

Whitefish Transportation Plan Urban Corridor Study of US 93 Public Information Meeting #2 Summary (07/17/07)

Introduction

The second public open house informational meeting for the Whitefish Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study of US 93 projects was held on Tuesday, July 17, 2007 in the Whitefish City Council Chambers, 402 East Second Street. The meeting occurred between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m. and included a PowerPoint presentation beginning about 6:15 p.m.

The meeting was attended by the following agency and Consultant Team members:

John Wilson	City of Whitefish
Sheila Ludlow	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Jean Riley	MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section (Helena)
Jeff Key	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Dan Norderud	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)
Scott Randall	Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA - Helena)

Seven (7) members of the public attended the meeting including Nancy Woodruff, a member of the Whitefish City Council. A copy of the sign-in sheet from the meeting is attached; however, not all signed the attendance sheets for the meeting since some joined the meeting as it progressed.

Meeting Purposes

The purposes of the public informational meeting were to:

- Describe work completed to date and review project scope and schedule;
- Discuss the land use assignments made for the planning horizon (year 2030) and how it influences transportation decisions;
- Present preliminary “future year” traffic volumes on the study area road system;
- Describe cursory findings of western route alternatives;
- Provide for open discussion on transportation issues in the Whitefish City Beach area and school areas; and
- Solicit input on the potential for expanding transit service in Whitefish and for an additional railroad crossing in the community.

Meeting Summary

Jeff Key of Robert Peccia & Associates (RPA) began the meeting at 6:15 p.m. and introduced representatives of the City of Whitefish, MDT and Consultant Team members. He then began a PowerPoint presentation focused on the Transportation Plan project.

Mr. Key summarized major work tasks and milestones for the Whitefish Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study projects, and outlined planned public outreach activities. He presented a project schedule that showed completion of the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study documents before the end of 2007.

Mr. Key provided an update of work progress to date for the Transportation Plan and indicated data collection activities began last spring and are ongoing. Some intersections were counted in May and numerous other locations will be counted during July and August to reflect peak seasonal traffic in the community. Average Daily Traffic (ADT) volumes have been collected for major roadways in the Transportation Plan study area and accident data has been analyzed to help identify crash locations. Further, he stated future land use and employment projections have been made and incorporated into the “travel demand model” for the Whitefish area and preliminary model results have been obtained from MDT. Public outreach activities have continued.

He stressed that work for the Whitefish Transportation Plan is taking priority over that for the Urban Corridor Study at this time. Defining overall transportation system needs and desires, recognizing future land use changes, and the travel demand modeling done for the Transportation Plan will provide important information needed to take a focused look at US 93 through Whitefish.

Existing Conditions Summary: Mr. Key presented a series of slides showing existing traffic volumes on major roadways, existing levels of service at key intersections, and crash locations within the study area. He stated the level of service analysis for intersections has not yet been completed due to ongoing data collection at numerous locations.

Land Use Forecasting: Mr. Key then discussed land use forecasting and its importance to the travel demand model. He stated that land use forecasting including the allocation of future dwelling units and the locations of non-retail and retail jobs is crucial to assessing transportation system needs in the future (year 2030 for the Transportation Plan). The projections are based on information from the US Census Bureau and local planning documents like the City’s *Growth Policy Update*, and Downtown Business District Master Plan. He stressed that the Whitefish community is growing and will continue to grow with an increasing impact on traffic volumes.

Mr. Key indicated that projected future dwelling units and jobs are allocated to individual Census Blocks within the study area. The travel demand model used by MDT is sensitive to this information and can reliably predict travel patterns based on the location of dwelling units and jobs. He then presented a series of slides that showed how dwelling units and jobs have been allocated to each Census Block in the study area. He emphasized that projections through the year 2017 are consistent with the City’s Draft Growth Policy and other planning documents. Growth rates after the year

2017 were assumed to remain similar to that recognized in the Growth Policy (3.6% per year). Mr. Key pointed out that this may or may not occur, but the growth rate is a reasonable assumption for the future.

Preliminary Future Traffic Volumes (2030): Mr. Key then showed several slides illustrating year 2030 projected traffic volumes on Whitefish area roadways. The traffic volumes were generated by MDT's travel demand model and reflect future volumes without any improvements to the road system. He stated that comparing future year traffic volumes against the capacities of roadway types in the community helps identify potential problems and roadway needs. Mr. Key selected several Whitefish roadways and presented existing versus future traffic volumes to illustrate notable changes.

Western Route Alternatives: Mr. Key moved onto a series of slides depicting western route connections between US 93 south and US 93 west of Whitefish. He indicated that work directives for the Transportation Plan require RPA to identify and evaluate potential new western routes that might help alleviate traffic on US 93 through the City. He explained that RPA revisited four potential western alignments considered in the Somers-Whitefish Final EIS. The western route alternatives were modeled to determine potential future traffic volumes on each alignment and their impacts on US 93 and parts of the local road system. Model runs were completed both with and without alternate routes in place to determine their potential to reduce traffic on US 93. The preliminary modeling showed alternate routes would attract a notable amount of traffic (typically 7,000-15,000 vehicles in 2030); however, significant traffic volumes would likely continue on the existing US 93 corridor.

John Wilson pointed out the importance of considering and planning for new connections on Whitefish's east side. He felt such routes could help meet long term needs, link schools with the JP Road area, and provide important connections in the Haskill Basin area.

Developing Issues/Open Forum: Jeff Key identified several emerging topics that will need to be considered in the Transportation Plan. These items are discussed below

- **City Beach Area.** Mr. Key showed an aerial photograph of the City Beach area and described existing traffic circulation and parking conditions and highlighted issues associated with pedestrian transportation in the area. He asked the audience for comments regarding improving traffic flows and pedestrian safety.

A member of the audience pointed out that parking for vehicles with boats is limited in the area and that vehicles must negotiate steep roadway sections. John Wilson stated the City's big motivation for looking at this area was to improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, skateboarders, and others. He felt there is a need to enhance trail connections from northeastern portions of Whitefish to City Beach.

- **School Area Circulation Improvements.** Mr. Key shared that RPA had reviewed conditions surrounding Whitefish High School and nearby Muldown Elementary School during May

when school was in session. He listed several circulation and safety problems experienced in this area and described a proposal he was aware of to extend a portion of 8th Street to Ashar Avenue. John Wilson indicated the 8th Street extension has been considered in the past by the City Council. He was not certain the extension would provide many benefits in the area.

- **Transit System Considerations.** Mr. Key described a meeting held with staff from Glacier National Park (GNP) regarding partnering with communities surrounding the park and making use of GNP transit vehicles during the park's off-season. He also asked the audience about how transit travel modes can be integrated into future transportation planning in the Whitefish area. Those in attendance generally felt that expanding transit services would be desirable; however, acknowledged conditions that contribute to low ridership levels.
- **Additional Railroad Grade Separation.** Mr. Key asked the group for ideas on where a new grade separation over the BNSF Railroad might be desirable. He pointed out that there is an existing at-grade crossing east of town on 2nd Street but enhancing the crossing is unlikely. He offered several potential locations for a new grade separation such as Columbia Avenue, East Texas Avenue/Pine Avenue, and in the Cow Coulee area. Those attending generally agreed that a new crossing was desirable and should be included in the Transportation Plan.

John Wilson commented that another railroad overcrossing has been viewed as desirable for many years and locations like those discussed had been mentioned before. He also noted a structure may be hard to justify given its high construction costs and limited funding sources.

A member of the audience asked about the possibility of an undercrossing instead of an overcrossing. John Wilson responded by stating high groundwater in the Whitefish area poses concerns for constructing an undercrossing. Jeff also said ensuring uninterrupted rail traffic could also add to the cost of an undercrossing.

Conclusion: Mr. Key concluded his presentation by summarizing upcoming work efforts. These efforts will focus on developing appropriate long-range recommendations for roadways, intersections, non-motorized infrastructure and transit. The recommended transportation network improvements will be modeled and future model volumes will be used to evaluate design options for US 93 corridor through the City. Design options for US 93 will be developed to maintain efficient traffic flows, address safety for all users, preserve the character of the downtown area and community in general, and ensure compatibility with the Downtown Master Plan and Growth Policy Update.

Public Comments/Questions: The following public comments or questions were heard during the meeting:

- **Has anyone ever looked at the possibility of developing Farm to Market Road from Kalispell to Whitefish as an alternate to US 93?** Mr. Key explained that while Farm to Market Road offers an opportunity for developing a parallel route to US 93, the corridor is

located too far from Whitefish and would not reduce traffic on US 93 through the City.

- **When will the next public meeting occur?** Mr. Key explained that the next series of meetings should occur near the end of September or in early October. Members of the audience suggested ensuring an article about the Transportation Plan and the third public meeting appears in the Whitefish Pilot.

The meeting concluded at about 7:30 p.m.

WHITEFISH

TRANSPORTATION PLAN URBAN CORRIDOR STUDY OF U.S. 93

SIGN IN SHEET

PUBLIC MEETING NO. 2 July 17th, 2007

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