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Streetscaping goes forward without changes

By RICHARD HANNERS, Whitefish Pilot

After listening to nearly two hours of public comment at their April 6 meeting, the Whitefish City Council approved downtown streetscaping plans without any additional changes. The vote was 4-1, with councilor Turner Askew opposed and councilor Ryan Friel absent.

An amendment proposed by councilor Nick Palmer to increase the width of driving lanes on First and Third streets by six inches by narrowing the sidewalks was defeated 3-2. Councilors Frank Sweeney, Nancy Woodruff and John Muhlfeld opposed the amendment.

Askew's motion to keep Central Avenue sidewalks at their current 10-foot width died for lack of a second.

Thirty people addressed the issues of wider sidewalks and intersections with bulbouts and raised pedestrian crossings, with about equal numbers opposed, in support or not taking a position. Many were concerned about snow-removal, litter and landscape maintenance.

City manager Chuck Stearns cautioned the council about having the city take responsibility for maintenance of the new bulbouts, which could create a slippery slope for city responsibilities elsewhere.

Public works director John Wilson said he wants to encourage downtown merchants to shovel snow onto the street. As for the bulbouts, he said he'd talk to his plow crews to get some ideas on how to remove snow there.

The first element of the downtown master plan is now underway — construction of a surface parking lot at the corner of Second Street and Spokane Avenue. The three-story parking structure called for in the original master plan was turned down last year for mostly economic reasons, although there was much opposition for aesthetic reasons.

The council approved the low bid by Schellinger Construction, \$428,267 for the surface parking lot and half a block of First Street. That was about 13 percent below the engineer's estimate, Wilson said. Another \$31,000 will go to burying utilities along First Street.

Tax-increment financing (TIF) funds will pay for the parking lot, and resort tax money will pay for the street reconstruction. Streetlights will be provided separately by the city.

The next big phase will be reconstruction of Third Street from Spokane to Baker starting this fall, followed by Central Avenue from Second to Third in spring 2010. This could mean businesses at the corner of Third and Central will see heavy construction for two subsequent shoulder seasons.

Wilson said it's desirable to start construction phases at the south end of downtown because of stormwater drainage pipes clogged with decades of mud.

The good news, according to consulting engineer Ryan Mitchell, of Robert Peccia Associates, is that the Third Street project will include rebuilding the raised "table" intersection at Third and Central — and about one lot width, or 25 feet, of Central will be rebuilt at the same time. When completed, downtown streets will ramp up six inches over 25 feet to intersections.

Wrapping street construction around and onto Central Avenue means corner businesses won't be sitting right next to a torn-up street for two straight seasons.

But there will be impacts up and down Central through spring 2012 — about 6-12 inches of concrete must be removed by saws and heavy equipment, temporary awning supports must be installed, and public access must be maintained for businesses along Central, Wilson said.

Work on Third and First streets will be easier because there's no concrete under the asphalt and fewer businesses will be impacted, Wilson said. The big ash trees on Third will have to go, however, because their roots will be damaged by street construction. Wider sidewalks and new saplings will go in their place.

Construction of a raised "table" intersection at Second and Central is not guaranteed, Wilson told the council, because Montana Department of Transportation officials so far do not approve of the design.

MDT is still developing a plan for U.S. 93 through Whitefish, which could include a "couplet" design involving Spokane and Baker avenues, Second Street and a new bridge over the Whitefish River at Seventh Street.

The downtown master plan calls for keeping two-lane traffic on Second, but if the Seventh Street bridge and couplet design doesn't happen, MDT might want four lanes on Second downtown, mayor Mike Jenson said.