

# Virginia City and Nevada City Historic Site Development Plan

## Introduction

The once quiet and somewhat remote historic mining towns nestled in Southwest Montana are now faced with the challenge of planning for growth. The Montana Heritage Commission, Virginia City and Madison County are now charged with adapting to this change. In addition to maintaining the town's historic buildings, collections and numerous land assets, the opportunity now exists to further capitalize on the local tourism-based economy. This collaborative Historic Site Development Planning process has been formulated to assist in advancing local business interests while protecting the State's historic assets as an integrated and sustainable destination.

The Virginia City and Nevada City Historic Site Development Planning Process will provide guidelines and recommendations for the area's future growth while preserving these State-owned treasures. Virginia City is a vibrant community and the County seat for Madison County. Nevada City is an open-air museum with an active living history educational program. Together, these two places attract thousands of visitors each year and provide extensive educational opportunities for K-12 and University-level students. The Historic Site Development Plan will create a framework that will allow the Montana Heritage Commission, Madison County and the Town of Virginia City to accomplish the following four main goals:

- 1) **To identify the projects and site improvements needed to “strengthen the visitor experience” and other program goals.**
- 2) **To expand our educational programs to diversify the use and economic potential of the historic sites**
- 3) **To improve the overall use and public benefits of the sites by protecting Montana's historic assets**
- 4) **To capitalize on the above three goals toward creating a “3-season destination” that will ensure a vibrant local economy and protect the value of the State's assets.**

The following lists the initial Opportunities and Constraints that were compiled during the first open house meetings which were held in February of 2008. A variety of governing agencies, business owners and local residents participated.

## Site Development Opportunities

- 1) **Visitor Information Kiosks** – An opportunity exists to create small visitor information kiosks at both ends of Virginia City and at the entry to Nevada City. By providing these simple information stations visitors will be much better orientated to the town's historic attractions, businesses and overnight accommodations. The kiosks can be placed outside in small parks and may have public restroom facilities adjacent to adequate parking with proper directional signage.
- 2) **Signage Master Plan** – Both Virginia City and Nevada City are in need of a directional signage plan. The opportunity exists to assist visitors in finding car and RV parking spaces, historic attractions, businesses, public parks, and other off Main Street attractions.

- 3) **Gilbert Brewery Park** – An opportunity exists to create an outdoor park-like gathering space near the old brewery. This will serve as the major multi-use outdoor gathering space for events on the east end of town
- 4) **Depot Park** –An opportunity exists to create an outdoor park-like gathering area near the train depot with adequate parking, restrooms and pedestrian spaces. This could serve as the major multi-use outdoor gathering space on the west side of town. It could possibly house an outdoor stage for concert venues and educational programs. In addition, an opportunity exists to create a nice park atmosphere at the northerly end of the train route near Nevada City. This would most likely be a smaller park, but create an inviting atmosphere for visitors.
- 5) **Trail and Train Corridor** – An opportunity exists to formalize the easements for the trail and train route between Virginia City and Nevada City. The trail could be developed for multi-use with interpretive signage, rest areas and other park like amenities.
- 6) **Small Seating Areas** – Several opportunities exist to create small ADA compliant seating areas between historic buildings in both Virginia City and Nevada City. This will greatly enhance the pedestrian visitor experience and will often keep the visitor at the various attractions and businesses for a longer time period. In addition, consideration of ADA accessible restrooms should be considered at centralized locations.
- 7) **Storm Water Management** – Many exterior spaces near buildings and roads currently pond water and snow in both Virginia City and Nevada City. This is due to the lack of proper site planning; and the elevations of the MDOT maintained highway. In Virginia City the road is higher in elevation than the sidewalk which creates an overall lack of surface flow. In addition, few storm inlets exist to handle the seasonal snows and rains. This lack of positive drainage exacerbates the deterioration of the wood on the lower portions of the historic buildings. A great opportunity exists to remedy this situation.
- 8) **Town Entry Corridors** – Opportunities exist to improve and protect the visitor’s perception of the area’s scenic qualities as they approach the Towns. This may be accomplished through landscape screening of unsightly built elements, protective zoning, design standards and open space preservation. In addition, the existing run-away truck ramp should be improved as a safety measure to the Town.
- 9) **Visitor Parking** – Several Opportunities exist to develop and organize parking areas for visitors. This is especially true in areas such as the Depot and adjacent park area, entry points into Virginia City and the parking area for Nevada City. A great opportunity exists to better organize the Nevada City parking, and to create a pedestrian safe zone for crossing the highway through traffic calming in association with MDT.

### Building Development Opportunities

- 1) **Visitor Center** – While the historic buildings and collections of both Virginia City and Nevada City are extensive, the existing visitor interpretation and educational opportunities are limited and could greatly be enhanced by a new visitor center in a readily accessible location. This could be one new centralized facility, or two separate facilities with one being for Nevada City and one being for Virginia City.
- 2) **Gas Station** – The Town currently lacks a gas station which is fundamental to visitor convenience and experience. An opportunity exists to develop a small gas station in a historically viable fashion as opposed to the standard “Town Pump” commercial approach which would degrade the historic integrity of the Town.

- 3) **Grocery/Market** – The Town currently lacks any type of grocery store or general supplies for the visitor or resident. An opportunity exists to develop a small grocery or convenience store in a historically viable fashion.
- 4) **Modern Visitor Accommodations** – The number of visitor motel rooms with modern restrooms and bedding is limited. This severely limits the amount of time that the majority of visitors will spend in Town to see the historic attractions, eat and shop at local business establishments. Currently the majority of visitors are drive by in nature and stay for a relatively short time period. An opportunity exists to expand the visitation time and season through creation of more modern overnight accommodations.
- 5) **Employee Housing** – The Montana Heritage Commission and many local businesses are constrained by a limited amount of appropriate employee housing. Several opportunities exist for expanding employee housing including rehabilitation of existing historic structures, creation of a RV Park and building of new facilities that will blend with the historic architecture of the towns.
- 6) **Storage Facilities** – A great deal of the Virginia City & Nevada City Collections are currently housed within historic structures. This creates conflict for restoration of buildings and does not adequately protect the collections; therefore, an opportunity exists to create adequate on and off site storage for the various collections.

### Management Opportunities

- 1) **Categorizes the Montana Heritage Commission Properties** – An opportunity exists to develop a management plan that will categorize MHC properties into categories such as: 1) Preserve and Rehab, 2) Sell for Private Preservation, 3) Demolish, 4) Develop for Storage, 5) Develop for Lodging, 6) Develop for Parking, 7) Maintain as open space as a significant cultural landscape.
- 2) **County and City Growth Policies** – An opportunity exists to better utilize and expand upon the existing Virginia City town growth polices. This will assist in preserving the historic and visual integrity of the area.
- 3) **Farmers Market** – An opportunity exists to promote an Outdoor Farmer’s Market as a tourism attraction. In addition, this will assist in providing a sustainable supply of locally grown foods for local residents.
- 4) **Window Viewing** – As historic preservation efforts move forward, an opportunity exists to create additional historic interpretation venues for visitors by creating more public access and interpretation within the window displays in the historic buildings.
- 5) **Arts and Trades** – An opportunity exists to promote Virginia City and Nevada City as a center for the arts including a variety of galleries and hands-on crafts and historic trades.
- 6) **Housing** – While housing is often built on private lands, an opportunity exists to best direct where new housing will occur to best protect the historical integrity of the Virginia City and Nevada City Entry Corridors.

### Constraints

- 1) **Utilities and Infrastructure** – The Town of Virginia City is currently somewhat constrained due to the existing underground utility network. The most notice constraint is the water pressure while the steam engine train is being filled in the summer season. As historic facilities, new facilities and undeveloped subdivided

- lands are brought on line the Town will have to address the water quantity and pressure issue.
- 2) **Government Regulation of Existing Policy and Codes** – While Virginia City has fairly adequate regulations in place, the implementation of the regulations has been inconsistent. Without consistency in regulatory control, it will be very difficult for private development and cooperation efforts to occur. Currently Nevada City is located in Madison County which is an unincorporated area with no zoning and little regulatory control. Without some regulatory control of surrounding properties the long-term protection of Nevada City’s historical integrity will be difficult.
  - 3) **Annexation of Lands into the City** – To date this has not been possible due to lack of infrastructure and public opinion. Without annexation or adequate County regulations, protection of the entry corridors to the historic VC/NC area will be difficult.
  - 4) **Possible Private Development** – Due to the lack of County zoning, almost any type of industrial, agricultural, commercial or residential development could occur along the outlying areas of Virginia City and Nevada City. This type of uncontrolled development has often surrounded historic towns and tourism-rich areas. This uncontrolled development often degraded the historical integrity of the attraction. In addition, these outlying developments typically compete with existing “in-town” business and make it more difficult for existing private business’ to prosper. Examples of fringe development potential includes: fast food restaurants, chain motels, convenient stores such as Town Pump, etc. and secondary tourism attractions such as water parks, gift shops and non-historic residential development.
  - 5) **ADA Compliance** – Many historic structures and exterior walkways do not comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. And, due to the nature of the historic structures and sites this will be very difficult to achieve without alterations that would hinder the historic integrity of the area.
  - 6) **Current Accommodations** – Very few “modern” overnight rooms exist for visitors which creates a situation in which the great majority of visitors do not stay overnight in Virginia City. They often leave and travel to another town. Without a good number of modern overnight accommodations a 3-season attraction will be impossible to accomplish.
  - 7) **MDT Snow Plowing Practices** – MDT currently plows snow up against historic structures. This makes preservation efforts increasingly difficult and 3-season tourism impossible.
  - 8) **Fire Fighting Plan Limitations** – While a fire fighting plan is in place it is a predominantly a volunteer effort and needs to be formalized and adequately funded for the safety of all structures and people. In addition, adequate water service should be provided for fire fighting.
  - 9) **Collection Ownership** – What is perceived to be MHC Properties and Collections are actually somewhat mixed with some privately owned collections. This creates a very difficult situation for MHC in regard to collection management, display, or rehabilitation of properties.
  - 10) **Train and Trail Connector** – The current train and trail paths cross multiple properties without clear ownership or easement documentation. This should be formalized to prevent future loss to train or trail access.