

Depot Park Master Plan Final

Whitefish, Montana

February 14, 2012



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WHITEFISH DEPOT PARK MASTER PLAN

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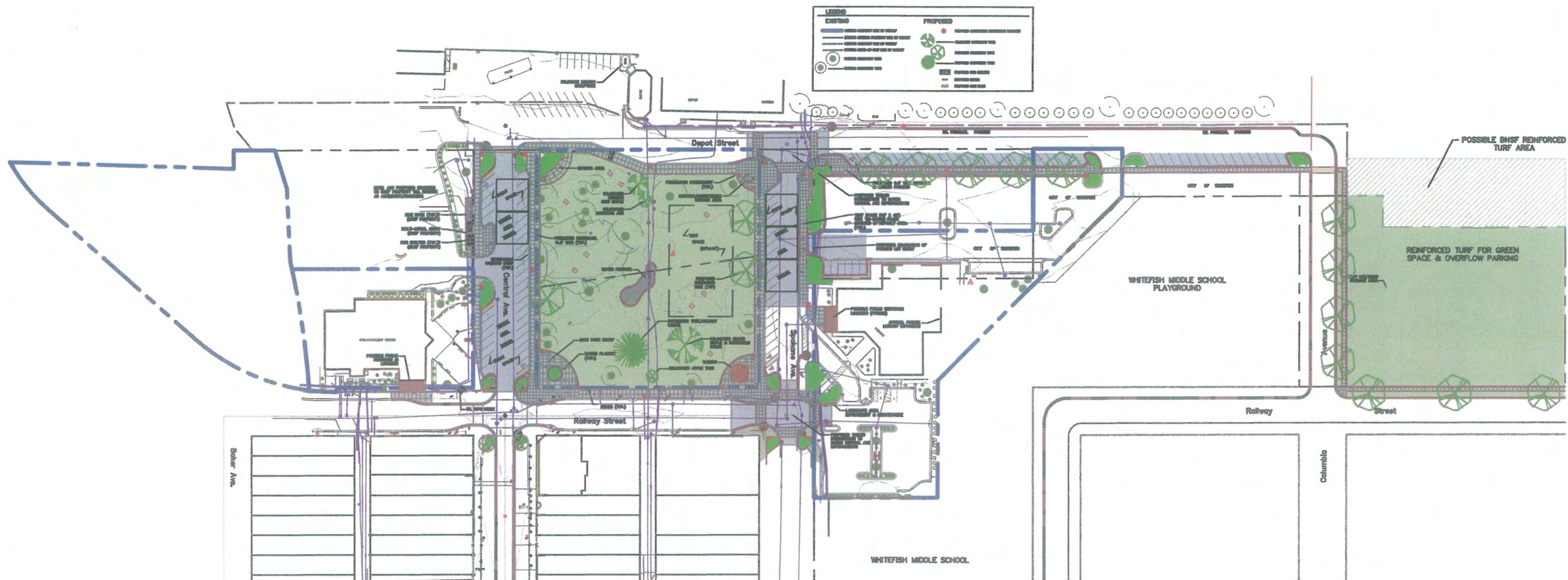
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Depot Park 1961



Depot Park 2006



DEPOT PARK FINAL MASTER PLAN

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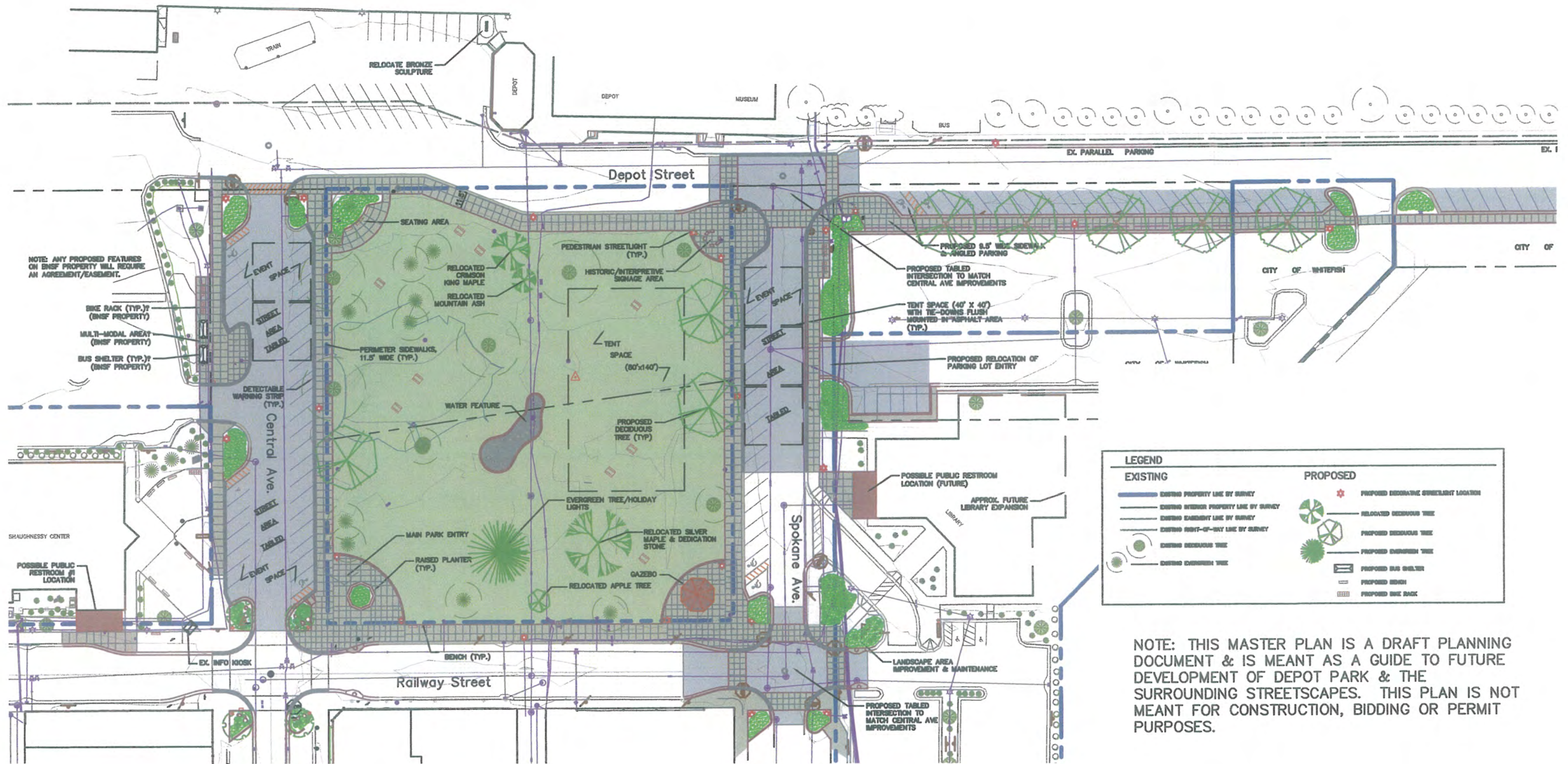
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NOT TO SCALE



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I. Purpose of the Plan

Depot Park is the last open space in the heart of the Whitefish's downtown. It is the venue for many summer festivals and events. It is also a place where families have picnics and one can enjoy a book. This park is loved by residents and visitors alike. It is nestled between the train depot, the city library and the O'Shaughnessy Center at the north end of Whitefish's downtown.



In 2010 the City of Whitefish Parks & Recreation Department decided to develop a Master Plan to address the Depot Park area and the surrounding streetscapes. The intent was to update and enhance the Park to meet the greatly expanded use, make the park more functional for community events, daily use and enjoyment, to create a terminus to the downtown Central Avenue improvements and gateway for the historic Depot building. The Master Plan was to build on the foundational ideas and decisions made in the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan.

The purpose of this plan is to set a vision for the park and lay a foundation for future park development. The plan establishes goals and objectives for park development and use, and identifies next steps.

II. Historical Perspective

Depot Park, the community parkland in the heart of downtown Whitefish, is an essential and dynamic place for community gatherings and events. The park provides a welcome setting for the historic train depot directly to the north and an attractive terminus for Central Avenue. Depot Park has, over the years, experienced an interesting evolution. Originally, the property functioned as railroad property open space and eventually led to serving as the location for temporary railroad housing. From there the property turned to Burlington Northern Credit Union ownership and the credit union structures were built. In 2009 the City of Whitefish acquired the property giving the community a centralized downtown green space in perpetuity. The Park and adjacent streets are both intensively used for events and also provide important support for the downtown business district.



As the park has evolved, so has the downtown area. The area, comprised of the O'Shaughnessy Center, the Whitefish City Library and the associated roads and infrastructure, historically was a vacant lot and a storage area for gravel, snow and automobiles. Private donors, with the City as their partner, made possible the area that exists to serve the public today, known as the Community Center. Depot Park, sitting in the heart of the Community Center area, is host to many community events year round.

Over time, the Park and surrounding streetscapes have evolved. From the 1940's through the 1960's "Depot Street" was primarily a working railroad spur and the Depot's south platform was the loading area and ramps. The properties west and east of Depot Park block were, for the most part, vacant with only temporary uses and very little activity on the streets. Through the 1970's and into the 1980's the west and east parcels served as gravel and snow storage areas and overflow used car lot.

In the 1980's the City of Whitefish began to look at these properties as vital to the future of the Central Business District. When the Mountain Mall on U.S. Highway 93 South was proposed, an alternate mall was proposed on the block west of Depot Park. Though that proposal was never realized, the City's interest in the three blocks remained. The community's and City's vision was realized through adoption of the Community Center Master Plan. Through negotiations the City eventually purchased the blocks west and east of the de facto park block that was under Burlington Northern Credit Union ownership.



Through a public-private partnership the utilities and portions of the surrounding streets, along with the O'Shaughnessy Center and Library were built. The City continued its interest in the Park block and the importance was reaffirmed in the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan [2006]. The City completed purchase of the Park block in 2009.

Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan

The Downtown Business District Master Plan process was begun in 2002 and culminated in the adoption of the plan in 2006. The Plan identified several issues related to Depot Park [called Great Northern Square in the WFDBD Master Plan] that help set the foundation for the Depot Park Master Plan. Most important among those issues is that the Park would remain an open, flexible green space to serve both daily use as well as events. There would be both turf and paved areas, suitable for passive and active uses and possibly some type of a water feature.



Other elements in the Business District Master Plan have an influence on the Park including: a proposed parking structure to the northwest [currently owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe], a proposed pedestrian-bicycle underpass to tie the commercial Railway District to the downtown and the Central Avenue streetscape.

I. Existing Conditions

Location

Depot Park is located in the center of the Community Center area and is the northern anchor to the downtown business district. To the south of the Park, across Railway Street, there are several small businesses and offices. It also serves as the visual foreground and physical link to the historic Whitefish Train Depot. The Depot is a very important center of activity and is the busiest Amtrak Station between Minneapolis and Seattle.

Parkland

The Depot Park property is a city block, consisting of 1.93 acres [84,050 square feet]. Adjacent rights-of-way, often used in conjunction with park events, total 1.51 acres [65,950 square feet]. Together, the entire park area is roughly [3.5 acres 150,000 square feet]. The adjacent rights-of-way are also intensively used in conjunction with the larger events, but they also function for business district parking, vehicle and pedestrian circulation and a visual attraction to the downtown. The Master Plan area includes Depot Street to Columbia Avenue and the east block of the 'community center' area (snow storage lot) and the adjacent Columbia and Railway Street right-of-ways.

The Park's main features are its trees and open lawns. There are two structures within the park boundaries – the former Parkside Credit Union building and the credit union's drive thru. The main building is now home to the City of Whitefish Planning & Building and Parks & Recreation Departments. This building will remain in place until a new city hall is constructed.

Activities

Depot Park is the setting for numerous events including: the weekly Farmers' Market, Huckleberry Days, Art in the Park, Oktoberfest and Taste of Whitefish. It is used for many other events, reunions, receptions, concerts and daily activities. The Park is used daily by the public such as walkers, dog walkers, picnickers, frisbee, family games and school athletes.



II. Depot Park Master Plan

A. Design Goals, Objectives and Recommended Actions

The following goals and objectives shall serve as a vision for the park and guide its development:

- A. Goal: Preserve and enhance the unique character of Depot Park.
- Objectives: Maintain as an open green space, as a terminus of Central Avenue improvements and as a forecourt for the historic Depot building.
Compliment surrounding architecture with proposed park elements.
- Recommended Actions:
Assess the health of the existing trees and preserve to the extent possible
Install Central Avenue standard furnishings.
Develop streetscape dimensions and character to match Central Avenue.

B. Goal: Depot Park will be planned to maximize the flexibility of the parks' space and provide for diverse users.

Objectives: Develop a flexible, open green space that is not highly programmed
Maximize event space and usage.
No permanent structures shall be located within the park

Recommended Actions:

Minimize hardscape within the park – keep hardscape to the perimeter of park.
Remove existing structures in phases.
Develop a covered pavilion for small performances and daily use.
Provide events spaces in streetscape areas.

C. Goal: Enhance the daily use experience in Depot Park.

Objectives: Improved pedestrian access and circulation.
Provide improved open green space for passive recreation.
Provide ample parking and other facilities.

Recommended Actions:

Develop a location for public restrooms.
Develop a water feature area.
Develop a covered pavilion for a gathering/picnic space.
Develop a historical/interpretive signage area.
Increase parking.



D. Goal: Manage Depot Park as one of the last open spaces in downtown.

Objectives: Protect the public investment in the park.
Recognize the varying needs of all of the users of the park.

Recommended Actions:

Develop and implement an operation and maintenance plan to protect Depot Park.
Limit the frequency & size of events.

E. Goal: Develop Depot Park with a 100-year vision.

Objectives: Development of the park will be timeless and have a simple design.
Development of the park will be flexible so as to respond to community evolution and allow for the largest variety of events.

Recommended Actions:

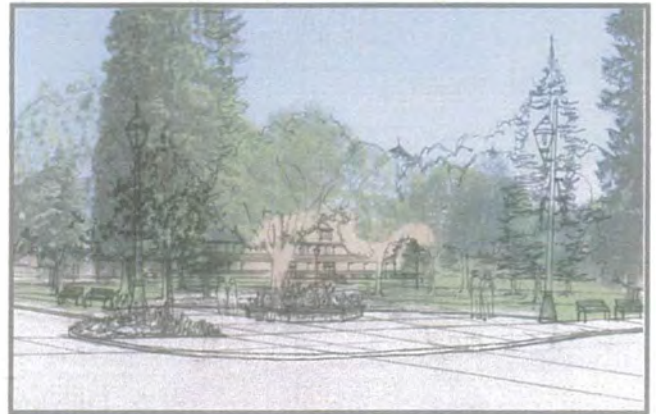
Use quality materials.
Plant long-lasting trees.



B. Depot Park Master Plan Narrative

Summary

The main features of the renovated Park will be the greatly expanded open lawn areas and greatly improved visuals. Approximately 30 % of the Park is currently occupied by structures, paved parking areas and a dilapidated pond. Besides occupying a significant portion of the Park, the existing structures block the visual connection from the business district to the historic Depot. The early removal of the drive-thru portion of the former bank facility along with the associated parking could provide some much needed and immediate additional green space. Eventually, as decided through the public process in the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan and supported by the Depot Park Steering Committee, all the permanent, occupied structures will be removed. The Park perimeter will be enhanced with a newly revitalized streetscape to match the characteristics of the newly re-built Central Avenue. The new streetscape will significantly alter the use patterns at the Park, allowing for much greater flexibility for event staging. There will also be enhanced paved pedestrian areas at the four corners of the Park, meant to act as a backdrop and as gathering/small event spaces. There will also be enhanced benches at the park perimeter and un-anchored picnic tables within the park green space.

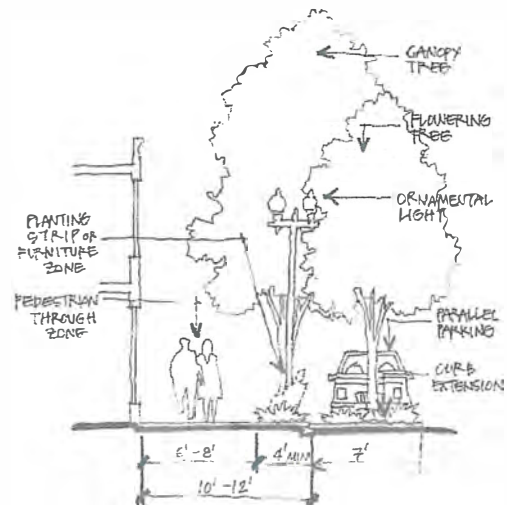


Corners

Each of the corner to the park will provide a unique gateway into Depot Park. The southwest entry to the park will feature a large raised planter to entice downtown users into the Park, provide a seat-height resting area and act as a foreground element to the Park and historic Depot. The northwest corner will primarily be an enhanced seating area among existing trees. The northeast corner, directly across from the Depot, will serve as an historical interpretive area and a gathering space. The southeast corner will have an expanded hard surface area and a 24-foot wide gazebo structure. The gazebo will serve as an informal covered space for daily activities and as a small performance space.

Streets

The adjacent tabled street areas of both Central Avenue and the northern portion of Spokane Avenue are meant to serve as the primary hard surface, intensive use areas—leaving the Park block as primarily open, flexible event and green space. The tabled street areas will add flexibility for events and circulation. One of the streets will remain open at all times. New scored concrete sidewalks will be 11.5-feet in width, new streetlights with flower baskets and banner arms and new street trees, where appropriate, will set the character for the Park.



Pedestrian Emphasis Streetscape Elements



Crown Fountain

Water Feature

Rather than having walkways traversing the Park, there is a water feature proposed as a visually blending attraction at the Park's center. While being unobtrusive, it would be an attractant when either the water jets and/or the lights are activated. The water feature would be flush with the lawn surface and its surface would be made of a dark blue-grey stone to be both visually unobtrusive and allow unrestricted and flexible event use when not activated.

Trees

The existing trees in Depot Park are an important feature. An arborist review of all the existing trees in the Park was undertaken early in the design process. As a result of that review and the renovation of the Park, there will be some changes to the overstory. Four trees of various small caliper will need to be relocated to accommodate new features in the Park and adjacent right-of-way. Twelve trees will need to be removed due to condition or Park renovation. Of those, 5 were identified as dead, 4 in poor condition and 3 in good condition. Four new trees are proposed to be added to the 20 remaining trees. All but one of the existing conifers will remain.

Lawn

The bulk of the Park block will remain as open, flexible lawn area. The lawn area will be updated with turf reinforcement where possible, soil amendments, re-grading and leveling for drainage and enhanced usable areas, new irrigation and sleeving for event tent setup.

Master Plan Features Outside the Park Proper

The following features, while not within the bounds of the park, are important to serve users of the park:

Angle parking on the south side of Depot Street between Spokane and Columbia Avenue.

A multi-modal area north of the O'Shaughnessy Center, to serve those using alternative modes of transportation including bicyclists, the Snow Bus, intercity transit, Rimrock bus service and Amtrak. There will be maps and an information kiosk. There is also a parking structure identified in the Downtown Business Plan.

Enhanced open space lawn area on the block east of the school playground (known as the snow storage lot), to serve the adjacent neighborhoods and be an adjunct space to Depot Park for activities and overflow parking.

Tabled intersections at Spokane Avenue and Depot Street and also Spokane Avenue and Railway Street, to function as additional event space.

Street reconstruction to match Central Avenue and provide more pedestrian friendly environment.

Potential public restroom facilities are also identified at the south side of the O'Shaughnessy Center and the west side of the Library, to serve the daily user of the park and downtown business district.

IV. Public Participation Process

Steering Committee

The Depot Park Steering Committee, appointed by the City Council, was charged guiding the planning process. The Steering Committee met monthly from May 2011 through February 2012. The Committee offered suggestions and input into the design of the Master Plan. Steering Committee members are:

Karl Cozad	Whitefish Parks and Recreation Dept. Director
Chris Hyatt	Whitefish City Council and Park Board
Susan Schnee	Whitefish Park Board
Chris Schustrom	Downtown Business District
Jill Evans	Stumptown Historical Society
Kevin Gartland	Whitefish Chamber of Commerce
Nancy Svenningsen	Farmers Market
John Phelps	At Large
Greg Gundersen	At Large
Tee Baur	At Large

Stakeholders

For the purpose of this plan, stakeholders are groups or entities that either are located in close proximity to the park, have special needs related to park development or are major users of the park facility. At the beginning of the master planning process, staff and the consultant team identified and met with the following stakeholders:

BNSF	Doug Schuch
	Ricco Montini
O'Shaughnessy Center	Carolyn Pittman
Farmers Market	Rhonda Fitzgerald
Chamber of Commerce	Kevin Gartland
Whitefish Christian Acad.	Todd Kotila
School District 5	Kerry Drown
Whitefish Community Library	Joey Kositzky

Also, the Design Team met with stakeholders, as necessary during plan development, to get feedback on specific aspects of the master plan. Overall, stakeholders were in support of the plan and concerns raised during their review were addressed.

Public Open Houses

Public open houses were held at specific points along the design process.

Open House #1 (Thursday June 9, 2011) was held early in the process to preview background and existing conditions information; determine how the park is currently being used; and what works well and what could be improved within the park.

Open House #2 (Wednesday August 10, 2011) presented the Preliminary Master Plan. Designers wanted feedback on proposed elements.

Open House #3 (Wednesday January 25, 2012) presented the final master plan (prior to presentation to Parks Board and City Council for adoption).

In addition, the public provided feedback to the Parks and Recreation Department staff directly throughout the project process which was shared with the Design Team. During the Farmers' Market in the summer of 2012, the Parks Department held an open house to solicit public comments.

V. Expected Next Steps

Adoption of the Master Plan

Following Park Board Review and Public Hearing in February of 2012, there will be a Public Hearing at Whitefish City Council. It is anticipated that the Public Hearing will be scheduled for March 2012.

Funding

The City is currently reviewing and prioritizing projects to be funded out of the Tax Increment Funds. In the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan, Depot Park (Great Northern Square) was listed as one of the five Priority Catalyst Projects, along with Public Parking, Central Ave., City Hall, and Baker Mixed-Use Redevelopment.

Design and Construction

Once funding is in place the City would issue a Request for Qualifications for design and engineering consultants, for the detailed design and construction documents phase of the project.

Following the detailed design work and Council approval, the project could go out for construction bids. Depending on funding, it is possible that the project might need to be phased. Part of the phasing process would be the removal of the Whitefish Planning, Building and Parks & Recreation Department building when a new City Hall is constructed.

