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## Streetscaping ferment is good, consultant says

By RICHARD HANNERS, Whitefish Pilot

The public was given another chance to hear about the city's plans for streetscaping on Central Avenue and voice their concerns before it goes to the Whitefish City Council on April 6. The council will direct staff to seek contract bids after that.

Heart of Whitefish, the downtown merchants association that supports the streetscaping proposal, hosted the meeting at the O'Shaughnessy on March 25. About 75 people showed up, not including presenters and members of the downtown master plan advisory committee.

Presenters included planning consultant George Crandall, engineering consultant Ryan Mitchell, landscaping consultant Bruce Boody, city manager Chuck Stearns and public works director John Wilson.

Toby Scott, who says he has a petition with more than 400 signatures opposed to the streetscaping plans, was working in New Jersey and unable to attend the meeting. He said he intends to show up at the city council's April 6 meeting to express his opposition to the plans.

"I understand there's a lot of ferment," Crandall acknowledged at the start of his PowerPoint talk. "That's a good thing — it shows you care about this plan."

Portland, Ore.-based consultants Crandall and Arambula conducted four downtown master plan workshops, beginning in November 2004. At the March 24, 2005, workshop to refine alternatives, the tally favoring improvements to Central Avenue was 65-3. The tally at the June 14, 2005, workshop to review final plans was 179-9 in favor.

"It was about as thorough a public process as one could expect," Crandall said, addressing criticism about the relatively low number of people who attended the meetings.

Design influences date back a century, according to Crandall, who showed historical photographs of Central Avenue from 1909. Pedestrian trails visible in the dirt street in 1909 indicate a preference for mid-block crossings, an alternative that didn't make the cut for the current master plan. He also estimated wooden boardwalks to be about 12 feet wide, half a foot shorter than the current plan for new sidewalk widths.



Bulbouts and raised pedestrian-crossings at intersections will create a pedestrian-friendly environment that will enhance the retail experience, Crandall said. He said the design provides adequate space for parking large SUVs or pickups as well as passage of large delivery trucks and emergency vehicles.

Having a raised pedestrian-crossing at Second Street, which is also U.S. Highway 93, has not yet been approved by Montana Department of Transportation, he noted, "but MDT is becoming more liberal on those ideas." Improving downtown business should be the priority, not vehicles, he said.

"In every community, the automobile has been the priority," he said. "That created places where people do not want to be."

Flathead County planner and Whitefish resident George Smith said he's seen streetscaping work in Hawaii.

"Drivers will adjust," he said, noting that Whitefish's downtown is a popular topic on the Internet. "Cars don't buy things, people do."

Several downtown business owners expressed concern about who will be responsible for clearing snow from the bulbouts and maintaining the trees and landscaping.

Downtown sidewalks were covered with a thick layer of hard, dangerously slick ice for much of the winter — especially in front of lots without active businesses, but also around depot park, which is half owned by the city.

Stearns said irrigation will be installed for landscaping, but current regulations require adjacent property owners to remove snow from city sidewalks. He said he has asked the parks department to come up with a better plan for snow removal.

When several business owners asked about installing systems to heat sidewalks and keep them ice-free, American Bank president Duane Bauch explained that their system was expensive to install and maintain.

Wilson said he has been directed by the city council to choose "green" alternatives, and heating sidewalks "is as far away from green as you can go."

The new street design will also address ice and snow buildup, Mitchell said. Water will drain away from sidewalk curbs and from the center of the roadway to drains on both sides of the street that are connected to the city's treatment pond at Riverside Park. The new road design will also protect basements from flooding.

Business owner Peter Elespuru expressed his concerns about funding for the streetscaping, at one point spilling a pile of papers and newspaper clippings on the floor that he claimed represented complaints that were rejected by the city.

"Everyone knows there's not enough resort tax money to pay for this," he said.

It's too big a project and will tie up resort tax money for 6-7 years, Elespuru said. People come to Whitefish for entertainment, not shopping, he said, calling for construction of an all-purpose sports arena here.

Mayor Mike Jensen stepped up to address Elespuru's remarks. Most of the city's resort tax revenue comes from downtown merchants, he said, and it's time to put money back in the downtown.

Wilson said the latest engineering design estimate for the downtown project is about \$4.3 million through 2011, but with the recession, he expected bids to come in much lower. He also said the difference between current sidewalk widths and going to 11-foot 6 inches is about \$124,000 — less than 3 percent of the total cost.

"It should be pointed out that most of the money will go to infrastructure work," business owner Mark Svennungsen said. "What we're really deciding is how to put it back together."