

VISION WHITEFISH 2045

CITY OF WHITEFISH GROWTH POLICY UPDATE

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Adopted by City Council July 17, 2023



INTENT OF THIS PLAN

The City of Whitefish is preparing to revise and update its Growth Policy. The Growth Policy represents a community's vision of how it wants to grow and change - how it will develop its land, redevelop older areas, ensure adequate housing, provide roads and sewers, protect natural areas, and meet other community and statutory objectives while still preserving its community character.

The City of Whitefish believes community participation is a critical component of the planning process and recognizes that policy and planning decisions about land use, housing, transportation, and capital facilities do not impact us all in the same way. Providing the opportunity

for public input encourages citizens to be invested in the future of their community and helps ensure recommendations developed as part of the Growth Policy update are implemented and sustained over time. Community members are holders of local knowledge. It is the responsibility of the City to listen, elevate, and consider community voices during the planning process. Robust and inclusive community engagement is a vital component of drafting and updating a Growth Policy.

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“This Public Engagement Plan describes how community members and stakeholders will be engaged throughout the planning process.”

This Public Engagement Plan describes how community members and stakeholders will be engaged throughout the planning process. It is intended to raise awareness of the Growth Policy update, provide a roadmap for the public to outline a clear and accessible public process, ensure input is sought and

considered from a broad range of participants, and make a sincere effort to ensure elected and appointed officials and staff are fully aware of and understand community and stakeholder concerns. This document is intended to act as a living document to help City staff and stakeholders understand what methods of outreach and engagement are most effective during this process, how to customize the process based on most successful engagement methods, and where improvements can be made for future efforts.

WHAT IS A GROWTH POLICY?

Montana Code Annotated (MCA) requires a Growth Policy ¹ be prepared for any City of more than 5,000 people which is in a county with a population greater than 70,000.

A Growth Policy is an official public document adopted and used by Montana cities, towns, and counties as a guide for making decisions about their future, particularly with regards to land use. A Growth Policy is not a regulation; however, a Growth Policy provides the legal basis for adopting or updating of zoning or subdivision regulations which can be used to achieve the goals of the plan. While the statutory requirements for a Growth Policy focus primarily on land use, the document also addresses topics such as economic development, housing needs, local services, infrastructure, natural environment as well as other issues of importance to each individual community.

The Montana Code Annotated requires the Growth Policy be reviewed and updated, if necessary, at least every 5 years. The City of Whitefish's Growth Policy was adopted in 2007, with recent corridor plans and other specific plans (such as the Downtown Master Plan) providing updates. Given the amount of time elapsed since the approval of the original Growth Policy, the City Council has made it a high priority to review and update it and incorporate more recent corridor and specific plans into a single, cohesive document. A Growth Policy is required to plan 20 years into the future, which is why this Plan is called "Vision 2045."

MONTANA STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Montana Code Annotated requires the governing body adopt a public engagement plan² detailing how a local government provided continuous public participation when adopting, amending or updating a growth policy. These requirements include:

- Dissemination of draft documents.
- Opportunities for written and verbal comments.
- Electronic communication regarding the process, including online access to documents and comments.
- Analysis and response to public comments.
- Public meetings after effective notice. Notice must clearly specify the nature of the land use plan under consideration, what comments the local government is seeking, and how the public may participate.
- Retention of records regarding how public outreach and participation was performed.

Throughout the adoption, amendment, or update of the land use plan or regulation processes, a local government shall emphasize that:

¹ "Growth Policy" is the term used by a previous version of the MCA and is the name of the City's existing document; recent State Statutory updates refer to a "Land Use Plan," although "Comprehensive Plan" or "Community Plan" are also synonymous terms.

² Called a "Public Participation Plan" by the MCA

- The Growth Policy is intended to identify the opportunities for development of land within the planning area for housing, business, agriculture, and the extraction of natural resources while acknowledging and addressing the impacts of that development on adjacent properties, the community, the natural environment, public services and facilities, and natural hazards.
- The final adopted land use plan, including amendments or updates, comprises the basis for implementing land use regulations in substantial compliance with the land use plan.
- The scope of and opportunity for public participation and comment on site-specific development in substantial compliance with the land use plan must be limited only to those impacts or significantly increased impacts that were not previously identified and considered in the adoption, amendment, or update of the land use plan, zoning regulations, or subdivision regulations.

This Public Engagement Plan addresses all statutory requirements for public participation as follows:

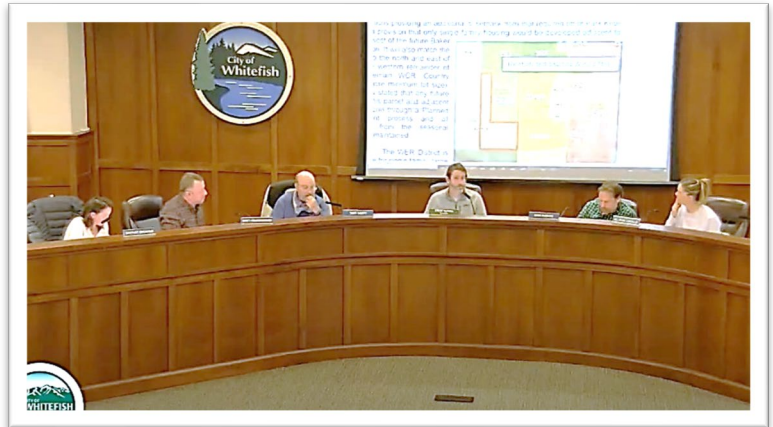
- Document drafts will be disseminated through a public engagement website, announcement on the City's main webpage, subscribers will be alerted through email notifications when drafts are posted, and drafts will be made available for review at all related public meetings. These are all opportunities for written and verbal comments. Public comment and staff analysis and responses to such will also be made available on the engagement website and in correspondence to the Planning Board and City Council. Staff will respond directly to all emails.
 - Notice of all meetings will be provided through news release, email notifications, the project webpage, social media, legal notices and postings on the door of City Hall. The Growth Policy will contain a section on how public outreach and participation was performed and the nature of input received.
 - During the town hall kick-off meeting, visioning sessions, and public meetings regarding the land use and housing elements, it will be emphasized that the Growth Policy is intended to identify the opportunities for community growth while acknowledging and addressing impacts. It will be publicly noted that the final adopted Plan will comprise the basis for implementation of land use regulations, and as mandated by the State, the scope of public comments on site specific development will be limited to new or significantly increased impacts not initially considered. The revised Growth Policy will also reference these requirements.
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ROLE OF DECISION MAKERS, COMMITTEES AND STAFF

Whitefish Planning Board

The City of Whitefish Planning Board is appointed by the City Council and consists of seven members, including one member of the City Council. ***Under Montana Code Annotated, a Planning Board is the public entity authorized to prepare a Growth Policy at the request of the City Council.*** The Planning Board will direct City Staff on preparation of the Growth Policy and will review the draft update on a chapter-by-chapter basis.

The Planning Board meets on the third Thursday of the month at 6PM. When discussions regarding the Growth Policy are needed, the Board has reserved 5PM prior to the regularly scheduled Planning Board meeting for work sessions. At these work sessions, the Board will provide opportunities for public comment while providing feedback and recommendations to City Staff. When the Growth Policy is completed, the Planning Board is required to give notice and hold a public hearing on the Growth Policy and by resolution recommend to the governing body (City Council) that the Growth Policy be adopted, not adopted or that the governing body take some other action related to preparation of a Growth Policy. All Planning Board and City Council public hearings and work sessions will be noticed and announced on the Growth Policy Website and meeting agendas.



Under Montana statute, a Planning Board is the public entity authorized to prepare a Growth Policy at the request of the City Council.

City Council

Montana Code Annotated (MCA) designates the Whitefish City Council as the governing body and the final decision maker on the Growth Policy. Council Members will be notified of all public engagement opportunities and will be invited to participate in the entire planning process. The Council will receive periodic briefings on the update and will review the Planning Board recommendations on the Growth Policy. Following a recommendation of the Planning Board, the governing body is required to adopt a resolution of intention to adopt, adopt with revisions or reject the proposed Growth Policy. The Council will hold several public hearings on the final draft of the Growth Policy.

Advisory Committees

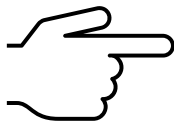
The City has several additional advisory committees that will have input into portions of the Growth Policy. Advisory committees are formed as a means of facilitating information exchange regarding a proposed project or specific topic. Advisory committees are not decision-making bodies but can

provide an important two-way communication link between the City and the public. The following committees will be invited to be involved and to provide feedback:

- Whitefish Park Board
- Pedestrian and Bicycle Path Advisory Committee
- Climate Action Plan Committee
- Whitefish Community Housing Committee
- Sustainable Tourism Committee
- Whitefish Tree Advisory Committee

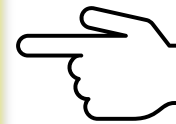
City Staff

Professional City Planners on staff will schedule and facilitate all types of public engagement and write and present Growth Policy materials to the community, Planning Board and City Council for review. They will revise documents as needed and provide materials in a timely manner. Staff will make every effort to use plain language in all materials and presentations and explain subject matter thoroughly. There is a project manager to serve as a central contact for the public and stakeholders and to participate in and help coordinate all facets of the Growth Policy and Public Engagement Plan.



**The Project Manager for the Growth Policy
Update is:**

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PARTICIPANTS / AUDIENCE

Below are some of the audiences to be invited to participate in the 2023 Growth Policy update. Please refer to the “Opportunities for Public Participation” and “Plan Update Phases and Engagement Methods” sections below for specifics.

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC TO ENGAGE

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Property Owners | Renters |
| Business Owners | Service Workers |
| Youth | Seniors |

COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS TO ENGAGE

| | |
|--|--|
| Chamber of Commerce | Moose Lodge |
| Citizens for Better Flathead | Montana West Economic Development |
| Community Action Partnership of NW Montana | North Valley Food Bank |
| Convention and Visitor's Bureau | NW Montana Community Land Trust |
| Faith-based organizations | NW Montana Association of Realtors |
| Flathead Area Mountain Bikers | Project Whitefish Kids |
| Flathead Audubon Society | Rotary Club |
| Flathead Builders Association | Save Farmland |
| Flathead Families for Responsible Growth | Shelter Whitefish |
| Flathead Fat Tires | Under the Big Sky / Big Mountain Ranch |
| Flathead Valley Ski Foundation | VFW |
| Glacier National Park Conservancy | Whitefish Community Center |
| Glacier Nordic Club | Whitefish Community Foundation |
| Habitat for Humanity | Whitefish Housing Authority |
| Heart of Whitefish | Whitefish Lake Institute |
| Housing Whitefish | Whitefish Legacy Partners |
| Homeowner's Associations | Whitefish Mountain Resort |
| Logan Health | |

GOVERNMENT AND QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES TO ENGAGE

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| BNSF | Montana Dept of Environmental Quality |
| City of Columbia Falls | Montana Dept of Natural Resources |
| Eagle Transit | Montana Dept of Natural Resources & Conservation |
| Flathead County Planning Department | Montana Dept of Transportation |
| Flathead Conservation District | Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks |
| Flathead Basin Commission | Montana League of Cities and Towns |
| Flathead County Planning Board | Snow Bus |
| Flathead National Forest | Trust for Public Land |
| Glacier National Park | US National Park |
| Whitefish School District | |

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There will be a myriad of ways for the public to participate in the Growth Policy update. Engagement opportunities will range from an online engagement portal, in person visioning workshops and town hall meetings to formal work sessions and public hearings.

a. Vision Whitefish 2045 Website and Engage Whitefish

The City has developed an online public engagement website at www.engagewhitefish.com, which will be an all-in-one resource for the public for information and participation in the Growth Policy update. Information will be provided through regular updates, newsletters, a calendar of upcoming events and posting of text, documents, and video recordings of meetings. Participation will be possible through message boards viewable to the public to allow discussion and response to Growth Policy topics or feedback, online map “widgets” where users can place markers in geographic locations and offer suggestions, and survey and comment input boxes embedded within content on the website. Users will be able to subscribe to the site to receive alerts based on personalized preferences. This website site will provide an easily accessible method for the dissemination of draft documents and opportunities for written and verbal comments as required by recent State Statute.

Staff has developed an online public engagement platform at www.engagewhitefish.com which will serve as an all-in-one resource for information and allow community participation through such tools as message boards, interactive mapping applications, and surveys.

In addition to the benefit of allowing users to engage and interact online, the website will make it possible for community members who might not typically attend public meetings or workshops due to reluctance, job situations, financial constraints, childcare needs or other difficulties, to participate in the Growth Policy update process at their convenience. This online platform has been successful and well-received in cities such as Bozeman, Missoula, and Belgrade, Montana. Staff anticipates the engagement site going live in June of 2023.

b. Visioning Workshops

The community vision is the driving force of a comprehensive growth policy. Before you build a house, you need blueprints. Before blueprints, you need a mental picture of what you are going to build. Visioning allows the community to make a mental picture of what they want Whitefish to be in twenty years, and the Growth Policy is the blueprint. Early in the process, staff will facilitate visioning workshops with the public both in person and virtually to establish the vision of what Whitefish should be, and the goals and policies of the Plan will help to manifest that vision. Visioning will look at the community as a whole, as well as various neighborhoods in the community. The number and topic of these visioning workshops will be determined as the project moves forward and public engagement commences. Some of the visioning topics may include:

- *What do we want our city to be like in twenty years?*
- *What is truly special about our community and needs to be preserved?*
- *What things need to change and be improved in the years ahead?*
- *What outside forces are threatening or shaping our community and how do we manage them?*
- *What does “community character” mean and what are the best examples?*
- *How and where do we grow sustainably while respecting our community character?*

*The **vision** is the dream. The **plan** is the blueprint.*

*The **vision** describes. The **plan** analyzes.*

*The **vision** is poetry. The **plan** is prose.*

*The **vision** is about possibilities. The **plan** is about policies.*

*The **vision** describes what. The **plan** shows how.*

*The **vision** is an aspiration. The **plan** is a legal document.*

*The **vision** appeals to imagination. The **plan** appeals to reason.*

*The **vision** is striven for. The **plan** is implemented.*

c. Open Houses

Open Houses allow community members to view plan drafts, data, and maps in a casual environment where people can come and go as their schedules allow and talk with staff informally. Open Houses will generally occur over a long time period in order to accommodate as many people as possible. Open Houses will include summaries of public input to date, draft maps, plan outlines, slide shows, and goals and objectives reached to date for various planning topics. Staff anticipates the open house meeting format will be utilized when presenting drafts of major plan elements to the public. At Open Houses, there will be opportunity for public input on all the information available. No decisions are made at Open Houses.

d. Town Hall Meetings

Town Hall meetings address the public directly. Staff anticipates the initial “kick-off” meeting to be a Town-Hall style meeting to allow staff to give a general overview of the project and presentation of existing conditions information. Town Hall meetings will allow the public to provide input and ideas and ask questions. Staff anticipates another Town Hall style meeting approximately halfway through the process to check in with the community on how the process has been going thus far and get further community feedback.



Town Hall Meetings include a presentation, with time provided for questions and comments.

e. Presentations to Civic Groups

Depending on the topic, there could be presentations about the Growth Policy to groups such as senior or veteran’s groups or local schools. Any community group is welcome to contact Staff and request a presentation.

f. Advisory Committees / Focus Groups

Planning Staff may use the City’s existing committees for guidance and feedback on elements of the project, or to assemble or assist work groups or outreach to the community. The Whitefish Community Housing Committee is one advisory committee that could play an important part in the housing element.

g. Work Sessions

Work sessions are held before regular Planning Board and City Council meetings when needed. Work sessions are informal meetings for Staff, the Planning Board and Council to discuss the project, ask questions and offer input. While no official action is taken, informal direction will be given to Staff. These meetings are open to the public and time is allocated for public comment. The Planning Board meets on the third Thursday of the month. When discussions regarding the Growth Policy are needed, the Planning Board has set aside an hour before regular Planning Board meetings, and discussions could continue after the regular meeting if additional time is necessary. Check the City Website, the Growth Policy Engagement Website, or the Planning Board agendas for scheduled work sessions.

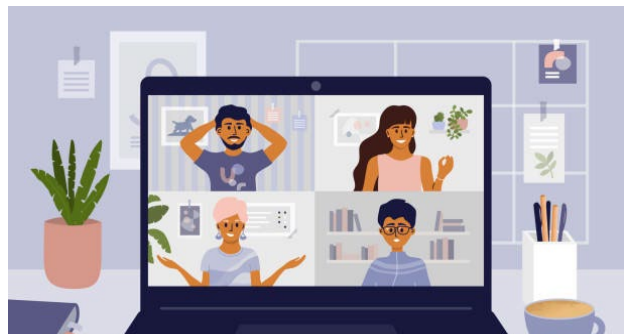
Staff intends to use Town Hall style meetings for the “kickoff” meeting. Visioning workshops will occur early in the process after the kickoff meetings. Open House style meetings will be used for presenting maps and plan drafts. The Planning Board will offer staff direction regarding the Growth Policy in work sessions. The final draft of the Plan will be presented to the Planning Board and City Council in public hearings. Public input and comment will be welcomed at all meetings.

h. Public Hearings

Public hearings are official meetings of the Planning Board and City Council where formal action is taken. All meetings are open to the public, recorded, and posted to the Planning Board and City Council webpage. At least one formal hearing of the Planning Board and City Council is required by Montana State Statute to adopt the final Plan, but the Board and Council will hold several. The public may attend and comment at all public hearings. Notice of these meetings will be provided through such methods as a news release, email notification, project webpage, social media, legal notices and postings on the door of City Hall.

i. Virtual Meetings

Staff will provide remote options for town hall meetings and visioning opportunities. Links will be provided on the project website and any additional communications regarding the project. Staff intends to record all work sessions and post them on the project website, along with any presentations and/or handouts, for the public to review.



Staff intends to provide the option for remote participation whenever possible.

TOOLS FOR OUTREACH

Below are the methods that the City will use to notify the public of the Growth Policy update process. The City will actively alert appropriate media outlets with project updates at applicable milestones throughout the Growth Policy process.



- ✓ Website - As mentioned above, Staff is presently in the process of developing an online public engagement platform at www.engagewhitefish.com which will serve as an all-in-one resource for information and allow public participation.
- ✓ Public Service Announcements – Staff will contact local television and radio stations in the Flathead Valley to request public service announcements regarding the kick-off meeting.
- ✓ Press Releases – Press releases of the initial kickoff meeting and public hearings on the final draft will be given in the Whitefish Pilot and the Daily Interlake
- ✓ Legal and Public Notice – All upcoming Planning Board and City Council public hearings and work sessions regarding the Growth Policy update will be posted on the City Agenda Center Webpage, at the front door of City Hall, the Growth Policy Website, and the City Facebook Page. The City Agenda Center is located at:

<https://www.cityofwhitefish.org/AgendaCenter>
- ✓ Email – Staff will compile a list of all interested parties, as well as proactively email identified public and community organizations regarding all public meetings, proposed plan elements, work groups, etc. The website, which is being developed will also allow the ability to subscribe to email notifications.
- ✓ Mass Mailing – Information regarding the project and the upcoming kick-off meeting will be mailed to every address in the 59937 zip code.
- ✓ Utility Bills – Staff will provide information in utility bills announcing the project with website and information regarding the kick-off meeting.
- ✓ City of Whitefish Facebook Page - The City of Whitefish has an official Facebook Page. Staff will ensure upcoming meetings, drafts of the Plan, Growth Policy news and other opportunities for engagement are announced on this page. Another option staff is researching is what is

known as “geo-targeting,” which are Facebook and Instagram ads which show up in the news feed for users within a specific geographic area.

- ✓ City Newsletter – The city newsletter is published twice a year. Staff intends to give project updates in this newsletter.
- ✓ Flyers – Staff intends to post fliers informing of the project, the website and the kick-off meeting around town, including within local businesses and at major employers.

Some of the methods of engagement and outreach include websites, social media, press releases, mass mailings, email, utility bills, and attendance and outreach at community events.

- ✓ Cover Art Solicitation – Staff will advertise a request for proposed artwork for the branding and cover of the Growth Policy. This could help introduce local artists and more of the community to the project and foster public ownership of the Plan.
- ✓ Civic and Community Events – To engage with members of the public unable to attend formal meetings or are unaware of the Growth Policy update, the City may set up a booth or table at community events to provide exposure regarding the Growth Policy update, provide information and speak with the public one-on-one at community events. Some of these events may include:

- Whitefish Farmers Market
- Christmas Stroll
- October Fest

- ✓ Local Schools - Staff is in communication with faculty at Whitefish High School to discuss how the Growth Policy Update can inspire a class project.

- ✓ Informational Displays - Information can be posted on poster boards and similar displays in public locations such as the City Hall Lobby, Whitefish Library, and the Whitefish Wave.



The Christmas Stroll is one community event staff may use to provide information regarding the Growth Policy update.

Photo acquired from the Whitefish Pilot
<https://whitefishpilot.com/news/2022/dec/14/photos-christmas-stroll-takes-over-central-avenue-/>

PLAN UPDATE PHASES AND ENGAGEMENT METHODS

To organize the complex process of updating the Plan, Staff has broken the project into phases. Each phase will have distinct tasks and identify the public participation opportunities to offer input to shape the Growth Policy (Engagement Methods). Please note the completion months for each step are estimates.

| PHASE | ESTIMATED TIME | TASKS | ENGAGEMENT METHODS |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---|---|
| Kickoff and Public Outreach | 1-3 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website development • Raise public awareness • Solicit public preferences • Provide overview of the project • Solicit cover artwork • Presentation of existing conditions • Identify issues and opportunities • Student involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Town Hall Meeting(s) • Planning Board • Separate virtual meeting • Email Blast • Facebook Page • Community events (depending on time of year) • Offer community groups presentations • Communication with Whitefish High School |
| Visioning | 1-2 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visioning (Staff anticipates multiple workgroup style meetings, depending on geographic areas) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Student Project • Workshops • Planning Board • Separate virtual meeting • Email |
| Land Use and Housing Elements | 6-8 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing documents • Identify specific character areas • Collaboration with housing agencies such as Shelter Whitefish, Housing Whitefish, etc. • Possible formation of work groups • Identification / mapping of land use / housing. • Review / discuss statutory requirements. • Drafting and review of text and policies • Potential annexation areas • Review and revisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Open houses • Planning Board and City Council Work Sessions • Separate virtual meeting. • Website • Email • Facebook • Community events • Potential Work Groups • Direct outreach to housing advocates and larger employers |

| PHASE | ESTIMATED TIME | TASKS | ENGAGEMENT METHODS |
|--|----------------|--|--|
| Community Check In (How are we doing?) Town Hall Meeting(s) | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Town Hall Meetings • Planning Board • Email • Facebook Page • Virtual Meetings |
| Transportation Element | 1-2 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing documents and existing conditions • Outreach to transportation-related agencies • Meet with City departments and other agencies and city / county governments • Discussion of existing transportation plans • Drafting of Plan Element • Open House • Revisions to Plan Element | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Open House Meeting • Planning Board • Website • Email • Facebook Page |
| Economic Development Element | 1-2 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing documents and existing conditions • Possible hiring of consultants • Data prep / review • Discussions with stakeholders such as Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Bureau • Review of previous economic studies and existing Growth Policy • Drafting and review of text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Planning Board • Website • Facebook Page • Email • Direct outreach to stakeholders |

| PHASE | ESTIMATED TIME | TASKS | ENGAGEMENT METHODS |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Environment Element | 2-4 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of existing documents and existing conditions • Discussions with environmental agencies • Review of climate action plan • Review of EPA maps and analysis • Review of Whitefish Lake Foundation information • Possible special work sessions with Climate Action Committee • Drafting and review of text and policies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Planning Board • Facebook Page • Workgroup with Climate Action Committee • Website • Email |
| Public Facilities | 2-3 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of existing conditions • Review of existing documents and existing conditions • Meet with Public Works and other City departments • Drafting and review of text and policies. • Review of infrastructure capacity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Planning Board • Website • Email |
| Parks, Open Space & Trails | 1-2 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with Parks and Recreation • Meet with Park Board • Review of existing documents and existing conditions • Review of adjacent municipalities' plans • Mapping • Outreach to Flathead County • Outreach to Whitefish Legacy Partners and Stolz Lumber • Drafting and review of text and policies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Planning Board • Facebook Page • Email |

| PHASE | ESTIMATED TIME | TASKS | ENGAGEMENT METHODS |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| Other Required Elements | 2-4 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and include annexation policy • Review and include subdivision policy • Review and drafting of coordination with other agencies section | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Town hall meeting • Separate virtual meeting • Website • Email |
| Final Draft | 2-3 Months | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout and design • Presentation of final plan draft for review and comment. • Revisions to plan as directed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Website • Planning Board work session/ hearings • City Council work session and hearings • Open Houses • Email • Facebook Page |