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NORTH HIGGINS STREETSCAPE PROJECT LAUNCHES

North Higgins Avenue begins its transformation this week.

Come this fall, North Higgins Avenue from Broadway to Circle Square at its north end will be easier and safer to use and more pleasing to look at. The improvements will include:

- Dedicated left-turn lanes for vehicles
- Protected bike lanes between the parked cars and the sidewalks on both sides of the street
- New pedestrian-scale, energy-efficient street lighting
- New street trees
- New pedestrian ramps at all the corners
- New landscaping
- A new street surface with durable new striping.

Construction will begin in earnest later in March. But this week, Mountain Water Company will begin replacement of the 65-year-old water main that runs from Pine to Alder streets. That work will begin at Pine Street and Higgins Avenue on Wednesday.

Missoula's Downtown Master Plan, approved unanimously by both the Consolidated Planning Board and the Missoula City Council, positioned the community to secure \$1.3 million in federal stimulus money (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) for the streetscape project. An additional \$200,000 is coming from the Montana State Legislature House Bill 645 funds, which is money freed up for projects when ARRA money came to the state.

The project will further cement North Higgins Avenue as the heart of the city and *the* destination for business, entertainment and prosperity.

“One of the ways we support economic development in the city of Missoula is by working with the community and with business to build great streets that invite people to enjoy all that our vibrant downtown has to offer,” said Mayor John Engen.

National figures show that every \$1 of public money invested brings \$7 to private local businesses, said Linda McCarthy, executive director of the Missoula Downtown Association. The public investment in downtown Missoula will attract private development and help the downtown flourish.

“Construction periods are never easy, but the end result will set the tone for what we want our downtown to look like,” McCarthy said. “It will give us the opportunity to see and use the protected bikeway, and it will improve the downtown environment and experience for all. I’m not sure we could have acquired the funding for this project if it weren’t for the Downtown Master Plan.”

During the work, construction will take place on only one side of the street at a time. It will start on the east side at Broadway and continue north behind the water main project. At least one lane of traffic in each direction will be open at all times, and parking will be provided on at least one side of the street. Sidewalks and access to businesses will remain open.

Especially during office hours throughout the construction, the Parking Commission encourages people to use Central Park, the parking structure at 128 W. Main St., where parking is low-cost and convenient. Parking on the streets is free after business hours and on the weekends.

Support for local downtown businesses from the Missoula public during the economic downturn has been heart-warming, said Kim Klages-Johns, owner of J Elaine’s Boutique women’s clothing store on North Higgins Avenue. She looks forward to the benefits the streetscape project will bring for the public.

“Come September, we will be enjoying this beautiful, pedestrian-friendly gift,” she said. “No one is even going to believe how spectacular it’s going to be.”

The apparent low bidder for the project is the local firm Western Excavating, pending state and federal approval for the awarding of the contract.

The project is scheduled to be completed in September.

Because of the completeness of this project, these three blocks of North Higgins Avenue should not require any construction for many years, said Ellen Buchanan, director of the Missoula Redevelopment Agency.

“This will be the most pedestrian-friendly street in Missoula, Montana,” she said.

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