

OPINION

Seeking a stronger future for Kalispell

By KRISTEN HECK

Kalispell sits at the confluence of many opportunities. With recent successes such as the bypass and TIGER Grant, now is the time to step forward and leverage these opportunities to improve our town's future. Skiing, hiking, camping, water-sports, and hunting are available here at a level of quality found few places in the West. Kalispell has these attractions, but they are only a part of what is required to bring vibrant, new industry to our community.

The Flathead Valley is already feeling the pinch of a labor force that cannot meet the demands of employers. State and national predictions are that this trend will continue over the next five years as more baby-boomers retire. The Flathead Valley will have to compete for a smart, well-educated and enthusiastic work force. Investing in our community can help.

Industry needs educated and trained young professionals available to facilitate growth. Today's young people, the key to attracting industry, want not only outdoor activities but excellent dining, live music venues, walkability and more. To appeal to the next generation of business leaders, Kalispell must offer work, play, and cultural enrichment.

Take for example, Bend, Oregon. Once a town reliant on logging, the town now thrives on the arts, tourism, and manufacturing. Bend harnessed the beauty of the Deschutes River flowing through its downtown. The community converted its old sawmill into parks and made recreation and walking along the river part of their economic base. Today, people can paddleboard on the river, and step off the water in the afternoon for a drink at the nearby, nationally recognized Deschutes brewery. Young people thrive in Bend and it fits their lifestyle. Yet, it also offers much beyond the town itself.

A factor in Bend's success is proximity to other towns such as Sisters, Oregon. Sisters is another small town that provides an active lifestyle; it has also encouraged businesses to create a distinct culture that draws outdoors enthusiasts and those seeking unique restaurant options. Likewise, Whitefish has done much the same as Sisters. It developed on a wealth of the outdoor amenities and fostered a vibrant downtown. Kalispell, working with our neighbor, Whitefish, can cultivate synergy similar to Bend and Sisters. The more active and happening the communities, the more young professionals will desire to be here because they can enjoy multiple scenes offering different activities.

Bend's investment in parks and a vibrant downtown has garnered a great return. According to a survey, 29.7 percent of Bend's population has a bachelor's degree. This compares favorably with the rest of the state, which has only 18.7 percent possessing a bachelor's degree. In Bend, 32.8 percent of households make more than \$75,000 annually, and Bend has a median household income of \$53,000. Bend has attracted more industry and grown successfully as a community because it offers an attractive lifestyle with strong supporting industries.

Comparing this to Kalispell, 18.2 percent of our households make \$75,000 or greater, and our median household income is \$41,000. Kalispell's population holding a bachelor's degree is lower than average compared to the state of Montana. However, this does not need to be our future.

Kalispell is much like Bend. We share a history of logging, but the conversion to a community that appeals to young professionals has progressed further in Bend. We can do more to facilitate this same growth in Kalispell. Our outdoor opportunities are many and we can create synergy with our neighbors. The next step is to create a highly attractive community from a lifestyle standpoint.

We do this by converting unused industrial land to parks and places where the community can gather and walk, while maintaining proximity to all the city has to offer. We create opportunities for businesses to invest in businesses and housing where young professionals will want to be. We do this by understanding how we can change and grow in a way that will create a place where our children can and will want to stay and work. We can make Kalispell the community both young professionals and new industries will want to make their home. We must act now on the many opportunities available to create a stronger Kalispell.

Heck, of Kalispell, is president and co-owner of LC Staffing and Loyal Care.

**Guest
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