

SCENIC RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY VISUAL CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

Scenery is not the backdrop—it is part of the community's identity.

Scenic resources and community character are among Whitefish's most valuable community assets, shaping residents' quality of life, supporting tourism and the local economy, and reinforcing the city's unique identity at the base of the Rocky Mountains. Consistent with Montana Code Annotated § 76-25-209, this assessment identifies, maps, and describes the community's significant scenic resources—including mountain vistas, lakes, rivers, forests, public view corridors, and other defining landscape features—and evaluates the conditions and potential threats affecting these resources. The assessment also examines the built environment and the physical characteristics that contribute to Whitefish's community character, providing a foundation for future land use, development, and public investment decisions that respect the city's natural setting while accommodating thoughtful growth.

Downtown – the Heart of Whitefish

Downtown Whitefish derives much of its identity from the relationship between its buildings, streets, public spaces, and surrounding mountain landscape. The scale of storefronts, comfortable pedestrian environment, and recurring views to Big Mountain together create an experience that residents and visitors consistently associate with Whitefish. As downtown evolves, future development should reinforce these defining characteristics while accommodating thoughtful growth.

Components That Define Downtown's Character

Downtown Whitefish is defined not by any single building or street, but by the combination of many physical elements that together create a memorable sense of place. The following characteristics contribute to the community's identity, reinforce its pedestrian-oriented environment, and distinguish Whitefish from other downtowns. Understanding and preserving these qualities can help guide future redevelopment while allowing the downtown to evolve in a manner that respects its unique character and relationship to the surrounding landscape. The following are components that make up the visual character of the Downtown:

Narrow Storefront Rhythm

Downtown Whitefish is characterized by a series of relatively narrow storefronts that create a comfortable pedestrian rhythm along the street. Frequent changes in building frontage, materials, and storefront design provide visual interest, support small local businesses, and make walking feel more engaging than long, uninterrupted building facades.

Frequent Entrances

Building entrances occur at regular intervals along sidewalks, creating an active and inviting streetscape. Frequent doors encourage pedestrian activity, provide convenient access to businesses, and reinforce the feeling that the street is designed first and foremost for people rather than automobiles.

Two- and Three-Story Scale

Much of downtown Whitefish is defined by buildings that are generally two to three stories in height. This scale frames the street without overwhelming pedestrians, allows sunlight to reach sidewalks, and maintains a comfortable relationship between buildings, public spaces, and the surrounding mountain landscape.

Upper-Story Stepbacks (Where Appropriate)

Where additional building height is appropriate, upper-story stepbacks can reduce the perceived mass of larger buildings when viewed from the sidewalk. By stepping upper floors back from the primary street façade, new development can accommodate additional floor area while preserving the pedestrian scale and visual character of downtown.

Human-Scaled Sidewalks

Downtown sidewalks are designed to comfortably accommodate walking, outdoor dining, shopping, and informal gathering. Street furnishings, landscaping, lighting, and building frontages combine to create a pedestrian environment that feels intimate, safe, and inviting throughout the year.

Active Ground Floors

Ground-floor storefronts containing shops, restaurants, cafés, galleries, and other customer-oriented uses contribute significantly to the vitality of downtown. Transparent windows, outdoor seating, displays, and frequent pedestrian activity create an animated public realm that encourages people to linger and supports the local economy.

Mountain Views Terminating the Street

One of Whitefish's defining visual qualities is the way many streets terminate with views of Big Mountain and the surrounding landscape. These view corridors provide a strong sense of place, reinforce the community's connection to its natural setting, and serve as important visual landmarks that distinguish Whitefish from many other downtowns.

Mature Street Trees

Large, mature street trees soften the built environment, provide shade and seasonal interest, and contribute to the welcoming character of downtown. In addition to their environmental benefits, the tree canopy creates a comfortable pedestrian experience and visually unifies the streetscape while framing storefronts and mountain views.

Central Whitefish and Representative Observation Points

One of Whitefish's defining characteristics is its strong visual connection to Big Mountain and the surrounding landscape. Throughout downtown, streets, sidewalks, parks, and public spaces frame views of the mountain, reinforcing a sense of place that is unique to Whitefish. The map identifies the locations from which the following photographs were taken, illustrating the visual relationship between the downtown, its built environment, and the surrounding natural setting. Together, these images document many of the views and streetscapes that contribute to the community's character and should be considered as future redevelopment occurs.

The following map identifies the representative observation sites used to document the defining features of downtown Whitefish. Photographs taken from these publicly accessible locations illustrate the community's relationship to its streets, buildings, public spaces, and surrounding mountain landscape.

Visual Character Assessment



	Baker Ave		Central Ave		Spokane Ave	
	Looking North ↑	Looking East ↗	Looking North ↑	Looking East ↗	Looking North ↑	Looking East ↗
Railway St.						
1st St.						
2nd St.						
3rd St.						
4th St.						

Defining View Corridors

Whitefish's visual identity is shaped by a handful of public streets that frame memorable views of Big Mountain and the surrounding landscape. These corridors provide residents and visitors with a strong sense of arrival and orientation while reinforcing the community's unique relationship with its natural setting. As the community grows and evolves, these public views should be carefully considered and protected consistent with the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA), which recognizes the importance of scenic resources and scenic corridors as part of community planning.

Central Avenue – As Whitefish's Main Street, Central Avenue is the community's most recognizable and photographed public space. Predominantly one- and two-story buildings, continuous storefronts, and pedestrian-oriented uses—including retail, restaurants, and cafés—frame a direct view of Big Mountain at the northern terminus of the street. This view has become an iconic image of Whitefish and is one of the community's defining visual landmarks.

Spokane Avenue – North of the Whitefish River, Spokane Avenue transitions into one of the community's most authentic and recognizable streetscapes. Its established building pattern, mature landscaping, and relationship to the surrounding landscape create a distinctly Whitefish experience while maintaining important views toward Big Mountain.

Baker Avenue – Baker Avenue serves as the principal northern gateway through downtown and the primary route to Whitefish Mountain Resort. As the roadway rises over the railroad tracks, it opens expansive views of Big Mountain, creating a dramatic sense of arrival and reinforcing the mountain's role as the community's dominant visual landmark.

Additional scenic views to the east— toward Great Northern Mountain, the highest point in the Great Bear Wilderness located at the southern extent of Glacier National Park—are framed along the east-west streets between Railway Street and 4th Street. These view corridors provide repeated visual connections between the downtown and the surrounding landscape, reinforcing Whitefish's unique setting at the base of the mountains. The regular street grid allows residents and visitors to experience these views throughout the downtown, creating a strong sense of orientation and place. Together with the views to Big Mountain, these eastern vistas are an essential component of the community's visual identity and should be recognized and considered as redevelopment and infill occur.

Zoning Map Recommendations

Consistent with the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA) and the General Plan's inventory and evaluation of Whitefish's scenic resources, the City should consider the following zoning map and ordinance amendments:

- Establish an “Old Town Scenic Heritage Shopping District” encompassing the blocks generally bounded by the railroad to the north, 4th Street to the south, and the alleys immediately east and west of Central Avenue. The purpose of this district would be to align permitted uses, development standards, building heights, setbacks, and design expectations with the area's established development pattern, pedestrian scale, and visual character.

This district contains one of Whitefish's most recognizable public spaces and several of its most important view corridors toward Big Mountain to the north and the southern extent of Glacier National Park to the east. The combination of its traditional pedestrian scale building pattern, pedestrian-oriented streets, and direct visual connection to the surrounding landscape creates a character that is unique to Whitefish. Future redevelopment should reinforce these defining qualities while allowing thoughtful investment and continued economic vitality.

Purpose. The “Old Town Scenic Heritage Shopping District” is intended to preserve and reinforce the authentic downtown character of Whitefish by ensuring that future development complements the area's established building scale, pedestrian environment, storefront rhythm, and iconic views of Big Mountain to the north as well as the mountains that frame the southern boundary of Glacier National Park to the east.

Map of Area for Rezoning Consideration

