subsurface petroleum contamination
- Contaminated sediments were also identified at roadway crossings of the Whitefish River



Environmental and Community Resources



	HISTORICAL SITES		WATERBODY / FLOODPLAIN
	HAZARDOUS MATERIALS		WETLAND
	SCHOOL		EXISTING HWY 93 CORRIDOR
	PARKS AND OPEN SPACE		URBAN CORRIDOR STUDY BOUNDARY

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Environmental Scan

Our work for the corridor study includes an environmental scan to help provide sufficient information to compare concept alternatives and make informed choices about a preferred concept.

For each alternative concept, our environmental scan will help us address such questions as:

- Does an alternative have any fatal flaws?
- Does this alternative have greater or lesser impacts than the other alternatives?
- Can the impacts be avoided, minimized or mitigated, and at what cost?
- What procedural hurdles – Section 4(f), Section 106, Section 404, etc. – would be triggered by this alternative, and how might these affect project implementation?
- What are environmental resource/regulatory agencies telling us about this alternative?



Next Steps

- Complete existing conditions and data gathering efforts
- Develop and refine community-wide and corridor transportation goals
- Begin analysis of transportation needs
- Begin identification of potential design options for the corridor
- Public involvement activities

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Concluding Remarks/Questions?

Questions, answers and/or comments?

Project Website: www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/whitefish

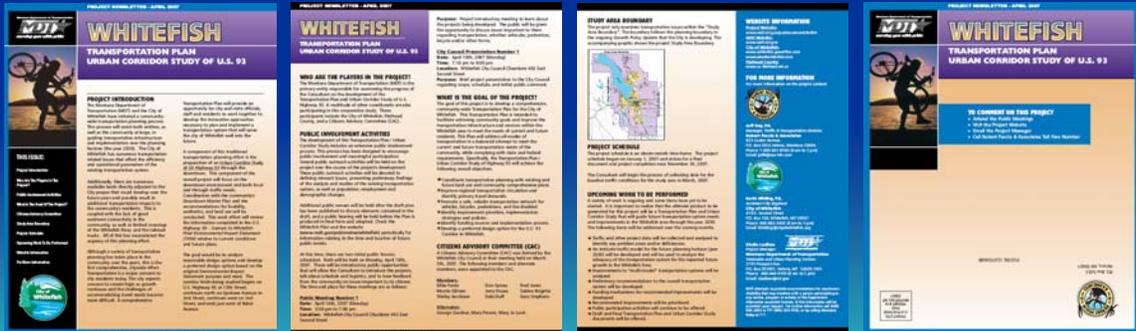
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Project Newsletters:



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