

ADDENDUM TO WHITEFISH RIVER STAFF REPORT-SOCIAL ASPECTS
FEBRUARY 6, 2012

The community of Whitefish is fortunate to have a clear, clean river flowing through the center of town. Over the past four years Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad has undertaken a massive cleanup of the river, removing thousands of cubic yards of oil-contaminated river silts, replacing them with clean gravel. A restored river has resulted from these efforts and the river has once again become a centerpiece of the community.

During the four-year closure for cleanup the river experienced little to no use. However, during this period an interesting phenomenon occurred; the standup paddleboard (SUP) became a popular recreational craft. Now, in addition to the traditional canoe, kayak, float tube, raft, and inner tube, the SUP has joined the river flotilla. As a result, more individuals and families than ever before are enjoying the safe, slow, shallow confines of the Whitefish River.

Recognizing the importance of the Whitefish River to the Whitefish community, and in response to the resurgence of recreational activities on the river, BNSF Railway donated an easement for, and constructed at their expense, a dedicated "non-motorized" boat launch to the City at the conclusion of their cleanup efforts. This new park was dedicated in July of 2013.

Now that the cleanup is complete, non-motorized use has proliferated. Several companies specializing in non-motorized water craft, namely SUPs, have opened up in Whitefish. These locally owned and operated businesses, in addition to sales and rentals, now conduct paddleboard classes and guide users along the river corridor. For example, the Whitefish Parks and Recreation Department sponsors paddleboard classes that use the river as their classroom. The community's concern is that an unrestrained jet ski or power boat would accidentally run through a group of floaters or paddle boarders.

Limiting the three-mile stretch of river between the BNSF trestle and the JP Road to manually powered craft and electric motors not only provides a safe and secure environment for family waterborne recreation, it also complements the City's bike and pedestrian path which parallels the river.

The Whitefish City Council held two public hearings on the proposed use restriction for the Whitefish River. Public support was overwhelming. At the first hearing only two persons spoke in opposition. Between the first and second hearings the Council revised the resolution to shorten the length of river under consideration from five to three miles and to include electric motors. With those revisions in place, only one person spoke in opposition at the second public hearing. Interestingly, one of the people who had been opposed at the first hearing came to the second and spoke in favor of the revised manually powered/electric motor restriction.

Whitefish has a strong tourist component to its economy. During the summer months locals and visitors alike have access to the full range of uses on Whitefish Lake: wake boarding, skiing, sailing, fishing, jet skiing, and leisure craft. A manually powered/electric motor restriction on the Whitefish River would provide a unique, quiet, and safe refuge for locals and visitors who are seeking an alternative recreational experience from that provided on Whitefish Lake.