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# Assessing Character of Place to Guide Geotourism

## A Case Study of Two Montana Communities

Evan Tipton, Research Assistant, Norma Polovitz Nickerson, Ph.D, and Jennifer Thomsen, Ph.D.

9/12/2016



This study explored the character of place from the diverse perspectives of residents and visitors in two Montana communities, Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs.

## Assessing Character of Place to Guide Geotourism

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## Abstract

In 2007 the governor's Montana Tourism Advisory Council adopted the Montana Tourism and Recreation Charter. Its guiding principle of geotourism pledges to sustain and enhance the character of the places that the people of Montana call home. How can the state's efforts to keep this pledge be assessed when "character of place" has never been defined in detail? To keep this pledge, and chart the future of geotourism in the state, it was important to clarify what is meant by character of place and identify the full range of present and potential problems that threaten the integrity of a character. Only by assessing character of place can we understand whether and how geotourism sustains the local environment and its aesthetic appeal, enhances the local community and its culture, and enriches the local heritage and well-being of its people.

## Executive summary

The purpose of this study was to identify character of place from the perspective of local residents and visitors. Using a participatory-multimedia elicitation approach, 45 participants were interviewed, including 29 residents and 16 visitors, obtaining photos and videos to show the attributes they felt comprised the character of their place. Follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant to probe the meanings and values behind the attributes they chose to portray the character of their place. Highlights from the study include:

- Top character attributes from **Whitefish visitors** highlighted the local amenities and restaurants, interactions and experiences with local residents, the intangible spirit and overall ambience, outstanding fly-fishing opportunities, proximity to Glacier National Park, local guide services, physical and historical presence of the railroad, and family-friendly atmosphere.
- The top three character attributes **Whitefish residents** identified included the influence of politics and planning that shaped the local character of place, the social cohesion and quality of relationships between residents, and the unique lifestyle opportunities Whitefish affords its residents.
- Top character attributes from **White Sulphur Springs visitors** included the local amenities and restaurants and interactions and experiences with local residents, as well as the rural setting and culture, the Red Ants Pants festival, the caring, neighborly feel in the community, the intangible spirit and pride, local fly-fishing opportunities, presence of open space, big sky and brilliant sunsets, and overall slower pace of life.
- The top three character attributes **White Sulphur Springs residents** identified included the influence of the rural culture, the importance of the working, ranching, and cultural history, and the specific local businesses and their impact on the social fabric of White Sulphur Springs.
- Results suggest that the character of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs centers on the civic virtue of neighborliness and the composite mixture of the natural and altered elements of a place.
- The character of place for both Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs align with the three brand pillars used in branding Montana.
- The process used to gather data through visual media (participant photographs) and interviews allowed for depth of discussion and understanding which lead to the three attributes needed in defining character of place: People, built environment, and natural landscapes. These attributes and a question about losing an attribute in communities could be the key that helps maintain character of place in Montana.

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## Introduction

This study aimed to identify the key traits that local residents and visitors believe make up the ‘character of the place.’ Montana’s geotourism charter aims to *sustain and enhance* the character of the places its people call home. Governor Bullock’s Main Street Montana Project likewise underscores the need to “Protect Montana’s quality of life for this and future generations.” But the critical concept of “character of place” is left undefined. Clarifying what we mean by character of place will help Montana grow in ways that protect this very character while enhancing the economic well-being of its people and the places they call home.

Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs were chosen for study as two comparable areas that feature contrasting qualities. Both communities feature well-known natural attractions and social amenities for tourists. Yet they differ significantly in terms of the tourist volume and intensity they attract, the history they embody, and the occupational range and distribution their economy embraces today. Thus Whitefish is located within the Crown of the Continent Geotourism Map Guide, and White Sulphur Springs is located outside of any Geotourism Map Guide area.

One goal of this study was to establish a framework for understanding and identifying the common and uncommon attributes that make up ‘local character’ throughout Montana. This framework can help local residents take stock of their communities and take part in improving them. Practical insights are offered to tourism marketers, community leaders, and policy-makers on how ‘character of place’ is constructed and ultimately how it can be sustained and enhanced.

## Research Objectives

The geotourism charter and Main Street Montana Project have given the concept of ‘character of place’ a central role in animating Montana’s tourism landscape. The research objectives below mark the first steps in clarifying and deepening our understanding of this encompassing concept.

### Objectives

- To assess what constitutes the ‘character’ of two Montana communities, and what enriches this character or detracts from it, for residents and visitors alike.
- To identify the key attributes that visitors to a community feel make up the ‘character of place.’
- To identify the key attributes that local residents feel make up the ‘character of their place.’
- To compare the ‘character’ attributes between two distinct communities: 1) Whitefish located in a geotourism hotspot, and 2) White Sulphur Springs in central Montana far from the high tourism areas.
- To determine how close depictions of ‘character of place’ come to the Montana brand, or diverge from it, and how these depictions can enrich it.

## Literature Review

This literature review is grounded in the conceptual framework of geotourism as an emerging approach to tourism and its focus on enhancing the geographical character of a place. It explores the history and evolution of geotourism, showing how geotourism differs from ecotourism and where geotourism is



now heading, particularly in the case of Montana. Then it examines the concepts of ‘character’ and ‘place’ in order to clarify their various meanings in context and analyze their linkage. This section concludes by assessing how videography added to resident-employed photography can advance the understanding of character of place.

## Introduction to Geotourism

The creation of geotourism drew on many influential ideas in the field of sustainable tourism since the Brundtland Report introduced the concept of sustainable development in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). It was not until 1997, however, that National Geographic started advancing the concept of geotourism (Boley 2009), which made its formal debut in a 2003 paper at the Travel Industry Association in partnership with the National Geographic Society. Jonathan Tourtellot of *National Geographic Traveler* originally defined geotourism as, “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of its residents” (Stokes, Cook, and Drew 2003). Geotourism emerges not as a niche form of tourism that focuses on sustaining one specific dimension of the travel experience, but rather as a unique approach to maintain the character of place (Boley, Nickerson, and Bosak 2011).

The evolution of the tourism industry and its related literature has spurred various tourism models from mass tourism through sustainable tourism to ecotourism and now geotourism. The literature features eclectic efforts to define sustainable tourism and ecotourism, and it reveals a problematic lack of unity (Boley et al. 2011). This has led to the manifold expansion and fragmentation of “sustainable tourism” to include ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1996), geotourism (Stokes, et al. 2003), new tourism (Rosenow and Pulsipher 1979), ethnic tourism (Moscardo and Pearce 1999), pro-poor tourism (Ashley and Roe 2002), alternative tourism (Butler 1990), justice tourism (Scheyvens 2002), and volunteer tourism (Wearing 2001). “Ecotourism,” meanwhile, has also been plagued with a lack of a coherent definition or understanding. In 2001, a content analysis of 85 definitions of ecotourism found that 45 percent of them limited ecotourism to activity within protected areas, 50 percent made no reference to culture, and only 48 percent included benefiting local residents (Fennel 2001). In sum, little agreement has emerged in defining what constitutes ecotourism, with substantial distinctions made between ecotourism and geotourism in at least 50 percent of the definitions (Boley et al. 2011).

Today geotourism has emerged as a uniquely holistic approach focused on sustaining all characteristics of a region. Geotourism differs from ecotourism by encompassing the entire working landscape as part of the tourist attraction. It is not limited to protected or pristine areas, and it seeks to enable local residents to shape tourism in their midst (Stokes et al. 2003; Boley et al. 2011). While sustainable tourism has been described as a nebulous concept at best, because it is oriented to a future that never arrives, geotourism promises more tangible outcomes centered on changing tourists’ expectations through a community-first focus rather than forcing a destination to adapt to the demands of tourism (Boley 2009). Given geotourism’s aim to sustain the region’s character through preserving local values and assets, using a participatory approach to identify attributes that make up the character of place will enable more informed decision-making in tourism management, marketing, and development going forward. Since many of these local “social landscapes” have natural resources at their core, those tasked with tourism development can make the most of a tremendous opportunity to add community character to traditional metrics such as visitor satisfaction and ecological quality (Amsden, Stedman, and Kruger 2010).

## The Application of Geotourism in Montana

It is vital to grasp the magnitude of tourism in Montana and its power as a catalyst for local change, both positive and negative. In 2015, the state received 11.7 million nonresident visitors, more than 11 times the total of the state's population. These non-resident visitors directly and indirectly helped to contribute \$5.15 billion to Montana's economy and to support 63,360 tourism-related jobs in the state (ITRR 2015 Nonresident Visitor Report). Tourism's economic impact across the state is widely understood, but carefully detailed evidence is needed to avoid overgeneralizing our impressions of what is really going on (Epstein and Yuthas 2014). The benefits of tourism are not distributed equally throughout local places across Montana, and the distribution of these benefits can depend on the type of tourism, the expectations of the tourists, and the ability of their hosts to provide appropriate facilities and destination activities (Hall 2007). As a result of this unequal distribution and reliance on a single industry, small-towns and rural communities in Montana may be especially vulnerable to variations in tourist traffic, and they may fail to realize the benefits of tourism proportionately or fully.

Research continues to show that visitors to Montana do possess the distinctive traits of geotourists. A 2010 study evaluating the travel behavior of non-resident visitors to Montana confirmed that they fit well with the state's geo-strategies, and that these geo-travelers can be found statewide, not just in specified 'geotourist' areas (Boyle 2010). In addition to being drawn to the state's natural amenities, these visitors are attracted to cultural and historic activities, the pristine environment, and the uniqueness of the small towns across Montana (Nickerson, Ellard, & Dvorak 2003). The state of Montana has recognized that these attractions coincide with the principles of geotourism, which it has integrated into its marketing and branding initiatives (Boyle 2010). Along with adopting the geotourism charter, the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations has launched two geotourism MapGuides for the "Crown of the Continent" and "Greater Yellowstone" regions, featuring two prominent locations in the state. These MapGuides combine traditional maps with guidebooks highlighting historic and cultural sites, recreational activities, and accommodations unique to a particular destination (Boyle 2010). These maps compose forms of strategic visual rhetoric that seek to engage their readers in cultivating a regional sense of place (Patin 2012). This rhetoric remains problematic, however, insofar as the professionals promoting geotourism have not articulated a clear sense of what a regional sense of place actually means in the complex experience of local residents and visitors (Gladfelter and Mason 2012).

What does this mean for Montana? By aligning itself as a geotourism state in 2007, the state adopted specific management and marketing principles associated with geotourism. Because geotourism in Montana is not limited to areas specified in the geotourism MapGuides, but encompasses a statewide tourism management philosophy, this study examines two cases--the geotourism 'hotspot' area of Whitefish and the White Sulphur Springs community outside any MapGuide area. Because geotourism offers a more consumer-driven approach to product-development and destination-management than other forms of sustainable tourism (Stokes et al. 2003), its good intentions require a clearer, fuller understanding of character of place in order to meet its stated objectives of sustaining the unique character of each place by providing quality living environments for local residents, while also delivering unique travel experiences for visitors.

## What Is 'Character'?

In order to articulate community-specific constructions of character of place, we need to understand the multidimensional, complex process behind the creation of this concept. What do people mean by character? The *Lexicon Webster Dictionary* defines character as "a distinctive trait, quality or attribute,"

the “essential quality or nature” of something, and the “reputation” of a person, place, or thing. The tourism literature is clear in stating, “each and every place has some measure of unique expression or quality and contains locally special attributes” (Garnham 1985, pp 830-832). Thus we can ask, what are the attributes that actually produce this essential quality of character (Pivo 1992)?

Geotourism states that geographical character encompasses the entire combination of natural and human attributes that makes a place worth visiting, including its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents (Stokes et al. 2003). Geography, from which “geotourism” derives, reveals not just “where” places are, but also “what” places are. It shows what makes one place different from the next. That includes not only flora and fauna, which lie in the realm of ecotourism, but also historic structures and archaeological sites, scenic landscapes, traditional architecture, and locally grown music, cuisine, crafts, dances, and other arts (National Geographic 2009). As America’s best-known bio-regionalist once said, “if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are” (Northwest Earth Institute). In this perspective, understanding the interrelated multidimensional construct of character of place proves pivotal in helping people, managers, and planners alike to preserve the unique *character* of places before they are gone.

## What Is ‘Place’?

If character is comprised of multidimensional and interrelated attributes derived from individual experience and socially shared interpretation, then what constitutes place? Relph (1976) defines place “as a setting comprised of physical location, human activities, and the psychological processes relating to it”. Expanding on Tuan’s (1977) historic observation of place, Williams and Stewart (1998) define sense of place as “the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality.” Sociologists have historically focused on social characteristics of sense of place, while urban designers emphasize its natural, visual, and cultural characteristics (Pivo 1992). Studies of place drawn from anthropology, political science, and geography often explicitly examine the political nature of place (Yung, Friemund, and Belsky 2003). However difficult it may be to capture the complexity of “place” in a single definition, Thomas Gieryn (2000) proposes three main components of place: geographical fixity, physicality expressed in the material form, and cultural definitions and symbolic representations.

The literature shows significant overlap between the “character” and the “sense” of place. This study does not aim to distinguish between the two concepts, but rather to advance our grounded understanding of what character of place means and how it is constructed in practice. Then and only then can these two sociocultural and biophysical constructs be critically weighed against one another. What is clear, however, is that both character of place and sense of place are changeable, fluid, and unique for each particular place (Stokowski 2002), and both are comprised of tangible (geographic location and physical landscape) and intangible (socially shared and culturally symbolized meanings) attributes that must be considered together (Campelo, Aitken, and Thyne 2013). Figure 1 provides an illustration of how these two sets of attributes from the physical and social environment interact to form sense of place (Campelo et al. 2013).

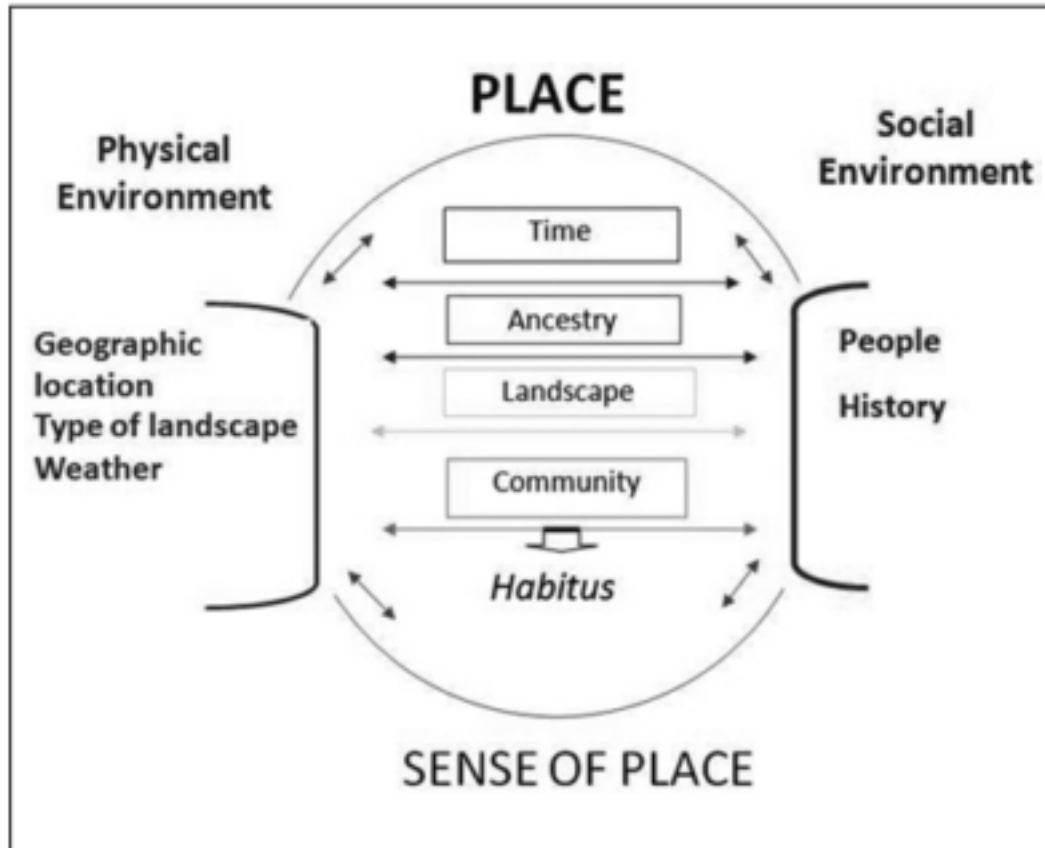


Figure 1 - Sense of Place Model (Campelo et al. 2013).

### What Then, Is ‘Character of Place’?

In the study of natural resources, sense of place has evolved from vague commonsense to a concept with *relative* consensus on its constituent elements (Farnum, Hall, and Kruger 2005). However, as the overlapping definitions of “character” and “place” imply, ambiguity still surrounds sense of place and related constructs. Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005) claim that most scholars would probably agree that sense of place is the more encompassing term, referring to the full constellation of ideas and sentiments that people hold regarding a particular geographic locale. This study starts from the critical premise that character of place is yet to be examined by the empirical means needed to determine which of these interrelated terms may in fact be the most encompassing. Given this study’s framing in terms of geotourism, moreover, it will conceive character of place to focus investigation on the human connections to place that local residents and visitors experience and interpret together.

The concept of “vanua” will help set the context for this study’s use of character of place. Indigenous to Fijian culture and society, vanua most fully encompasses what character of place means within the scope of this study. “Vanua does not mean only land and the area one is identified with, and the vegetation, animal life, and other objects on it, but also includes the social and cultural system – the

people, their traditions and customs, beliefs and values, and the various other institutions established for the sake of achieving harmony, solidarity, and prosperity within a particular social context (Kerstetter and Bricker 2009). Thus, the character of place can be seen as spanning five dynamic and constantly evolving spheres of meaning: (1) biological, (2) environmental, (3) psychological, (4) sociocultural, and (5) political (Beckley, Stedman, Wallace, and Ambard 2007; Yung et al. 2003; Low and Altman 1992). These five spheres align quite closely with the components evident in definitions of geotourism, including environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of residents. While geotourism is a community-first approach and the definition of character of place does not mention the visitor, their perspectives need to be considered in tandem with that of residents if the 'vanua' of a place is going to be sustained, enhanced, or truly understood.

## Methods

This study uses a two-phase, mixed-methods approach in order to examine what makes up the 'character of place' from the perspectives of both residents and visitors. Phase one of the study looks at what makes up the local character of place by employing a participatory-multimedia elicitation (PME) approach. Given the need for follow-up investigation, Phase two of the study featured semi-structured qualitative interviews following the collection of multimedia from the residents and visitors.

### Phase 1: Participatory-Multimedia Elicitation (PME)

This approach seeks to enable residents and visitors to reflect deeply on the community being studied and identify the attributes that they feel make up its character. While participants were asked to capture 10-20 photographs and 5-10 videos exemplifying these attributes, it was not required given the significant time involved with participating in this study. The time and effort needed to select and submit such thoughtful photos and videos to exemplify character of place reduced response rates to 75 percent. Nonetheless 34 out of the 45 participating interviewees submitted photos and videos, including 12 of 16 visitors and 22 of 29 residents. By limiting the number of photographs and videos, participants were able to provide a more targeted reflection of place attachments (Beckley, Stedman, Wallace, and Ambard 2007).

The research participants were told upfront that the purpose of this project is to identify the attributes that they feel make up the character of their place, and for visitors, the character of the place they are visiting. The instructions of what and where to photograph/video were kept fairly open to avoid influencing the content and location of the media. Given the breadth of what the character concept entails, participants were encouraged to capture the positive and negative attributes they felt comprised the character of their place. At the outset, the participants discussed with the interviewer a list of possible attributes to focus attention on images and videos likely to express character of place, given prior research showing such a pre-set list helped participants avoid taking impulse photographs (Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, and Ambard 2004). These brainstorming sessions involved asking participants what attributes they wanted to include and walking them through their 'place' with a hypothetical camera to clarify the process for capturing these desired attributes. Participants were welcome to add any pre-existing photos or videos in order to account for the seasonality of this study making certain attributes not replicable.

In addition to the brainstorming sessions, the primary researcher sat down with each participant before they began collecting data to sensitize them to the project and establish rapport as well as provide clear instruction, given the intimate and intangible nature of trying to capture the complex intersubjective phenomenon of defining character of place.

## **Phase 2: Follow-Up Interviews**

Once photos and videos were submitted, interviews were scheduled with each participant. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide. Each resident interview started with a relaxed conversation to put the person at ease and elicit personal history in the community, occupation, interests, and related topics. This background information helped inform probes for each interview and shed light on the historical context and personal outlook of each participant. The researcher then guided the interview to examine in detail each of the 10-20 photos and 5-10 videos, asking the subject to describe the content and setting represented, the reasons why they took this photo or video, and whether they saw any factors that could endanger or enhance the attribute in question. For each video file, the researcher asked further questions to uncover additional connotations or associations that each photo and video held for the subject, including soundscapes, social settings and interactions with others, and the nuanced meaning of body language and gestures. Every participant was asked at the outset for permission to audio-record the interview, and assured they could turn off the recorder at any point in time. Visitor interviews followed a similar structure, but the conversation upfront touched on their trip planning and travel history in Montana, if any, instead of their personal history in the community.

The interviews ranged in duration from 18 minutes to 134 minutes, and all 45 interviews totaled 47 hours and 13 minutes. All visitor interviews had to be conducted over the phone; 16 of the 29 resident interviews were done in person, while the rest were completed over the phone.

## **Sampling Framework and Procedure**

The researcher sought to compose a representative sample of 15 residents and 10 visitors in each community (50 total participants) by using nonprobability purposive sampling. Given the limitations described below, a total of 45 subjects took part in this study, as grouped in Tables 1 and 2. The residents taking part were selected initially from a list of town residents recommended by the directors of each community's chamber of commerce. The researcher sought to include key decision-makers, community leaders, potentially marginalized persons, newcomers and old-timers, and a representative range of persons by occupation, gender, generation, and income. As residents completed their interviews, they were asked to refer additional residents they felt would offer perspectives differing from their own. In addition to asking for resident referrals based on differing perspectives, this method of chain referral was further refined to account for differences in occupation, gender, and length of residency given participants' actual availability. The visitors were engaged at various community events along the main streets, and recruited online via TripAdvisor.

Initial attempts to recruit visitors during their visit proved challenging for several reasons. After many visitors would agree to take part in the study in-person, the number who actually submitted photos and videos or responded in any form to follow-up emails and phone calls were very few. In addition, visitors were often intercepted towards or at the end of their trips, making it difficult for them to have the relevant photos and videos available. As a result, the primary researcher utilized TripAdvisor's direct messaging capability to send visitors to each community a personalized recruiting message. The visitors who responded seemed to resonate and understand the purpose of the study and were eager to participate. The resulting sample size from the on-site intercepts of nonresidents was 11 while five interviews were conducted on visitors from Trip Advisor.



**Table 1 - Resident Participants Overview**

Community	Number of Residents	Length of Residency (0-5 Years)	Length of Residency (6-10 Years)	Length of Residency (11-20 Years)	Length of Residency (21+ Years)
<b>Whitefish</b>	15	3	3	5	4
<b>White Sulphur Springs</b>	14	3	5	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 2 - Visitor Participants Overview**

Community	Number of Visitors	First Time Visitor	Repeat Visitor
<b>Whitefish</b>	7	5	2
<b>White Sulphur Springs</b>	9	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>

## Analysis

Data analysis was consistent with previous resident-photography studies in using a process of categorical aggregation to analyze the character attributes discussed in the follow-up interviews. Initial categorization of each transcribed interview was followed by two phases of coding to determine the meanings and experiences associated with each media file and the corresponding transcribed text. The 45 research participants submitted 553 photographs and videos. After the interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded into qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, along with the photos and videos.

In qualitative data analysis, a node can broadly encompass themes or meanings, serving as a way to tag data in order to find and analyze trends or patterns (Columbia University Library, NVivo Terminology). In order to avoid preconceived notions by the primary researcher, only after the data was collected were broad categories or ‘parent nodes’ established. Creating parent nodes after the data was collected but prior to any coding allowed for better initial organization of coding. Child nodes were then established to provide an early framework for beginning in-depth data analysis. In the node hierarchy, the parent node is the largest and broadest container, and the child node is a sub-node of a parent node. Due to the large hierarchy of nodes in this study, certain child nodes could also be considered a parent node when they contain their own child nodes. After establishing parent and child nodes, re-coding and linking these relationships, the aggregation of data to identify emerging themes occurred, as outlined below.

The first step of such analysis seeks to determine places of importance in and around the two communities. In light of existing character and sense of place literature (Beckley et al. 2007), this meant starting with broad categories. This first set of coding, or open coding, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) define it, provides the starting point for grouping together events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning under the more abstract categories (Babbie 2013).

The second step in the data analysis determines the meanings and experiences behind each of these place categories. The narrative text helps to elucidate photos and videos that may contain multiple attributes of character of place. It can also clarify photos and videos difficult to label because they fail to represent clearly what the photographer intended. As the meaning of specific images and impressions grew clearer, a re-coding of categories in this second phase of analysis took place. For example, one image of a participant’s family (image below) and the associated transcribed interview text was initially given a place code of “generational” (under social structure) and “family”. After the first round of recoding, it was clear from the participant’s depiction and further place meanings that arose from other interviews that the image represented more than just family bonds and the role of generations passing down their values. As a result, it was then given an additional meaning code of “caring/neighborly” due to the depiction from the participant of the role her family played in inspiring the neighborly component in herself and her children. Table 3 below outlines one example of the coding process and code hierarchy.



	Parent Codes	Child Code	Sub-Child Node
<b>Coding Step 1</b>	Social	Social Structure	Generational
	Social	Family	
<b>Coding Step 2</b>	Social	Social Structure	Generational
	Social	Family	
	Social	Cultural	Caring/Neighborly

**Table 3 - Code Hierarchy and Coding Process Example**

A third and final step organizes the meanings and experiences within the initial place categories to show how each contributes to creating character of place. Place categories alone do not offer the specific insights this study seeks, since they are broad and could prove common to many communities in Montana. Therefore, in this third step, further analysis went into the suggested and associated meanings of experiencing character of place to gain deeper insight into how character of place is constructed (Amsden, Stedman, and Kruger 2010).



## Limitations

Several limitations mark this study. First, the research took place in only two locations and it involved only 45 participants. This limits the range and representation of inferences and generalizations that can be made from this study's findings. Second, the time and effort needed to fulfill the study's request for thoughtful photos and videos proved too demanding for several residents and visitors to fulfill, even after allowing them to submit photos and videos shot previously. Nonetheless, 75 percent of the participants submitted photos and videos. Third, as other photo-elicitation studies suggest, it is not clear whether the researcher's initial instructions unintentionally or indirectly influence participants' decisions on what to photograph (Beckley et al. 2007). Fourth, in line with the exploratory nature of this study, the methodological literature recommends experimenting with this approach, since there is no single correct or definitive way to analyze such qualitative data, particularly in coding and analyzing the photos and videos. Collecting and interpreting rich media materials helps participants think critically about which character attributes to capture, and interpreting these media files then helps structure and guide the interviews. Attempting to code individual photos and videos apart from the transcribed interviews proved to provide little or no additional insight, as originally believed, since their meaning relies on the narrative accounts of the transcribed interviews, which yield the best understanding of character of place and its construction.

Several methodological issues that may have limited this study can also raise questions for further research. The question still remains whether categories for photos and videos should be created in the analysis portion of the study by the researchers, or whether presenting participants with categories at the interview stage would be more appropriate. Stedman suggests that having participants make their own determination as to what category or categories their media files belong to may result in a much larger and more complex database than the approach described in this study would derive (Beckley et al. 2007). Finally, although this study initially met with participants to explain procedures for taking photos and videos, it did not monitor them actually doing so. Should such monitoring be attempted in order to make sure participants do not experience frustration or discontent in the course of this process, which could influence each individual's results variably and unpredictably (Kerstetter et al. 2009)?

## Results

The results below come from an exploratory research endeavor that aims to understand the interrelated meanings of what *it* is that makes up the character of one place. The research process enabled the researcher to step into the lives of 45 residents and visitors to view their place through the eyes of each person. The results below shed new light on the most frequently raised character attributes from both residents and visitors. It is important to preface this section by acknowledging that the character of place concept is far more encompassing and complex than any report can accurately portray. The character of each place is grounded in the top three attributes that residents and visitors put forth, but it grows from historical roots that go back more than a century. Conceptions of character of place concept can only be understood in the form of snapshots taken in time as character evolves continuously. In short, these top attributes tell an important chapter of a much larger and longer story. Seen in this light, the results below can serve as a critical benchmark both in understanding what it is that makes up the character of a place here and now, and how to preserve these positive attributes going forward.

The following results are provided in this report:

1. A nonresident comparison of 'character of place' between the two communities.
2. A resident comparison of 'character of place' between the two communities.
3. Description of key attributes that comprise the local character of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs based on resident and visitor perceptions.
4. Respondents' definition of 'character of place' (provided in Appendix C).

The results start by summarizing participants' definitions of character for each community. A table is provided that outlines the top ten most common categories of character attributes by nonresidents, residents, and then for each community as a whole. The top three character attribute categories are discussed in greater detail, concluding with a comparative analysis. All photographs and quotes are generated directly from the research participants. The appendix includes responses summarized from all participants to the following two interview questions: 1) If your community lost something that would be a reflection of a major loss of character, what would that look like? 2) In a word or two or a sentence or two, how would you describe the character of Whitefish/White Sulphur Springs?

## Results Section 1 - A Nonresident Comparison of Character of Place



Photo 1 - Mountains and lakes at your doorstep, a 'mecca' as one visitor described it.

### Whitefish - Nonresident Depiction of Character of Place

Visitors to Whitefish identified 45 different character attributes totaling 152 coded segments in the interviews. The top 10 attributes, based on the frequency of mentions, are described in Table 4. Each of the top attributes are broken out by the number of times it was mentioned (i.e. coded segments), the percentage of visitors who talked about that attribute, and a brief description of the meaning behind that attribute. Following the table, the top three attributes are described in further detail. Finally, a summary is provided of Whitefish visitors' depiction of the character of place.

**Table 4 – Whitefish Nonresidents Top Ten Character Attribute Categories**

Attribute	# of Coded Segments	% of Participants Mention This Attribute	Meaning
<b>Amenities and Restaurants</b>	16	86%	These attributes represent the businesses and services that visitors felt help to define Whitefish.
<b>Resident-Visitor Relationship</b>	15	71%	These attributes highlight visitors’ interactions and experiences with local residents in Whitefish.
<b>Visitor Impressions on the ‘Spirit’</b>	13	86%	These attributes reflect the intangible spirit and ambiance of feeling comfortable, safe, uncrowded, relaxed, and “overall good.”
<b>Fishing and Hunting</b>	9	29%	Among the various activities Whitefish offers, fishing was the top draw for several visitors.
<b>National Parks</b>	6	57%	Outside of specific activities, Glacier National Park was a key component of many visitors’ experience in Whitefish.
<b>Guide Services</b>	5	29%	Guided fly-fishing and bicycling tours were praised by many visitors.
<b>Railroad</b>	5	29%	Most visitors to Whitefish highlighted the physical and historical presence of the railroad.
<b>Family-Friendly</b>	4	43%	Visitors noted the family-friendly atmosphere that enhanced their time spent in Whitefish.
<b>Crowding</b>	4	57%	Visitors in Whitefish mentioned crowding as either a detraction or as a non-factor during their stay.
<b>Recreation</b>	4	29%	Visitors raved about the array of recreational opportunities in and around Whitefish.

**\*Note: All quotes are the personal opinions of that individual and are not necessarily shared by the researcher, funding entity, or the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research.**

## #1 - Amenities / Restaurants



Photo 2- Experiencing the local amenities with a 'Going-To-The-Sun' beer at Caseys

Visitors were extremely impressed by the diversity of options offered by local businesses, and by the quality of those options. These options included restaurants, bars/breweries, lodging, shopping and entertainment, coffee shops, art studios, and especially the theatre and library.

As a first time visitor, Daniel emphasized:

I thought that Whitefish was already doing quite a bit, like the library, we went to visit the library, and it was really pretty nice for a town that size and seemed to have a lot of community projects. There's a theatre there. So even though it's a fairly remote location, there seemed to be entertainment options.

Visitors noted reasonably high expectations in planning their trip, but they were constantly surprised by the high quality of the food and drink they actually found. Michael, another first time visitor, commends the BBQ:

We went to a pub and we went to the barbecue place which was really good. I highly recommend it by the way. Piggy Back Barbecue...I mean, I've eaten barbecue all over the country, and this was very good.

Visitors pointed out how Whitefish has amenities and public services remarkable for a town of this size and relatively remote location. Visitors went on to rave about their experiences at Casey's, the Bulldog, Great Northern Brewery, Loulas, as well as the Whitefish Golf Club. Yet another first time visitor, Jason, summed this up nicely saying:

And one of the best meals we ate was at one of the golf courses. We had prime rib dinner and a bottle of cab, and that was – there was just nothing bad to be said about that...And so that was an upper-end eating establishment... and yet the next morning we're down at Loulas breakfast place, and that's about as small town, mom and pop as you can get. And what a great place that was. So the diversity of the experience is just – I thought was incredible.

Betty was on her first ski vacation to Whitefish and was equally impressed with the array of local businesses, especially the Great Northern Brewery, where she appreciated the unique view of the brewery operations but at the same time "thought it was interesting that it still managed to not stick out like a sore thumb architecturally."

From local mom and pop options to high-end steak dinners, from freedom to order "every kind of seafood you can imagine" to seeing an elk burger on the menu for the first time, visitors loved all the amenities Whitefish had to offer. Nora made the point, "That's another thing that speaks to the *character of any place* you go is the variety of food that might be different from the place where you come from." Jason went on to draw a revealing parallel to the similarly sized mountain town and sophisticated ski hub of Truckee, California, when he told his wife, "Honey, it's like Truckee but there's more venues. I said, there's more nice earrings, there's more interesting bars." His lasting impression catches the captivation of visitors here, "There's a lot of places I fish where my wife wants a nice dirty martini, and they go, what? So, you know, I mean, but see that's what I thought was so unique. I was absolutely blown away by Whitefish, Montana."



## #2 - Resident – Visitor Relationship



Photo 3- Who is enjoying the local-tourist interaction more, James or the local bike shop staff?

Despite the world-class amenities Whitefish offers its visitors, their experience of interacting with local residents proves nothing short of world-class as well. This starts with simple encounters of warm welcome with locals but runs deeper into a true sense of appreciation that visitors felt from the residents of their host community. Betty explains her experience of being genuinely welcomed by locals, not just tolerated as a tourist:

You know I come from a tourist town too, Virginia Beach. And so you know I definitely understand what it's like when it's tourist season...but I understand the point of view of locals who, you know, don't necessarily really love the influx of tourists because they feel like it changes their community for that time...I appreciated not being treated like a tourist, or as if I'm not as important as the people who actually live there. Because the truth is, I am a person who actually does live somewhere, in some community, somewhere, you know just like they do. So you know who wants to go somewhere and be treated like you're not as important because you're an outsider...I felt that we were treated nicely by local people and that we appreciated and hopefully showed that we appreciated the environment and all that the town had to offer and the mountain had to offer.

With this feeling of mutual appreciation that many visitors expressed, there comes recognition of a relaxed atmosphere and easy balance between locals and tourists that fosters an environment full of character and conducive to a truly memorable experience for visitors. Daniel described how this experience began the moment they landed in Whitefish:

...The part that sticks out in my mind is when we rented the car...Somebody had to pick us up at the bed and breakfast and take us to the car rental place. And that was just a fun ride out there. The guy was just a local guy and very friendly and we told him what we were doing and he...told us about bear spray and they had a dog there, which we liked. It was just very laid back, very friendly, easy going. So it just - we had a very good feeling about Montana from landing in Whitefish.

Another first time visitor, Jason, commented warmly on his experience with the local characters in Whitefish, "What am I going to tell you I didn't expect to find in Whitefish? Hippies. They're everywhere...From a guy who was a teenager in the '70s in California, I haven't seen that many hippies since I went to San Francisco when I was in college." He went on to explain his appreciation for the balance between locals and tourists:

I'm a gregarious guy. I'm sitting at a bar and you're sitting next to me, I'm liable to strike up a conversation. I thought the balance between locals and tourists was excellent. I mean if I wanted to talk to somebody from Whitefish, it wasn't hard to get somebody to talk to, give me information. If I wanted to run into tourists, they were pretty easy to spot because they look like me...it wasn't hard to find a local to have a beer with and shoot the shit with. So it's not like it was 100 percent tourists. So I thought that flavor, the balance of those two things I thought was excellent.

Felicia, who rented a place in Whitefish for a few months during the summer, shed additional light on the resident-visitor relationship. On a day trip she and her husband ran into a longtime local at a remote trailhead to a backcountry lake (see photo 4). The local fellow generously gave them a book that was his own guide to fishing the lakes of Montana. She was blown away at how helpful he was, and how his generosity seemed to mark the beginning of her 'acceptance' by this place. Felicia stressed just how open and welcoming a community she found in Whitefish, where lifelong residents invited her to attend church together with them, by contrast to places where "just because you are not born and raised here, you don't belong." She concluded, "I made more friends there in the 3 months I was there than I have in the 3 years I've lived in Florida."

## #3 - Visitor Impressions on the 'Spirit' of Whitefish



Photo 4- Felicia having a very successful day fishing after getting the lowdown from a local at the trailhead. This exemplifies what she meant by the 'better opportunities' Whitefish has and just how accepting of a place it is.

Visitors to Whitefish praise its amenities and local businesses, and they appreciate local residents welcoming them so warmly. This third attribute highlights the spirit of Whitefish. It encompasses the splendid landscape, historic architecture, and unique local culture, and it helps make Whitefish a unique destination. It takes in visitors' reassuring impression of how "relaxed, safe, and clean" Whitefish feels without diminishing the ability of going out at night and enjoying a good time. "I still enjoy a good drink at a bar but I'm not drinking myself into an oblivion, and going out and doing stupid shit in the snow like I used to do," Michael observes candidly, "To me, Whitefish felt much more family-friendly, family-oriented. I didn't experience a bunch of drunken college kids...and that's okay for me." Along with the absence of a rowdy college-drinking scene, Daniel appreciated the absence of crowds, "It wasn't too crowded. Of course there were other tourists but it wasn't uncomfortably crowded. And we found the people that we met were just really friendly."

Visitors compared Whitefish favorably to other resort and recreation areas to celebrate its character. Still glowing from his recent bike tour in Glacier, James noted how the arts really added to the town's appealing ambience, and made it "much more authentic than say your Tahoe." Felicia likewise described the virtues that separated Whitefish from competing destinations for a summer-long stay:

Well, it has amenities so if you need to get some bigger stores, Kalispell fills that need. It's got some theatre, and we looked at Sheridan (Wyoming), but you're in the middle of nowhere with nothing. And we went to a fly-fishing convention in Bend, and the size of Whitefish just felt good. And you don't have just mountains behind you. You're surrounded by lakes. There's just a



better opportunity.

Michael likewise compared Whitefish to West Yellowstone, noting, “Similar in location. It’s similar in reason for being. It’s similar in its attractions; mostly its hotels and restaurants. But I got to say that I think Whitefish had more than just hotels and restaurants, and that was kind of cool.”

Finally, such specific amenities, experiences, and impressions add up to a greater good epitomized by the spirit of Whitefish. Stephanie, the lone international visitor interviewed, caught that spirit directly, “It was a really nice – it was a nice character town. I can’t think of anything that they could improve, to be honest. It was nice, lovely character. Nice place to keep *as is*, really.” Michael leaves us with his sense that it is more than just about the proximity to Glacier or the wild-west theme. He describes this fuzziness that can be hard to capture in words:

It’s unique... I want to say it’s unique because of its place next to Glacier, but if you compare it to the town of Cody, Wyoming, Cody is 30, 40 miles from the east entrance to Yellowstone. And I could look it up, but I think the populations are probably about the same...but it (Whitefish) has...Theme is not the right word, feeling, genre, that’s too weird. I don’t know what it is. [That’s right, it’s] ‘Spirit.’

## **Summary of Whitefish Nonresidents Depiction of Character of Place**

When asked to describe the character of Whitefish, visitors’ responses highlighted character attributes ranging from their love of the diverse geography and passion for outdoor recreation through opportunities for shopping and entertainment to appreciation of a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Jason reflected on the double pleasure of Whitefish as a destination fishery that doubles as a place where his wife is not bored:

Of all the destination fisheries I’ve gone to, and that is what brought me there, it is absolutely number one, without question. I don’t know who I would give number two, but number one is Whitefish, Montana for the ability for me to include my wife on the trip and have her be very enamored with the trip and not bored...So this place, I went, okay, I will be here every year from now on because I can bring my wife and she will want to come back.

Meanwhile, Michael uniquely framed the character of Whitefish as the “Wild West meets granola man and grizzly bears.” Finally, Felicia summed up its character by stating, “I think it’s a real slice of the mountain west. It really encompasses a lot of what you think about. So you still have the cowboys and the ranchers driving around with the dogs in their truck, and yet you have the berry picking and you have the lake and you have the mountains and you have tourism at your doorstep. So what doesn’t it encompass?” The visitors made it clear that Whitefish is a unique destination that can fulfill and exceed a wide range of expectations. Whitefish achieves this by boasting a character that offers an incredible assortment of outdoor recreation and entertainment opportunities wrapped up in a warm, welcoming spirit of wilderness and freedom that captivates nonresidents.

## White Sulphur Springs - Nonresident Depiction of Character of Place



**Photo 5– Approaching White Sulphur Springs opens up the vast plains and sweeping scenery of Montana that frame the character of this place.**

Visitors to White Sulphur Springs identified 46 different character attributes totaling 133 coded segments in the interviews. The top 10 attributes, based on the frequency of mentions, are described in Table 5. Each of the top attributes are broken out by the number of times it was mentioned (i.e. coded segments), the percentage of visitors who talked about that attribute, and a brief description of the meaning behind that attribute. Following the table, the top three attributes are discussed in further detail. Finally, a summary is provided of White Sulphur Springs visitors' depiction of the character of place.

**Table 5 - White Sulphur Springs Nonresident Top Ten Character Attribute Categories**

Attribute	# of Coded Segments	% of Participants Mention This Attribute	Meaning
<b>Amenities and Restaurants</b>	15	78%	These attributes represent the businesses and services that visitors felt help to define White Sulphur Springs.
<b>Resident-Visitor Relationship</b>	15	67%	These attributes highlight visitors' interactions and experiences with local residents in White Sulphur Springs.
<b>Rural Culture</b>	12	78%	Visitors pinpointed the rural setting and culture of the community as keys to its character.
<b>Red Ants Pants</b>	9	55%	Visitors enjoyed the festival itself and its celebration of the town's setting and spirit.
<b>Caring and Neighborly</b>	5	44%	Visitors prized the caring, neighborly feel of White Sulphur Springs as a small town with a rural culture.
<b>Community Pride and Spirit</b>	5	22%	The intangible spirit of White Sulphur Springs and pride in the community impressed visitors.
<b>Fishing and Hunting</b>	5	22%	Fly-fishing was a top draw for several visitors.
<b>Open Landscapes and Big Sky</b>	5	44%	Visitors often praised the natural landscape, open space, big sky, and brilliant sunsets as defining attributes of White Sulphur Springs.
<b>Pace of Life</b>	4	22%	Visitors embraced the slower pace of life and laid-back atmosphere of the community and its culture.
<b>Ranching</b>	4	22%	Visitors appreciated the high profile of ranching as a way of life and cultural cornerstone in White Sulphur Springs.

## #1 - Amenities / Restaurants



Photo 6— An image from Lindsay showing the Montana décor she was not accustomed to.

Visitors to White Sulphur Springs highlighted experiences in town that ranged from various restaurants and bars to lively street dances and the “ugly, rundown liquor store.” White Sulphur Springs was home to the best cinnamon roll one visitor had ever tasted, and the best chicken-fried steak that another had ever savored in Montana. The common denominator spanning these experiences proved to be their sense of the well-preserved, authentic “old school Montana setting” of the town. Paul, a longtime annual visitor, reminisced as he described the feeling of coming into town for the Red Ants Pants festival, “It was just nice to be back up there. There’s some really neat things, a couple of old farm houses, and you’ve got the train right there...Yeah, it’s just a beautiful little setting. It’s very old school. It’s very western. It’s very kind of cowboy. Very Montana. I like to see Montanans.” As a first time visitor, Lindsay was no less struck by the frontier décor and drama of Montana:

I don’t particularly care for hunting as a sport, trophy hunting, so I’m not big on the head hanging on the wall, it doesn’t bother me, but it’s not something I want in my house...The bear hanging on the wall always reminds me that there’s a story. I want to hear the story. I’m like, who killed that and why and what were they doing and was that bear attacking, you know, I want to hear the story behind it.

The feeling of an authentic town full of friendly folks highlighted visitors’ experience of meals, lodging, and an evening out. “Everybody is so friendly,” Monica explained, “and the gal that runs the little hotel couldn’t have been nicer. She sent us to Bar 47 for dinner, just what I call western kind of food that’s not exactly my favorite. I don’t like a lot of meat and fried food, but it didn’t matter. It was just a wonderful evening. And then we had breakfast at the Granite Mountain Café, which is not even listed on Trip Advisor, so I couldn’t give them a 5 star for friendliness.”

Laura, who set up a booth at the Red Ants Pants Festival, similarly described her own experience in town:

So the first night that I went to town there was a free street dance and they ran the shuttle through it. We went and had a slice of pizza at the movie theatre and it's just kind of like this old tiny - they still show movies but an old tiny movie theater and you walk up to the counter and order a slice of pizza and sit down and have a drink. And they sell beers in there. I think they shut down the street and you can have a couple of cocktails in the road...But it was fun, just kind of a small town Montana experience. And that was kind of a family-friendly event.

As much as visitors love such small-town Montana experiences, indeed precisely because they love them so much, preserving them can become no less a challenge than building on them to develop tourism. So notes Lindsay, a visitor to White Sulphur Springs who has studied economic development in larger cities to show how powerfully streetscaping can remake communities:

It creates jobs and unites the community and makes it an appealing place for people to come...So I think all communities have that opportunity, no matter how depressed. But I think that you have to make it appealing for tourists to come there. For example, there's a lot of great potential here, when you drive through the town. It looks like a little old mining community. It's got this cute little Main Street where if you have merchants that had cute little shops and places where people could shop. We didn't see any place where we could actually stop and walk and shop along the street. Everything was closed.

Chris, a repeat visitor to White Sulphur Springs, reflected on how to improve the community without sacrificing its unique character:

It's tricky, isn't it? One of the things that I always felt was that improvements, like sidewalks and lamp posts are great, but when people turn to removing the blight or erasing the things that make the town stand out, that's where I have trouble, things like sign ordinances. I have some trouble when they go that far with it. So mostly I want the towns to embrace whatever it is that makes them unique, whether it's that really weird liquor store that's in White Sulphur that also sells, like, funny purses and men's underwear. Like that is one of those places that makes White Sulphur unique, but is an ugly little rundown store that people would have a tendency to want to repaint or update, or let's get a nice liquor store in here.

Visitors (as well as residents) recognize this dilemma, and they raise the double-edged sword of upgrading a small town's amenities and building its economy without losing its character. Must the face of White Sulphur Springs be made up to appeal to tourists while losing its soul, or can the town develop tourism as it sustains its unique character, including a rundown little liquor and underwear store?



## #2 - Resident - Visitor Relationship



Photo 7– Business owner and founder of Red Ants Pants with one of many summer visitors.

Due to the intimacy of White Sulphur’s small size and rural setting, visitors’ experience of local amenities engaged them in relationships with local residents in noteworthy ways we can compare in further detail with Whitefish. In both cases resident-visitor relationships were very positive. However, one visitor to White Sulphur Springs, whose mother grew up there in the 1950s and 1960s, felt that the town seemed a bit weary of outsiders, which she thought was only natural for small rural communities. Ruth notes:

Well, I didn’t feel like the town was super welcoming, other than Red Ants Pants. I thought when I walked into her store, they embraced me and they’re like, hi, how are you? What can we help you with? They were very, very friendly. But I thought when I went in the café and I kind of walked through the town a little bit that I felt that maybe the locals are a little weary – I mean, leery of outsiders. And I don’t know that it’s particular to that town. I kind of feel like that’s how people in small towns are.

At the same time, this seemed puzzling to Ruth, “because I assume that they need our tourist dollars real bad, and it surprises me that they’re not more friendly to tourists...And maybe that’s part of it, you

know, when you live in a big city you're kind of a little more loud, and maybe I'm just used to being around people from the city. I'm sure they're all very friendly once you get to know them."

Judging resident-visitor relationships reflects how places are socially constructed in large part by the interaction of people who live in them. In describing particular experiences with local residents, visitors also characterize the 'atmosphere' of the town that locals have helped to create. Monica said she found the people of White Sulphur to be "extremely friendly," and the town to be a place that felt "quiet, peaceful, and safe." Lindsay described it in terms of a neighborhood bar filled with friends:

The people were awesome there, and it was so cool to see. I love, love, love, love a little local bar where the locals can come in and eat and have a drink after work or whatever, and I loved to be in a little small bar like that where you can actually overhear the conversations that are going on next to you. It was just so small town, friendly, you know, that whole 'Cheers' experience where everybody knows your name, you know, where people know one another. It's what community should be like.

Laura likewise recalled a night on the town in White Sulphur Springs, "I kind of expected the bartender to be grumpy and mean, and not enjoying having so many people in there and yelling. But she was having a blast. She was just kind of having the time of her life. She looked like maybe 70 years old, and just having so much fun...Everybody was friendly and having a good time. We met some real characters in there." While Sulphur Springs is home to many of its own characters, but is a place that also attracts many visitors who feel free to step into and out of character as well.

Visiting customers of local businesses (described in attribute #1) become engaged in social and cultural exchanges with real-life locals. That turns out to be the tried and true recipe for a memorable experience, as Anthony attests from long experience of coming from California to stay in the All Seasons Motel and fish every year, "The Bank Bar closed for a while or was sold, and lost its character. We fish with guides and asked if we're going to stop in the Bank Bar on the way home. No, it's changed hands. It's gone. Totally different feel to it. Not even worth stopping anymore." The local guides took Anthony and his group to a new local watering hole, Stockmans, which lived up to its name. "Well, it sort of has authentic looking bar area," Anthony reports. "The people that were in there, not a lot of tourists, you know, so you were talking to locals. My friend with the outstretched arms has a phenomenal memory and recites cowboy poetry, so you put a cocktail in him and you wind him up and he goes, and so he was entertaining a couple of the local guys in there. It was very funny. We got everybody laughing." Local business fuels resident-visitor relationships, and it breathes the atmosphere of White Sulphur Springs as a small town with a distinctive rural culture, outlined below.

## #3 –Rural Culture



Photo 8– Anthony and friends connect with the locals at the Ringling Bar outside of White Sulphur Springs

Visitors were quick to point out that White Sulphur Springs exemplifies the real flavor of small-town Montana. What's that? It involves a true sense of community where folks look out after one another, and the pace of life moves just a bit slower. "It has this old vibe to it with an old hot springs around," notes Laura, "and I think a lot of the same families that are there have been there for generations." Lindsay goes on to probe the light and dark sides of small-town life in the country:

I loved the conversation that we had with two young girls there...I was asking those two girls about school and what do you do for fun here? And they were like, well, you know, this is it. We go out to eat and, you know, their parents were like we come to the bar, and we have a drink or we eat. I said, well, do you guys eat out a lot? And they were like, well, yeah, because, you know, that's socially how they connect with people in their community. That's real community going on there where you eat together, and there's not a lot to do there, I think, for teens.

And that's the sad thing about small towns for me that we really have to work on... youth development and giving them an outlet. Because one of two things are going to happen: One, they're going to end up sitting in the bar getting drunk all the time because that's all there is to do, and that's your social life. Or they're going to leave that small town and go somewhere else where they can find more satisfying outlets. And so I think for a small town like that, that's probably one of their biggest challenges is how do you develop the youth and youth programs that give them something to do consistently.

Ronald, a repeat visitor to White Sulphur Springs who grew up in Bozeman, elaborates on Lindsay's notion of "real community" into the moral metaphor of the small town as a big family at the heart of its



character:

I think it all comes down to one thing, and I started to figure it out this year. I think it all comes down to it being in a small community, because there's this attitude in a small community that people take care of one another, because everyone knows everyone so well that it creates this big family...I will always remember this, I was just walking out, it was a hot day like this July day, Red Ants Pants...and I see this dude kind of like burly rancher guy come and pull up in this 4 wheeler. And you would think of this guy as being kind of a tough guy, right. He's got this big neck brace on, and he just hands me an otter pop. Thanks, man! I appreciate that. It's a kind thing to do. You're working and it's hot out, and he gives us an otter pop. To me, that one interaction speaks so much about the place and the community. So I think it all comes down to that. I mean, there's the landscape obviously, which is spectacular and everything, but I think it's really about that small community of people at the end of the day.

Ronald's parable of a popsicle given as a gift on a hot day exemplifies the culture of community that visitors love to share when they come to White Sulphur Springs. Ruth ties this intimacy into the larger story of a past and a way of life worth carrying on:

I would say that going to White Sulphur Springs is a bit of a step back in time. And it's nice to go back in time. It's nice to see that a small, clean little town is still kind of holding on to what made it special back in the day. You know, you feel safe there. I felt safe there. I felt that they moved at a slower pace, which is possibly healthier, right? They're not all running around on their cell phones...They were totally engaged in the people they were with. They were happy, they were laughing... And I thought, okay, you would never see this where I live. Everybody's heads were tipped down looking at cell phones. And I didn't see that in White Sulphur. When I walked into Dory's Café, everyone's having conversations. No one is looking at cell phones. So I do think it's a throwback in time and I think it's cool. And I think that if you were to live there or visit there, you would have to slow your pace a little bit to adjust to it.

However nostalgic or romantic, this vision makes clear that White Sulphur Springs attracts the sort of visitors who can appreciate its character and share its community. Such cultural conversation and social interaction among visitors and residents help constitute the character of a place as well as explain it. They enact the mutual benefits and common goods that geotourism can foster.

### **Summary of White Sulphur Springs Nonresidents Depiction of Character of Place**

As with Whitefish, every visitor stated the character of White Sulphur Springs was more positive than it was negative or somewhere in between. They commonly summed up the character of the place as embodying the history and culture of Montana in its rural rhythm, cowboy gait, and ranching lifestyle at home on the range. Several visitors highlighted the caring, neighborly feeling they found among the local residents, "I would say it's what I consider so reminiscent of the West, with the open plains and the farming and very neighborly, because you need to be helping each other since there's just not a lot of choices about what's out there. So I would say it's very neighborly." Such practical necessity goes hand in hand with the town's authenticity, according to Anthony, a Californian who comes to White Sulphur Springs to fish every year, "It's a great spot. It's fun being out in a place that's authentic. It's sort of dirty and a little run down and dusty, but it's authentic. It's got character. It's genuine. It's real...you're growing things, you're making things."

Visitors to White Sulphur Springs see and feel the vast beauty of its landscape. They appreciate its world-class recreational opportunities, compelling sense of community, and rough-around-the-edges spirit that defines the character of this place and its people. Ronald, a repeat visitor, sums up this character:

I think rugged. I think caring. I just think people, like I said, I mean, they just care about one another because everyone knows each other. So to me, it's all about the community. Really, that's what it comes down to. The community and then probably secondly is landscape. When I think about White Sulphur Springs' character, I think about that kind of like rugged cowboy that is driving that 4-wheeler that gave me a little otter pop [popsicle]. That's a pretty good image, you know. It's this very kind of rugged exterior with a really friendly, kind interior. That's probably the best way to describe that.

### **Comparison of Nonresident Character of Place Depictions**

Residents' sense of their own home merit special consideration based on their intensity and depth of insight, derived from their duration and breadth of experience, but these insights must be considered in conjunction with those of visitors to fill out the interrelated meaning of the place they share and better grasp its overall shape in context (Farnum, Hall, and Kruger 2005). Many tourists, including longtime regular visitors, form strong attachments to these places, as their interviews make clear. Their insights reach from the character of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs in the present back to their historical roots and forward to their fate in a future rich in risk as well as promise.

Visitors to both communities were highly positive in their perceptions of resident-visitor relationships, local businesses/amenities, and the overall character of both places. This certainly suggests that geotourism is accomplishing its goal of attracting the *right* type of visitors to each place, given the goodness of fit between its character and their judgments. Granting that both places feature world-class recreation opportunities set in mountains and rivers without end, it is instructive to see how differences in local culture and social practice played out in the interviews. In Whitefish, Jason celebrated the fact he was able to get his wife a good, dirty martini. Meanwhile in White Sulphur Springs, Chris singled out the "ugly little rundown liquor store" in depicting the unique character of the place. Visitors to both communities thought each place was very 'real'. However, visitors to White Sulphur Springs who had also been to Whitefish proved critical of the bigger "fancier" town, as Chris put it: "Well, Whitefish, for one, I don't really like Whitefish. It's way too fancy and all the buildings look the same when you're downtown. They look fancy but they don't – there's nothing that stands out as being really truly Whitefish." Ruth adds:

You know, like when I went to Whitefish, Montana, that town has totally changed in 20 years. It looks like a little town in California. It looks like La Jolla. It's been totally made over. And I know that the locals don't like it. I mean they want to preserve it how it was. So I would say the threat to this little town would be reconstruction or demolition of the old buildings and created into something new.

Like Ruth, many visitors do not simply compare Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs to each other, but to other destination resorts and recreation areas as well. For example, Daniel compared Whitefish to

Aspen, “It attracts people who have money....You know, one of the things that somebody told us who had retired to Whitefish was that it was more low key than a place like Aspen, not as expensive as a place like Aspen. So he looked around a lot before he settled on where to retire. And that’s what he told us. He said he liked to ski every day that he can and Whitefish is easy to get around. It’s not as built up, you know, as a place like Aspen.” Conversely, Chris explained her goal for what White Sulphur Springs should strive to become by comparing it to Ennis, Montana, still small in size but a major tourist attraction and angling destination, “It’s tricky. Ennis does a pretty good job, although I know they are trying to swing their town into more of a fancy upscale place, but Ennis has a good balance currently of things that are nice and like good shops and restaurants but still having sort of an authenticity.”

The character of each community will be defined in more detail below, but it is important from the outset to see how visitors perceive the character of each of these two places to be unique, given local amenities and infrastructure, culture and relationship with residents. As we go on to explore how residents perceive the character of the place they call home, it is no less important to keep in mind the reciprocal role that tourism plays in shaping both of these communities in the experience of their residents now and into the future. The impacts of tourism, both positive and negative, emerged as focal points in interviews with residents. More than a few visitors share such concerns. Asked if geotourism is serving its stated goals, Chris reflects on her time in White Sulphur Springs by concluding, “I would not say that it is sustaining or enhancing the character. But I do think it is necessary for economic development. But I don’t think that bringing in and having a bunch of outsiders and the culture of catering to outsiders really – I think that really changes the character rather than preserves it.”

## Results Section 2: A Resident Comparison of 'Character of Place' between Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs

### Whitefish - Resident Depiction of Character of Place



Photo 9 – This image of Roy’s backyard BBQ exemplifies the current and future backbone of the character of Whitefish, “just good friends and good people.”

Residents of Whitefish identified 107 different character attributes totaling 995 coded segments in the interviews. The top 10 attributes, based on the frequency of mentions, are described in Table 6. Each of the top attributes are broken out by the number of times it was mentioned (i.e. coded segments), the percentage of residents who talked about that attribute, and a brief description of the meaning behind that attribute. Following the table, the top three attributes are discussed in further detail. Finally, a summary is provided of Whitefish residents’ depiction of the character of place.

**Table 6 - Whitefish Resident Top Ten Character Attribute Categories**

Attribute	# of Coded Segments	% of Participants Mention This Attribute	Meaning
<b>Regulations and Policy and Planning</b>	51	87%	Residents mentioned the influence of politics and planning in 13 of 15 interviews, underscoring how pivotal a role this attribute plays in shaping the local character of place.
<b>Social Cohesion</b>	33	67%	Residents of Whitefish consistently tied the town’s social cohesion to the quality of their relationships, which they judged in significantly different ways.
<b>Lifestyle</b>	29	93%	Residents of Whitefish in 14 of 15 interviews specified this lifestyle attribute in terms of quality of life linking the town’s character to the lifestyle opportunities it offers.
<b>Stratified Social Structure</b>	28	60%	This attribute highlighted local perceptions of the stratifying social influence exerted on Whitefish by wealthy newcomers and old money, second-home owners, tourists, Canadians, and long-term residents.
<b>Development</b>	28	67%	This attribute involves existing and proposed changes to the physical landscape from downtown through nearby residential neighborhoods to surrounding forests and open space, including conservation and protection against development.
<b>Character Threats and Changes</b>	27	67%	Categorized under tourism impacts, this takes in local perceptions of how tourism has historically changed and currently changes the character of Whitefish, and the future problems and prospects it poses.
<b>Family</b>	27	60%	Residents commonly viewed Whitefish as being an extremely family-friendly place, however much they differed on other attributes of its character.
<b>Recreation</b>	26	73%	Residents in 11 of 15 interviews stressed the unique array of recreational opportunities Whitefish has to offer as essential to the town’s outstanding lifestyle and quality of life.
<b>Attitudes Towards Tourism and Growth</b>	25	67%	Residents discuss where the town stands right now on tourism and growth, and how it should plan for the future in order to keep its true grit and not give in to the false charms of a resort town.
<b>Local Businesses</b>	23	40%	Residents highlight specific local businesses that contribute to the character of Whitefish, and evaluate the broader business environment from changes downtown to big-box stores and new developments on the outskirts.



## #1 – Regulations / Policy / Planning



Photo 10 - Jordan included this image to show how she feels “roadwork seems to be a theme of Whitefish in perpetuity.” She went on to describe the void she sees between city counselors and planners making decisions to line their own pockets versus doing it to better the community, as she doesn’t think the political decisions are 100 percent genuine right now.

Politics play a dynamic and constantly evolving central role in composing the character of place, residents of Whitefish agreed in every interview. At the same time, they disagreed widely in judging local regulations and regulators, individual policy issues, and overarching planning strategies. Despite disagreeing on angles of approach and individual issues raised as most decisive, most residents stressed the question of *whose* best interests are being served by political decision-making in Whitefish today. Residents raised critical concerns about tilting too far to favor tourists at the expense of locals, inconsistencies and bias in decision-making, the influence of new money and outside money on local policy and planning, and overly stringent local ordinances. At the same time, however, many residents commended local political efforts to maintain an intact and unique Main Street, keeping big retail chains and corporations out of the downtown, and preserving open space in and around the city. The next section seeks to summarize the evolution of local politics shaping the character of Whitefish today. Then it focuses on particular regulations residents highlight as keys to the character of Whitefish. Finally, the fine line is traced that local politics walks through Whitefish and the impact it makes on the town’s character, according to several well-placed local residents.

You need not spend long in Whitefish to sense the accelerating speed of the economic transition in the last few decades. The social, economic, and political impact of this high-speed trip still divide many locals today. Victor, a longtime resident, provides a firsthand overview of the economic transformation:

You know, the change really started happening in the 1980s in the County. But it really started taking off in the '90s. And it's just accelerated. So one of the things that came out of that report, especially again working with Chambers of Commerce, was sort of the golden goose argument. We got our great natural environment, our clean water, our public access, and recreational opportunities, and that's the goose that lays the golden egg. That's what driving our economy. It's not just old-fashioned timber jobs or railroad jobs or whatever. Not to denigrate those, and I think it's an important part of the mix, but it's not your grandfather's economy anymore.

The political dynamics of Whitefish today reflect these economic changes, and they tend to see the goose of tourism in town laying the golden egg. "All of the council members are progressives right now," Victor explains, by contrast to 20 years ago when he first came to town. "The City Council was still sort of the good old boys' network and it wasn't that far different from Flathead County." Since taking over from the good old boys, new progressives have made some astute political moves to preserve the town's character, according to Holly, another longtime resident of Whitefish:

I think we've done some really progressive and innovative things to preserve character. One is we've adopted a dark skies ordinance so that all lighting has to be shielded so that you don't get light going up in the sky. Focus down where it belongs, which allows you then to reduce the illumination on the fixture. We have a carefully crafted, I think some people would say overly strict, but I don't think it is, a sign ordinance in terms of size and what kind of signs they can have downtown. So I think that that helps preserve some of that character.

Residents were very divided over the sign ordinances and related regulations, but most agreed on how difficult a task city council and planners faced in deciding such issues. "I think Whitefish is sort of interesting in that it's a little town but it's got big city demands," Cynthia observes. "The public expects, sort of the level of planning that you wouldn't find in a town this size. So we instantly started working on things like critical area ordinances, updating subdivision regulations, and a lot of community character-based regulations, architectural review standards and stuff like that."

The question of 'community character-based regulations' fuels this political fire. Most residents acknowledge the need for careful planning efforts to preserve the downtown core of Whitefish, but they disagree over 'how much' regulation is required and 'for whom.' To please tourists celebrating on Saturday night, "we're tolerating too much to the detriment of other visitors and people who live here and have to live with Sunday morning," as Sarah put it. Local politics and tourism planning are driven by new money from outsiders who want to spend and invest big in Whitefish, according to Mitchell, a lifelong resident:

It's that gen X kids and Silicon Valley people that have all of a sudden they've got millions of dollars and that goes a long ways up here. They really like to try to change things. They really want it to be the next Vail or next Telluride or something like that yet they still want to keep it a

small town, that's why Whitefish has some of the weirdest zoning and planning. They're trying to preserve, put us in the snow globe but yet still make it in their image. When I was a kid, you could go up on Big Mountain with 12 coke bottle lids on certain nights and you could ski. It was a local thing. Now, I mean, they have zero local deals to go to Big Mountain to ski. You'll pay your 60 or 70 bucks like everybody else.

Echoing such criticism of the town's political agenda tilted toward tourism, another longtime resident points to problems of undue political influence and biased process as well as unfair outcomes. Joan asserts:

That's another thing that you get into with how things are changed and how things happen. Whitefish is hiring planning people from outside to come in and tell us what to do with our little town so you get into how wide the sidewalks should be. We have sidewalks that are wider than our driving lanes on Central. So you get into that kind of a thing where influences are brought in, and the voice of the people who live here are shadowed out.

**\*Researcher's Note: Representatives from the city of Whitefish have confirmed that the sidewalks are technically not wider than the roads themselves.**

Residents of Whitefish debate how far its tourism should continue to grow, and how much more growth its local politics should support. They wonder what will happen to the character of the town if it allows tourism to keep mushrooming. Where does the balance lie between catering to tourists and doing right by local residents? Why can't local politics strike this balance and protect it fairly? Joan weighs these questions:

Looking back and I've thought about this since we've talked, I'm not sure it's ever really been balanced. When I was growing up in the '50s and '60s in Kalispell and Whitefish, we remember how wonderful it was. But it was also very hard. People were unemployed. Most winters were, you know, it was hard. There were potholes that would swallow buses in Whitefish trying to get up to the mountain. But again it comes back to family and community and people knowing each other and helping each other. As opposed to just figuring out how to make tourists happy or our visitors who come for a vacation and then start Iron Horse or big developments where it might be their second or third home. And they're like multi-million dollar homes that they live in two weeks out of the year but it has changed the tax base so much that home values are completely out of sync with reality.

Residents of Whitefish felt strongly that specific issues need to be addressed here and now, from parking and increased traffic to more affordable housing and better housing standards. Residents disagree on priorities among issues, but most agree that Whitefish must limit how much it can continue to grow, even if that limit is hard to identify. Kevin shared his hopes about finding this limit:

Well, I think there is a limit. I don't know what that is, and I guess I'd have to have faith in my city councilors and the mayor that they're going to do a good job to limit that. I don't know that it's been reached yet. There's a new hotel going up south of town. I think the zoning has done a good job of, at least, kind of suburban development out of downtown, like there aren't any chains allowed downtown, which is kind of cool. It makes it quaint. But, yeah, the development

continues. Housing continues. And I just – I hope that the city council can recognize that and help us govern it.

Although local residents disagree over policy issues and interests, they share such hopes in the face of current challenges, grounded by faith in the character of Whitefish as a caring community and in local politics to help strike the right balance going forward, as Rachael concludes:

We have to strike that balance between conservation and growth. We have to grow as a community but at the same time we cannot ruin places like this. We just have to be very careful about it. And that creates a lot of tension in this town. We've talked about that. There's a lot of disagreement between developers and conservationists and I guess I fall kind of in the middle. I see both sides and I think there's a way to slowly grow economically while still maintaining our sense of place. It just means that we have to be just very methodical and very thoughtful about how we do it. But it's going to happen. And that's where I disagree with some people that we can't stop this town from growing, nor should we. I think we should continue to grow and continue to make it better and better and better. We have to do it in a way that is thoughtful and not destructive.

In the pursuit of achieving the balance Rachael and fellow residents describe, political measures such as Whitefish's downtown masterplan and resort tax are helping to sustain and enhance the character of this place. From the progressive items Holly mentioned earlier to the regulations keeping franchises out of the downtown, Whitefish is spearheading novel political planning action to hang on to their character and enhance it going forward. Meanwhile, the 3% resort tax is levied on the sale of lodging, restaurant and prepared food, alcoholic beverages, ski resort goods and services, and the retail sale of defined luxury items (FY 2016 Budget PDF). While tourism and development continue to grow, so does the pool of resort tax dollars. Most residents were emphatic in their support of this tax and the infrastructure improvements, property tax relief, conservation easement and ongoing park improvement projects that it affords. As one of the few municipalities in the state with a resort tax, Whitefish is taking proactive political strides to realize as much character enhancing potential possible from its tourism industry as possible.



## #2 – Social Cohesion



**Photo 11 – A shot from Victor’s backyard where they gather to pick apples and share in an annual cider pressing party. This image portrays the “big-hearted, kindly neighbors” and special bonds shared by Whitefish residents.**

In 1926, the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce issued a pamphlet describing the character of a neighborly place warm with welcome, “Here are to be found big-hearted, kindly neighbors who have made for you a city where the stranger will feel that he is coming home.” Ninety years later, this still holds true, most residents confirm, but they worry about their own future and the continuing cohesion of the community they share.

Most residents of Whitefish agreed that strong bonds among locals are what makes this place so special. “I think the real character of Whitefish is the people,” Roy affirms. “I’ll always go back to the people. Whether it’s the business that’s run by somebody like Megan at Crush or Marcus and Jessica at the brewery, it’s the people that make this place so special. But I do think the fact that real authentic folks like myself living within a couple blocks of this area is important.” Holly shares this sentiment, and attributes the community’s cohesion to the sincerity of its people, “It’s a sincere place. If there are people in the community who need help, I have seen it over and over and over again, there is a potluck and pass the hat that raises thousands of dollars for somebody that needs, let’s say, a surgery or some kind of medical procedure or attention that the town just rolls out.”

Social cohesion takes many forms in exemplary action. For Holly it comes to life in the sincerity and willingness of a community to care of fellow residents in need. For Kevin it plays out in good friends to



share a game or an evening: “Happiness is only worthwhile when you share it with those people that you love and we’ve got a pretty good community of people since moving here that we love hanging out with and recreating with.” For Joe, it comes together in relationships bred by community volunteering:

The attorney I use here in town I met swinging a hammer out at the baseball fields. My eye doctor is somebody that I got to know [that way]. So getting involved in stuff like that really helps you to sort of channel into the people in town. In addition to there being a lot of money and affluent people and a lot of charity, there’s also a lot of people that give a lot of time. It’s pretty neat.

The social concerns that some of these same residents express do not overshadow their strong bonds, but they color their consciousness of local politics and shifting economics and their worries about what the future holds for the social fabric of the place they call home.



Photo 12 – Cynthia’s photo shows the work of the “Lights on Whitefish” group responsible for decorating the town each season. While Cynthia describes this shot as a scene out of *It’s A Wonderful Life*, Alexis dually notes how the seasonal decorating used to be a community event that is now out of the community’s hands, which she uses to help describe a greater loss in social cohesion.

Although most residents would not agree that Whitefish has lost its cohesion as a community, many would agree that this state of flux challenges the integrity of the community’s social fabric and threatens to loosen it. Victor tells a story close to home that makes this point:

The house I lived in was a little cabin, a log cabin. It was built in 1910, and it was a rental. I loved it. And I tried to buy the property, but couldn’t afford to...That cabin has been torn down. It’s been turned into condos, townhouses. But that was a type of neighborhood it was. Very eclectic. Some mobile homes there and my old cabin. And it’s definitely changing because half

the people in my neighborhood, half of the houses, are owned by Calgarians.

I call Calgary the monster that ate the Crown of the Continent. We have seen it throughout Fernie, Crow's Nest Pass, the East Kootenai in British Columbia. And half of the lakeshore properties around Whitefish are owned by Canadians.

And so that photo [I took and gave you] I just wanted to juxtapose. Here's a mobile home where Brenda lives and I visit with Brenda almost every day, because I walk my dog the loop there, and she's native American. I don't really know her whole story, but a very nice woman. There's three mobile homes in a little cluster right there. And basically it's surrounded by these trophy homes of Calgarians.

What will become of the "kindly neighbors" proclaimed by the Chamber of Commerce in 1926? That question unsettles many residents of Whitefish today. Whitefish bans gated communities, as Holly notes, but more affluent newcomers have nonetheless brought to town more residential stratification, pricier enclaves, and much higher home prices across the board. Echoing Victor, Holly points out how this spreading "exclusivity" can undercut the character of an open community, "People are free to drive through and bicycle through and walk through anyplace. And I think that's the way it should be. Because if you start to become exclusive, that exclusivity really destroys the character or it certainly changes the character of the community, and not for the better." Spreading exclusivity reveals the powerful interplay of local politics and an evolving economy with social cohesion under stress. Holly explains how these factors play out on the ground of affordable workforce housing:

I think that there is a strong sense within our community that we always like it the way it was, and the way it was 20 years ago is much different than the way it was 5 years ago, but that's the way it was. So we'll always be seeing those changes and transitions. But one of the big issues is going to be how do people afford to live in this community. The average price of a home is \$307,000 currently. That's not affordable. That's not workforce housing. So we've got to find ways to increase the availability of workforce housing. Not necessarily affordable housing but what is called workforce housing. Unlike Aspen and similar places in Colorado, the one advantage that Whitefish has is that we do have a safety valve in terms of affordability in Kalispell and Columbia Falls. It would be best to have our police and fire and nurses and administrative help, all of the people that are fully and gainfully employed, it would be best to have them here in town, because that's how we keep that grit. That's how we keep that hometown flavor.

Such a safety valve notwithstanding, outspoken residents of Whitefish protest the rising tide of local workers displaced by home prices inflating over the heads of "ordinary people." Residents agree that keeping longtime locals in town is vital to preserving the character of Whitefish. Residents tell stories of close friends forced to move out of town to make ends meet, while landlords replace them with summer-only renters solicited on VRBO or Airbnb, "That's not creating character in town if you don't actually live in that house," Roy testifies.

Residents of Whitefish thus paint a vivid light-and-dark picture of the town's social cohesion. It flourishes in the radiant sincerity of most townspeople and the caring bonds among them. It is bred by volunteering, playing, and relaxing together, and it is expressed in family-friendliness and generous philanthropy. However, the picture darkens in the shade of growing residential stratification and

inflation fed by an influx of affluent outsiders, market forces, and an evolving tourist and resort economy. While egalitarianism and exclusivity remain in dynamic equilibrium in Whitefish today, their social enactment must be nurtured with no less care than their political regulation and economic development to keep them in balance, as Rachel suggests:

I think one of the things that makes the town very cool and different from maybe some other resort towns is how egalitarian it is. How the millionaire and the railroad worker all go to the same bar. And I think that's a really neat thing about this town. But I think one of the things that makes Whitefish different than Aspen or Jackson or any of those places, is that there's this kind of egalitarian nature to the town and I would hate to see it lose that.

How can Whitefish continue to grow as a resort community while retaining the grit and social cohesion that grounds its character, and keeps it "real" and true to its past? The social cohesion and cultural coherence of a place create its character, but complex economic and political forces working together in turn generate the social structures that frame such feeling and meaning. Alexis concludes with a familiar predicament that catches this complexity: "It's all about people. It's about the roots, it's about the stories, it's about how we help each other. Both our daughters have come home with their husbands and they can't find a place to live. And that's not okay."

### #3 - Lifestyle



Photo 13 – A fitting image of Roy introducing his 12-year old nephew to the Whitefish lifestyle while teaching him to fish on a visit out from the east coast last summer. This shot helps visualize the crystal clear waters, “shining mountains, and beautiful skies” the Chamber of Commerce was describing in 1926.

“Here is the playground designed by Nature and being set in order by man for the entertainment and recreation of her people...Here is the land of shining mountains, beautiful skies, sparkling springs, fertile acres, and homes. Truly, Nature has been kind...The whole world stands clamoring for what Whitefish has to offer...” So proclaimed the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce in 1926.

The authors of *Stump Town to Ski Town* quickly pointed out just how flowery the language is above. They explain how Whitefish grew up like many other western towns, along railroad routes, and that much of its history is typical rather than special. They acknowledge however, that there are some things that are special about this place, and the lifestyle residents will describe below is truly special. It is true that if nature were to create a recreational mecca, it may look something like Whitefish, Montana. It is also true that many stand clamoring for the lifestyle Whitefish has to offer. How true to life this story proves, and how responsibly its citizens and investors guide its course, hold the key to the future of Whitefish.

In light of its natural beauty, recreational opportunities, public services, and private amenities, Whitefish offers a lifestyle of self-fulfilling freedom its residents prize, especially by comparison to a gritty big city, as Sarah observes of locals, “They love the lifestyle. They love the beauty. They love the seasons. They don’t mind the snow. People live here because they want to, not because they have to. Where you go to, like, Cleveland, people have to live in Cleveland.” Whether you jog along the river in the morning, carve a deep-powder trail downhill in the afternoon, or simply watch the evening sun go down over the mountains, Whitefish offers a lifestyle, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that its residents see as a way of life essential to their own identity no less than the character of the place they call home. Thus, Kevin describes why he settled in Whitefish, “Yeah, that’s one of the biggest reasons that we chose to live here is that our lifestyle kind of dictates a lot about us. It dictates our social life. It dictates everything we do in our free time. It’s our livelihood, and if we don’t have access to those places, then we aren’t very happy.”

The special character and unique lifestyle of Whitefish may begin with its natural beauty and recreational opportunities. But local residents see it reaching much further, inspired by shared values that spark citizen-driven initiatives to improve the already high quality of life in the town. More than \$50 million in private money has been invested in community projects over the past 10-15 years, Joe estimates. These projects range from a local food bank to the performing arts center, new schools to the state-of-the-art North Valley Hospital, athletic fields to dog parks and nature trails. For a town of roughly 5,000 full-time residents, Whitefish attracts a widening range of extraordinary people from all over the country and around the world, including highly skilled new residents along with affluent visitors and vacation homeowners. Residents can tell the difference this makes at the local swimming pool as well as the hospital emergency room, as Roy notes, “Like a good example would be my son. We put him in swim lessons and the swim instructor was incredible. She’s just insanely good. And I’m thinking to myself, she’s probably some retired big swimmer or a retired early-education development specialist from Stanford, or some shit like that, you know. That’s what this town is filled of.”

A lifelong resident, Mitchell, spells out just how powerful the draw of Whitefish’s quality of life has grown, and how powerfully it has changed the Flathead Valley as a whole:

You try to distill the pride of your community and your neighborhood and your town. I tried to give that to my kids, and I talked to them about how lucky they are...There’s more in the Valley, obviously, than Whitefish, but Whitefish brings the money into this valley. Without Whitefish, I



don't think you'd see the Flathead Valley growing the way it is. You wouldn't have Flathead Valley Community College on the verge of getting dorms.

Because of Whitefish, because of the popularity of people coming in this valley, Kalispell becomes stronger, Columbia Falls becomes stronger. Because of Whitefish and the tourism that it brings in and the popularity it has, it's bettering – I hate to say that because we do lose our innocence through it – it is bettering this valley. You get better hospitals, you get better quality of doctors coming in. You also get better quality of merchandise and stuff like that that comes in.

I do think it loses some of the innocence of a small town, that sense of a little community and knowing everybody. But at the same time, it's improving the quality of this valley. The education here, the public schools are some of the best in Montana because of it, because teachers – good teachers--want to live here. They'll take a pay cut to work in our schools. Same as the doctors, they're taking pay cuts to come here. But they're quality educators, they're quality physicians, so you get the benefit of that.

Beyond the scope of recreational opportunities, local amenities and services, and skilled professionals in Whitefish lie subtler dimensions of its lifestyle that Jordan defines in aesthetic and moral terms, "There's a slower pace which is really refreshing and wonderful...riding your bike instead of driving downtown, or skateboarding downtown. It's just kind of being more aware of your surroundings and taking time to enjoy them, instead of head down, rushing from place to place." Overall, this lifestyle is conducive to creating a rich sense of personal awareness.

Despite these subtler aspects of the Whitefish lifestyle, let alone the more obvious appeal of its high-spirited night life, "You've got to really want to live here, because you've got kind of everything working against you," as Rachael prudently points out. Especially for its less well-educated and less affluent residents, Whitefish offers fewer employment opportunities and higher costs of living than other towns, and making ends meet has grown harder and harder in the area. Yes, the scenery is beautiful, but as Alexis asks in response, "Does that mean the groceries are cheaper? And if I buy a car, is it cheaper here? And then they look at me like I'm crazy, and then I look back at them. It's like, well, I need to somehow make a living and survive. I have worked two to four jobs at any given time in the last seven to eight years." Behind the "rose-colored glasses" the Flathead Valley wears, as one resident put it, emerges a darker, more demanding reality that leaves many residents struggling to stay afloat, especially on the lower rungs of the job ladder.





Photo 14 – Rachael included this image to show the Montessori preschool her kid’s attend. While she is very happy with the decision to send her kids to such a fine school, she goes on to say, “We’re having to scramble every week to try and make sure we have tuition paid and still have money for groceries and that kind of stuff, but it’s good.” This represents the duality between the quality of options available in Whitefish and the high associated costs that cut into the lifestyle one leads.

How can the lifestyle that has made Whitefish so attractive be sustained for future generations to enjoy and share across class lines? How will the evolving interplay of social, economic, and political forces in Whitefish affect the unique lifestyle its residents have come to know and love? Whatever the outcome, the character of this place ultimately rests in the hands of those who call Whitefish home, those whose identities and values are embedded in the Whitefish lifestyle.

### Summary of Whitefish Residents Depiction of Character of Place

In 1972, the authors of *Stump Town to Ski Town* described Whitefish at a crossroads. Should this “uniquely normal” place continue along the winding road of gradual growth it had followed for the past seventy years without changing character or exploding in size, or, should it take the highway marked by drastic growth and change and leap into a new era? Forty-five years later, many residents believe they are standing at a similar crossroads. Local residents of Whitefish make up the character of this place, Roy testifies, and now the city must decide to embrace or exile them:

Whitefish is at a turning point in the cost of living. The city needs to decide from a zoning and investment standpoint if it wants to put efforts into creating affordable housing or if it wants to continue to become more and more expensive and ultimately become a location that is too expensive for the people that make it so great. Columbia Falls and Kalispell are much more affordable and offer lower costs of living for the working class of Whitefish. If we want soccer coaches, active PTA parents and the local bartender to still live down the street we need to invest in our community and the cost of living. If this effort isn’t pursued we’ll end up with neighborhoods full of second homes and VRBO rentals and the folks that make the community will take that character to Columbia Falls and Kalispell.

As Roy testifies, this study confirms that social relationships and dynamics among local residents are critical in constituting the character of a place, and its political life both expresses and defines how this

social process actually plays out on the ground. Thus the top 10 character traits local residents of Whitefish attribute to their city revolve around politics and people. The lifestyle and recreation opportunities Whitefish offers certainly stand out to residents (and visitors alike), but these luxuries depend, for better and for worse, on decisions made at town hall.

Many attributes clearly compose the character of Whitefish in the eyes of its residents and visitors: lifestyle options and recreation opportunities, world-class amenities and public services, an intact Main Street and countless community events. Even clearer, however, is how essentially the character of Whitefish hinges on its “grit.” What does that mean? Holly a longtime resident, answers:

To me it’s the authenticity of a working community that provides services to the tourists who come and spend their time and money here. In addition to providing meaningful employment for the people who teach in our schools, take care of us medically, and protect us from fire, and the importance of police, as well as taking care of those who are on fixed income, the elderly and the disadvantaged.

The social bonds and responsibility shared by such members of Whitefish as a working community make up the nucleus of the town and embody its “grit,” as a ski town today no less than the stump town of the past. The character of Whitefish encompasses the spectrum of social, economic, recreational, artistic, cultural, and lifestyle characteristics discussed above. But it depends on political processes and principles exercised fairly and wisely to ensure that decisions made in town hall on the future of Whitefish are made for the common good of all the citizens of the town. As highlighted in a 2004 research article in the *Journal of Environmental Practice* that examined the role of tourism, industry and community development in Whitefish, the author and the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce secretary in 1957 argue that, “In the end, the people most affected by tourism are the locals themselves. Misunderstanding their role in the local economy could lead to disastrous policies.” Thus, linking the past to current success and concerns about Whitefish’s tourist economy has, and can continue to lead to more thoughtful and useful planning initiatives. It is the onus on the resident values and lifestyle that will help preserve the “uniquely normal” character of the place they love, as Rachel concludes:

I guess uniquely normal. I think for a resort town it’s really normal. People are down to earth and good hardworking people, which maybe it’s not unique. Maybe every resort town is like that. But this town doesn’t seem like that. This town doesn’t seem like every other resort town. It seems more down to earth for some reason...We live in a very unique place. I mean, there are very few places, if any, in America like this. And, yet, the people of this town are very much like the people I grew up with in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They’re just normal, nice people. And, yet, they live in this extraordinary place, and I think that’s a neat mix.

## White Sulphur Springs - Resident Depiction of Character of Place



Photo 15 – Locals love the “mud room mentality” of White Sulphur Springs as emblematic of its down-to-earth rural culture, devoted work ethic, and deep connection to the land.

Residents of White Sulphur Springs identified 95 different character attributes totaling 788 coded segments in all interviews. The top 10 attributes, based on frequency of mention, are described in Table 6. Each of the top attributes are broken out by the number of times it was mentioned (i.e. coded segments), the percentage of residents who noted that attribute, and a brief description of the meaning behind that attribute. Following the table, the top three attributes are discussed in further detail. Finally, a summary is provided of White Sulphur Springs residents’ depiction of the character of place.

**Table 7 - White Sulphur Springs Resident Top Ten Character Attribute Categories**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b># of Coded Segments</b>	<b>% of Participants Mention This Attribute</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Rural Culture</b>	30	86%	Residents in 12 of 14 interviews singled out the pivotal role of rural culture in shaping the character of their place.
<b>Heritage and History</b>	27	71%	Locals prize working ranches, the connection with the land, and the peaceful waters of the spa at the root of White Sulphur’s history and heritage.
<b>Local Businesses</b>	26	71%	The unique character of local businesses imprint the social fabric of White Sulphur Springs, and keep residents loyal to its small business environment.
<b>Generations</b>	22	78%	Strong multi-generational families anchor the town, and residents worry that it will suffer as younger locals leave for work and the population grows older.
<b>Social Cohesion</b>	21	50%	Some residents sense divisions among themselves and wariness of outsiders, but most see the community as a tight-knit family.
<b>Ranching</b>	20	71%	Residents stress the enduring economic, social, cultural, and political influence of ranching on the character of White Sulphur Springs.
<b>Shifting Economic Landscape</b>	19	78%	11 out of 14 residents noted the harsh reality of White Sulphur’s shrinking job market, past and present, while hoping for a turnaround driven by tourism.
<b>Strong Work Ethic and Practicality</b>	19	57%	Locals champion their strong work ethic and practicality in the face of a flat economy, but some see others as unwilling to work hard enough.
<b>Attitudes Towards Tourism and Growth</b>	19	78%	Residents weigh needs for more infrastructure and planning in the town to expand tourism and guide its future, without giving up its “rough-around-the-edges” character.
<b>Sense of Hope</b>	19	78%	Scarred by broken promises of economic recovery in the recent past, residents share their tempered and tenacious hope for the future.



## #1 – Rural Culture



**Photo 16 – Growing up on the ranch, this 3<sup>rd</sup> grader loves pushing cows on his bike when they get too close to the house and dreams of building his own chicken coop “with some real chickens and a Jersey milk cow.”**

The residents of White Sulphur Springs were quick to highlight the range of rewards as well as hardships that come from living in such an isolated rural location. Calling this place home requires grit. Its remoteness breeds an intimate social setting where everyone knows almost all your business, not only your name. It limits public services and private amenities alike, and it sometimes leaves locals feeling that they are “behind the times” in key respects. But this intimacy also fosters a spirit of true community. It inspires a self-reliance and “mud room mentality that city people don’t get,” grounded in a deep connection to the land through labor and livelihood. The rural culture of White Sulphur Springs plays a dominant role in shaping the character of this “real cowboy town.”

Residents of White Sulphur Springs often refer to “grit” in praising their home as real and authentic, but also defining it as a place that demands courage to endure and resilience to flourish. As Charles points out, “With the realness comes the fact that it’s really hard sometimes. The winters are awful sometimes. And there are really challenging elements for sure. It’s not sugarcoated by any means.” Grit is exemplified by the female branding crew that’s been doing it together here since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It’s about “people who actually live off meat. They don’t hunt for fun, they hunt to feed their families.” It is this



grit and independent spirit that will see them through, as Elizabeth adds, as it does the veterans of the local rodeo:

To see these cowboys, with their half casts and their broken fingers taped, get on these animals and do this is the spirit of White Sulphur Springs. So if the character is friendly and kind and generous, then the spirit is we're just a little tiny bit of rabble-rousers and we've got just enough oomph where if you cross the line, you're going to hear about it from us. And we're going to say No. No. We're not doing that. We're not part of that. You can't make us.

Such grit runs deeper than one's ability to rope and ride. It also means dealing with the remoteness of White Sulphur Springs and its lack of services, entertainment, shopping, policing, and medical facilities. Sharon spells this out, "So I think the remoteness of White Sulphur makes it unique in the sense that we are pretty self-sustaining in most things. But it also creates a lot of people that live here that are not afraid at all to travel that 70 to 100 miles to do all their shopping." The lack of local entertainment options bothers younger people in particular, Sharon adds, "We had a younger kid, he was in his 20s, that was working for his parents' business here in town, and he complained all the time about the fact that there was nothing for the 20s, 30s years of age to do except for go to the bars." Several locals mentioned outsiders coming into town to dump their junk cars because no local laws or zoning prohibit it. Patricia noted that she walks a check over to pay her monthly water bill, since they do not accept credit cards. For most residents these examples do not count against White Sulphur Spring. Rather they reveal the obvious and subtle aspects of its "realness."

Stereotypes plague many rural communities, Barbara protests, and she offers pictures to rebut them, "I felt really compelled to put a lot of these personal pictures in just because I want everybody to know we're just normal like everybody else, too." She adds, "Sometimes I feel like as a rural community we get put in a box of being uneducated and not having many opportunities, and we definitely try to give our kids the same opportunities." The school sports teams may be smaller and have to travel further to games, and the land ordinances may be fewer and farther in between than elsewhere. But, as Kristin points out, "Half of the community is devoting their spare time and energy to church projects and making a community with and through their church. While the other half is doing the exact same thing, only in a bar." This small town in the country may have fewer opportunities than a big city affords, but its people make the most of the unique opportunities they enjoy.

These unique opportunities take different forms, but residents see themselves privileged in ways that city dwellers often fail to understand or value. This includes a chance to join with nature in the rhythm of the seasons by ranching and working the land, as Mark affirms:

I think there's an ethic that goes hand-in-hand with both working the land and working livestock. And also just living in a place like this, where you have these views and these mountains and rivers and prairies and whatnot. They humble us fully. They remind us that we are not in control of much, really, in this world. A bad fire season or a bad winter, you know, tough rain for hay season when they're cutting, or like everything else is a big factor in our lives. And I think that puts it all in perspective somehow in a healthy way. These people are working day in and day out, year round. That's something that I value tremendously, and I think it's just kind of the flow of the community. Whether it's calving in the spring and feeding in the winter, you know, fencing and haying in the summer, and shipping in the fall. It's cyclical and it's rhythmic with the seasons and the weather and the landscape.

Kristin's explanation sums up this aspect of rural culture by reference to the "mud room mentality," as she likes to call it, "People who live in the city don't understand what a mud room is. People who live out here, you're hard pressed to find a house without one, because it's part of life, that mud. Mud smells an awful lot like cow shit, just so you know. Some people would call that the smell of money." While it may be dirty or demanding labor for some, branding cattle actually means signing your name to your life's work, Brian adds, and attesting it to the character of the place "in terms of the fact that that's people's signature" (photo 17 below).



**Photo 17 – Brian's photo of the branding irons reflect the pride behind a rancher's life work, a spirit that one can only experience in the rural culture in a place like White Sulphur Springs.**

The good, the bad, and the ugly rear their respective heads in this rural culture. Maria feels the remoteness of this place makes some people unable to "realize just how big the world is and the many other things there are to talk about besides other people's lives." Mark describes it as "a very traditional, genuine Montana rural community with good people and good hearts and a strong work ethic--a beautiful place to live and play." This is "Rural Montana at its best," as Brian sums it up, and there's a rich heritage and history behind that claim.

## #2 – Heritage and History



Photo 18 – The spa and murals in Susan’s image tell the story of the “Valley of Peaceful Waters.”

The rural culture that defines the character of White Sulphur Springs originates from a heritage rooted in mining and timber. Since the mines and mills have closed, the economy of the valley heavily depends on multi-generational working ranches. These industrial and agricultural roots in turn reach into the ground of a rich Native American heritage. Before the town of White Sulphur springs arose, this land was named the “Valley of Peaceful Waters,” which still flow through its strong sense of All-American community pride and foster this “neighborliness component” over the years. As the population of White Sulphur Springs grows older and its younger generation dwindles, however, residents express concern over carrying on this history and preserving the character of this place.

Several residents pointed out the significance of the sulphur springs in giving the town its name and giving birth to its history. Kristin points out:

I mean, if you look back through the history books, at some point this valley was called the Valley of the Peaceful Waters, and it wasn’t because there’s nice big peaceful lakes here. It’s because the water was bubbling up out of the ground and it was healing water. And the tribes came here to use that healing water in peace. They called a truce in this valley so that everybody could use the water. Have I seen documentation of that? No. That’s all from word of mouth, history, if you will. But it sounds very true to me.

Brian echoes this notion, saying, “The spa, it’s something that has brought a lot of people together for a really long time. It’s a really prideful part of the town.” Just as peaceful waters bubble up from the

bottom of the valley, mountains towering over it embrace a rich history as well. Kristin shares her perspective on the role of the five mountain ranges surrounding the valley, “The Castle Mountains, the way they pop speaks to me. They’re part of the landmark that gives us that history, that heritage, and the rocks that built the actual castle came out of those mountains. That to me is history and heritage.” There lies the spiritual significance of the land, only to be followed by the community’s history of its reliance on the land for their livelihood. The community officially supports 4-H culture so strongly Michelle explains, because, “It’s been part of the economic life of the area for a couple hundred years.”

“If you look through the history of White Sulphur,” George adds, “and you look at old pictures of how it used to be, and you read about the millennium moments in the paper, this White Sulphur was a hopping little town.” It was also a town of progressive firsts, he points out, “We had the first bicycle club in Montana. And we had the first hydroelectric plant in Montana.” As you drive around this valley, you can study the architecture of original homesteads, note that the railroad and Ringling Family were once present here, and admire the collection of vintage cars and American flags that remain, even as you wonder at the vast openness of this place that dwarfs the sprawling ranches that it holds in its immensity.

The ranching heritage of White Sulphur Springs has formed its economic back-bone for decades. While how many cows you own may count too much in town politics for some critics, most locals argue that the working ranches have kept White Sulphur Springs afloat through hard times, inspired an unyielding work ethic, and preserved open space and access to wilderness. As tourism grows, streetscaping spreads, new businesses open up on Main Street, and a proposed copper mine is under review, local residents hold renewed hopes for their future. At the same time, they hold mixed views on whether their heritage will be preserved going forward, and how best to sustain it. George asserts that “People in their 60s, 70s, 80s, they have the last little remnants” of pride in their heritage, as George sees it. “But everyone age-wise down, I don’t think really has it. Or is interested in preserving it.” Some residents worry that family ranches are not being passed down, as more of the younger generation leave town and fewer return. But just as many residents interviewed stressed instead the influx of hard-working young newcomers, or dismissed the loss of working ranches as an issue of concern.





Photo 19 - This image displays the ranching heritage being passed down to the next generation.

While the future of White Sulphur Springs remains to be written, it will certainly remain tied to the land that has shaped its character, and must be protected to sustain it, as Mark reminds us in a parting description of the heritage and character that attracted him to White Sulphur Springs in the first place:

It's its own community that stands on its own two feet just because of the geography. The landscape was a huge part, obviously. And just feeling like it was wide open and not a lot of people. I appreciate that for sure. The big ag component, that it's still very traditional ranching, you know, a lot of roping and riding and a lot of horse work still. That just all felt good to me. I'm sure some of it was just my romantic imagination getting excited about living in a little cowboy town. But it was, it felt real to me.



## #3 – Local Businesses



Photo 20 – The Berg Garage, established in 1919, impresses Michelle as an old-fashioned service station where nice, friendly people will still clean your windshield, fix a flat, or press a bearing. “That, I think, is part of the character of the town.”

Rural culture permeates the small businesses in White Sulphur Springs that hold up the community. These local businesses also provide an essential resource for this rural county as a whole, as Michelle points out, “So the fact that there are three gas stations, two grocery stores, a hardware store, a pharmacy, you know, this is notable.” Although these local businesses are logistically important, given such long distances to larger towns, residents see them as no less significant to the spirit of the town, given “the character of our businesses” as Elizabeth explains:

Every business I’ve ever had a part in, in this area, will go to the nth degree for you, will accommodate you if you have meetings there, if you need your groceries delivered. I’ve had two flat tires that the local garage has come, drove their truck here, pumped up my tire, followed me back to the garage, brought me back, come and got me to go get my truck. So the character of caring about your customers is very prominent here. That is, they care! Carry groceries out. I know a couple of disabled people they deliver to. I’ve had the pharmacist meet me after hours to get medicine.

Neighborliness counts as a leading virtue of White Sulphur Springs as a whole, but residents often credit local businesses with a big role in creating this communal spirit, as Mark explains:

Every mom and pop shop in town is supportive of all the school activities and, you know, the rodeo club and sponsoring everything and doing giveaways for every civic organization in town. And I think that's what I really value about small business in general. And it's very much the backbone of the community. And so both personally and businesswise, I think just being involved and being a good neighbor. Yeah, it's pretty basic. It's just being human.

In a big-box retail economy society where success is often viewed solely by maximizing profits and market share, businesses in White Sulphur Springs reflect values, as Mark says, of "just being human." From the Berg Garage to the local knitting store and computer service shop, from Red Ants Pants to local lodging, these local businesses exemplify customer service and an "in-house culture" that residents appreciate. Thus Charles extols the local movie theatre and pizza parlor as "gems" of neighborliness:

That movie theatre with a pizza parlor in it; that is one of the things that I just love about living here. And the fact that I that you don't have to carry cash anywhere you go. Like there's no place in town where you can't just tell them your name. They don't open credit accounts, they don't do any of that, they just take your name down and at the end of the month, they tell you how much you owe them and you pay them. There's no formality to it.

Although While Sulphur Springs still struggles with a depressed economy, and it serves as the seat of one of the poorest counties in Montana, local businesses boast a rich character that proves contagious and helps spark a sense of hope in the town. White Sulphur is "seeing a lot of businesses change hands," Kristin pointed out. "And the younger generation is starting to take these businesses and try to make them successful." Amid calls for change in White Sulphur Springs by many townspeople, met by reluctance to change shared by others, residents interviewed agree that local businesses like the Berg Garage and their "just simply human" values express the character of this rural community.

### **Summary of White Sulphur Springs Residents Depiction of Character of Place**

Alongside their unique rural culture, heritage, and local businesses, residents of White Sulphur Springs single out their town's strong social cohesion and neighborliness, generational ties, and a newfound sense of hope in sustaining the character of their place. As White Sulphur Springs moves forward, they face the delicate dance of balancing how to grow in a way that preserves their "rough-around-the-edges" and "authentic" character, yet also enables them to flourish socially and prosper economically.

Barbara, a lifelong resident who left for college only to return afterwards, shares a story that touches on the generational ties and social cohesion in White Sulphur Springs:

If you've read the Meagher County news at all, you'll probably see a section of local and social notes. That was really big for my mom and dad's generation, the local and social notes. We would see our name in the local and social notes every week. It was always something that my mom had put in. Finally we took her aside and we're like, "We don't want everyone to know we had a doctor's appointment yesterday or that week, or we went to get groceries." My dad took me aside and he's like, "It is a sad day when you don't want to know what your neighbors are doing." ...It's something that stuck with me ever since we moved back. It really is important to look out for your neighbors, and want to know how they're doing. That's part of our character.

The social fabric of White Sulphur Springs faces challenges ahead, as its population ages and its work ethic shifts from the setting of multi-generation family ranches. If you look at a profile of the United States population, you see a pyramid with more young at the bottom than old at the top, even with a baby-boom bulge in the middle from age 50 to 70. Look at White Sulphur Springs and you see a pyramid turned upside down by the rural-to-urban migration that marks this country as a whole. The population of White Sulphur Springs has not returned to the population numbers seen in earlier decades, and has plateaued since 1990 around 1,000 people (Meagher County Growth Policy 2015). In 2010, the median age in Meagher County was 50 years, by contrast to the median age of 37 in the United States as a whole. Problems that residents raised stemming from a shrinking younger workforce and an expanding elderly population range from the practical demands of maintaining the skilled manpower needed to work ranches to providing caregivers for dependent seniors. In addition to the town's increasing age disparity, several residents noted a "character problem" in the type of people the town is now attracting. Kristin cuts right to the point, "The character is attracting the wrong crowd...Come here and hide from the government. Or come here because our cost of living is the lowest in the state, but guess what, so is our incomes. We're attracting that crowd. They want to live on welfare on the system, or whatever, because it's easy."

Residents hold deep moral concerns over the social cohesion of the community and a fierce hopes for its future, as they made emphatically clear throughout their interviews, and in their voting to pass a recent school bond by a 2 to 1 margin. While White Sulphur Spring remains a "church pew or bar stool kind of town," as one resident put it, this fierce hope for the future animates the beautification projects now underway on and around Main Street, the visions and plans for increasing tourism, the ongoing success of the Red Ants Pants music festival, the promise of the proposed copper mine and new businesses opening up in town. Through all these changes, the town's ties to the land and the natural environment will endure as the foundation for its character and the touchstone of its hopes, as Elizabeth observes:

So when you can step out and can be refreshed by what's around you, nature that is definitely the type of people who are attracted here. A lot of people who enjoy nature, who enjoy small towns, small amount of people, quiet. We have little traffic, little air traffic. I can't even remember the last time I heard someone honk their horn, to be honest. Our environment is part of our character.

As White Sulphur Springs navigates the waters between treasuring its history and catalyzing its future growth, its residents seek continuity through gradual change to realize a sustainable future guided by their enduring commitments to family and friends, good neighbors and the land around them, and to a community that still takes the time to be "just simply human," as Barbara concludes:

My closest friend growing up in Ringling now lives in San Diego. She married a guy from San Diego, and when they come to visit, he always calls it the Montana good-bye. And I'm like, what's the Montana good-bye? And he's like, well, you say good-bye in the living room, and you stand up and you talk a while. And then you say good-bye at the front door. And then you go outside, and say good-bye again at the car. He's like saying good-bye in Montana takes a half an hour. And it is so true.

**Comparison of Resident Character of Place Depictions**

Community	Population	Land Area (sq. miles)	Median Age	Median Household Income	2015 Visitation
Whitefish Flathead County	6,864	6.43	40.1	\$48,813	604,238
White Sulphur Springs Meagher County	910	1.01	51.2	\$37,277	49,519

**Table 8 – Community Profiles, with 2015 visitation estimates from ITRR interactive data reports, based on visitors who stayed at least one night. (Note: Small sample size calls for caution in interpreting White Sulphur Springs visitation data). Population figures are based on 2015 census data. Median household income data are based on 2014 data.**

Residents of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs depict the character of each place by attributing similar traits to their town: a unique lifestyle, strong social cohesion in the face of forces threatening to fray social fabric, key economic changes influencing local politics and character of place, and divided attitudes towards growth. For all these common themes, their underlying dynamics and meaning vary dramatically. Both communities have undergone historic economic transitions, but these transitions have played out on the ground in starkly different ways. Commonly mentioned character attributes help explain opposing sentiments, pro and con, held by residents in each community on the current character of their place and its future. Residents of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs alike see the social relationships and political decision-making shared by their fellow citizens as ultimately creating, sustaining, or changing the character of their town.

Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs feature unique lifestyles vital to the character of each place seen as a coherent community of character and practice. Whitefish enables its residents to live, work, and play in a place that offers unique recreational opportunities, outstanding public services, world-class amenities, a thriving tourist economy and a comfortable pace of life. White Sulphur Springs celebrates its authentic rural culture, working ranches, and enduring connection to the land, challenged by a depressed economy and both insulated and isolated by its remote location. Residents in both places highlighted their strong social cohesion in the face of diverse pressures threatening to fray their social fabric. Long-term residents of Whitefish stressed the stratifying social influence they felt from wealthy newcomers, second-home owners, tourists, and Canadians. Residents of White Sulphur stressed their concerns about the social divide growing between hard-working townspeople and newcomers who lean too heavily on welfare checks. In both communities subtler social divides find expression in local residents calling for change and progress, and criticizing the “good old boys” who resist change for the good of all.

Residents identify economic forces in each community as significantly influencing its character of place by driving changes they feel in its social fabric as well as its economy. A booming tourist economy has swung a double-edged sword through Whitefish, judges Mitchell, a longtime resident. The influx of

tourists and new money have brought a “loss of innocence” and a new “privileged attitude” to Whitefish, he charges, while acknowledging the economic benefits of booming tourism as well as the expanding conservation efforts and cultural opportunities it supports. In White Sulphur Springs, by contrast, the downward course of economic decline has been driven by losses in timber and mining industries, and railroad transportation, and challenges to ranching and agriculture industry to keep the shrinking local economy afloat for the past several decades. As White Sulphur struggles to turn the economic corner, it looks to tourism as the catalyst for a new era of prosperity. As each town looks ahead from its own perspective in the present, it asks the same apt question: How much tourism can we absorb without changing our character or losing our soul? Charles offers a peculiar perspective on this dilemma of growth as a resident of White Sulphur who grew up in Whitefish:

...Whitefish has really traded those [raw, rough, down-to-earth] edges for what they got. And what they got was, you know, a completely charming, beautiful little town, but where people like me who grew up there don't totally feel welcome, or don't necessarily feel at home. It sort of feels like a Disneyland of a Montana town, like a replica of a Montana town that's perfect. I would, if I could control the growth of White Sulphur, I'd say just stay the way you are and don't, you know, do plastic surgery on the town.

While some residents of Whitefish dissent, many feel that the mushrooming success of the local tourism industry is making it impossible for “ordinary people” to live in the town, even though these very folks exemplify the true character of the place. The town is still “real,” but it has reached a tipping point, as Cynthia fears:

I think the biggest thing would be the loss of the people that live and work here. It's the people that make all of the amenities great, ensure we have great amenities, keep our downtown vibrant, preserve our water quality, are super involved in the community through nonprofit organizations or city boards and committees, etcetera. I think if all the good people that live here couldn't afford to live in Whitefish anymore--and maybe lived in Columbia Falls or Kalispell – going to the grocery store would be an entirely different experience. Shopping or eating at our locally owned businesses would be a different experience. And all the impressive work done by locals probably wouldn't happen, or it would have an entirely different feel.

If the character of Whitefish depends on the people who call it home, it must face the growing challenge to remain a “real” place, where “exclusivity” does not overshadow or exile the “ordinary people.” Residents affirm how much they love the place they call home, testifying to its unique goodness and beauty alike. “I would say it's an inviting mountain town focused on the good life,” Deb summed up. Adds Justin, “I'm just pretty lucky that I landed here, and my kids grew up here. I don't think I'll ever live anywhere else. It's always going to be home to me. My mother could never understand why I lived up here. But I just can't imagine living anywhere else.”

On the other hand, White Sulphur Springs faces a tipping point of its own. Convinced it must pull itself up by its bootstraps, the community is hoping tourism and small business development can help in sustaining the town's solidarity and harmony by boosting its economy. Residents look to a future full of potential, while they acknowledge a present at risk from “minuses,” and they draw strength from their historic character, defined by a rural culture of neighborliness, a “rough-around-the-edges” cowboy resilience, and an enduring resolution to be “just simply human.”



Through all the different attributes residents of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs feel comprise the character of each place, they find common ground in the conviction that it is the local people who truly make up the character of their town. It is “the people that make this community,” George concludes in the case of White Sulphur Springs. From Whitefish Roy echoes this belief: “I think the real character of Whitefish is the people. I’ll always go back to the people, whether it’s the business that’s run by somebody like Megan at Crush or Marcus and Jessica at the brewery. You know, whatever, it’s the people that make this place so special.”

### **Results Section 3: Understanding and Comparing the ‘Character of Place’ between Visitors and Residents**

Both the literature and principles of geotourism stress the importance of aligning visitors’ expectations of a place with its felt meaning for the residents who embody and express its character. Ideally, when these two groups share perspectives on the character of a place, tourists can help enrich and sustain the community, while its residents can help enhance the experience of their visitors and bring them back again and again. On the other hand, as we can see from the destination branding and marketing literature reviewed in the section on “implications and recommendations” below, trouble follows when visitors and residents get out of sync and wind up at odds.

#### **Comparing the Character of Whitefish between Visitors and Residents**

Visitors and residents alike agreed on what they loved about Whitefish, as expressed in their interviews and summarized above. The two groups expressed significant overlap in their respective evaluations of character of place. Both praised the towns’ abundance of world-class amenities, its family-friendly and relaxed atmosphere, the authenticity of its intact Main Street, and its appealing lifestyle and recreational opportunities. Just as many visitors credit the physical landscape for bringing them to Whitefish and keeping them there, a repeat visitor Michael attests, “What brings me to Montana is the wilderness.”

Visitors less often mention the role of politics in creating the character of Whitefish than do its residents, but some take note of its apparent influence. “There were a lot of natural elements,” Betty pointed out, “whether they were real, or even if some of them were synthetic. I thought that things looked very nice and definitely had character. You know the colors seemed in line with nature, but still were modern.” Just as if she had overheard residents protesting narrowed downtown streets, Betty went on to observe, “The strange thing we found was apparently some of the sidewalks had been extended into the street by 18 inches a few years back. And we thought that was strange from the perspective of the people who had to drive.”

To different degrees, then, visitors and residents of Whitefish typically see the role of politics in shaping its character of place. Similarly they see the importance of natural resource management in protecting the area’s spectacular natural environment and its impressive outdoor recreation opportunities. Whitefish resident Jordan, for example, singles out “this environmentally conscious kind of awareness that I think is unique to Whitefish, because it’s not necessarily reflected in other parts of the state,” as definitely “part of the character of the town.” First-time visitor Jason concurs, citing his own experience with exemplary local fishing guides, and his own anger at jet-skiing interlopers on the Flathead River:

I was thoroughly impressed with the management from all of the guides that we were in contact with. Every guide that we were around really emphasized care of fish. So whether they thought they were going to guide there for the rest of their lives or not, they acted like it. They really went out of their way to treat the resource well. So from a sustainability standpoint, I was highly impressed with that. The only thing I really saw that I thought was just crazy is jet skis on the river. If it would have been legal, I would have shot about 3 or 4 of them.

Residents and visitors alike emphasized the 'spirit' of Whitefish that helps distinguish its character. Both groups discuss the array of attributes that comprise this spirit and color the character of the town. While residents disagree on how best to maintain this character in the future, most agree on just how special a place Whitefish has been and still is. First time visitors such as Stephanie likewise agree in hoping Whitefish will preserve its character, "It was really nice. It was a nice character town. Can't think of anything that they could improve, to be honest. It was nice, lovely character. Nice place to keep as is, really."

### **Comparing the Character of White Sulphur Springs between Visitors and Residents**

Visitors and residents of White Sulphur Springs also shared a common vision of the attributes they felt comprised the character of this place. They agreed on the top three character attributes for White Sulphur Springs: its caring, neighborly feeling; awareness of the land and a close working relationship with it; social cohesion and intimacy instilled with a "rough-around-the-edges" spirit that expresses the town's "genuine, authentic, unique" rural culture.

Visitors felt the "realness" of White Sulphur Springs that many residents highlighted, and they agreed that the character of this place springs from its ruggedness, as Ronald puts it:

Montana in general is a rough state and it's a state that is not the easiest state to live in. It's cold in the winter. It's rugged. It's rough. And so I think the type of people, particularly people who live on the land and who are really working in the elements, they certainly personify that landscape. But at the same time, they band together... White Sulphur Springs isn't a huge economic center, obviously, by any means, so there's not a ton of money in there. It's a tough landscape. It's not the easiest place to make a living. So the community comes together and takes care of one another because of that. So it is a rugged exterior but when you get into the community, it's certainly more warm and friendly.

Michelle testifies from a longtime resident's standpoint to the gritty authenticity of White Sulphur Springs:

It's still a depressed little western town. But that has a certain charm to it. And as far as tourists go, I mean, you come into town, there are people with horses in their backyard. There are deer in town. There are tons of people walking around in cowboy boots, for whom that's just the natural way that they dress. And pickups with the dog on the back. And all those western things. And so for tourists it's real Americana. It's not a put-on or a put-off.

Visitors love the unique character of White Sulphur Springs that residents hold close both in civic pride and in the harsh struggle to endure in a pinched, depressed economy. Both groups recognize this character of place as grounded in its working relationship with the land and its geographical

remoteness. Come to White Sulphur Spring and you “step back in time,” marvels Ruth, a repeat visitor. The town is “still kind of holding on to what made it special back in the day. You know, you feel safe there. I felt safe there.” Residents may attribute this “step back in time” to wrongheaded reluctance to change and the restrictive reality of a stagnant local economy, but they, too, acknowledge the town’s struggles in helping to forge its enduring character of place. Ronald, a repeat visitor sums up how geographical remoteness, neighborliness, and rural culture come together to create the town’s unique character:

I like how we talked about it earlier, just in terms of the people and the place being shaped by this kind of landscape, but also being this kind of family and community that comes from that harder life. That it is just special. You don’t see it a lot. There’s just this really incredible community, and really incredible people that I think more people would love to live there, too. I mean, I would kind of love to live there. I think people, once they get a taste of that community kind of lifestyle, they really like it. And they’re probably hungry for it, because we’re all descendants of smaller tribes, you know what I mean, like, that’s our biology. We came up in these smaller tribes, and we’re now in this wild world of billions and billions of people. And guess what, we’re all connected through this incredible worldwide web, and we can talk to people in China and London. But are we really that connected? You know what I mean? There’s this huge technology network. Does this actually make us more connected, or does it make us more fragmented? Because are we getting away from these real communities that we were traditionally biologically programmed for? So that’s probably good way to end it, I guess.

## Results Section 4: Understanding the ‘Character of Place’

The preamble to the United States Constitution begins, “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...,” and then proceeds to list the other compelling reasons for establishing this new government. The preamble in Montana’s state constitution contains many of the same elements, but the people of Montana had something else to say: “We the people of Montana, grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of its mountains, the vastness of its rolling plains, and desiring to secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of liberty for this and future generations do ordain and establish this constitution” (Kemmis 1990). The author of *Community and the Politics of Place* questions why the creators of the state constitution “paused to express their gratitude for the Montana landscape?” This study also pauses to reflect and argues that the writers of the state constitution placed an additional civic responsibility on the people relating to the character of place.

As “we the people,” there is an additional onus stemming from the unique beauty of this state to sustain and enhance the character of this place, for this and future generations. When looking at the character of place findings in this study next to the state constitution, the parallels are no coincidence. The “quiet beauty” is synonymous with the rural culture, unique lifestyle, and slower pace of life that many residents and visitors noted. The “grandeur of its mountains” aptly encompasses the natural landscape elements of Whitefish as well as the fuzzy spirit of that mountain town. “The vastness of its rolling plains” helps describe the open valleys of White Sulphur Springs that support the ranching history and close connection to the land that residents hold and visitors feel.

The authors of the state constitution may have felt obligated “to say more than their federal counterparts because they were expressing a different attitude toward self-government than the

Founding Fathers.” But what is clear, as resident and visitor participants from each community dually highlighted, Montana and communities in it like Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs are aware of the unique character of our last best places, and there is an intimate relationship between this character and the “quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of its mountains, the vastness of its rolling plains, and desiring to secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of liberty for this and future generations.” Kemmis concludes, in support from Wendell Berry, “that no real culture, whether we speak of food or of politics or of anything else, can exist in abstraction from place,” that our “culture must be a response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other” (Kemmis 1990). By studying the context of specific places like Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs, the residents who strive to live well in them and visitors who temporarily inhabit such places, the journey towards identifying a uniquely common character of place and ultimately sustaining it, can begin.

In an effort to summarize the character of these two places, draw meaning from them, and in turn, produce actionable insights, it is imperative to understand the commonalities amidst participant’s wildly diverse depictions of character. Admittedly, trying to decipher what the character of these two places boils down to must be dramatically simplified. However, it is through this process of simplified understanding that the greatest value this study can produce is revealed. Thus, it was found in this study that the character of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs centers on the civic virtue of neighborliness and the composite mixture of the natural and altered elements of a place. ‘Natural’ elements are intended to include the social, cultural, political, and environmental characteristics of a place.

Residents and visitors in both communities were emphatic in their direct and indirect attribution to the linkage between ‘neighborliness’ and the character of place. This study expands the Old English rendition of ‘neighbor’ meaning someone who may live near you, to represent the social cohesion, sense of belonging, and fuzzy spirit that residents and visitors attributed to the people of each place. Neighborliness and character can be viewed in the sense that there is only one place for residents and visitors to share, not a piece of a place for each to individually consume. Being a good neighbor certainly includes the examples participants identified from carrying the groceries home for an elderly couple, inviting a visitor to your place to Sunday church service, volunteering for public service projects, or starting a charity event for a fellow resident in need. However, neighborliness, as a prized quality of life, extends even further. It is this virtue that creates a sense of belonging to a place, a sense of empowerment, and ultimately a genuine public life through harmoniously inhabiting a place together. Whitefish resident Brendan encapsulates this breadth in meaning and influence of the neighborly component on the character of place:

I hope you get the flavor for belonging means it’s more than just me and my husband coming back here and buying a little house in a little town so our girls can get to know their uncles and aunts. It’s about continuing the story of building family and community and security. That’s beyond just having a good job – it’s about being able to call up my brother and he comes up here and helps because our sump pump went out and my basement’s flooding.

The social cohesion, stemming from a place’s neighborliness, proves to be such an influential factor on the character of both communities given its ability to position, or not, the inhabitants of a place inside a single organic household. Ronald explains the neighborly attitude that fosters this collective family, “I think it all stems down to it being in a small community, because there’s this attitude in a small community that people take care of one another, everyone knows everyone so well that it creates this – it’s almost like a family, right, it’s like a big family.” While the social cohesion is certainly intact in both

communities, residents from each place identified grave threats to their respective “big family.” The stronger the social bonds in a place, the greater the number of local residents can harmoniously reside inside the collective household. If the extent of neighborliness determines the number of and harmony of this collective household, this household (or social cohesion) then determines the composition of “natural and humanly appropriated elements” of a place. Ultimately, the stronger the presence of neighborliness is in a place, the more coherent the depiction of character will be. The more coherent the depiction of character is, the greater the consensus about what the common good for a place should look like.

The common good of a place is arguably made up by this composition of natural and humanly appropriated elements. Whitefish resident Victor defines the character of his place in line with this complex composition, “Still a real town with world-class amenities. I don’t see us primarily as a resort town. I see it as sort of the resort aspects and tourist aspects complimenting the real community and threatening to overwhelm it, but it hasn’t. That’s the continual challenge.” White Sulphur Springs visitor Monica uses her definition of character to highlight the value of having the natural elements remain predominant in a place:

I would say it’s what I consider so reminiscent of the west with the open plains and the farming and very neighborly because you need to be helping each other since there’s just not a lot of choices about what’s out there. So I would say it’s very neighborly... You get a vibe of peaceful and happy. I’ll tell you what, after I was out west, I wondered why anybody would even want to live in New York and all the honking and just constant barrage to your senses. If everybody came to Montana and saw that, they would have such a different view of life.

This study understands that the character of place is comprised in part by the challenge of finding the right mix between the natural and altered. Just as the preamble in the state constitution supports, residents and visitors alike reinforce the importance of the non-altered elements of a place. Just as you cannot savor the benefits of progress while enjoying the peace of staying the same, the altered elements of a place are not inevitable, they are necessary. The complexity behind sustaining or enhancing the character of place lies in the process of determining what your place’s composition of the natural and altered looks like. Ultimately, this composition should support a place’s neighborliness, which in turn will enhance the character and make a place more attractive to visitors. Mark, a White Sulphur Springs resident, explains the intersection of these components:

But in my mind, what I’ve come to the conclusion of, as long as the strides that we make forward are designed for the enjoyment and fulfillment of the local community, then the tourists will enjoy them as well and they’ll come. But as long as it’s designed for what we, as White Sulphur people want and need, whether it’s having some sort of place for commuters to hang out, other than bars, you know, like a coffee shop that has music coming through once in a while or just a community space or a place for barn dances that are open to the public or a place for graduation parties or kind of a community hall kind of thing. If we design things that really boost the community elements and then I think that just continues to snowball into what tourists would find appealing about a community.

Mark’s vision for the character path ahead supports the notion that if you build it for the common good, both residents and visitors will benefit, and only then, can the character of a place be sustained, let alone enhanced.



## Implications and Recommendations

### Montana Brand Pillars and Character of Place

On average, \$114 was dropped every second in Montana by out-of-state visitors equaling \$3.6 billion in 2015. Visitors directly supported 48,260 jobs in Montana and 63,360 jobs both directly, indirectly and induced (Grau, 2016). The character of Montana's places help support these impressive numbers of dollars and jobs. When probing conceptions of a "brand" compared to conceptions of "character of place," we find significant overlap. Both feature attributes that distinguish a place from others, and one product from its competitors. Both concepts encompass the direct and indirect experience of guests who visit Montana, and have perceptions of those who live here. One key difference between stated definitions of a brand and the character of a place lies in the socially enacted and historically unfolding character of a place as a constantly changing process, while a branded commodity or product is "something that does not" change (<http://tourism.mt.gov/Resources/TheMontanaBrand>).

At the same time, effective branding can help preserve and enhance the character of these last best places, as affirmed by Montana's residents and visitors as well as defined by the state's brand book in terms of "the people, the towns, and the natural environments." Given the ongoing economic, social, and environmental impact that tourism creates, Montana's destinations call for sensitive understanding and careful guidance in developing and managing the brands that represent them as part of a continuing process. Since the appeal of a place to visit conceived as a destination brand actually depends on its environment and natural features, its social and cultural capital, expressed in the images, stories, and values attributed to character of place, theory of place can and should guide destination branding. So through this study it becomes clear that in order to enable tourism (through branding) to contribute economically to the state, attention must be given to the natural beauty, social integrity, and cultural value of the places we love, not only their economic prosperity (Hankinson 2007; Gnoth 2007). Because the local community animates character of place, it should lie at the heart of any branding strategy. Sever this living link, and you threaten the brand's sustainable impact and authentic appeal (Campelo et al. 2013).

Images like those below bring the Montana brand to life through aligning visitors' and residents' perceptions of place, enabling them to engage each other in putting the principles of geotourism into practice, and making the dreams of Montana come true.

Below, the Montana brand pillars and images from visitors and residents from each community are presented, reflecting this alignment:

1. **“More spectacular, unspoiled nature than anywhere else in the lower 48”**

- This is our ace card— the Differentiator. Of the three, this is the one that distinguishes Montana from our competitors—particularly when we “iconify” some of our most outstanding examples such as Yellowstone, Glacier and others. When you have a hand this strong, lead with aces.

Whitefish Visitor



Photo 21 – Felicia’s experience was highlighted by “pristine rivers and lakes that you can see 50 feet to the bottom, *just untouched*. I mean, so great.”

Whitefish Resident



Photo 22 – For Kevin, the character of his place is made up in large part by what he describes as the “proximity to wild places.” Noting how difficult it is to find wilderness in the U.S, this proximity to wilderness helps differentiate this place from Charleston or Knoxville where he grew up.

White Sulphur Springs Visitor

White Sulphur Springs Resident



Photo 23 – In the branded spirit of “more unspoiled nature than anywhere else in the lower 48,” Anthony describes his fly fishing trips to White Sulphur Springs as “truly unique experiences” as he’s only seen one angler in five years.



Photo 24 – Barbara explains how they have the corner niche on sunsets in White Sulphur Springs and it is important for her to capture “these quiet moments” and to “just experience them.” Moments of unspoiled natural beauty like this are why Barbara and others choose to live in their place.

**2. Vibrant and charming small towns that serve as gateways to our natural wonders**

- This is the card that people are surprised we have—the Mitigator. It mitigates people’s perception of Montana being remote without denying it. It further shifts the focus from the destination being the town itself to the town being a gateway to the natural wonders.

**White Sulphur Springs Visitor**



Photo 25 - Sandra’s image illustrates the remote community of White Sulphur Springs, home to the Red Ants Pants festival and gateway to five mountain ranges, the Smith River, and world-class hunting, fishing, hiking, and more.

**White Sulphur Springs Resident**



Photo 26 – Elizabeth wrote ‘home’ on her photo to show her attachment to the community and its surrounding beauty.

**Whitefish Visitor**

**Whitefish Resident**



Photo 27 - Felicia described Whitefish as “a real slice of the mountain west.” She went out to explain how this “unique”, “welcoming”, and “hard to beat” town has incredible access to “everything” from biking hiking, berry picking, the lake, mountains... “so what doesn’t it encompass?”



Photo 28 – Jordan highlighted impromptu musical gatherings like this one to exemplify the charming and slower pace of life in Whitefish. Jordan went on to later define the character of her place as “*vibrant*, passionate and loyal to supporting their own, and on the whole appreciative of the wilderness and the nature that surrounds them.”



### 3. Breathtaking experiences by day, and relaxing hospitality at night

- This is the card that ties the hand together—the Brand Builder. It leverages the strengths (nature and scenery) to drive up the qualities the audience desires (comfort and exhilaration). And remember, depending on the person, exhilaration is just as easily achieved during a scenic drive as it is scaling the highest peak.

Whitefish Visitor



Photo 29 – James first stop in Whitefish included a local craft beer with quite the scenic overlook. For James and other visitors, Whitefish embodies nature, comfort, and exhilaration, exemplified through his satisfaction with his local accommodations, bicycle tour through Glacier, hiking adventures, and “cool restaurants that were off the beaten path.”

Whitefish Resident



Photo 30 – Even residents like Deb chose to include scenic driving images to portray the breathtaking experiences available.

White Sulphur Springs Visitor

White Sulphur Springs Resident



Photo 31 –Anthony typifies this brand pillar by enjoying world-class fly fishing opportunities by day and reciting cowboy poetry with the locals at the bar by night. He described these days as being simply “great.”



Photo 32 – Susan feels strongly that the spa and hot springs is at the core of White Sulphur’s character. Visitors tended to agree, as it is hard to beat the local spa when it comes to truly *relaxing hospitality and comfort*.

### Research process – a Reflection

This study was conducted in an attempt to ‘discover’ how character is defined and portrayed by residents and visitors to two communities in the hope that an easy and valuable model or framework could be generated. In Figure 2 below, it shows how this study followed a basic research process starting with the large arrow on the left. Process descriptions 1-5 were conducted for this study while the last two steps are only suggestions on what could happen after the analysis.

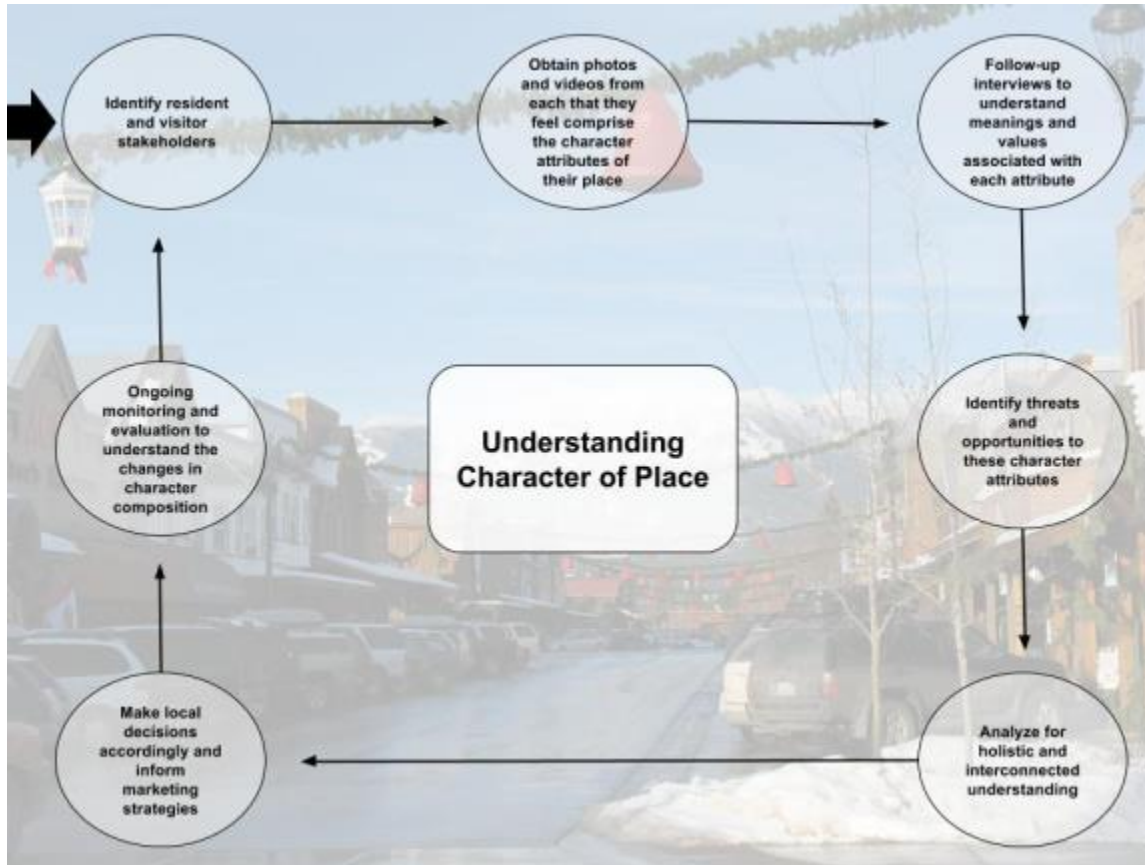


Figure 2 – Procedure used to understand the character of place for this study.

Communities could repeat the same process as suggested in Figure 2, but it is time consuming and can be rather expensive to hire someone to help identify character. Upon further examination of the data it was discerned that the most essential information was derived from one basic question asked of residents related to what would affect character the most if it were no longer in their community. The following is the suggested framework for communities to use to assess their character of place.

### **Proposed Community Framework for Sustaining and Enhancing Character of Place**

The proposed framework to assess character of place is based on the data from this study and the resulting conclusions. While both visitors and residents were interviewed to gather a complete set of opinions on the community’s character, when residents were asked to reflect on the thing, that if lost, would change their character, the most robust and seemingly honest yet simple and clear statements emerged. In combination, these statements reflect the true character attributes of a community.

In the analysis of this question, “If your place (community) lost something that would be a reflection of a major loss of character, what would that look like,” both Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs residents focused in on three main attributes of character: built environment, natural landscape, and social elements as shown in Table 9.

What would affect the character of your community if it were no longer there?		
Attribute	Whitefish	White Sulphur Springs
<b>Built Environment</b>	Central downtown core/no corporate	Spa/hot springs
	Ace Hardware store	Full service garage
	Big Mountain, railroad	Ranches
	Downtown	Red Ants Pants
	Small town	Bar 47
<b>Natural Landscapes</b>	Surrounding wild places	Public land access
	WF lake/clean water	Smith River
<b>Social</b>	Hard working people who live in WF	Our clannishness
	Real families	Neighborliness
	Locals at the bars	Ranching/branding
	Mix of old/new and poor/wealthy	Growing too rapidly
	Generosity of the people	Pride in community

**Table 9: Attributes that define Character of Place for Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs**

Table 9 obviously shows the distinct characteristics or attributes of the two communities in this study highlighting the need to treat each community as its own. Therefore, the framework for future research is shown in Figure 3.

Once these ‘losses’ are identified by local residents, each attribute can be assigned indicators for monitoring and evaluation. The threats/loss residents identify for each attribute inform the monitoring indicators and assist in sustaining character, while the opportunities residents identify for each attribute highlight the ways the community can enhance its character (Figure 3).

Using these attributes for other communities who would like to establish a sense of their ‘character of place’, three questions could be asked of a ‘Task Force’ or some other group within that community that represents a broad spectrum of residents.

Answers to these questions will inform the indicators for the character monitoring process and identify specific opportunities to enhance the character.

1. What built environment aspect(s) in your community would affect your community character if it was no longer there?
  - a. Why is that attribute significant to the character of your community?
  - b. What are the associated threats or opportunities with that attribute (if any)?
2. What natural landscape feature or attribute(s) would affect the character of your community if it was no longer there?
  - a. Why is that attribute significant to the character of your community?
  - b. What are the associated threats or opportunities with that attribute (if any)?

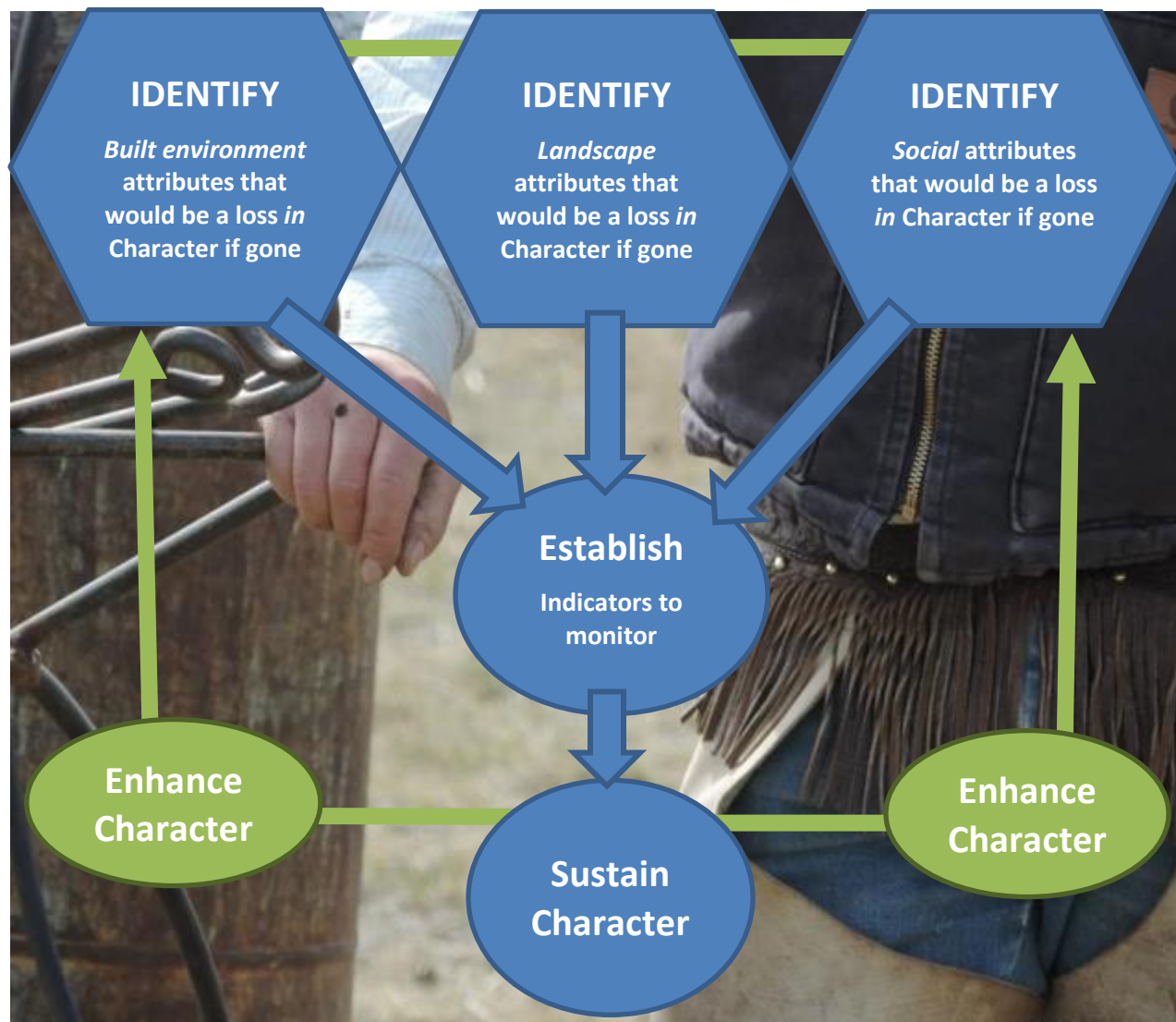


Figure 3: Community Framework for Sustaining and Enhancing Character of Place

3. What are the social attributes in your community that if no longer there, would affect your community character?
  - a. Why is that attribute significant to the character of your community?
  - b. What are the associated threats or opportunities with that attribute (if any)?

Once those questions have been answered and displayed in a format like Table 9, how to monitor changes in that character can be decided upon. For example, in Whitefish, the Ace Hardware store and in White Sulphur Springs, the full service gas station, represent a character that people do not want to



lose. However, these are private businesses who could ‘pull-out’ at any point in time. First and foremost, community leaders could maintain a close relationship with the business owners so that the community is informed of possible changes before anything happens. The community would have to decide what to do if the business is likely to leave or sell. Would it entail a policy change to help keep them in business? Would it be a community purchasing the business like a cooperative to keep it there? Or, is that character replaceable with something else? All those questions could be answered ahead of time so the community is ready when and if the time comes for the business to sell or change.

To maintain the ‘natural landscape character’ a community might need to be in close contact with the land management agencies who are responsible for those landscapes important to the community. They also might need to be in contact with local farmers and ranchers whose land creates the landscape. In Whitefish the surrounding wild areas and in White Sulphur Springs the access to those public lands help define their character. Loss of public lands and access to them could strip the people of their desired character. These public lands and adjacent private land owners could be the key to keeping that character intact, therefore monitoring what is happening on that landscape is vital to the community’s character.

The third attribute, social, is a large and complex character component. In Whitefish, the desire to keep the hard working middle class in the community is seen as a large reason why the community is what it is. If those folks can no longer live there, the soul of the community is gone. Monitoring housing prices, the number of people who work in Whitefish but live elsewhere, and the stability of the school age population might be key indicators that a change is taking place and action needs to be taken. In White Sulphur Springs, the idea that the people in the community are part of a clan who stick together and help each other out is what makes their community what it is. Monitoring each other is simply what they already do. However, as new people move in, it will be essential for the community members to befriend these new folks and in their own way, invite them into the clan. Once the clan gets divided into those who are in and those who are out, the character of White Sulphur Springs will deteriorate.

As stated so eloquently earlier in this report by Mark (White Sulphur Springs resident), “In my mind, what I’ve come to the conclusion of... as long as the strides that we make forward are designed for the enjoyment and fulfillment of the local community, then the tourists will enjoy them as well and they’ll come.” The purpose of this proposed Framework is to guide communities in managing their own character, driven by resident values. By doing so, communities can ensure they are actually sustaining and enhancing the character of their place, for residents and visitors alike. In short, this framework supports the notion of “Don’t lose it (character) and they will come.”

## **Future Research**

Given the limited ample, scope and depth of this exploratory study, we need additional research to monitor ongoing changes in character of place over time. The dynamic nature of this concept suggests that we need to measure and interpret crucial and subtle changes over time in resident and visitor depictions of character of place. Using this study as a point of departure, longitudinal studies and monitoring processes can provide keys to unlock insights into planning and marketing decisions needed to keep pace with ‘real-time’ events in the interplay of politics and policy with popular perceptions in shaping the character of place.

Communities around Montana could ask their residents to contemplate and answer the three questions about losses in social, landscape and built environment attributes that would alter the known character of their place. Those answers could become the monitoring point for sustaining and enhancing their last best place...home.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Resident Interview Guide

### History/Background

1. **How long have you been a resident?**
  1. Probe about other places they lived and positions
2. **Describe your role/responsibilities of your job/positions in town?**
  1. Probe about their positions if unclear
3. **General Trends/Changes since you've been here.**
  1. Probe for further clarification, good or bad changes, etc.
4. **How is tourism helping enhance the character?**
  1. Probe
5. **How is tourism hurting the local character?**
  1. Probe

### What does this photo mean to you?

#### Image #1 (same for each image)

Notes:

Meanings:

Threats:

Opportunities:

#### Video 1 (same for each video)

Notes:

Meanings:  
 Threats:  
 Opportunities:

**Anything you missed?**

**If (White Sulphur Springs or Whitefish) lost something that would be an indication of a significant loss of character, what would that look like?**

**In summary, how would you describe the character of WSS?**

- **Positive, negative, or somewhere in between?**

## Appendix B: Resident responses to “If your place lost something that would be a reflection of a major loss of character, what would that look like?”

### Whitefish Resident Responses – “If Your Place Lost Something...”

Name	Response
<b>Kevin</b>	I don't know that there's any one thing. I mean, there's the access to wild places. That's huge for me. The community of people that live here; that's huge for me. So, yeah, if we lost – like if you put the city of Whitefish in the middle of Kansas, I probably wouldn't want to live there. But if you put a smaller version of kind of hoity-toity Aspen, Colorado here, like maybe I wouldn't want to live here. So those kind of qualities, all of them, add to a good place. I don't know if I can pick one that I wouldn't – that would really affect it.
<b>Holly</b>	I think if we allowed our central core to be invaded by corporate businesses then we're in trouble.
<b>Mitchell</b>	I think if we lost those people that are working their ass off. I think if you lost that – especially the younger – there's a lot of 20 somethings working living in Whitefish that are really, really working. They're (inaudible), they're bar tenders, they're waiters, they're – then they stock shelves at night. I mean, I think if we lost that and we went truly to that Vail atmosphere where – you hear it in Vail, the locals and our townies and then you had the rich. I think if we got to that point, then, yeah, I don't want to get it to – you haven't heard that yet. You do hear some people say about locals. But you haven't gotten so bad now that it's just purely them against us...To me, because that's what it's always been. I mean, it was a scrappy little town to begin with. It was the railroaders that built that town, loggers, they're a bunch of scrappy hardworking people and it progressed from them. It was just a bunch of people that were working, and it was that way all the way up until the end of the '80s and '90s until it is where it is now. It's always been that class of people that were working their 3 jobs. To me, if we lost that, I do think that we would finally step over that threshold and we would be no longer that

	small town and we'd be that resort instead.
<b>Victor</b>	Well, you know, it sort of gets into the geotourism thing...It's like, we don't like to think of ourselves as a resort community. This is a real community with real families. This is just a great quality place to live. We don't want to be seen primarily as a tourist community, but you walk downtown Whitefish and there's a lot of art galleries and foo-foo stuff and Nelson's is the anchor against that. So this is still a place where just a good old hardware store where you know everybody that's in there and you can get whatever you need and it would be devastating to this community if we lost Nelson's because it's one of the last things we have left.
<b>Cynthia</b>	I think the biggest thing would be the loss of the people that live and work here. It's the people that make all of the amenities great, ensure we have great amenities, keep our downtown vibrant, preserve our water quality, are super involved in the community through nonprofit organizations or city boards/committees, etc. I think if all the good people that live here couldn't afford to live in Whitefish anymore and maybe lived in Columbia Falls or Kalispell – going to the grocery store would be an entirely different experience, shopping in/eating at our locally owned businesses would be a different experience and all the impressive work done by locals probably wouldn't happen (or it would have an entirely different feel).  Affordable housing is the key ...
<b>Justin</b>	Well, I always worry about the lake. We have all these big homes and big grassy lawns and a lot of water quality has changed over the years and it's always the other guy that's the cause, and we just really need to pay attention to the landscape and how we're using the land. If we lose the water quality here, it would be a huge impact on this town, because nobody is going to want to live there and nobody's going to want to buy or sell property or – it would be devastating if we really did something – or if we had an oil spill or anything. So that worries me.
<b>Alexis</b>	You could probably go to the Northern -- Great Northern Bar, the Northern Bar and see all the old farts and talk to them. They'd be great, they're great there. You go to Casey's or – yeah, Casey's Bar completely different people and economic things --well, I shouldn't say that because there's some old timers that you know just been around here so much and they still go to the Northern and drink and they're regulars, they're gonna go there every day when that's gone, that's gonna be an indicator. So when those old guys are gone.
<b>Roy</b>	The people. Whitefish is at a turning point in the cost of living. The city needs to decide from a zoning and investment standpoint if it wants to put efforts into creating affordable housing or if it wants to continue to become more and more expensive and ultimately become a location that is too expensive for the people that make it so great. Columbia Falls and Kalispell are much more affordable and offer lower costs of living for the working class of Whitefish. If we want soccer coaches, active PTA parents and the local bartender to still live down the street we need to invest in our community and the cost of living. If this effort isn't pursued we'll end up with neighborhoods full of second homes and VRBO rentals and the folks that make the community will take that character to Columbia Falls and Kalispell.
<b>Sarah</b>	First I would say it would be Big Mountain. Second = Whitefish Lake, Third, = the railroad...referring to the historic nature of having a train run through the area with a

	historic depot.
<b>Joe</b>	I think it would be the loss of its small town character. Even though we are a resort/tourist economy, we still function as a small Montana community.
<b>Nick</b>	I think if Whitefish Mountain Ski Resort were to stop getting snow completely, it would be devastating to the local economy and the town of Whitefish. Tourism is a major pull in this town, and the ski resort is a large part of that draw [at least in the Winter months]. I think the town would become along the lines of a forgotten Western Town, think Philipsburg-ish. With environmental climate change looming, I also feel that is a real threat to the economy and lifestyles of many people that live in Whitefish. Our town is emerged in the skier mentality, from a huge influx of seasonal workers in the winter, to the visiting ski bums from all over the US, the resort pulls in a large population of people that the area would otherwise not attract.
<b>Joan</b>	Well definitely if the powers to be closed off Central [avenue], that would be a huge -- the beginning of the end. I'll fight it down to my tooth and nail.
<b>Rachael</b>	I think one of the things that makes the town very cool and different from maybe some other resort towns is how egalitarian it is. How the millionaire and the railroad worker all go to the same bar. And I think that's a really neat thing about this town. And I think if we lost that, I think more so than the -- I mean, the outdoor stuff clearly. But I think one of the things that makes Whitefish different than Aspen or Jackson or any of those places, is that there's this kind of egalitarian nature to the town and I would hate to see it lose that.
<b>Deb</b>	<p>A huge aspect of the character of town is the generosity of residents (especially a few in particular) towards local non-profits (including the trail system, local theatre groups, conservation groups, etc., that all serve both local residents and visitors). If that funding went away, and non-profits started folding, that would also be a huge loss to the community.</p> <p>Also, Central Ave is key to the character of Whitefish. If a huge economic crisis hit and many of the downtown businesses were to close leaving empty storefronts, that would affect the character. Fortunately, Whitefish has withstood those downturns so far!</p>

### White Sulphur Springs Resident Responses – “If Your Place Lost Something...”

Name	Response
<b>Patricia</b>	I probably would have to say the spa. If we lost that. Yeah.
<b>Linda</b>	I think if the State of Montana were to deny access to our public lands and our rivers and streams, I think that our character would fall a lot. I think that's one contributing factor. There are so many different components of this area that I just believe that the access issue would be a big deal. That's a hard question.
<b>Barbara</b>	I was listening to a conversation that I was brought in on an older gentleman in our community telling someone who was moving here to practice law for a while that this community is a little bit clannish and tribal. And I was instantly angry. I was just like, No, we're not. That's not who we are. But the more I thought about it over the years since then, I think we are. I think we are in the fact that we might fight internally and disagree internally, but if there's ever an outside force that were to say something, everyone stands very strong together, almost like a family.

	If we were to lose that sense of community and family, I think that would be a bad indicator.
<b>Elizabeth</b>	I think we lose our ability to care for each other and we get indifferent to our neighbors...We stop checking in on our elderly and we quit mowing their lawns and we quit bringing them groceries and we don't help our kids, baseball teams. When we quit volunteering to help each other, that's our biggest death now because we're so small.
<b>Mark</b>	Probably a combination of our full service garages and all the businesses in town who have accounts for locals. Not many grocery or parts stores you can find anymore where you can run a tab!
<b>Maria</b>	If we're talking about losing something...having less tourists and less people here, it will definitely hurt the town. I mean, it's still going to be a strong community, but I think it will probably hurt – maybe the good side of town. I mean, there's just not going to be much going on and people will try to leave and I would hate to see this great little town die. But if we're talking about more traffic, more people, more tourism coming through, on the other hand, the town will prosper and it will bring more people. But on the other hand, somehow it will lose its small town character. There will be more people coming into this small family and it's just going to – I mean, eventually probably some of them will probably be part of the town but it's just going to take a while, and you know how people are, maybe someone will not be accepted. Whatever happens it will change the character but it's the matter of time, I guess, to see whether it's going to be a good or bad change.
<b>Susan</b>	The spa. The hot springs. Because White Sulphur Springs is even named after that. It's the Sulphur spring, it's what makes the town, so to speak. It really is. Whether really some people don't appreciate that, they don't see – especially those locals that think that we are just doing too good, you know what, no. That's what makes the town special. I'm an outsider. I know I'm a local now but I look at it as an outsider.
<b>Brian</b>	The spa. I don't know. In terms of like tourism and stuff like that, the spa goes back a long, long ways.
<b>Michelle</b>	If the mine opens and there's constant truck traffic on 12 so that it's hard to cross the street and they build a lot of fast food restaurants and residential housing, condo-type stuff, and the number of new people in the area overwhelms the ability of the community to absorb it, it could easily happen. White Sulphur would become just another American town and would no longer be the cowboy town that it is...But, yeah, if White Sulphur grows too quickly and in response to the mine, which is not ranching, I think that would definitely impact the culture. It might be in a bad way or it might be in a good way. I know North Dakota and Northeastern Montana, a lot of towns have had problems with increases in crime and just the town becomes so much more anonymous, there's a lot more human on human crime and a lot of difficulty in expanding their law enforcement in a way that stays on the positive side. That's one thing that Meagher County really has that is so rare these days, it's like having an isolation status school. Our sheriff's department really are community servants. And they're people that you know and that you can talk to you, and the undersheriff also has a contracting business that puts steel roofs on houses. I mean, they're real people. And if law enforcement



	<p>changed here, it would change the whole character of the place as a place to live.</p>
<b>George</b>	<p>That would look like the ranches giving it up. That would look like the, for me, because that's what I had seen in the other valleys. It would – you know giving up the rural. Giving up – I mean for me and as an example, so when we come in towards White Sulphur at night time, how I monitor growth is how far do the lights go out? When we first moved in here, White Sulphur was just a few little twinkly lights all together. Now its goes out further. That means already ranches have given an acre whether it's to a family member or whatever, it's still another house there. It's still land, and the land is gone. So more houses being built here. And for me it's gonna be, I think buildings that are gonna obscure my view of the mountains.</p>
<b>Helen</b>	<p>I think somewhere along the line many of us have lost pride, and I think if you don't have any pride in what you're doing, why do a good job? Nobody is going to notice. Nobody cares if you paint your fence. Nobody cares if you put that board back. But you look around and there are little spots in White Sulphur where people care and kind of go, wow, look at that. I drive around town and, oh, what a great yard. Oh, they fixed that all up. That's really great. Progress. Progress. I see that. I don't know, hopefully we can get that back. We've got to have pride in our town. If you don't have pride, as I said, you don't care.</p>
<b>Sharon</b>	<p>If we lost something like even like the Smith River floating and the festival or something like that, you know, I don't know if we lost those two things if we would really even notice that there was much different. Some of the businesses would maybe notice a difference, but a majority of us . . . I made a comment to my husband last year when Red Ants Pants was here and except for that night of the street dance, during the day and the evening you would never guess there was 10,000 people two miles away. Driving up the streets, they looked just like they did any other time of the year in the summer. The Smith River people. Like I said they maybe go to the motels and maybe restaurant and maybe get gas probably but other than that, they are . . . we are just a place to pass through and get last minute supplies or whatever. So in that sense. But I think that if . . . let's say they move the highway to where it did not go through White Sulphur, now that would hurt the character because it would . . . I think without making people come and stop here we would definitely eventually dwindle and people would have to go other places to make a living. So, I think as long as things are kind of still staying the same as far as events and this and that, I think that we'll survive as a small community but we might not go forward and we might not go backwards. We might kind of just stay the same, which isn't really a very good spot...</p>
<b>Charles</b>	<p>Branding. Like ranching, branding and shipping parties for ranchers. And Red Ants Pants and Bar 47. That's what I would miss about White Sulphur if they were gone...But the out of towners definitely. I would say just the influx of people moving in, the same thing that is helping the town, it will also be the thing that sort of rubs out some of that that – hang on a second – oh so my friend, she says that the biggest threat to the town was the hospital almost closing because we're 120 miles from any town... I mean we would turn into a ghost town because people couldn't live here because they couldn't be so far from medical services.</p>
<b>Kristin</b>	<p>If that were the case, if you're talking that, what that speaks of what we are, I</p>

	<p>would have to say the Labor Day event would probably be the – although that music festival is really catching up quick. That’s getting to be a really, really big event. We didn’t even touch on that. That was something we didn’t even think about. I mean, she brings 3 times the population of town or 4 times the population of town to our area for 4 days. Would we survive without it? Yeah. Would it change our character? Sure, it would. Either one of those events would change who we are. Although, it would be harder to replace the festival than it would to replace the rodeo...I think if you wanted to look at it from a tourism point of view, we have 2 things, but what made this town what it is, is the spa.</p>
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**Appendix C: Visitor and resident responses to “In a word or two or a sentence or two, how would you describe the character of Whitefish/White Sulphur Springs?”**

**Whitefish Visitor Responses - Character of Place Definitions**

Name	Response
James	<p>I thought Whitefish was charming and a perfect get away. It had a great mix of local eateries and boutiques/outdoor shopping opportunities. To my wife and I it was the perfect launch site for our bike vacation in Glacier National Park. I only wish I had time to go fishing!</p>
Jason	<p>I like when you said, okay, from my perspective of destination fisheries, let’s – I think – and I alluded to this earlier – of all the destination fisheries I’ve gone to – and that is what brought me there – it is absolutely No. 1 without question. I don’t know who I would give No. 2 to. No. 1, Whitefish, Montana for the ability for me to include my wife on the trip and have her be very enamored with the trip and not bored. Even when I took her to Louisiana, we had to stay a long ways from the – so I could keep my buddy and took our wives – we couldn’t stay right where we wanted to fish, because there’s nothing there for gals to do...I could keep on going. British Columbia, when I get to the Campbell River, there’s really nothing for my wife to do. So this place, I went, okay, I will be here every year from now on because I can bring my wife, she will want to come back.</p>
Daniel	<p>I would say that it’s friendly and relaxed and very well – it seems fairly sophisticated in sort of establishing itself as a place for visitors. A variety of people who are real outdoors people as well as, you know, there’s shopping and there’s entertainment.</p>
Stephanie	<p>Quaint and characteristic.</p>
Michael	<p>Let’s see, how can I do this right? Okay. If I was portraying Whitefish in words, I would say wild west meets granola man and grizzly bears.</p>
Felicia	<p>I think it’s a real slice of the mountain west. And it really encompasses a lot of what you think about so you still have the cowboys and the ranchers driving around with the dogs in their truck and yet you have the berry picking and you have the lake and you have the mountains and you have tourism at your doorstep.</p>

	And so what doesn't it encompass? You have biking, you have hiking, you have..I made more friends there in the 3 months I was there than I have in the 3 years I've lived in Florida.
<b>Betty</b>	Let's see. Picturesque for sure. You know diverse geography, you know beautiful, diverse, natural, well geography is natural, but geography. You know it's really cool how you could be up on the top of the mountain like you said and look down over you know the lake and the flat all that flat land. Even flying over the mountains was really cool because I had never actually seen I guess the mountain ranges like maybe relative small compared to others I guess. I haven't looked at it on a map, but you know flying over it, I could see all this flat land and then boom these mountains are all of a sudden jutting out of it and then boom the mountains stop and it's all this flat land again. I thought that was that was just something I had never seen before and I thought that interesting and noteworthy and it was nice. Another thing I noticed, we met a lot of people who lived there who had grown up there and then moved away for one reason or another and then moved back and stayed. You know they just loved it so much and part of what they all seemed to have common was that love for nature. They loved to fish and hike and ski and take advantage of all of these great outdoor activities.

### - Whitefish Resident Responses - Character of Place Definitions

Name	Response
<b>Jordan</b>	I would say vibrant, passionate and loyal to supporting their own, and on the whole appreciative of the wilderness and the nature that surrounds them.
<b>Kevin</b>	Young, motivated, vibrant people who share the same outdoor values...Yeah, I think upholding values – upholding similar values in outdoor recreation and environmental values and political values. There is some diversity here that really adds to it. There are hardworking people here but there's also some really lazy people here that just want to ski. So I can't say either way about the character in that respect. I would say it all comes back to sharing the same values.
<b>Holly</b>	Whitefish is authentic in that it is real working people contributing to the success of their community.
<b>Mitchell</b>	Fun loving crazies. Even the snobs and the hardworking and the retirees, to me, they're there to have fun. That's why people move there. I mean, whether it be partying downtown, no matter what, people move there to have fun, and they still do it. You see people smiling downtown. A lot of them are nuts too. But it's fun. To me, even though it's not the same town I grew up in, it's still a fun loving place. People are still somewhat friendly, not like it used to be but no one is anymore, it's just the way the world is nowadays. It's still a fun loving place. Most of the people there, they're there to have fun, whether it's nightly debauchery or healthy lifestyle. There's still innocent fun about that town...So many different, obviously, varieties. It's an enjoyable, happy – plus you're working your tail off but even then, some people are having fun doing it. A lot of the kids, they'll say, yeah, I work 3 jobs but man I had a blast. I do see that still. It's hard not to go down to Whitefish and not see people smiling and whistling and yelling at people across the street. You don't see – you always get the drunks out of the fight. You'll always have that.

	<p style="text-align: center;">Even you have people having fun watching it.</p> <p>I'd say it's somewhere in between. I don't think it's overly positive. I definitely don't think it's negative. I do think – there is positive – character and attitudes of people in Whitefish, they're positive. They're there – I do think it's – like I said, it's a good place for people to raise their family. You don't hear as much negative as you do, let's say, in some of the smaller areas around the valley where people are complaining about this or complaining about that. Different complaining in Whitefish. People are complaining didn't snow enough last night or it rained so now I can't golf. It's a different – it's just a different set up.</p>
<b>Victor</b>	<p>Still a real town. With world-class amenities. And it's not -- I don't see us primarily as a resort town. I see it as sort of the resort aspects and tourist aspects is complimenting the real community and threatening to overwhelm it, but it hasn't. That's the continual challenge.</p>
<b>Cynthia</b>	<p>Small town, active, which could mean both physically and mentally. Community involved. Well educated. Community minded.</p>
<b>Justin</b>	<p>Well, I guess I always think of it as a mountain resort town and live a lot of kind of unique attributes and really great people. Since I've lived in this town, people come here, they just sense this thing where people say hello to you on the sidewalk. If you come from like Seattle or New York and you walk downtown and people say hi to you, they think there's something wrong. What's going on here? I just think it's a very friendly town, great place to live, and great place for your kids to grow up. I'm just pretty lucky that I landed here and my kids grew up here. I don't think I'll ever live anywhere else. It's always going to be home to me. My mother could never understand why I lived up here, but I just can't imagine living anywhere else.</p>
<b>Alexis</b>	<p>I'm tainted. You know, ten years ago I would have said out west this is the last best place, that it was fun, you know, to be. Oh, yeah, Whitefish is a fun place to be. Now, I would -- I can't -- I don't know. I think in a flux, a flux, I don't think it's -- it's not as easy to find now. To see it. I think it's still -- it's chaos right now, maybe that's the word chaos. And sometimes you know if, as things are in chaos there, it works, things work and it's all good but I kind of don't know where it's headed now.</p>
<b>Roy</b>	<p>I'd say just in general it's an authentic mountain town. It was – it's full of people that genuinely want to live here and enjoy being who they are here. Whether that is someone who works in the travel and tourism industry or whether its someone who works at Plum Creek or Stoltz or, you know, as a fireman or firefighter or whatever, you know, people live here because they want to be here. And they are genuinely invested in the quality of life in town. It's a very involved community. I'm always amazed at like how much people are involved in causes...</p>
<b>Sarah</b>	<p>I would say it's a vibrant, family-centered healthy environment...I would say it's much closer to positive. I mean, there's so many good things here. Would I move because there's some aspects that I don't like? I haven't done so, so far. I think when you compare it to a lot of places it's – people love it here. They love the lifestyle. They love beauty. They love the seasons. They don't mind the snow. People live here because they want to, not because they have to. Where you go to</p>

	like Cleveland, people have to live in Cleveland.
<b>Joe</b>	Well, I guess I would say resort with still that Montana feel, Montana community hometown feel. I do once in a while need to remind myself that this is a resort community. A lot of people say, we're not a resort. Well, we are too. Look around you. But I don't wake up every day and think about that, because it's still home to me. It's a great place to live. We've made a lot of good friends here and really enjoy living here, not because it's a resort, it's just a great little town. So once in a while I have to remind myself it's a resort.
<b>Nick</b>	I would say lively and vibrant. There's a lot of tourists. So you never know if you're talking to somebody from someplace, if they're a tourist or if they're a local.
<b>Joan</b>	Whitefish is still Whitefish, it's a scrappy little town and it's very proud of itself and it's a survivor, it's a surviving town. I think it will continue to be a very special place.
<b>Rachael</b>	I guess uniquely normal. I think for a resort town it's really normal. People are down to earth and pretty – yeah, just down to earth and good hardworking people, which I think – well, maybe it's not unique. Maybe every resort town is like that. But this town doesn't seem like that. This town doesn't seem like every other resort town. It seems more down to earth for some reason. And I think that's cool...We live in a very unique place. I mean, there are very few places, if any, in America like this. And, yet, the people of this town are very much like the people I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They're just normal, nice people. And, yet, they live in this extraordinary place, and I think that's a neat mix.
<b>Deb</b>	I would say inviting mountain town focused on the good life.

### White Sulphur Springs Visitor Responses - Character of Place Definitions

Name	Response
<b>Sandra</b>	Nosy. Everyone in town knows everybody's business.
<b>Ruth</b>	I would say that going to White Sulphur Springs is a bit of a step back in time. And it's nice to go back in time. It's nice to see that a small clean little town is still kind of holding on to what made it special back in the day. You know, you feel safe there. I felt safe there. I felt that they moved at a slower pace, which is possibly healthier, right? They're not all running around on their cell phones. I thought it was interesting when I went to the county fair, the Richland County Fair over in Sidney, I didn't see any adults looking at cell phones. And very few teenagers looking at cell phones. Everyone at that county fair was having a great time. They were totally engaged in the people they were with, they were happy, they were laughing, and I think it's a big deal to go to the county fair. And I thought, okay, you would never see this where I live. Everybody's heads were tipped down looking at cell phones. And I didn't see that in White Sulphur. When I walked into Dory's Café, everyone's having conversations. No one is looking at cell phones. So I do think it's a throwback in time and I think it's cool. And I think that if you were to live there or visit there, you would have to slow your pace a little bit to adjust to it.
<b>Paul</b>	The character of White Sulphur and Red Ants is old school Montana but it's like a



	new age wave of acceptance and community.
<b>Ronald</b>	I think rugged, community. I think caring. I just think people, like I said, I mean, they just care about one another because everyone knows each other so it's – to me, it's all about the community. Really, that's what it comes down to. The community and then probably secondly is landscape. When I think about White Sulphur Springs' character, I think about that kind of like rugged, cowboy that is driving that 4-wheeler that gave me like a little otter pop. That's a pretty good image, you know. It's this very kind of rugged exterior with a really like friendly, kind interior. That's probably the best way to describe that.
<b>Laura</b>	It's definitely a small town. It's definitely not – it kind of has this old vibe to it with an old hot springs around and I think a lot of the same families that are there have been there for generations. But definitely has a lot of traditional small town flavor, specifically true of small town Montana flavor. And I think for this even especially it seems like the town really embraces it and takes advantage of its big opportunity to shine. I think it's a great place. I had a wonderful time.
<b>Anthony</b>	Well, rural Montana cowboy town. Not a – there's not a lot happening there. But it's a – I don't think I would go stay in White Sulphur if I wasn't for fishing. I wouldn't just – unless I was passing through, you know, I would not make it an end destination White Sulphur right now. But the fact of the fishing and there's a nice clean motel there. I haven't stayed at anyone but the All Seasons. It's a great spot. It's fun being out in a place that's authentic. It's sort of dirty and a little run down and dusty but it's authentic. It's got character. It's genuine. It's real. That – there's a big sort of schism that's happening in America, you know, with the east and the west coast, more liberal, much more densely populated. Everybody's worried about everybody else's rights and understanding and, you know, whether or not you're some gender confused person. Granted, you know, they all have their issues and stuff, but there's something genuine about Montana, something real. You're growing things, you're making things. It's – it gets you away from the wackiness of California and all of its people and all of its problems and all of its silliness. One of these days, who knows, I might move to Bozeman. Get out of here and leave California to itself. But just getting up, you know, getting fishing in Livingston and White Sulphur area is one of my literally favorite things I do every year.
<b>Lindsay</b>	I would say it's a sweet, well-preserved Montana town that really exemplifies the culture of Montana.
<b>Chris</b>	I think it's small town ranching community. In high school I always thought it was kind of back woodsy. But now – but it also has a little bit of flavor of recreationist with the Smith River. And that's fine. Like I think that's cool. It has its own thing...But as far as recreation, it's not like the – since I've lived near Ennis, it's not necessarily the yuppiest recreationalist. It's sort of a little bit more middle class. It's accessible.
<b>Monica</b>	I would say it's what I consider so reminiscent of the west with the open plains and the farming and very neighborly because you need to be helping each other since there's just not a lot of choices about what's out there. So I would say it's very neighborly...I would say it's extremely positive. Very positive. Yeah, you get a vibe of peaceful and happy. I'll tell you what, after I was out west, I wondered why

	anybody would even want to live in New York and all the honking and just constant barrage to your senses. Why would anybody want – if everybody came to Montana and saw that, they would have such a different view of life because – I haven't been to New York that often but it's just so different. It makes you insane.
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## White Sulphur Springs Resident Responses - Character of Place Definitions

Name	Response
<b>Linda</b>	I would say that it's a very friendly community where people work together and play together and support the youth and the senior citizens and take care of each other.
<b>Barbara</b>	I would say that we are a colorful cast of characters. And by "we," I even include myself in that. That could probably be like a cast of characters on Seinfeld or Green Acres – no, we're eclectic. But I love that about us. And I don't want that to change. [So the character of White Sulphur is in large part made up by the people?] Correct. And the diversity of the people and also the direct connection to the land...And the other thing maybe about our place – let me think about this a little further – I guess maybe it just comes down to a place that I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Maybe for a few months in the winter when it's super cold.
<b>Elizabeth</b>	I would say White Sulphur is a community at risk that still cares deeply for their community and for their future.
<b>Mark</b>	I would say it is a very traditional genuine Montana rural community, good people and good hearts and strong work ethic and a beautiful place to live and play in Montana.
<b>Maria</b>	I would just call it a beautiful small community because, you know, with all the minuses that I was talking about, I think it's a very welcoming – it's beautiful, not just like the people but just the landscape and everything. I think it's very welcoming community, which needs to – I just feel like it needs see more – it needs to be open more. I don't know...you are going to be welcomed here no matter what, but you're just going to be an outsider. Does that make sense?...I mean they're going to be nice to you and eventually you may become a part of the town. Again, I'm just talking about people because people who form the town. Since I've been here for 4 years, and I am pretty sure a lot of people just love me, but I still feel like I'm not part of it. I'm an outsider. It's not necessarily a bad thing.
<b>Susan</b>	Can be promising...It's promising in the sense that if there are – right now people are not very open minded, some of them, but promising to the point that if there are new ideas, new – energized people, come up with something, the town can be promising, because there's already the hot springs, that's the foundation there, and the wildlife. Hunting season. Hunting is a good in this and neighboring towns. So White Sulphur Springs is a very promising town that if new things brought in here, new people live here or something like that, then it could be good. It could turn out really good.
<b>Brian</b>	Rural Montana at its best.
<b>Michelle</b>	White Sulphur is a somewhat depressed little cowboy town with a lot of very lovable people in it.
<b>George</b>	I'm not sure because I think depending on what day, or what mood you catch me

	<p>in, you know what struggles I had gone through during the day, a word that comes to mind is delinquent. Because when I think of delinquent, I think of a person a young person who is not considerate of others. Who is selfish and hostile, and rebellious. But when you think of delinquent, at least I do from having a teaching background, I always think of well there's hope. You know, there's hope that it'll turn around. [So how is that hope part of the character?] Because whether you know driving around or where there'll be some change and you know I'll notice like somebody has cleaned up their yard or a business has painted or swept. You know just something to clean it up. That just brings a smile to my face. It's like YAY! You know I'm so happy they did that or that looks so nice and or when the Seredays bought Castle, you know the old Edwards Grocery Store, they changed it to Castle Mountain Groceries. That's so exciting because it means that they're putting their hope in this town too. And so I get yeah I guess hope will definitely have to be in there...</p> <p>The people make the community. And you know when you think of like Bozeman, they have what they have because people are out there making it happen. And so really when you start like some of these retired people or the people that are living you know, you start asking them what they do or what their talents are. It's like we have a lot of knowledge and talent in this community. And it's so underutilized.</p>
<b>Helen</b>	<p>Eclectic. [How so?] Well, you've got a little bit of everything. The good, the bad, and the ugly. And we're working with it and hopefully we're going to turn out really good with all those people helping... We need to energize people and we need people with energy and ideas. I think ideas is what we need. I don't think I'm an idea person, really, but I sure will jump in there and work for something if I think it's great.</p>
<b>Sharon</b>	<p>I would probably have to say that we are friendly and welcoming, we care about our neighbors, we want the best for us.</p>
<b>Charles</b>	<p>Genuine, authentic, hard-working, fun.</p>
<b>Kristin</b>	<p>It's a want-a-be town stuck in the past. How about add: Stuck in the past looking to the future. And I think that really speaks it a lot because there's a dynamic here that wants to move but can't. Does that make sense? That whole dynamic we talked about, that whole thing really wants to move to the right. And at the same time, protect the heritage. [And the I want to move but can't, that's primarily the financial?] Economic, yeah. Absolutely. That's how I feel. That's where I'm at. I've got \$200 in water bills due tomorrow, and I have no idea where the money is coming from. But it will come. Or I will pay the late fee. [What about the want-a-be part?] I feel like more than not the people would like to be back to going back to where we were pre lumber, pre mill closing...</p>