

CITY OF WHITEFISH

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PLAN

UPDATED APRIL 20, 2026



INTENT OF THIS PLAN

This Public Engagement Plan describes how the public will be engaged throughout any subsequent community plan updates, regulatory updates or site specific developments pursuant to the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA) Montana Code Annotated 76-25. It is intended to raise awareness, 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 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, how to customize the process based on most successful engagement methods, and where improvements can be made for future efforts.

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, development and capital facilities do not impact us all in the same way. Providing the

“The City of Whitefish believes community participation is a critical component of the planning process. It is the responsibility of the city to listen and consider community voices during the planning process.”

opportunity for public input encourages citizens to be invested in the future of their community and helps ensure community plans and development regulations are updated, 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.

STATUTORY PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

MLUPA requires a governing body to adopt a public engagement plan¹ detailing how the local government provides continuous public participation when adopting, amending or updating a community plan or regulations. 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.

¹ Called a “Public Participation Plan” by the MCA

- 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.

MLUPA requires, throughout the adoption, amendment, or update of a community plan, a local government emphasize:

- The community plan is intended to identify opportunities for development of land within the planning area for housing, business, agriculture, and the extraction of natural resources while acknowledging and addressing impacts of development on adjacent properties, the community, the natural environment, public services and facilities, and natural hazards.
- The final adopted community plan, including amendments or updates, comprises the basis for implementing land use regulations in substantial compliance with the community plan.
- The scope of and opportunity for public participation and comment on site-specific developments in substantial compliance with the community plan or land regulations must be limited only to new impacts or significantly increased impacts 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 can be alerted through email notifications when drafts are posted, and drafts will be made available for review before and at all related public meetings. These are all opportunities for written and verbal comments. Public comment and staff analysis and responses are also available on the engagement website and in correspondence to the Planning Commission and City Council. Staff will respond directly to all emails.
 - Notice of all meetings are provided through news releases, email notifications, any project webpages, social media, legal notices and postings on the door of City Hall. The community plan contains a section on how public outreach and participation was performed and the nature of input received.
 - During any town hall meetings, visioning sessions, and public meetings, it will be emphasized that community plan updates are intended to identify the opportunities for community growth while acknowledging and addressing impacts. It will be publicly noted that adopted plan(s) will comprise the basis for implementation of land use regulations and, as mandated by the State, the scope of public comments on site specific
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development will be limited to new or significantly increased impacts not initially considered.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY PLAN?

The Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA) requires a community plan² be prepared for any city of more than 5,000 people in a county with a population greater than 70,000. A community plan 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 community plan is not a regulation; however, it provides the legal basis for adopting or updating zoning or subdivision regulations which can be used to achieve the goals of the plan. While the statutory requirements for a community plan 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. Associated plans such as downtown plans, transportation plans and open space plans may also be considered components of a community plan.

MLUPA requires a community plan be reviewed at least every five years and updated if necessary, although due to intense growth pressures and changes taking place in Whitefish and the Flathead Valley, the city has decided that the plan should be thoroughly reviewed every three years and updated as needed.

WHAT ARE LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS?

Land development regulations are local rules governing how property can be used, divided, and built upon within Whitefish. This includes zoning regulations, subdivision regulations, lakeshore regulations, engineering standards, and design guidelines. Together, these regulations guide the location and form of new development, ensure compatibility with surrounding land uses, protect natural resources, and support orderly, safe growth that aligns with a community's long-term planning goals. Zoning, subdivision and other land development regulations are the legally enforceable regulatory mechanisms by which a community plan is implemented. MLUPA requires development regulations be in substantial compliance with the community plan.

WHAT IS A SITE SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT?

A "site specific development" is any proposed development of land in which a building permit or development permit is required. This could include any residential, commercial or industrial projects, as well as creation of lots through a subdivision process. According to MLUPA, the time for public participation is during the adoption, amendment or update of a community plan or regulations, and after these have been adopted, there is a presumption that all (site specific) permitting in substantial compliance with the zoning regulation, map, or amendment is in

² Recent State Statutory updates call this document a "Land Use Plan" but previous versions of the MCA use the term "Growth Policy." These are the terms used in Montana legislation, although "Comprehensive Plan" or "Community Plan" are more commonly used synonymous terms in other states. The updated plan reflects the goals and vision of the City of Whitefish community and not merely issues pertaining to growth or land use. Accordingly, with the recent update it was determined that "Community Plan" is a more appropriate term for the document.

substantial compliance with the land use plan and the public was provided a meaningful opportunity to participate (at the time of the writing or adoption of the community plan or development regulations). Under MLUPA, all site specific developments are to be reviewed administratively with a final decision rendered by the planning administrator without a public hearing. See the “City Staff Role on how Site Specific Developments are Reviewed” section below for details about how site specific developments will be reviewed.

ROLE OF DECISION MAKERS, COMMITTEES AND STAFF

CITY COUNCIL

Montana Code Annotated (MCA) designates the Whitefish City Council as the governing body and the final decision maker on zoning changes, community plans and land development regulations. Council Members are notified of all public engagement opportunities and are invited to participate in the entire planning process. The Council receives periodic briefings on updates and reviews the Planning Commission recommendations. Following a recommendation of the Planning Commission, the Council holds public hearings on the final drafts and adopts, adopts with revisions or rejects the proposed documents. Documents to be considered at City Council meetings are always linked through the agendas on the city website’s agenda center along with any written public comments by Friday before the public hearing.

WHITEFISH PLANNING COMMISSION

The City of Whitefish Planning Commission is appointed by the City Council and consists of seven members, including one member of the City Council. Under Montana Code Annotated, a Planning Commission is the public entity authorized to prepare (or amend) a community plan at the request of the City Council and directs city staff on preparation of these documents. The Planning Commission also makes recommendations to the City Council on proposed land development regulations (such as zoning or subdivision code), proposed zone changes, and hears appeals of the planning administrator’s decisions on site specific development proposals.

The Planning Commission meets on the third Thursday of the month at 6PM. When discussions regarding community plan adoption, updates or subsequent regulations are needed, the Commission may reserve time prior to the regularly scheduled Planning Commission meeting for work sessions. At any work sessions, the Commission will provide opportunities for public comment while providing feedback and recommendations to City Staff. When a community plan update or regulation is completed, the Planning Commission is required to give notice and hold a public hearing and recommend to the governing body (City Council) that the updates be adopted, not adopted or that the



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

governing body take some other action related to preparation of the documents. All Planning Commission and City Council public hearings and work sessions are noticed and announced on city websites and meeting agendas. Documents to be considered at Planning Commission meetings are always linked through agendas on the city website's agenda center along with any written public comments by Friday before the public hearing.

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

The City has several additional advisory committees that are sometimes asked to participate in portions of a community plan or land use regulations. 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 are some of the committees that may 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

Professionals on staff schedule and facilitate all types of public engagement and write and present materials to the community, Planning Commission and City Council for review. There will also be a project manager to serve as a central contact for the public to participate in and help coordinate all facets of the document creation or site specific development review. Documents for review are always posted on the city website, project websites and linked to hearing agendas as well as available to the public at city hall by request.

City Staff Role on How Site Specific Developments are Reviewed

As required by MLUPA 76-25-305, site specific developments must be reviewed by the planning administrator without additional public hearings³. The planning administrator is to make an initial determination of whether a proposed development is in substantial compliance with the zoning regulations or map, and whether all impacts resulting from the proposed development were

³ Public notification and opportunity to comment is not required for ministerial permits. "Ministerial permit" means a permit granted upon a determination that a proposed project complies with the applicable regulations and meets all established standards set forth in the applicable regulations. The determination must be based on objective standards, involving little or no personal judgment, and must be issued by the planning administrator (MCA 76-25-103). A building permit, sign permit or fence permit is an example of a ministerial permit.

According to MLUPA, after a community plan or regulations are adopted, the public comment process on site specific developments is limited to when the planning administrator determines the proposal fails to comply with the community plan or regulations or if there would be new or significantly increased impacts not previously considered by the adopted plans or regulations.

previously analyzed and made available for public review and comment in the adoption, amendment, or update of the land use plan, zoning regulation, or zoning map⁴.

If the planning administrator makes a determination that a proposed development, is in substantial compliance with the zoning regulations but there would be new or significantly increased impacts resulting from the development that were not previously analyzed and made available for public review and comment prior to the adoption of the land use plan, zoning

regulation, map, or amendment thereto, the planning administrator can request additional data or analysis and will provide public notification with an opportunity for the public to provide comments on the identified impacts. Otherwise, the planning administrator is to make a written determination approving, approving with conditions, or denying the application without further public review or comment. The applicant will also be notified and given an opportunity to provide additional data or analysis on those impacts.

MLUPA 76-25-503 allows any final administrative decision of the planning administrator to be appealed to the Planning Commission. Appeals must be made within 15 business days of the decision, the appeal is limited to the issue raised upon the appeal, and it must be demonstrated that the appealed decision was made in error. Planning Commission decisions can be appealed to the City Council, and City Council decisions can be appealed to district court.

PARTICIPANTS / AUDIENCE

Below are some of the audiences that may be invited to participate in community plan and regulatory updates. Please refer to the “Opportunities for Public Participation” and Engagement Methods” sections below for specifics.

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC TO ENGAGE

Business Owners	Service Workers

⁴ Until July 1, 2027, there is a 15-day public notification and comment process required on the planning administrator’s initial determination (MCA 76-25-305). After this date, public notification will occur if it has been determined that there may be new or significant impacts, but public comment is limited to new or significantly increased impacts not previously considered as identified by the planning administrator. The additional notification process was added as a temporary measure during the State of Montana vs. Montanans for Inappropriate Densification challenge to MLUPA.

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 are a myriad of ways for the public to participate in community plan or regulatory updates. Engagement opportunities range from an online engagement portal, in person visioning workshops and town hall meetings to formal work sessions and public hearings. Below is a list of all the different opportunities the city may make available for public input. Please see the table at the end of this document for a more detailed description of all the participation opportunities and outreach tools by process.

a. Engage Whitefish

The City has developed an online public engagement website at www.engagewhitefish.com, which is an all-in-one resource for the public for information and participation in any community plan or regulatory updates. Information is provided through regular updates, newsletters, a calendar of upcoming events and posting of text, documents, and video recordings of meetings. Participation is possible through message boards viewable to the public to allow discussion and response to 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 are able to subscribe to the site to receive alerts. This website provides an easily accessible method for the dissemination of draft documents and opportunities for written and verbal comments as required by recent State Statute. In addition to the benefit of allowing users to engage and interact online, the website makes 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 update processes at their convenience.

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.

b. Visioning Workshops

Visioning workshops are used during major updates (such as land use) to a community plan. The community vision is the driving force of a comprehensive growth policy. Visioning allows the community to make a mental picture of what they want Whitefish to be in twenty years, and the community plan is the blueprint. Early in the process of adopting the community plan, staff facilitated 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 helped to manifest that vision. Visioning looked at the community as a whole, as well as various neighborhoods in the community. Depending on the extent, updates to elements of the plan could facilitate future visioning sessions. Common visioning topics 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?*

c. Open Houses

Open Houses are typically used when presenting specific maps, plans or designs related to a particular city project. They 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 often include summaries of public input to date, draft maps, plan outlines, slide shows, and goals and objectives reached to date for various planning topics. Open House meeting formats are typically utilized when presenting drafts of major plans or 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. These are generally organized to allow staff to give a general overview of a project and presentation of information. Town Hall meetings allow the public to provide input and ideas and ask questions.



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 community plan 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 projects, or to assemble or assist work groups or outreach to the community.

g. Work Sessions

Work sessions are held before regular Planning Commission and City Council meetings when needed. Work sessions are informal meetings for staff, the Planning Commission and Council to discuss a 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 Commission meets on the third Thursday of the month and when needed, work sessions typically occur before the regular Planning Commission meetings. Check the City Website, the www.engagewhitefish.com, or agendas for scheduled work sessions.

h. Public Hearings

Public hearings are official meetings of the Planning Commission and City Council where formal action is taken. All meetings are open to the public, recorded, and posted to the Planning Commission and City Council webpage. The public may attend and comment at all public hearings. Notice of these meetings are 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

The city often provides remote options for participation at work sessions. Links are provided on project and city websites along with any additional communications regarding the project. All work sessions are recorded for the public to review.

TOOLS FOR OUTREACH

Below are tools available to the city to notify the public of a community plan or regulatory update process. The City will actively alert appropriate media outlets with project updates at applicable milestones throughout the process. Tools specific to each process are identified in the table at the end of this document.

- ✓ Website - As mentioned previously, the online public engagement platform at www.engagewhitefish.com serves as an all-in-one resource for information and allows public participation.
 - ✓ Public Service Announcements (PSAs) – Prior to town hall meetings for major endeavors such as a major update to a community plan or development of a completely new uniform development code, staff may contact local television and radio stations in the Flathead Valley to request public service announcements.
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- ✓ Press Releases – Press releases are typically submitted to the Whitefish Pilot and the Daily Interlake when there are work sessions or public hearings on community plan drafts or sections of development regulations.

- ✓ Legal and Public Notice – All Planning Commission and City Council public hearings and work sessions are published in the *Whitefish Pilot*, posted on the City Agenda Center Webpage, at the front door of City Hall, the engagement website, and the City Facebook Page. The City Agenda Center is located at:



<https://www.cityofwhitefish.org/AgendaCenter>

- ✓ Newsletter Alerts: For projects on www.engagewhitefish.com, newsletters with recent updates and progress reports can be sent via email to subscribers.
- ✓ Email – The public is always welcome to email project managers with comments or requests for information. Emails are public record.
- ✓ Mass Mailing – Depending on the scale of the project, information may be mailed to every address in the 59937 zip code. (This occurred during the initial process of Vision Whitefish 2045)
- ✓ Utility Bills – Depending on the scale of the project, staff may 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. Upcoming meetings, drafts of documents, project news and other opportunities for engagement are announced on this page.

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.

- ✓ Civic and Community Events – To engage with members of the public unable to attend formal meetings or are unaware of the community plan update, sometimes the city sets up a booth or table at community events to provide exposure regarding city projects, 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 communicates with faculty at Whitefish High School to discuss how city projects 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 project updates.

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

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION DURING COMMUNITY PLAN / REGULATORY UPDATES			
	Community / Area Plans Updates	Regulatory Updates	Outreach Tools
Town Halls	Kickoff meeting will be held at a minimum. Staff is always available for questions or comments at town halls.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter Alerts • City website • Social media • PSAs • Public notice • Press releases • Email blasts • Mass mailing • Newspaper notice • Utility bill notice • Flyers
Visioning Workshops	Depends on extent of plan update, typically held for new plan adoption or significant land use updates. Staff is always available for questions or comments at these workshops.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter alerts • City website • Social media • PSAs • Public notice • Press releases • Email blasts • Newspaper notice • Flyers
Civic Group Presentation	Most commonly happens by request	Most commonly happens by request	

	Community / Area Plans Updates	Regulatory Updates	Outreach Tools
Advisory Committees	Typically consulted for specific plan element topics, such as housing or climate change. Agendas are posted for these. Public comment is accepted.	Typically consulted for specific regulations, such as housing or climate change. Public comment is accepted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public notice • Project website • Newsletter alerts • City website • Agenda posted
Open Houses	Typically utilized when presenting specific drafts of important sections of a plan such as land use maps for public input. Staff is always available for questions or comments.	Typically utilized for regulations when presenting specific drafts of design sections from a regulation or technical manual. Staff is always available for questions or comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter alerts • City website • Social media • PSAs • Public notice • Press releases • Newspaper notice
City Staff	Staff coordinates with other experts, jurisdictions and agencies to create drafts. Draft plans are always sent out for public comment at least a week prior to public work sessions or meetings with information regarding where to send comments.	Staff coordinates with other experts, jurisdictions and agencies to create drafts. Draft regulations are always sent out for public comment at least a week prior to public work sessions or meetings with information regarding where to send comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter Alerts • City website • Agendas prior to a public meeting • Social media
Work Sessions	Work sessions are held by Planning Commission and Council on each plan section, for proposed updates and often before formal hearings to provide information. Public comment is taken at all work sessions.	Work sessions are held by Planning Commission and Council on each code update topic, or multiple work sessions on more involved code sections. Public comment is taken at all work sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter Alerts • City website • Social media • Public notice • Press releases • Agenda posted

	Community / Area Plans Updates	Regulatory Updates	Outreach Tools
Public Meetings	At least one formal public hearing is held for plan adoption. Public comment is always taken.	At least two public hearings – first and second readings – are required on ordinances for regulatory updates. Public comment is always taken.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project website • Newsletter Alerts • City website • Social media • Public notice • Press releases • Agenda posted
SITE SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS (illustrated in flow chart on following page)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial review to determine if application complies with plans and regulations, or if new or significantly increased impacts would result not previously considered. • If new / increased impacts are identified, public notice will be given, and public comment is accepted on the impacts. • Following 15 working day period, planning administrator makes final written determination. • Decision can be appealed to Planning Commission within 15 working days of decision. • Planning Commission decisions can be appealed to City Council. • City Council decisions can be appealed to district court. <p>* See footnote 4 above regarding additional notification prior to July 1, 2027 * See MCA 76-25-503 in regard to appeal process</p>			

SITE SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

