

# WHITEFISH MONTANA

## SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT PLAN



# WHITEFISH

• MONTANA •

## CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### Adopted

September 21, 2020

Cover photo: Chuck Haney.  
Additional photos provided by: Explore Whitefish, Visit Montana,  
Brian Schott, City of Whitefish, Kathleen McMahon



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of people spending time in Whitefish, especially during the peak summer season. There is concern that too much visitation will diminish the quality of life that the community values and that visitors find so attractive. The purpose of this Plan is to promote sustainable community-based tourism development that is beneficial to community members, employees, and visitors.

***“Sustainable Tourism: A sustainable approach to tourism means that neither the natural environment nor the socio-cultural fabric of the host communities will be impaired by the arrival of tourists. On the contrary, the natural environment and the local communities should benefit from tourism, both economically and culturally. Sustainability implies that tourism resources and attractions should be utilized in such a way that their subsequent use by future generations is not compromised.”***

(Source: World Tourism Organization)

A resident survey showed concerns related to housing prices, traffic, infrastructure, and community character. While residents identified challenges related to growth in visitation, they also recognized the benefits that accompany the tourism industry. These include positive economic impact from nonresident visitors that contributed \$614 million to the regional economy in Flathead County in 2018. Each year skiers at Whitefish Mountain Resort contribute \$12.1 million to the economy and Whitefish Trail visitors contribute \$6.4 million in consumer spending. The resort tax provides funding for roads, parks, other infrastructure, and a portion allocated for a property tax rebate.

This Plan relies on community input to identify fundamental values that underlie plan recommendations. These values are expressed as the three key pillars.

### KEY PILLARS



Data regarding population growth, new construction, and visitation reveal that nonresident tourists only account for a portion of the increase in summer crowds. Whitefish experienced a 3% annual average population growth rate since 2010 while Flathead County experienced an annual average growth rate of 2% per year. In addition to this population increase, there has been corresponding growth in seasonal/vacation homes that are primarily used during the peak summer months. New hotel construction has contributed to visitor growth but the increase in short-term rentals, through companies such as AirBnB and VRBO, has far outpaced the number of new hotel rooms. All these factors contribute to increased traffic, higher housing costs, workforce shortages, longer wait times at restaurants, and user conflicts on trails.

Trends also indicate that tourism growth will continue over the next decade or longer. As visitors discover Whitefish, many choose

to relocate to the area, generating more population growth. The airport is expanding, and more flights will bring more visitors to the area. National Park visitation has increased nationwide, with Glacier National Park recording record visitation in recent years. Visitors and locals use social media to share their vacation experiences, generating even more interest in visiting the area. While the Convention and Visitor Bureau focuses on marketing off-season activities, businesses and state agencies continue to market Glacier Country during summer months.

While the pillars represent the overarching principles, five specific focus areas were identified to provide an organizational framework for addressing priority issues. Within each focus area, are recommended goals and actions to address concerns that emerged from public input and the data analysis. The table below indicates the page number to find the list of actions for each focus area.

Focus Area	Action Item
Tourism	pg. 26
Economic Diversification	pg. 55
Housing & Development	pg. 78
Environment	pg. 99
Transportation	pg. 113

Although Whitefish has little control over the trends that underlie this growth, it can take action to respond and manage the growth that is occurring. Several initiatives are underway to address concerns. The City is implementing recommendations from the “Workforce Housing Strategic Plan” and recently adopted a “Parking Management Plan.” The City enacted a water conservation ordinance in 2019, and upgrades to the wastewater treatment plan will commence in 2020. Other plans include “Downtown Business District Master Plan,” “Connect Whitefish Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan,” “Climate Action Plan,” and “Wisconsin Avenue Corridor Plan.” Given the work already completed, the “Sustainable Tourism Management Plan” builds on these processes, establishes next steps, and identifies actions to maintain the quality of life.

Such a framework includes the following steps for completing this plan.

1. Inventory and define the problem
2. Include the public to develop solutions
3. Identify initial actions to build capacity
4. Identify strategies to address key issues
5. Measure, monitor, and adjust

A community workshop solicited suggestions on policy and action items that are reflected in these recommendations. The implementation chapter compiles the recommended actions from each of the focus areas and identifies the following high priorities actions. Implementation depends on partnerships between community organizations, state/federal agencies, funders, and businesses.

### High Priority Organizational Actions

- **Benchmarking & Data Collection:** Indicators to monitor progress and process to refine data
- **Appoint Standing Committee:** Responsible for implementing plan
- **Business Survey:** Identify support for buy local, green business, workforce development
- **Education & Outreach:** Promote responsible tourism and recreation

### High Priority Issue Oriented Actions

- **Short-Term Rentals:** Enforce, educate, zoning for parking, incentives for long-term rentals
- **Recycling:** Research and expand opportunities for recycling, support local recycling businesses, and reduce overall waste
- **Funding:** Legislature outreach to secure funding for various programs in 2021 Legislative session
- **Wildfire:** Emergency Preparedness – Education, outreach, coordination, firesafe best practices
- **Transportation:** Transit, park-n-ride, employee parking permits, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities

## Work Program

	2020		2021				2022
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Qtr	4 <sup>th</sup> Qtr	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr	2 <sup>nd</sup> Qtr	3 <sup>rd</sup> Qtr	4 <sup>th</sup> Qtr	1 <sup>st</sup> Qtr
Education -Outreach Campaign Dev.	█	█	█				
Education – Outreach Implementation		█	█	█	█	█	
Appoint Tourism Standing Committee		█					
Business Survey		█	█				
Recycling Research		█	█				
Fire Preparedness Workshop - Audits	█				█		
Legislative Outreach		█	█	█			
Update Trail User Policies			█	█			
Summer/Special Event Shuttle – Policies		█				█	
Benchmarking – Data Collection Project				█	█	█	
Refine Whitefish Brand Guides				█			
Update STR Zoning-Parking regulations.				█	█		
Incentivize STR conversion to workforce housing				█	█	█	█
Downtown Employee Parking permit	█	█	█	█			
Pilot Park-N-Ride – Carpool program					█	█	█
<b>Coordination Activities</b>							
US 93 Urban Core Transportation Plan	█	█	█				
Whitefish Transportation Plan	█	█	█				
County Transit Plan	█	█	█				
Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan	█	█	█	█			
City Growth Policy Update						█	█

**To Be Scheduled:**

- Landlord – Realtor Education
- Day Care Initiative
- Car share Feasibility Study (If employer interest)
- Worker Apprenticeship Programs thru FVCC
- Business Incubator
- Commercial Space Inventory
- Impaired Driving Prevention Grant
- Commercial space inventory
- Local Investment Cooperative
- Urban Wildlife Management Plan
- Historic Preservation Survey
- Gateway Treatments
- Update Architectural Design Guidelines
- Dig Once/Open Trench Policies
- Update BNSF response plan
- Sustainable/smart parking designs
- County zoning – proposed amendments
- Homeless prevention
- Broadband Task Force
- Coordinate with public health on air quality