

Whitefish Growth Has Stopped

In its annual report earlier this year, the Whitefish Planning and Building Department wrote that, “Whitefish continues to be one of the fastest growing communities in the state of Montana.”

In a recent editorial, local politicians advocating the “Whitefish Way” repeated this mantra, writing, “Whitefish has been the fastest growing community in Montana.”

While this view of rapid growth was true some time ago, it is not now.

According to the U.S. Census, between 2000 and 2010, Whitefish grew 26.3 percent. Yet, across Montana, 130 communities during that time grew faster than Whitefish. Whitefish’s growth rate was actually sandwiched between Elmo’s 25.8 percent (Lake County) and Birney’s 26.8 percent (Rosebud County). Strange?

Whitefish is not even the fastest-growing community in the Flathead Valley. In fact, it is the slowest of its major Flathead Valley neighbors.

During the same 10 years, Columbia Falls grew 29 percent, Kalispell 40 percent, Lakeside 59 percent and Somers 99 percent. Bigfork grew a whopping 200 percent, but this exponential growth was due in part to annexation.

Why does it matter if some leaders and the planning department think our town is rapidly growing when it is not? It’s simple.

If City Hall wakes up each morning thinking Whitefish is the fastest-growing Montana city, its top priority will be to manage or slow growth. For the past decade or so, City Hall has implemented this management philosophy, which has caused Whitefish, previously one of the fastest-growing Montana cities, to add only five (that is not a typo) people between 2008 and 2010.

Whitefish consequently fell from first to last in growth among major Flathead Valley communities. Conversely, if City Hall wakes up each morning understanding (correctly) that Whitefish’s growth has stopped – we are stagnant – and that its regulations and fees are driving away people and jobs, then it will be more likely to adopt policies that make it easier for businesses to prosper and families to afford to live here.

A community’s growth affects the amenities the community can offer, the quality of its schools and its residents’ property values and ability to earn good incomes. A community with stagnant growth has much different problems than a community with vibrant growth. Whitefish was in the latter category but no longer.

Before City Hall can plan for our future, it must understand the present. Wishing away reality is not a successful management strategy.

*Mike McNamara
Whitefish*