

# Sustainable Tourism Management Plan

Update - 2024

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City of Whitefish

Whitefish Convention and  
Visitor Bureau

# Acknowledgements

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# I. OVERVIEW

## A. Background

In 2017, the Whitefish Convention and Visitor Bureau (Explore Whitefish), City of Whitefish, local stakeholders, and engaged community members participated in a robust dialogue on how to incorporate sustainability principles into destination marketing and tourism management efforts. As a result, the City of Whitefish, in partnership with Explore Whitefish, appointed a volunteer committee to develop a “Sustainable Tourism Management Plan” (STMP). After extensive public input, the STMP was approved by Whitefish City Council in 2020. The plan included five interrelated focus areas.



The plan emphasized partnerships and high priority action items that reflected significant community input. The following accomplishments are a direct result of the plan:

### STMP Accomplishments

- Explore Whitefish adopted specific destination stewardship goals which came directly from the STMP.
- Explore Whitefish created the “Be a Friend of the Fish” outreach campaign to reinforce positive visitor behaviors and to promote responsible recreation.
- The City of Whitefish appointed a new standing STMP Committee to implement recommendations from the plan.
- The City of Whitefish also appointed a Whitefish Community Housing Committee to implement recommendations of the “Community Housing Needs Assessment.”
- The City of Whitefish amended regulations regarding short-term rentals (STR) and created a staff position to enforce codes and reduce illegal STRs.
- Explore Whitefish established a “Community Sustainability Fund” with a voluntary 1% fee on bills from participating businesses. Funds support local housing programs as well as the Sustainability Grant Program.
- City residents approved a ballot measure to designate a portion of resort tax funds to support affordable housing initiatives.
- Explore Whitefish partnered with other non-profits such as Whitefish Legacy Partners (WhitefishTrail), Protect Our Winters, and Pledge of the Wild.

Source: <https://explorewhitefish.com/csf> and <https://www.cityofwhitefish.org/642/Sustainable-Tourism-Management-Plan-Stan>

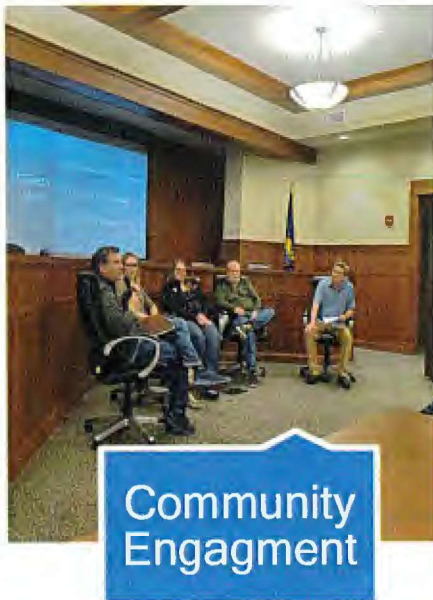
## B. Sustainable Tourism & Key Pillars

The STMP Committee used the following definition of sustainable tourism to guide work on the plan.

*"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)*

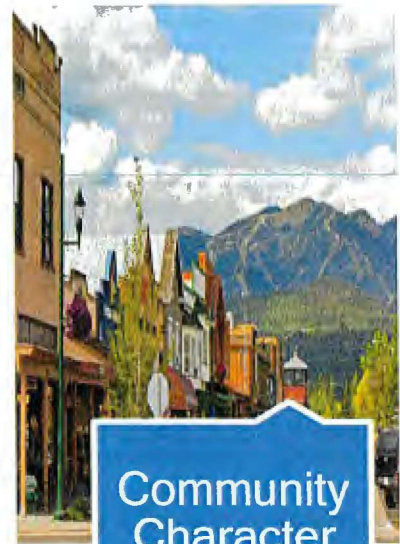
The above definition emphasizes that tourism should reflect the culture of the community. The key pillars below represent community values and provide a framework to ensure that priorities in the plan reflect these values. High priority actions are based on community input and generally fall within the intersection of the three key pillars.



**Community  
Engagement**



**Livability**



**Community  
Character**

### **Community Engagement**

Engage and empower local residents to plan for and manage the tourism economy. Conduct outreach and solicit resident opinions. Coordinate and partner with stakeholders regarding tourism issues.

### **Livability**

Strive toward a community for all income levels through affordable housing and affordable cost-of living. Encourage businesses to incorporate sustainable tourism practices. Strengthen the quality of life through improved local services and adequate and sustainable infrastructure. Identify opportunities and services from tourism that will benefit lower income households.

### **Community Character**

Respect, preserve and celebrate the heritage, authentic culture, arts, traditions, and distinctiveness of the community. Promote a vibrant, creative, diverse, and friendly community with emphasis on unique local businesses. Discourage sprawl and development not in character with the community.

## C. Why Update the Plan

The purpose of the STMP Committee is to assist implement the plan, recommend actions and budget priorities to the City Council, track progress towards the Plan's goals, update data/benchmarks, and establish work plan priorities. It was anticipated, that the original STMP would provide guidance for these activities through 2025. Since completion of the plan in 2020, however, there have been significant changes in economic and community trends. Additionally, major legislation and funding opportunities have been adopted at both the State and Federal levels. These factors necessitated an earlier update of the plan.

### Major Changes Since STMP Plan Adoption

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Covid Pandemic

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Rapid Population Growth

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Escalating housing prices

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Federal Programs (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act)

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State Legislatives Sessions (2021 & 2023)

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Glacier National Park Reservation System

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Airport Expansion

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Climate Threats (Wildfire, drought, snowpack..)

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Inflation

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Whitefish Growth Policy Update

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Staffing shortages

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Increase in anti-tourism attitudes

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Loss of recycling drop-off

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To respond to these external factors, the STMP committee determined that an update of the plan was warranted. Community input was critical to determine how residents' attitudes and priorities might have changed since adoption of the original plan.



## II. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

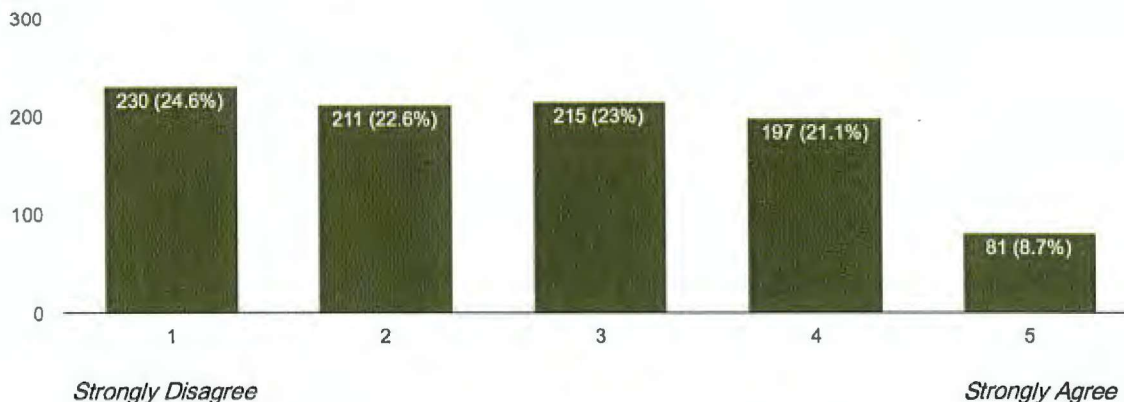
### A. Survey

From August through October 2023 the STMP Committee conducted an online survey. The survey was promoted through press releases and email and resulted in 936 responses. The respondent profile below indicates the demographics of the respondents.

- 86% of respondents were year-round residents.
- 79% of respondents had lived in Whitefish for over 5 years.
- 70% of respondents were full-time homeowners and 17% were year-round renters.
- 16% of respondents were age 35 or under while 26% were age 65+
- Half of the respondents had annual household incomes over \$100,000 while 18% had an annual household income of less than \$50,000.
- 14% of respondents were remote workers and 30% were retired.
- 32% of respondents worked full-time in Whitefish while 15% worked full-time outside of Whitefish. 8% worked part-time in Whitefish.

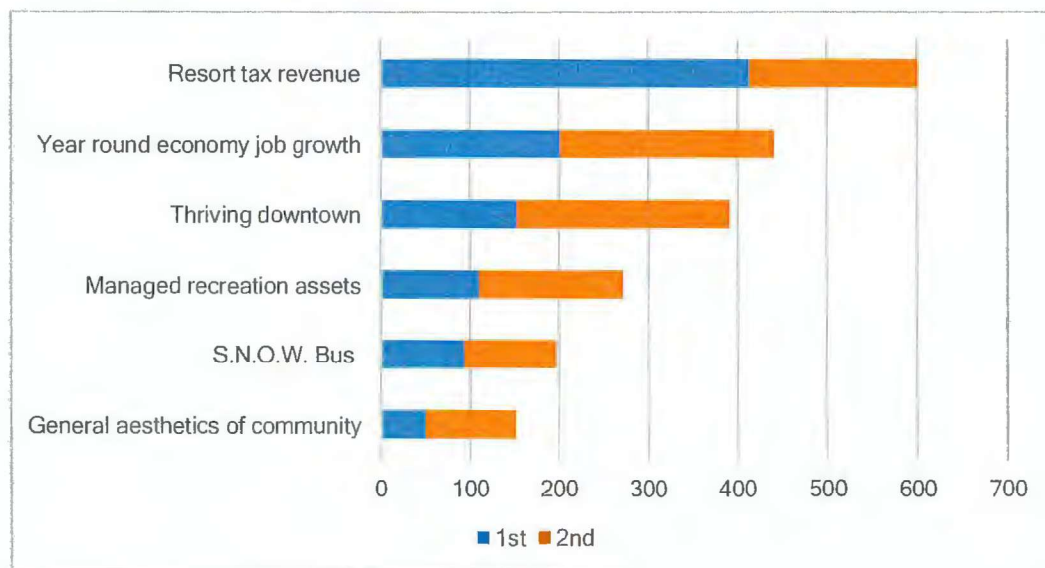
One of the most significant findings from this survey was the shift in attitudes towards tourism. In 2018, almost two-thirds of respondents acknowledged that, "Tourism benefits do outweigh the negative impacts". According to the 2023 survey, however, only 30% of respondents agreed with that statement while 47% disagreed with the statement.

*Figure 1: Do you agree with this statement, "The overall benefits of Whitefish outweigh the negative impacts."*



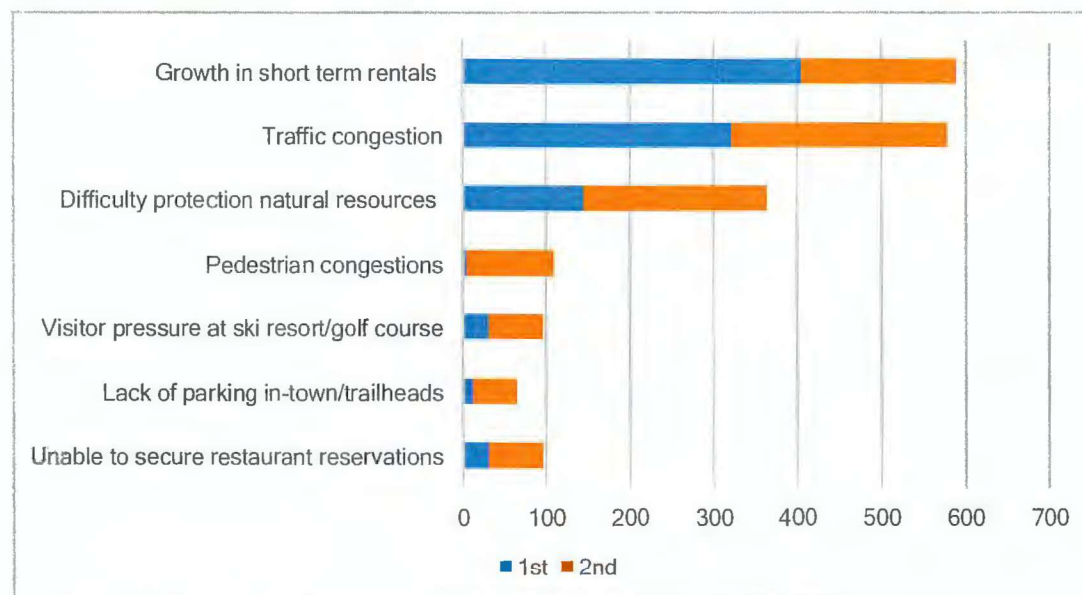
The benefits of tourism that ranked the highest among respondents were the resort tax revenue and year-round economy/job growth. The general aesthetics of the community ranked lowest.

*Figure 2: Respondent ranking of tourism benefits.*



The most concerning impacts from tourism were growth in short-term rentals, traffic congestion and difficulty in protecting/sustaining natural resources. (See Figure 3) in another question, only 10% of respondents agreed with the statement "Short-term rentals are a positive addition to our town." While 72% disagreed.

*Figure 3: Ranking of Tourism Impacts*

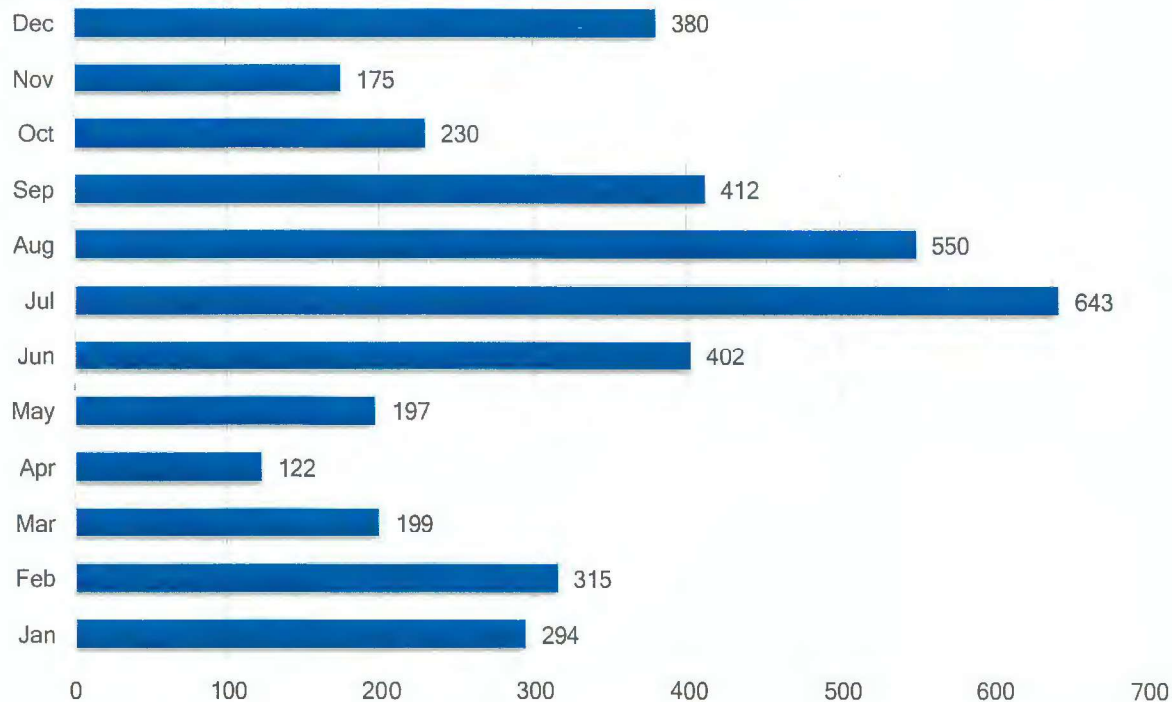


Following is a summary of more specific attitudes regarding impacts of population growth and tourism growth:

- Only 22% of respondents agreed with the statement that tourism makes Whitefish a good place to live. The majority of respondents (54% disagreed with this statement.)
- 42% of respondents agreed that impacts on the community stem more from residential growth, while 29% felt tourism created more impacts while 28% of respondents had no opinion.
- Only 10% of respondents agreed with the statement that, "Short-term rentals are a positive addition to the town." compared to 73% who disagreed with the statement.
- 29% of respondents agreed with the statement that, "Visitor levels have returned to pre-pandemic levels and/or are a more manageable level than during the last 2-years." There were 54% of respondents who disagreed with this statement.

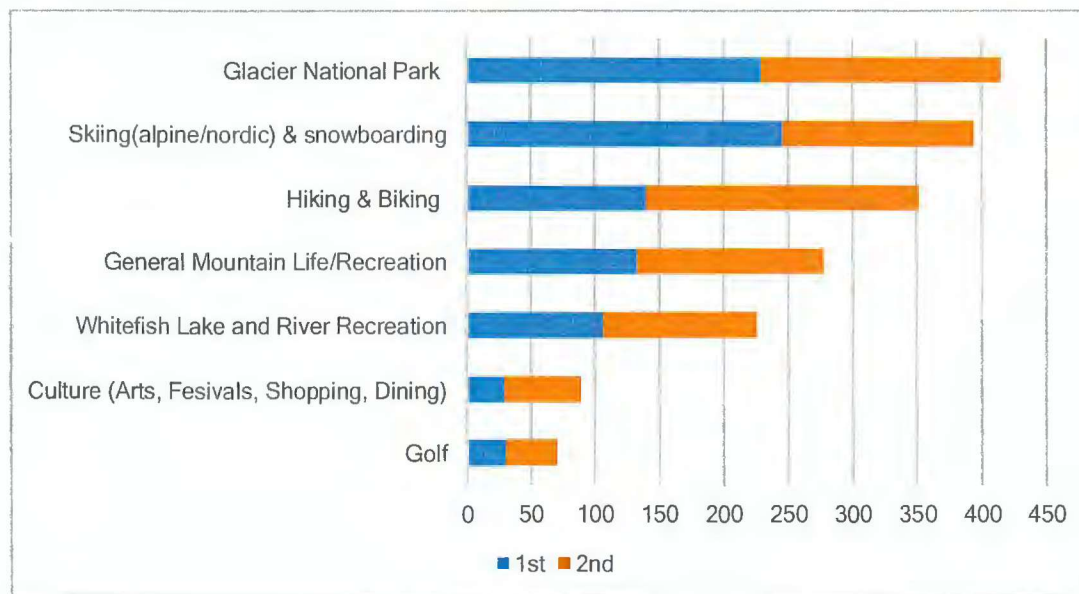
Most respondents (85%) indicated that friends and family stayed with them when they visited while 10% indicated that visitors stayed in traditional lodging. Only 4% of family/friends stayed in vacation rentals and 2% stayed in campgrounds. The time of year that friends and family visited was similar to trends for non-resident visitors with July/August being the peak summer months and a smaller peak in the winter during December/January/February.

*Figure 4: Months when Friends/Family Visit*



The most popular recreation activities among respondents all had to do with outdoor recreation. Glacier National Park, winter recreation, hiking and biking opportunities were the top answers. The rankings for Whitefish's top assets reflect the popularity of recreation opportunities.

*Figure 5: Ranking of Popular Recreation Activities*



*Figure 6: Ranking of Whitefish Top Assets*



## B. Focus Groups

In November 2023, the STMP Committee invited community members to participate in a series of focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to host more in-depth discussions about attitudes and preferences regarding sustainable tourism. Focus groups were conducted at city hall and one group was held at a local tap room to encourage a younger demographic to attend. Below is a summary of the major themes that emerged from this discussion.

### 1. **Housing Affordability Crisis:**

- Rapidly rising housing costs and shortages are driving away young residents.
- Short-term rentals exacerbate the problem by reducing available housing stock and driving up prices.
- Strategies discussed include building affordable homes, enforcing regulations on short-term rentals, and exploring options to fund affordable housing initiatives.

### 2. **Impact of Tourism on Community Dynamics:**

- Tourism is vital for the town's economy but is also causing negative impacts such as overcrowding and driving up the cost of living.
- Residents express concerns about maintaining the town's authentic character amidst increasing tourism.
- There is a need to balance economic benefits with preserving the town's identity.

### 3. **Transportation and Infrastructure:**

- Challenges related to transportation include congestion, limited parking, and the need for better transit options.
- Discussions include promoting walkability, enhancing public transportation, and addressing parking issues to alleviate congestion.

### 4. **Workforce Challenges:**

- Businesses face staffing shortages due to housing affordability issues.
- Employers are exploring alternative solutions such as hiring foreign workers and retirees.
- Retaining employees through benefits like insurance, retirement plans and other perks are potential solutions.

### 5. **Community Engagement and Advocacy:**

- Residents express a desire to be actively involved in finding solutions to housing, transportation, and other community challenges.
- Form advocacy groups and other initiatives to educate residents, promote sustainable practices, and address housing affordability through various programs and collaborations.
- Engagement in local events and discussions reflects a commitment to preserving the town's identity and addressing its evolving needs.

## C. Community Meeting

The STMP Committee held a community meeting on April 3 to facilitate a community discussion on tourism trends and to solicit feedback on policy recommendations for a path to sustainable tourism. The workshop reviewed current programs and included panel discussions and hands-on activities for participants to share their thoughts. Over 50 community members attended the workshop representing business owners, professionals, hospitality workers, and non-profit organizations. Telecommuters, full/part-time workers, students, and retirees were also represented at the meeting. The meeting included an interactive exercise to help prioritize action items and real-time polling to engage audience members.

**AGENDA**

- Resort on City Programs
- Feature Whitefish OVO Tourism Trends
- Business Owner Panel
- Community Member Panel
- Interactive Polling
- Submit comments on action items!

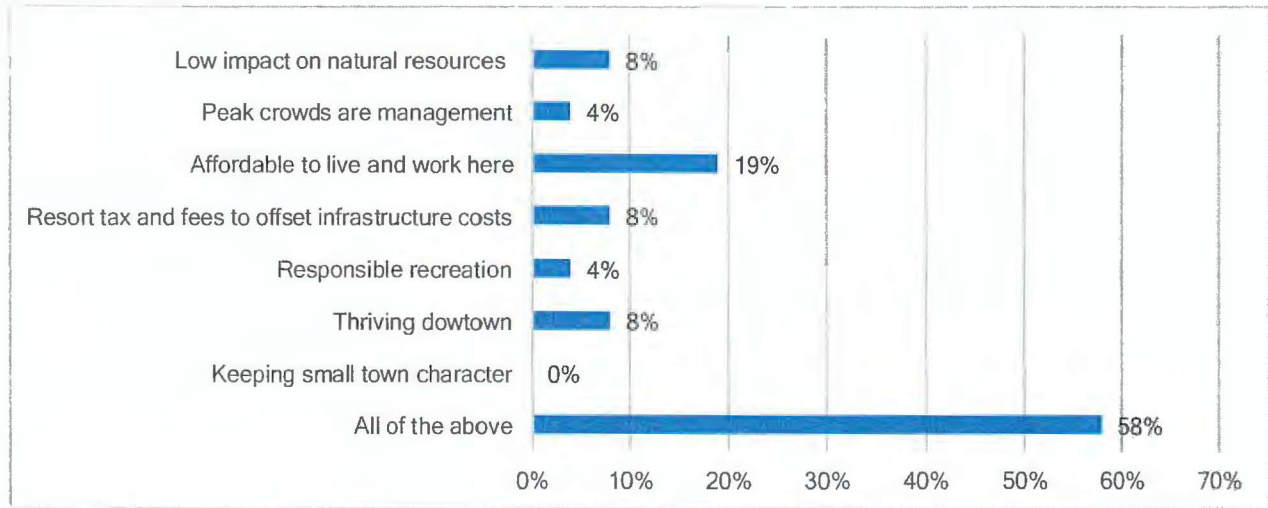
**COMMUNITY MEETING!**  
**WHITEFISH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**JOIN US - YOUR INPUT IS IMPORTANT!**  
 The City of Whitefish is updating the Whitefish Sustainable Tourism Management Plan. The plan provides a framework to address issues related to tourism growth such as housing, transportation, infrastructure, sustainability and livability.  
 Community input is a key to this effort. We invite YOU to help with this update!  
 Please join us to LEARN about existing efforts, LISTEN to fellow community members and to SHARE your concerns and recommendations for the future of Whitefish.

**APRIL 3, 2024**  
**6:00 PM**  
**WHITEFISH CITY HALL**

WHITEFISH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT PLAN

Figure 7: Which phrases best matches your definition of sustainable tourism?



Additionally, the meeting offered an opportunity for community members to listen, learn and share information. There were presentations on tourism trends and the community survey results and an interview with the mayor. A panel discussion with local business owners and another panel representing multi-generational community representatives, provided insight from different cohorts within Whitefish.

## III. MARKET PROFILE

### A. Socio – Economic Information

#### 1. Population Trends

While the growth rate for Whitefish has historically been between 1.5% to 2% per year, from 2020 to 2022, the growth rate for Whitefish averaged 7.5%. This was among the highest rate of growth in the State and in the County. Construction permit activity significantly decreased since the peak year of 2021 indicating that growth rates may return to historic levels.

Table 1: Population Trends

Location	2010	2020	2022 (Estimate)	2020-2022 % Increase
Whitefish	6,357	7,746	8,915	15.1%
59937	12,588	14,354	14,158	14.0%
Flathead County	90,928	104,349	111,814	7.2%
Montana	989,415	1,084,225	1,122,286	3.6%

Source: U.S. Census, Census of the Population & American Community Survey

#### 2. Demographics

Compared to the county and state, Whitefish has a smaller share of family households and owner-occupied households. The average household size in Whitefish is also significantly lower than the county. This may be due to a higher percentage of retirees that live in the community.

Table 2: Selected Population & Household Statistics

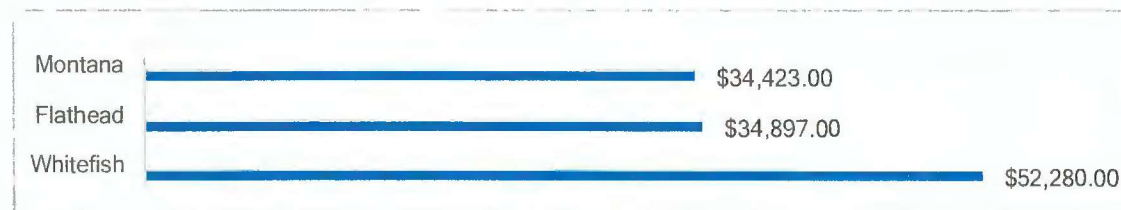
Statistic	Whitefish	Flathead County	Montana
Median Age (2020)	41.5	42.2	40.1
Average Household Size	2.21	2.51	2.41
Family Households	47%	66%	61%
Owner-Occupied Households	62%	75%	69%

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey (2017-2021)

#### 3. Per Capita Income

Per Capita income levels in Whitefish are significantly higher than both Flathead County and Montana.

Figure 8: Per Capita Income

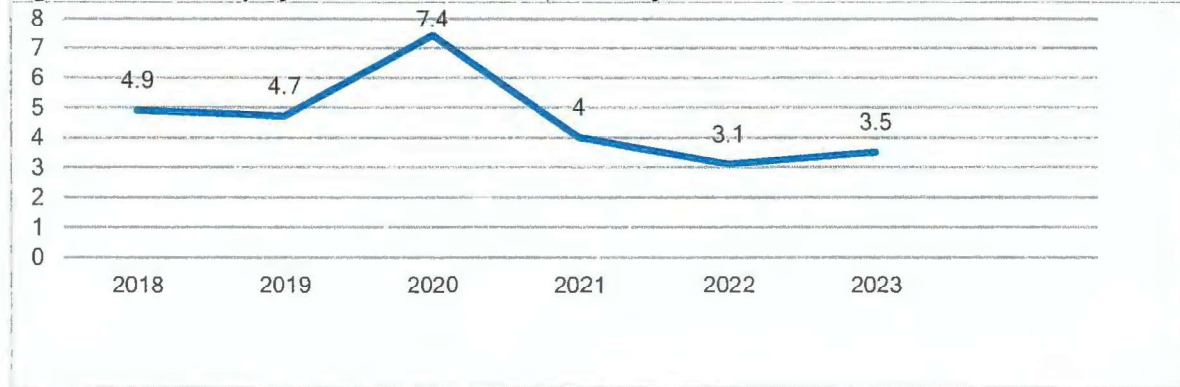


Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey (2017-2021)

#### 4. Labor Market - Annual Unemployment Rate

The annual employment rate for Flathead County is 3.5% compared to 2.9% for Montana. A rate less than 5% is an indicator of a tight labor market. Unemployment is lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 8: % Unemployment Rates - Flathead County



Source: Montana Dept. of Labor and Industry, <https://lmi.mt.gov/LocalAreaProfiles>

#### 5. Business Profile - Whitefish

Health and tourism related businesses are the leading employers in Whitefish.

Table 3: Leading Industry Sectors in Whitefish

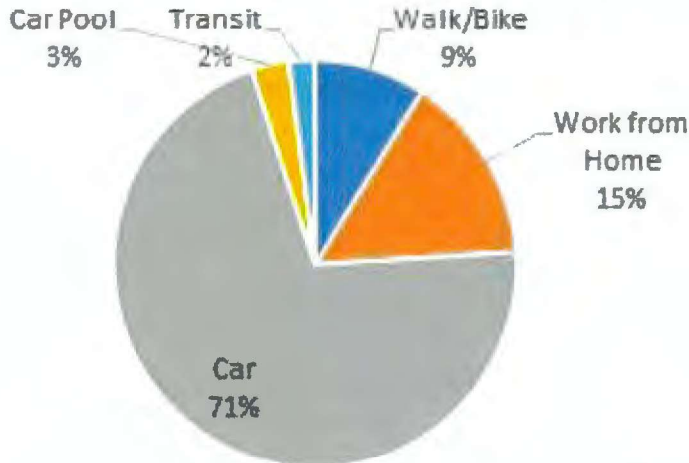
Industry	# Business	# Employees
Health Services	55	1,175
Eating & Drinking	59	817
Retail Trade	99	729
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	89	601
Hotels & Lodging	10	487
Movies, Recreation, Entertainment	33	359
Education Institutions & Libraries	15	315
Construction	31	134
Government	10	110
Other Services	169	890

Source: Montana Site Selector <https://svc.mt.gov/doc/siteselector/>

## 6. Commuting to Work

Census data indicates that 71% of residents in Whitefish commute to work by car. Whitefish has a higher percentage of home workers and people who walked to work than statewide averages.

Figure 9: Commuting Characteristics - Whitefish



Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2017-2021

## B. Housing Information

### 1. Housing Prices

According to sales data, median sale prices in Whitefish are 50% higher than the median price for the rest of the County. Sales prices in Whitefish were more than double what they were just five years ago. Recent trends for 2023 indicate that the rate of increase in housing prices is stabilizing.

Table 4: Flathead County/Whitefish Median Sales Price by Year

Location	Flathead County		Whitefish	
	#	Median Price	#	Median Price
2019	2,084	\$330,000	440	\$431,000
2020	2,773	\$380,000	689	\$535,000
2021	2,545	\$515,000	616	\$652,000
2022	1,789	\$600,000	399	\$835,000
2023	1,483	\$595,000	319	\$900,000

Source: Northwest Montana Association of Realtors, Market Report

### 2. Rental Prices

According to data collected for the Whitefish housing needs assessment, the average rent in Whitefish increased by 50% from 2016 to 2022. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development collects data for fair market rents on a county-wide basis. According to this data, a 3-bedroom rental in the County established for the year 2024, is over a \$1,000 lower than the average 3-bedroom rent in Whitefish in 2022.

Table 5: Whitefish Rental Rates

	Average Rent 2016	Average Rent 2022	Average Yearly % Change
<b>1 Bedroom</b>	\$775	\$1,170	7.1%
<b>2 Bedroom</b>	\$1,275	\$1,845	6.4%
<b>3+ Bedroom</b>	\$1,680	\$2,815	9.0%
<b>Overall Average</b>	\$1,240	\$1,890	7.3%

Source: Whitefish Area Community Housing Needs Assessment Update, August 2022

Table 6: Fair Market Rents Flathead County

	Fair Market Rent 2019	Fair Market Rent 2024
<b>Efficiency</b>	\$560	\$733
<b>1 Bedroom</b>	\$664	\$823
<b>2 Bedroom</b>	\$828	\$1,081
<b>3+ Bedroom</b>	\$1,197	\$1,425
<b>4 Bedroom</b>	\$1,398	\$1,720

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

### 3. Building Permit Data

The number of permits for residential construction was higher than the average from 2019 to 2021 and then declined in 2022 and 2023. Since 2018, 41% of permits were single-family units while multi-family units comprised 32% of new residential permits.

Table 7: Residential Construction Activity in Whitefish

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
<b>New Single-Family</b>	64	95	92	129	57	24	461
<b>New Accessory DU</b>	--	6	5	7	6	15	39
<b>New Townhome/Duplex</b>	40	77	67	57	16	16	273
<b>New Multi-Family</b>	34	68	138	27	34	34	335
<b>Total new units</b>	80	246	302	220	113	63	1018

Source: Whitefish Planning & Building Dept., Annual Report - 2023

### 4. Seasonal Housing

According to the US Census data the total vacancy rate for all types of housing was 25.4% compared to a statewide average of 14.8%. The higher vacancy rate in Whitefish can be attributed to the presence of vacation home/seasonal dwellings. The vacancy rate for non-seasonal dwellings in Whitefish is comparable to statewide averages.

Table 8: Occupancy Status

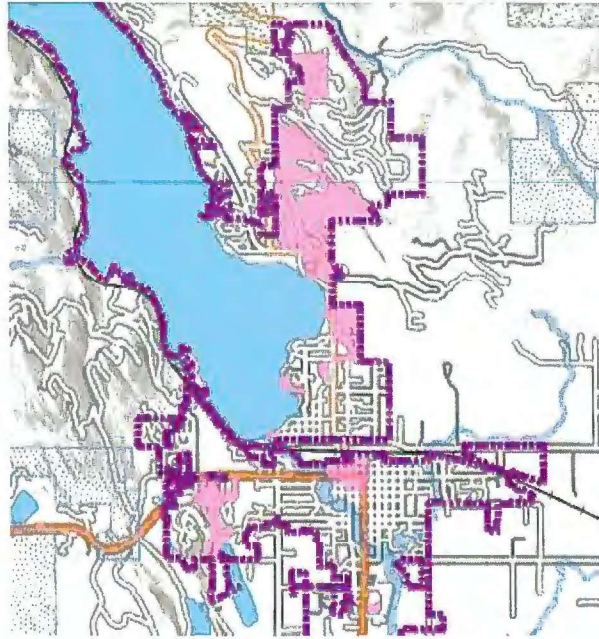
	Whitefish	Flathead County	Montana
<b>Total Dwelling Units</b>	4,660	49,595	512,553
<b>Vacant Dwelling Units</b>	1,185	8,815	76,072
<b>Seasonal/Recreational Dwelling Units</b>	835	6,301	38,816
<b>Seasonal Units as a % of all Units</b>	17.9%	12.7%	7.6%
<b>Vacancy Rate - All units</b>	25.4%	17.7%	14.8%
<b>Vacancy Rate - Non-Seasonal units</b>	7.5%	5.1%	7.2%

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey 2017-2021

### 5. Short Term Rentals

Short Term Rentals (STRs) are defined as the rental of an entire privately owned house, townhouse unit, condominium unit, apartment or other residence, or any space within a dwelling unit rented independently, for stays of less than 30 days. In Whitefish, short term rentals are allowed in the WB-3, WRR-1, WRR-2, WRB-1, and WRB-2 zoning districts. (See map) All STRs are required to register with the Planning office and demonstrate that they meet code requirements. Operating an STR outside an allowed district is a violation of the City Code, and subject to enforcement action. Short term rental units located in the county are permitted in any county zoning district.

Figure 10: Location of Zoning Districts that Permit Short Term Rentals in Whitefish



Note: Pink areas represent zoning districts that allow short term rentals

Source: Whitefish Planning and Administration Web map

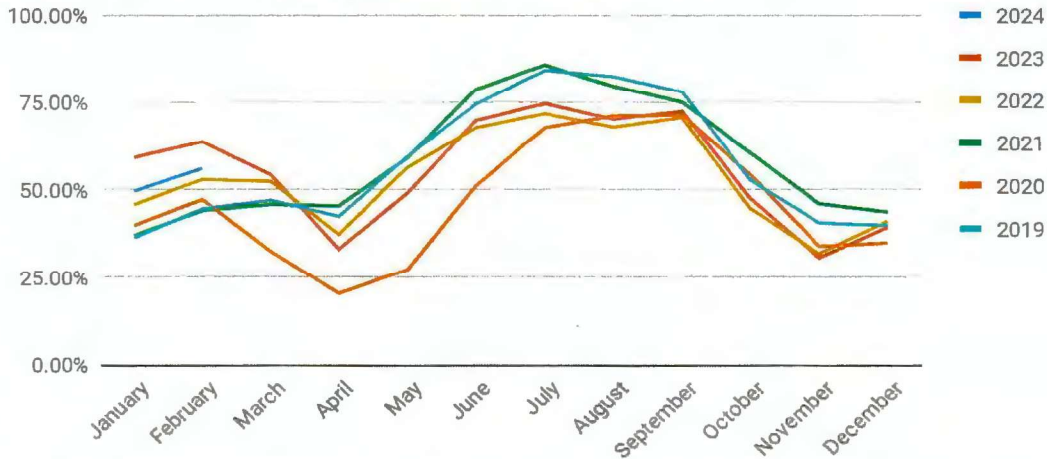
As of October 2023, there were currently 375 legally licensed units in the city limits within the approved zones for STRs in Whitefish. The number of legal units has increased from 150 units in 2021. Per data from AIRDNA, in July of 2023, there were 478 STRs units operating within the city limits and 1,261 units operating in the 59937-zip code outside of city limits. In 2019, there were 252 STRs in the City and 896 in the unincorporated areas in the zip code areas. AirDNA indicates that STRs have a 58% year-round occupancy rate and average approximately \$8,000 per month revenue. The average daily rate for an STR is \$500 compared to \$200 for a traditional hotel room.

## C. Lodging Trends

### 1. Lodging Occupancy Rates

As indicated in the chart below, the peak months for lodging occupancy are July followed by August. April and November have the lowest occupancy rates. In 2020, there was a dramatic drop in occupancy from March to June due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 11: Traditional Lodging Occupancy Rates 2024-2019



Source: Data Source: Smith Travel Research (2019-2021), Destimetrics (2022-2024 YTD)

The years of 2019 and 2021 had the highest occupancy rates for traditional lodging but once pandemic restrictions for oversea travel were lifted, overall visitation and lodging occupancy rates dropped off in 2022 and 2023. There is more fluctuation in occupancy rates for short-term rentals, but generally they have had lower occupancy rates during the pandemic years.

Figure 12: Short Term Rental Occupancy: 2024-2019



Source: Air DNA via Whitefish Convention and Visitor Bureau

The data indicates that traditional lodging and short-term rentals had similar patterns regarding peak summer months for occupancy rates. Short term rentals had slightly higher occupancy rates than traditional lodging during the peak summer months.

*Table 9: Whitefish Convention Traditional Lodging Occupancy Performance*

FY24 Month	Occupancy	Occupancy Chg vs PY	Avg. Daily Rate	ADR Chg vs PY
July 2023	74.53%	+4.11%	\$470.46	+2.88%
August 2023	70.05%	+3.41%	\$404.22	-4.97%
September 2023	72.30%	+2.58%	\$294.20	-2.85%
October 2023	47.32%	+6.34%	\$167.44	+3.52%
November 2023	30.62%	-3.65%	\$138.05	+4.52%
December 2023	39.22%	-4.18%	\$218.25	-6.42%
January 2024	49.53%	-16.12%	\$208.16	+14.60%
February 2024	56.09%	-11.77%	\$206.96	-0.04%

Source: Destimetrics

*Table 10: Whitefish Convention Short Term Rental Performance*

FY24 Month	Occupancy	Chg vs PY	Avg. Daily Rate	Chg vs PY	Supply Nights*	Demand Nights*
July 2023	82%	+9.33%	\$579	+17%	32,731	26,449
August 2023	70%	-4.11%	\$509	+2.21%	33,046	21,945
September 2023	63%	+1.9%	\$444	+2.78%	29,853	16,972
October 2023	41%	+20.02%	\$428	+12.63%	25,239	7,802
November 2023	28.23%	-23.73%	\$362	-8.2%	17,471	4,671
December 2023	39.88%	-12.89%	\$581	+6.47%	21,613	11,519
January 2024	45.64%	-13.53%	\$518	+8.84%	28,392	12,675
February 2024	59.66%	-1.45%	\$528	+4.32%	24,879	22,129

\*Equals total available listings multiplied by total available nights per month

Source: AirDNA

## 2. Lodging Tax

Statewide, tourism and film promotion are funded through the 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax, commonly known as the “Bed Tax.” The bed tax is collected from guests of hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, guest ranches, resorts, and campgrounds. The majority of bed tax funds collected in Whitefish are not available for local use. Flathead County is located within the Glacier Country tourism region.

*Figure 13: Montana Tourism Regions*



*Source: Montana Dept. of Commerce - Office of Tourism*

There are three Convention & Visitor Bureaus (CVB) in the county (Whitefish, Kalispell, Columbia Falls). The Whitefish CVB/Explore Whitefish Mission statement is as follows:

### **MISSION STATEMENT**

Foster sustainable tourism through inspiration, education, and partnerships to enhance, protect and preserve our viable year-round community.

### **VALUE STATEMENT**

Achieving long-term economic and community sustainability through steadfast destination stewardship.

As indicated in the table below, Flathead County generates the largest amount of lodging tax in the State. The third quarter (July, August, September) is the peak month for collecting the tax.

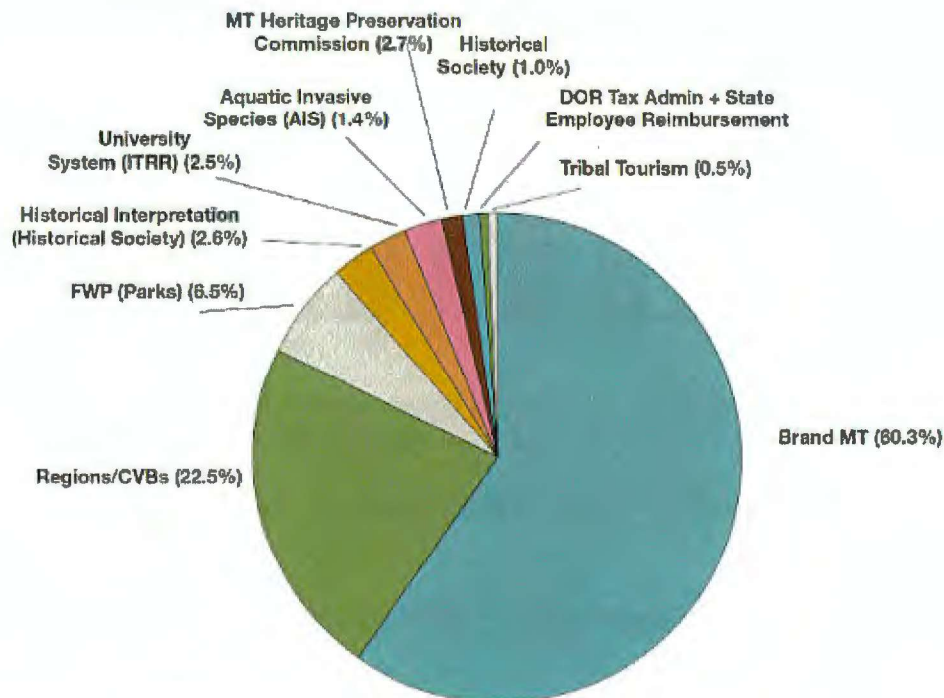
*Table 11: Lodging Tax Collection by County*

County	Lodging Tax Collection
Flathead	\$10,113,105
Gallatin	\$9,843,143
Missoula	\$6,558,143
Yellowstone	\$5,020,416
Lewis & Clark	\$1,951,495

*Source:* <https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Office-Of-Tourism/Lodging-Facility-Use-Tax>

The pie chart indicates how revenues from the lodging tax are allocated. The State of Montana receives most of the funds for "Brand MT". The six tourism regions and CVBs receive around 22% of the lodging tax collections. The remainder of the tax is distributed to various state agencies.

*Figure 14: Distribution of 4% Lodging Facility Use Tax*



<https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Office-Of-Tourism/Lodging-Facility-Use-Tax>

## D. Visitor Spending

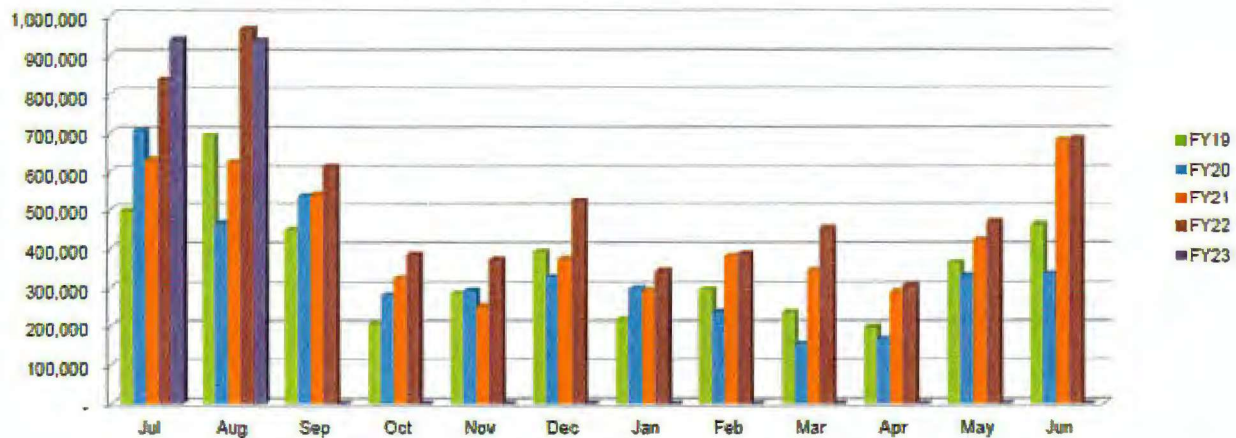
### 1. Resort Tax

In 1995, Whitefish voters approved a 2% resort tax for a term of twenty years. Since then, Whitefish voters have approved several extensions as well as an increase in the resort tax rate from 2% to 3% to fund the purchase of the Haskill Basin Conservation Easement. In 2021, voters approved a 20-year extension of the 3% tax and a new formula for allocating funds. Allocations include property tax reduction, streets repairs, underground utilities, sidewalks, improvements to bike paths/parks. A small amount of resort tax funds is used for administration and for Whitefish Trail maintenance. In 2023, voters approved a ballot measure to allocate 10% of funds for housing projects.

The total tax collected in FY 2022 was \$6,319,737. Some trends to note include:

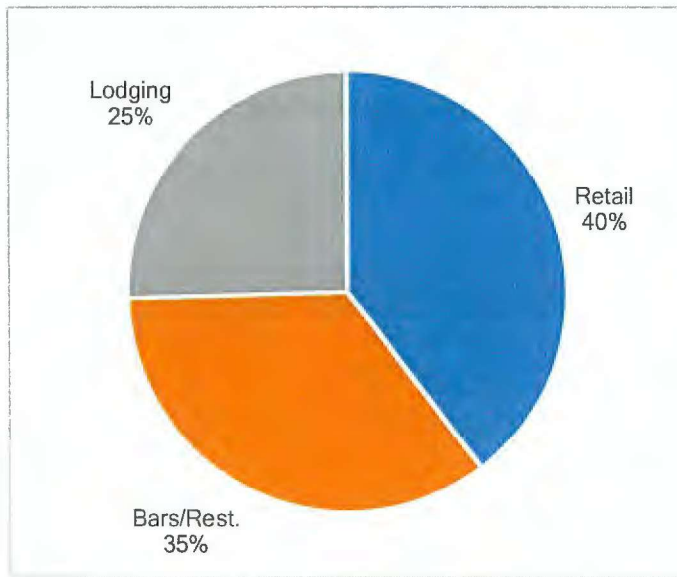
- For FY 2023, only the months of July and August are represented on the chart.
- As indicated in the chart below, July and August are the peak months for collecting the resort tax.
- The month of April represents the lowest month for resort tax collections.

Figure 16: Total Resort Tax Collections by Month



- Fiscal year (FY) 2019 represents trends prior to the Covid pandemic. Resort tax collections in FY 2020 and FY 2021 represent visitation during the Covid pandemic.
- Resort taxes in FY 2022 represent the highest year of collections. Inflation will impact collections amounts.
- As indicated in the pie chart, the retail sector collects the most resort tax followed by the bar/restaurant sector.

Figure 16: Resort Tax Collections by Business - FY2022



Source: City of Whitefish Finance Department

## 2. Visitation Expenditures

According to ITRR surveys, the total amount of direct expenditures from visitation in Flathead County was \$818,639,000. Expenditures were highest in the restaurant/bar category followed by outfitters/guides and hotel/motel. Including non-direct spending from employment in the travel industry, the combined economic impact from tourism was \$1.3 billion in Flathead County. Statewide, only Gallatin County had a higher level of economic impact.

Table 12: Total Nonresident Spending in Flathead County - 2022

Type of Expenditure	Annual Amount	% of Total
Restaurant, Bar	\$174,309,000	21%
Outfitter Guide	\$137,581,000	17%
Hotel/Motel	\$104,375,000	13%
Gasoline, Diesel	\$91,894,000	11%
Groceries, Snacks	\$73,401,000	9%
Rental Cabin Condo	\$72,453,000	9%
Auto Rental	\$52,762,000	6%
Retail Sales	\$48,036,000	6%
Made in MT	\$28,347,000	3%
Campground, RV Park	\$14,383,000	2%
Licenses, Entrance Fees	\$13,487,000	2%
Vehicle Repairs	\$2,524,000	<1%
Gambling	\$1,917,000	<1%
Farmers Mkt.	\$1,180,000	<1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$818,639,000</b>	

Source: University of Montana Institute of Tourism and Recreation Research

### 3. Visitor vs. Resident Spending

According to Visa Card Services overall expenditures in Whitefish for the peak summer month of July indicates that overall spending decreased from 2022 to 2023. Based on aggregate data regarding expenditures based on home address of the card holder, visitor spending is almost double the amount of spending by Whitefish residents during the peak summer season.

*Table 14: VISA Destination Insight - Monthly Card Spend - Whitefish*

Month	Year	Visitor	Resident	Total
July	2023	\$12,912,869	\$6,513,686	\$19,426,553
July	2022	\$14,713,840	\$7,082,178	\$21,796,018
Year Over Year		-\$1,800,973	-\$568,492	-\$2,369,465

Source: Visa Card Services

Notes: 1. Does not include online purchases; Visa represents approximately 65% of domestic market share  
 2. Warm Season - YOY "Card Spend" (May - July): 2023: \$44,924,727 2022: \$49,756,787  
 3. Top Non-Resident Markets: Seattle area, Los Angeles Area, Minneapolis-Saint Paul

The pattern of visitor spending outpacing resident spending holds up throughout the year. Based on VDI reporting, although Whitefish saw a 7% decline in spending in 2023, visitor spending represented 57% of all point of purchase spending in Whitefish.

*Table 14: Year-to-Year Visitor and Resident Spending*

Calendar Year	Visitor Spend	Resident Spend	Combined Total
<b>2023</b>	\$87,360,878	\$68,103,008	\$155,463,886
<b>2022</b>	\$95,782,251	\$71,340,314	\$167,122,565
<b>2021</b>	\$95,748,676	\$63,692,544	\$159,441,220

Source: VISA Destination Insights

Spending by international visitors increased significantly in 2023 after the pandemic restrictions were lifted. The top international visitor origins were Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Germany and South Africa.

*Table 15: International Visitor Spending*

Year	International Spend
2023	\$1,247,475
2022	\$457,802

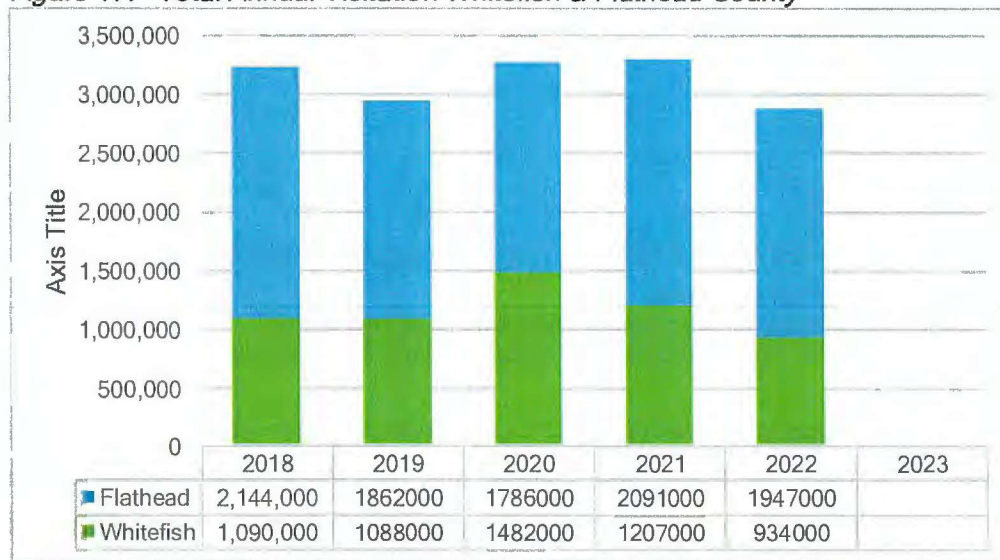
Source: VISA Destination Highlights

## E. Visitation Trends

### 1. Annual Visitation Totals

Visitation in the county peaked during the pandemic years due to international travel restrictions and a preference for outdoor vacations. More US travelers opted for international travel in 2022 resulting in a decline in visitation to Montana. ITRR noted travel delays in the airline industry also contributed to lower visitor levels in 2022. Non-resident visitors to Whitefish typically comprise between 33% to 36% of all visitations in the County. Other external factors influencing visitation include weather, wildfire, air fares and gas prices.

*Figure 17: Total Annual Visitation Whitefish & Flathead County*



Source: <https://www.umt.edu/tourism-recreation-research/interactive-data/default.php>

### 2. Whitefish Mountain Resort

Winter skier visits and pass sales have increased in the last 5 winters. Weather is a significant factor in the number of skier visits. Summer visitation numbers are trending back toward pre-pandemic levels in activity visitation and visitor spending. Visitors unable to obtain reservations for Glacier National Park may seek alternative recreation opportunities such as Whitefish Mountain Resort.

*Table 16: Winter Skier Visit Totals*

Year	Skier Visits
2019-20	359,114
2020-21	458,527
2021-22	463,875
2022-23	500,187

Source: Whitefish Mountain Resort

Note: Resort closed 3-weeks early in 2019-20 due to Covid-19 pandemic

### 3. Glacier National Park

The number of visitors to Glacier National Park peaked in 2017. In 2020, visitation was down due to a temporary park closure in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Visitation rebounded in 2021 as more people ventured outdoors and then declined slightly in 2022. Visitor numbers will vary from year-to-year depending on weather conditions, the opening date for Going-to-the-Sun road, and wildfire activity. Visitation has remained relatively steady even with the implementation of the park reservation system.

*Table 17: Annual Visitor Trends for Glacier National Park*

	# Visitors
<b>2017</b>	3,305,512*
<b>2018</b>	2,965,309
<b>2019</b>	3,049,839
<b>2020</b>	1,698,864*
<b>2021</b>	3,081,656
<b>2022</b>	2,908,458
<b>2023</b>	2,936,260

Source: U.S. National Park Service - Glacier National Park, <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/Park/GLAC>

Notes: 1. Visitation in 2017 was the highest on record.  
 2. In 2020, park was closed from March 24 to June 8. East side remained closed.  
 3. In August 2023 Year-to-Date = 2,249,540 compared to August 2022 Year-to-Date=2,212,917

Although the overall visitation to the park remained stable, the reservation system did impact the traffic at various park entrances. In 2022, the Polebridge, Camas, and Two Medicine entrances did not require a reservation. Due to congestion, reservations were required for these entrances in 2023 and the number of visitors using these entry points did decline. The reservation system is still in a pilot phase and subject to additional changes. In 2024, reservations will not be required for the Two Medicine and Saint Mary's entrances.

*Table 18: Visitation Trends by Selected Park Entrances*

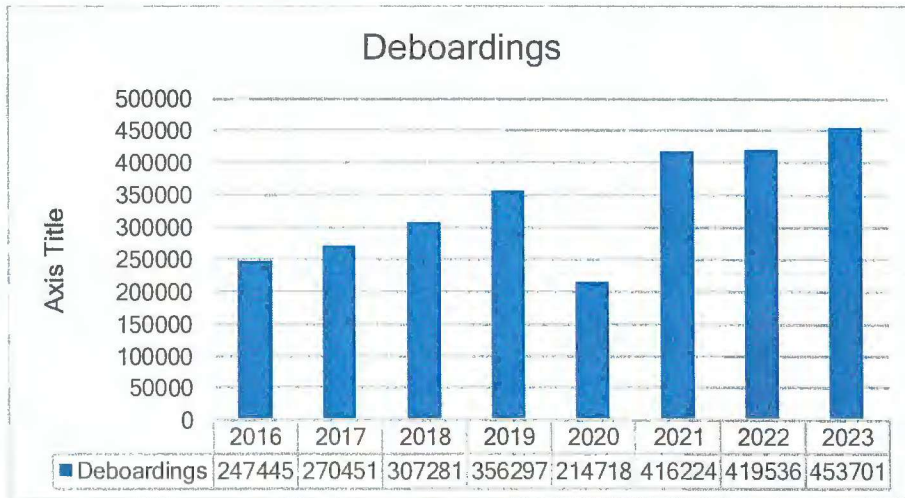
	July 2023	July 2022	% Change
<b>Polebridge</b>	15,643	20,799	-24.8%
<b>Camas</b>	25,702	28,316	-9.2%
<b>West Entrance</b>	338,439	310,796	8.9%
<b>Saint Mary's</b>	158,706	154,719	2.6%
<b>Two Medicine</b>	52,691	61,299	-14%

Source: U.S. National Park Service - Glacier National Park, <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/Park/GLAC>

#### 4. Glacier Park International Airport

Glacier Park International Airport provides commercial passenger service and direct flights to multiple locations. Six major airlines –Alaska, Allegiant, American, Delta, Sun Country, United and Avelo – serve the Flathead Valley with service to hubs in Seattle, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, Denver, and Las Vegas. In addition to daily and weekly service through these main hubs, direct seasonal flights with the various carriers are also available to New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Houston, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Phoenix, Portland, San Francisco/Oakland, and San Diego. As noted in the chart below, except for the pandemic year of 2020, there has been a steady increase in deboardings. The construction and equipping of an approximately 120,000 square foot terminal expansion to the Glacier Park International Airport is underway and is expected to be a 5-year project. (<https://www.gpiexpansion.com/>)

Figure 18: Glacier International Airport Deboardings



Source: Montana Department of Transportation, <https://mdt.mt.gov/aviation/studies-research.aspx>

Whitefish Airport is a general aviation airport owned and operated by the Montana Aeronautics Division of the Montana Department of Transportation. The airport is located on the east end of town and has a grass runway for small planes.

#### 5. Whitefish Trails

Annual use on the Whitefish Trail system has experienced a steady increase every year since 2017. The most popular trailhead is Lion Mountain. Other popular trailheads include Beaver Lakes, Big Mountain, and Swift Creek.

Table 19: Annual Whitefish Trail use 2017-2023

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
99,927	137,644	153,572	181,569	198,738	212,419	226,165

Source: Whitefish Legacy Partners

## F. Visitor Characteristics

### 1. Non-resident Travel Patterns - Characteristics

The following statistics from the Institute of Tourism & Recreation Research indicate travel patterns by non-resident tourists who visit Whitefish. Non-resident visitors are defined as not residing in Montana.

- 72% are repeat visitors.
- 12% enter the State at the U.S. Hwy 93 - Port of Rossville
- 21% Flew on portion of trip to Montana.
- Average nights spent in Montana: 7.4
- 65% Travel as a couple. 18% travel with immediate family. 10% travel alone.
- Visited: Glacier National Park (79%) Yellowstone National Park (25%) Flathead Lake State Parks (20%)
- Average Age = 59

### 2. Non-resident Vacation Preferences and Planning

According to ITRR Data, the primary trip purpose of Whitefish non-resident visitors is vacation/pleasure. Mountains, forest, rivers, lakes, and open space are the main attractions for visitors. Business travelers represent the smallest segment of visitors at only 2% of all non-resident visitors.

Figure 9: Primary Trip Purpose to Whitefish -2022

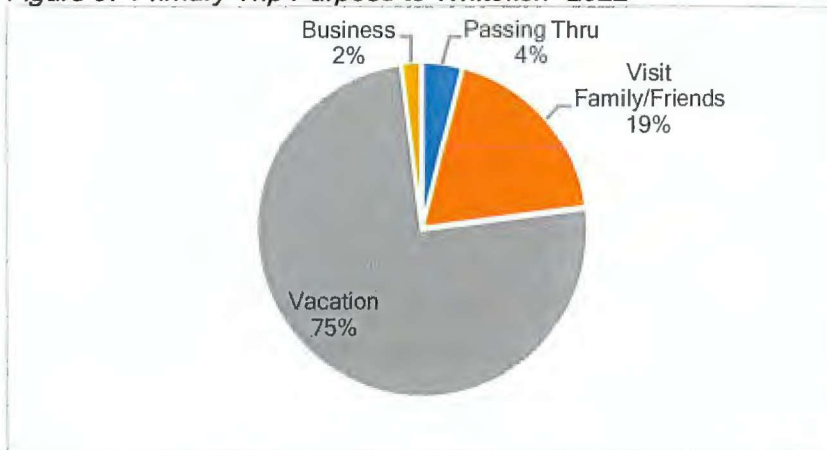


Table 21: Features & Activities that Attracted Whitefish Visitors to Montana for Vacation - 2022

Feature	% Attracted	Activity	% Participated
Mountains/Forest	74%	Scenic Drive	69%
Rivers	54%	Day Hike	66%
Lakes	50%	Wildlife Watching	38%
Open space/uncrowded	48%	Nature photography	37%
Hiking	41%	Visit Local Brewery	31%
Camping	17%	Car/RV Camping	30%
Family/Friends	15%	Visit Historic Site	29%
Fishing/Flying Fishing	11%	Recreational Shopping	29%
Native American History	11%	Visit Farmer's Market	11%

Source: University of Montana Institute of Tourism and Recreation Research - 2022

### 3. Travel Planning

Online sites and apps are the primary information sources for visitors planning vacations. About one-third contact the hotel directly to book a room while another third use on-line web sites.

Table 21: Travel Planning Resources Used by Whitefish Visitors

Information Sources	%	Booking Methods	%
Search Engine	65%	Contact hotel directly	31%
National Park Website/brochure	39%	Walked-In	17%
Official MT Website (VisitMT.com)	24%	On-line travel site	10%
Info from previous visitor	24%	VRBO/Home Away	10%
Consumer Online Reviews	22%	AirBnB	10%
Mobile Apps	20%	Other	8%
Friends/relatives living in MT	18%	N/A	13%
On-Line Video	13%		
Social networking	12%		

Source: <https://www.umt.edu/tourism-recreation-research/interactive-data/default.php>

### 4. Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors expressed the highest levels of satisfaction with a welcoming experience, the amount of open space and the local culture/heritage. Wildlife viewing and stewardship of land also ranked high. The lowest rankings for satisfaction were with availability of EV charging stations and recycling facilities.

Table 22: Satisfaction with Aspects of Montana

	2022 % Positive	2018 % Positive
A feeling being welcomed	96%	91%
Amount of open space	94%	88%
Main Streets reflecting local culture/heritage	93%	80%
Wildlife viewing opportunities	86%	79%
Stewardship of the land	85%	75%
Amount of historical roadside information	82%	79%
Access to public lands	81%	65%
Restaurants with local products	80%	79%
Availability of travel information	78%	82%
Availability of local arts and crafts	65%	63%
Highway rest areas	65%	82%
Availability of recycling bins	41%	57%
Availability of electric car charging stations	2%	n/a

Source: <https://www.umt.edu/tourism-recreation-research/interactive-data/default.php>

## G. Economic Impact

The following studies and data points provide an indication of the economic impact of tourism.

- In 2022 estimates of spending in Flathead County by nonresident visitors to the state totaled nearly \$819 million. This \$819 million in local spending directly supports \$735 million of economic activity in the region, and supports an additional \$583 million of economic activity, indirectly. The total contribution of nonresident spending to the regional economy was \$1.3 billion. (Source: ITRR, "Economic Contributions of 2021/2022 Non-Resident Travel")
- Glacier Country Tourism region had the highest level of Visa card spending levels from non-resident visitors (\$628 million) among the six regions. Yellowstone region was the second highest. (\$590 million). (Source: <https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Marketing/Tourism-Research/>)
- Since FY96, the first year of collections, the Whitefish Resort Tax collections has generated \$62,893,103 in revenue. (Source: *Whitefish Finance Department*)
- The "Spending Potential Index" (SPI) represents the amount spent for a product compared to a national average. ESRI Site Selector data indicates that the SPI for the City of Whitefish exceeds national averages in spending for recreational vehicles and sports/recreation equipment. (<https://svc.mt.gov/doc/siteselector/>)
- The "Market Potential Index" (MPI) measures the relative likelihood of households in the specified trade area exhibiting certain purchasing patterns. ESRI Site Selector data indicates that the MPI for purchasing local products and "Buying American" is significantly higher than the national average.
- Outdoor recreation adds approximately \$2.6 billion annually to Montana's GDP. (Source: <https://businessformontanasoutdoors.com/research/>).
- in a 2020 report prepared by the Institute of Tourism and Recreation Research, "Quality of Life" is the number one reason entrepreneurs "start, relocate and keep their businesses and jobs in Montana." Access to "outdoor recreation/parks/open spaces" is ranked as the highest attribute of quality of life (26.2%) above cost of living, public safety, health care, education, and culture. (Source: ITRR, 2020).
- The Glacier Country Tourism, "Destination Stewardship Plan" indicates strong recognition of the contribution of tourism to the state and local economy.

Figure 20: Tourism Contributions



Source: Glacier Country Tourism, "Destination Stewardship Plan"

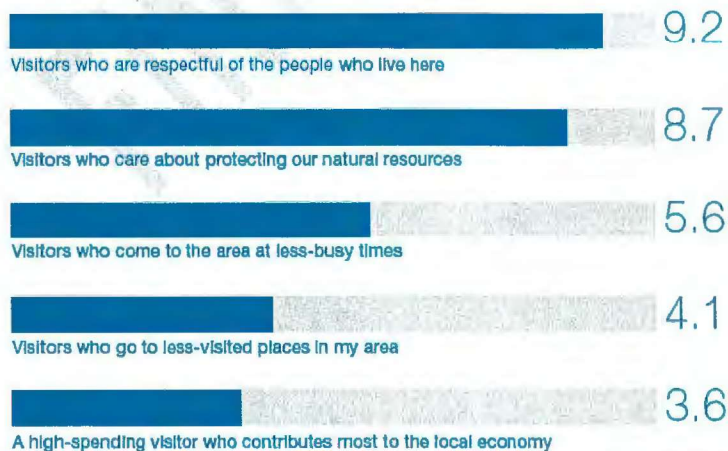
## H. Tourism Studies

### 1. Resident Attitudes Towards Tourism

- a) "Montana Residents Attitudes Towards Tourism," University of Montana - ITRR, 2022
- Since 2001, the percentage of Montana residents that agree with the statement that, "Overall benefits of tourism outweigh the negative impacts.", has remained relatively stable. Since the beginning of the pandemic (2020), the levels of disagreement have been increasing but are still well below the previously recorded high of 38% in 2001.
  - At least half of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the state is becoming overcrowded because of more tourists. Results from 2022 indicate an 11% decrease in the overcrowding sentiment from 2021.
  - Statewide, and in the Glacier Country region, approximately eight of ten respondents agree that tourism promotion by the state benefits their community economically.
  - Only 35% of residents in the Glacier Country region agreed with the statement that "If tourism increases in Montana, the overall quality of life for Montana residents will improve."
- b) "Glacier Country Tourism - Destination Stewardship Plan"
- On a scale of "1= Too Few Visitors" and "10= Too many visitors", residents of Flathead County strongly indicated that summer season had too many visitors (9.33) while the spring season ranked at "Just the right amount visitors". (5.11). The fall was ranked at 5.96 and winter at 6.91.
  - In response to support for various tourism strategies, attracting visitors who are respectful of the people who live here and who care about protecting our natural resources ranked the highest.

**Figure 21: Support for Tourism Policies**

To support my county's tourism economy, Glacier Country should focus on attracting... (10-point scale)



Source: Glacier Country Tourism, "Destination Stewardship"

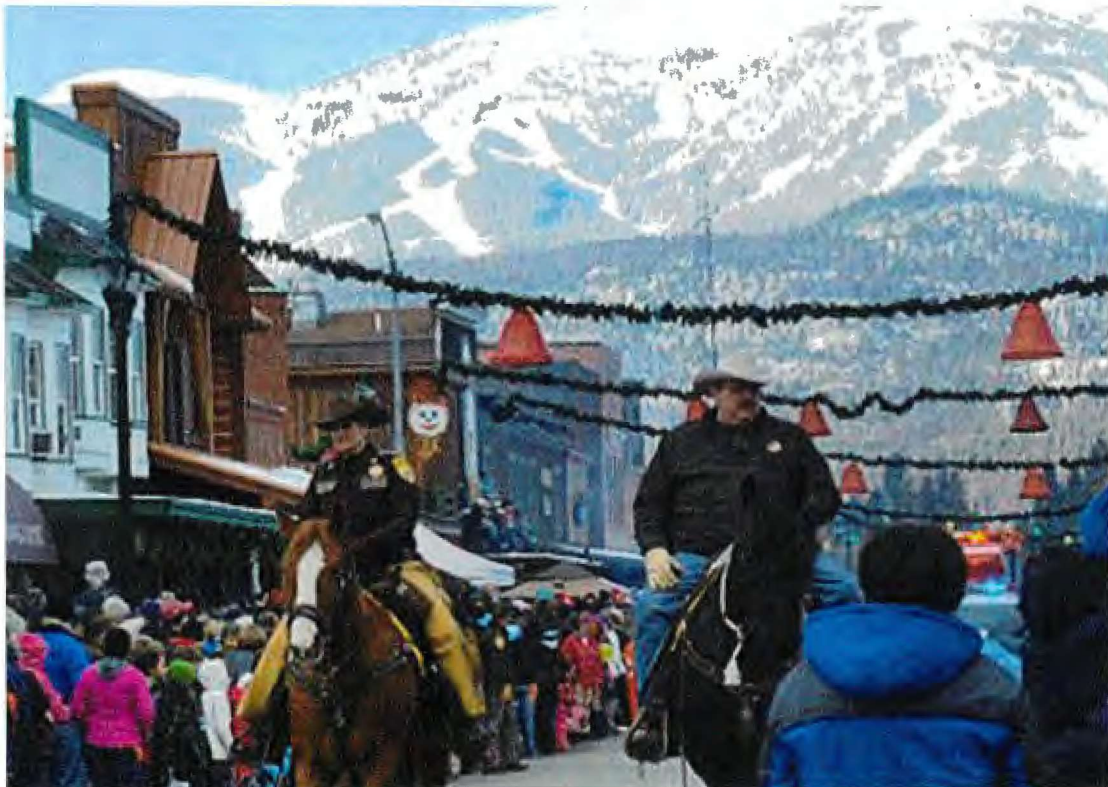
## 2. Work Force Studies

### a) University of Montana ITRR, "Montana Work Force Study-2022"

- Of those respondents with some work experience in the service/hospitality industry, nearly half (47%) reported that they left their job at some point since the beginning of 2020. This compares to 22% for all employees. It should be noted that respondents may have returned to their same employer or a new employer within the same industry (e.g., return after furlough)
- In the Glacier Country tourism region 48% of employees chose to leave their job as opposed to being furloughed. This compared to 60% who chose to leave jobs statewide. 16% of workers statewide reported leaving due to retirement.
- In Glacier Country tourism region 10% of workers rely on seasonal work.

### b) Montana Department of Labor, "2023 Labor Day Report"

- Tight labor market conditions persisted in 2022, with nearly three job openings for every one unemployed person.
- In 2022, Montana added 20,900 jobs - the most of any year in state history. Montana ranked 8th among states for employment growth in 2022, posting 3.9% growth.
- The state unemployment rate fell to a record-low 2.3% the first quarter of 2023,
- Montana ranks 2nd in the nation for the largest percentage of in-migration from 2020 to 2022. Over 40,000 more people moved to the state than left from 2020 to 2022, translating to 3.8% of Montana's population.



## IV. GOALS AND POLICIES

### Tourism

#### Goal 1: Measure progress through benchmarking and record keeping.

- 1.1 Compile data on visitor levels, economic performance, housing market and other statistics related to the focus areas.
- 1.2 Compile data on different types of growth (population, tourism economy vs. real estate economy.)
- 1.3 Identify livability benchmarks to measure progress towards goals.

#### Goal 2: Conduct community outreach and education.

- 2.1 Conduct community events each year to inform and engage local businesses, civic groups, and multi-generational community members in STMP activities.
- 2.3 Conduct outreach to emphasize the benefits of a tourism economy such as Resort Tax, Explore Whitefish Community Sustainability Fund, and other amenities.

#### Goal 3: Coordinate and partner on sustainable tourism programs.

- 3.1 Work with Explore Whitefish on implementation (outreach, sustainability fund, benchmarking....)
- 3.2 Continue to advocate the desire of residents to have easy access to Glacier National Park.
- 3.3 Coordinate with University of Montana Institute of Tourism and Recreation Research on data collection and benchmarking.
- 3.4 Coordinate with regional tourism related organizations to implement STMP. (Glacier Country, Kalispell CVB, Whitefish Chamber of Commerce, State of Montana Office of Tourism...)



## ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

### Goal 1: Support local businesses – especially during shoulder season.

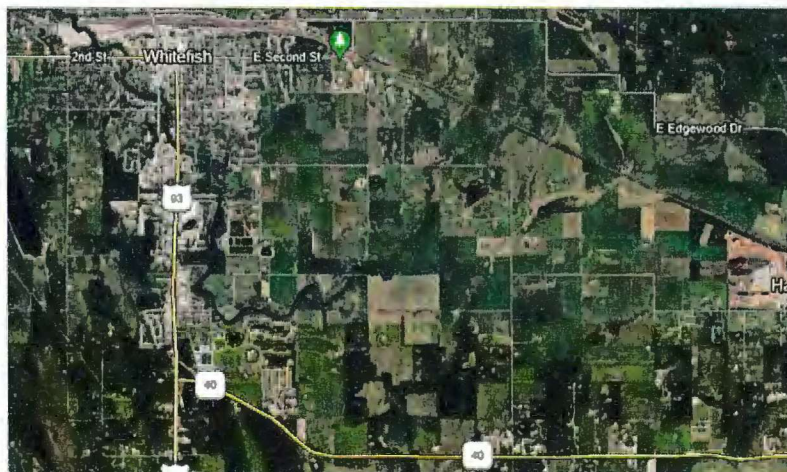
- 1.1 Conduct business survey to identify issues and support for various programs.
- 1.2 Promote shoulder season for corporate retreats, think tanks, wellness retreats, and other low impact events.
- 1.3 Identify best practices for programs that encourage residents to “buy local.”

### Goal 2: Develop business incubators and creative spaces for economic development.

- 2.1 Continue to promote Whitefish as a music hub and artist community and support businesses that contribute to the arts scene.
- 2.3 Target business recruitment and incentives to attract year-round, good paying jobs to diversify economic base.
- 2.3 Incentivize sustainable-green businesses.
- 2.4 Work with businesses on programs to off-set high cost of living for employees. (Coordinate with strategies for housing and development.)

### Goal 3: Coordinate and partner on economic development programs.

- 3.1 Coordinate economic development strategies with Whitefish Growth Policy – Vision 45 plan update and economic studies.
- 3.2 Support entrepreneurship and workforce development programs for local businesses.
- 3.3 Work with Montana West Economic Development to promote common economic objectives from the Sustainable Tourism Management Plan and Flathead County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.



## TRANSPORTATION

### Goal 1: In order to reduce the need for cars, expand public transit options.

- 1.1 Create a public transit joint working group to coordinate expanding public transit options in Whitefish and Flathead County.
- 1.2 Incentivize hospitality business to offer local shuttles for hotel guests to travel to downtown, trailheads, and other amenities.
- 1.3 Work with Glacier Park International Airport to increase options for shuttle or transit services for early morning departures and late-night arrivals.

### Goal 2: Address downtown parking issues during the peak summer season.

- 2.1 Collect data, assess need for additional parking and conduct pilot programs for parking management options.
- 2.2 Work with businesses to increase participation in programs to address downtown employees such as a permit system, car-pooling and other parking management tools.
- 2.3 Research car-share, bike-share, park-n-ride, and other best practices for reducing vehicle traffic and parking demand downtown.

### Goal 3: Coordinate and partner with state/local agencies to address transportation issues.

- 3.1 Work with county, state, and local municipalities on countywide transportation planning, road/safety improvements and funding options.
- 3.2 Support recommendations in the Whitefish Transportation Plan to improve the capacity of the transportation network to accommodate projected growth, provide for improved north-south access over the railroad and improve pedestrian/bike networks.
- 3.3 Work with MDT to implement recommendations in the Core Area Transportation Plan especially those that reflect the community's preferred alternative for Spokane Avenue.

### Goal 4: Promote pedestrian safety, trails, and walkability.

- 4.1 Support efforts by the city, local groups, and MDT to create a connected trail system.
- 4.2 Engage the community in the Whitefish Safety Study and support recommendations for a safe, walkable pedestrian/bike system.
- 4.3 Explore best practices to enhance pedestrian activities downtown and to promote cycling, walking, and carpooling.

## HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT

### Goal 1: Provide affordable workforce housing programs.

- 1.1 Expand use of land trust/deed restricted model in Whitefish (i.e., Depot Park Townhomes ...).
- 1.2 Secure and expand funding for the construction of permanently affordable housing and for workforce rental assistance.
- 1.3 Explore best practices to that result in affordable housing such as infill development, higher density in appropriate areas, community housing via annexation policy, conversion of short-term rentals to workforce housing, and preservation of naturally occurring affordable housing.
- 1.4 Establish landlord education program and recognize best practices for landlord/tenant relations.

### Goal 2: Support development compatible with existing community character.

- 2.1 Work with civic groups on community service projects for public art, community gardens, gateway landscaping/signage, community beautification and other projects.
- 2.2 Update design standards to be compatible with community character.
- 2.3 Incorporate sustainability principles into new developments.

### Goal 3: Strengthen short-term rental regulation and enforcement.

- 3.1 Conduct outreach about city efforts to enforce short-term rentals such as the "Problem Report" app on the city's website.
- 3.2 Research additional best practices for reporting and enforcing short-term rentals.
- 3.3 Monitor and collect data on short-term rental enforcement efforts to determine effectiveness.

### Goal 4: Coordinate and partner with local/state agencies on affordable housing efforts.

- 4.1 Integrate housing policies from STMP into Growth Policy -Vision 45 update.
- 4.2 Support projects by Whitefish Housing Authority to provide housing for seniors, people with disabilities and very-low-income households.
- 4.3 Coordinate with community non-profits (i.e., Housing Whitefish) on outreach, funding and supporting workforce housing projects.

## SUSTAINABILITY & ENVIRONMENT

### Goal 1: Promote sustainability through green business practices, resilient infrastructure, and community projects.

1.1 Conduct outreach and education events to local businesses on sustainable green business practices.

1.2 Support green infrastructure and preservation of open space/farmland.

1.3 Expand outreach efforts such as “Be a Friend of the Fish” to promote responsible recreation.

1.4 Invest in infrastructure upgrades that incorporate resiliency and sustainability principles such as EV chargers, renewable energy, and water/energy conservation.

### Goal 2: Establish community sustainability funding to support projects related to sustainable/resilient community

2.1 Explore best practices for a voluntary carbon off-set fee to be paid by visitors and businesses.

2.2 Explore grant programs that fund sustainability projects.

### Goal 3: Coordinate and partner on environmental and sustainability efforts.

3.1 Integrate sustainable tourism strategies into city plans and budgets. (Growth Policy, Climate Action Plan, ....)

3.2 Support Explore Whitefish efforts to incorporate livability and stewardship concerns into their activities.

3.3 Work with partners to offer mandatory citywide curbside recycling, promote recycling of construction materials and expand composting services.

3.4 Support Whitefish Lake Institute on water quality programs and education about best practices to protect Whitefish Lake.



## V. ACTION PLAN

The action plan translates goals into actionable steps to achieve desired outcomes. The action plan identifies six key strategies that reflect community input and represent the most effective use of the STMP committee time and resources. Over the next few years, the STMP Committee will develop agendas and work plans to reflect the tasks outlined in this action plan. This effort may include joint meetings with stakeholders, assigning sub-committees to lead efforts on specific action items or pursuing funding opportunities to implement action items. Communication, clear priorities, and adaptability are critical to successful implementation efforts. Key principles underlying the STMP Action Plan include:

- **Leverage existing resources** - Some recommendations in the plan will rely on securing adequate funding for various initiatives. Leveraging existing funds may help provide matching funds for grant applications and may also attract donors that are more likely to support a program with a proven track record. Additionally, leveraging current resources is often more efficient than start-up costs for a new undertaking.
- **Build on successes** - The STMP Committee has a notable list of accomplishments since the plan was adopted in 2020. Building on these successes provides a foundation for future achievements and motivates stakeholders to continue supporting and investing in these programs. The “Be A Friend of the Fish” responsible recreation campaign is an example of a popular initiative that community members would like to continue and expand.
- **Rely on partnerships** - Establishing partnerships will optimize the effectiveness of stewardship activities to achieve common goals. Partnerships can expand the reach of various activities as well as bring different viewpoints and expertise to the project. Partnerships also provide opportunities to access additional staffing and funding resources to implement projects. The partnership between Housing Whitefish, City of Whitefish and Explore Whitefish to create a funding pool for affordable housing is a good model.
- **Identify priority projects** - Focusing action on key objectives can maximize efficiency and impact of the STMP. The implementation plan identifies six key initiatives that reflect community input and represent the most effective use of the Committee’s resources. Other objectives in the plan may be accomplished by coordinating with community organizations and state agencies on projects that align with the plan’s goals. This approach fosters collaboration and ensures a unified approach towards shared objectives.
- **Measure progress** - Integrate data collection, and progress reports throughout all activities and focus areas. This will allow the committee to identify challenges and new trends so the STMP Committee can make informed decisions and adjustments to ensure the success of strategic planning efforts. Explore Whitefish regularly compiles data from public and private data sources to monitor visitation trends. There was also special interest in monitoring the effectiveness of the short-term rental enforcement initiatives.

### ACTION 1: Public outreach on benefits of a tourism economy.

#### Potential Tasks:

- Publish annual report on sustainable tourism updates and accomplishments.
- Use social media to regularly engage the community on STMP news.
- Initiate in-person “drop-in” events or pop-up events to engage with the community. (i.e., “Coffee with a Cop”)
- Bi-Annual community meeting with panels & tourism updates.

**Timeframe:** On-going

**Lead/Partners:** Whitefish STMP Committee, Explore Whitefish. Coordinate with Chamber.

**Budget/Resources:** Low budget. Use City & Explore Whitefish websites, social media accounts. Find partners to sponsor/host community events.

### ACTION 2: Promote shoulder season for retreats and other low impact events.

#### Potential Tasks:

- Hire sales manager to promote and assist meeting planners with events in Whitefish.
- Inventory local activities that are available in the shoulder season such as arts & culture, wellness providers, culinary activities ....
- Coordinate with Glacier Park International Airport on improving services for connecting flights in the shoulder season.

**Timeframe:** Hire staff in the near term. Marketing is an on-going activity.

**Lead Agency/Partners:** Explore Whitefish (Lead), Chamber of Commerce, Glacier Country

**Budget/Resources:** Cost of hiring sales manager require reallocation or expansion of marketing budgets.

### ACTION 3: Create a public transit working group

#### Potential tasks.

- Convene group and meet with stakeholders to identify options improve transit service.
- Identify public and private funding sources to help fund transit services.
- Survey businesses on employee transit needs.
- Research best practices in other resort towns.
- Coordinate with park-n-ride and other programs to reduce vehicle trips.

**Timeframe:** On-going monitoring and promotion of transit opportunities.

**Lead:** Joint effort between STMP Committee and Whitefish Climate Action Plan Committee

**Stakeholders:** Big Mountain Commercial Association, Mountain Climber, Montana Dept. of Transportation, Glacier National Park, Glacier International Airport, Chamber

**Resources:** Federal and state grants, business and local govt. contributions, user fees ...

### ACTION 4: Support efforts to create a connected trail system.

#### Potential Tasks:

- Engage in county-wide regional trail planning.
- Coordinate with Growth Policy update.
- Advocate for MDT to emphasize community preferences for pedestrian safety, trail connectivity and to maintain shared paths.
- Identify public and private funding sources for construction and maintenance.
- Support legislative initiatives that fund a connected trail system

**Timeframe:** Near-term meet with stakeholders to identify areas for collaboration

**Stakeholders:** Whitefish STMP & Pedestrian and Bicycle Path Advisory Committees. Non-profit trail groups, county park & rec, schools

**Resources:** Federal and state grants, resort tax, fundraising, ...

### **ACTION 5: Coordinate with non-profits on outreach, funding & support for affordable housing.**

**Potential tasks:**

- Meet with Housing Committee and housing agencies to identify areas of collaboration.
- Identify potential public and private funding sources to help fund affordable housing.
- Advocate state legislature for affordable housing funding.
- Explore expanding land trust model.
- Research best practices in other resort towns.
- Facilitate community forums on housing topics.
- Coordinate with Growth Policy Update

**Timeframe:** Conduct meetings in near term

**Lead:** STMP Committee coordinate with Whitefish Housing Committee to identify areas of collaboration

**Stakeholders:** Housing non-profits, developers, banks, state agencies, employers, Chamber, NW Montana Realtor Association, Whitefish Planning Dept.

**Resources:** Federal and state grants & programs, business and local govt. contributions, developer participation, private donations, financial institutions, non-profit programs

### **ACTION 6: Conduct outreach with local businesses on sustainable green business practices.**

**Potential tasks:**

- Meet with Climate Action Plan Committee for potential areas of collaboration.
- Compile best practices & resources for business to adopt sustainable practices.
- Find partner to develop outreach materials and training for businesses.
- Create an annual award program to acknowledge exemplary examples in the business community.
- Survey businesses on attitudes & preferences for adopting sustainable practices.
- Support opportunities for increasing recycling, composting and zero waste business practices.

**Timeframe:** Begin outreach to businesses within 1-2 years

**Lead:** Joint effort STMP Committee and Whitefish Climate Action Plan Committee

**Stakeholders:** Chamber of Commerce, MWED, related non-profits, state, and county agencies with related programs

**Resources:** Federal and state grants, non-profit grants, partnerships, ....