

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

Mayor Barnhart called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL: Councilor King, Councilor Lovering, Councilor Piper, Councilor Robinson, Councilor Shepard via zoom and Mayor Barnhart. Absent: Councilor Price.

Also present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland and Police Chief Stephens.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

APPROVAL OF AGENDA: Councilor Piper made motion to approve the agenda, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried.

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor King motioned to approve the consent agenda, noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows: Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Robinson and Barnhart.

Approval of Claims - September 15, 2025 - \$146,446.83

Approval of Payroll Claims - September 12, 2025 - \$127,138.84

Approval of Regular Council Minutes - September 2, 2025

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Flathead County and the City of Columbia Falls re: Medical Direction for Law Enforcement Medical Response.

Typographical correction of Resolution # 1951

Surplus Recommendation - Parks 2006 Ford F-150

Request the Council approve the City Manager to apply for the FWP funded Montana Community-Bear Conflict Prevention Efforts Fund grant.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Grant Application Approval Notification from Montana Department of Transportation

Police Chief Stephens reported that the city has been notified by the Montana Department of Transportation that our application for funding a DUI officer has been approved in the amount of \$165,263. As you may recall, the city submitted this grant application in March for a full-time DUI officer, along with additional overtime funding for enhanced DUI enforcement, training, and equipment. The grant is supported by MDT through federal funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Once MDT receives the federal allocation, the city will be awarded the grant. Staff recommend approval of the grant and proceeding with acceptance upon confirmation of federal funding.

Councilor King made motion to approve the Grant Application Approval notification from Montana Department of Transportation, seconded by Councilor Lovering with Council voting as follows. Ayes: King, Lovering, Piper, Robinson, Shepard and Barnhart.

City Manager Hanks presented the Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Message to accompany the approved budget, which was included in the Council packet. The message outlines key milestones, opportunities, and challenges for the upcoming fiscal year. Hanks noted that he is available to answer any questions related to the budget

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

presentations over the past several months and the final compilation of the budget message to be submitted to the State.

The Hungry Horse News recently published a comprehensive article on the budget. A final packet containing all budget materials will be prepared, posted on the City's website, and then submitted to the State.

NEW BUSINESS:

Montana Land Use Planning Act – Update

City Manager Hanks provided an update on the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA) process, which replaces the City's Growth Policy with a Land Use Plan. The City's plan will be branded "Columbia Falls Ahead 2045," reflecting a 20-year outlook. Unless the Council objects, this branding will be used throughout the process.

Hanks reviewed the background: MLUPA was adopted in 2023 (Senate Bill 382) and amended in 2025, requiring ten Montana cities to adopt land use plans. The new terminology and requirements place greater emphasis on early and ongoing public participation, consistency between zoning, subdivision regulations, and growth planning, and periodic review every five years. Columbia Falls' current Growth Policy, updated in 2019, positions the City well for this transition.

He outlined progress made: the housing study has been completed and approved; water and wastewater preliminary engineering reports are underway; and an RFP for a land use planning consultant closes October 3, with interest already shown. The consultant will assist with data integration, public engagement, and development of the Land Use Plan and future land use map. Public participation will include surveys, workshops, and online materials posted on the City's website.

The wastewater review will focus on the collection system and lift stations, while the water review will assess demand forecasting, storage, and transmission, including aging infrastructure and the need for redundancy. Both studies will help identify critical projects to support future growth. All draft documents will be made available for public review on the City's website, which will also be upgraded in the coming months to better support this effort.

The housing study projects a 10-year need of 445–650 housing units, which extrapolates to roughly 890–1,300 units over 20 years. These targets will guide updates to zoning and subdivision regulations to ensure the community can accommodate projected growth and meet housing demand. He also referenced provisions of Senate Bill 382 requiring cities to adopt certain housing reforms.

In October, the city expects to select a land use planning consultant. In November or December, the City will host a public meeting focused on current conditions of utility infrastructure, followed by a second meeting in February to review recommendations for improvements. Public engagement activities including surveys, interviews, and workshops are expected to begin in December once the consultant is on board. A joint Council and Planning Commission workshop is planned for January 2026. From April through May, the focus will shift to finalizing the Land Use Plan and preparing for adoption.

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

Hanks stressed that while the Planning Commission will carry much of the responsibility for developing recommendations, joint work sessions with the Council are anticipated throughout the process. The statutory deadline for adoption is May 2026.

In response to a question from Mayor Barnhart about whether the City's existing zoning and subdivision regulations will require major changes, Hanks replied that while some state directed updates will be necessary, the City's relatively recent updates mean changes should be manageable.

Jeff Clark, 327 Rogers Road, asked how the process would play out regarding the future land use map and the wastewater PER. Specifically, he wanted to know whether the plan would address growth outside current city limits. He noted that the wastewater study referred to areas east of the river and west and asked how that would work since it extends into the county.

City Manager Hanks explained that the Land Use Plan requires the City to establish the expected jurisdictional area and future land use boundaries needed to meet projected housing requirements over the next 20 years. The current Land Use Map from 2019 is the baseline for these discussions, but it does not automatically mean expansion beyond current limits. Growth projections will guide the conversation, and while the county does not vote in this process, coordination will occur with the planning consultant and Planning Commission as appropriate. Ultimately, the City Council makes the land use decisions.

Mr. Clark asked further whether there would be more detailed opportunities for public participation beyond what was shown in the schedule, which listed only utility-related meetings and the first reading of the MLUPA on May 4. Mayor Barnhart responded that public participation will be ongoing, and the schedule will remain fluid. Information will be posted on the City's website, and both city and county residents will have equal opportunity to attend, listen, and provide input. He emphasized that the process is designed to be open and transparent.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Drive, asked if the two council workshops scheduled for January 26 and April 13 would be open to the public. Mayor Barnhart confirmed that the workshops are open, though they are informational only, with no votes taken. The public is welcome to attend and listen to reports.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor King once again noted how easy this year's budget was easy to understood in its current layout and expressed her appreciation.

Mayor Barnhart shared that his visits to Rivers Edge Park have been very enjoyable and complimented how well it is being maintained. He added that parking is becoming limited on weekends and suggested exploring options to expand parking. He also relayed feedback from a first-time visitor from Kalispell who was impressed with the park, praising its overall quality compared to other parks he frequents. Mayor Barnhart would like staff to have a look at the sink on the east side of the restroom as it drains slowly. Mayor Barnhart also commended the Community Garden, noting that all the garden plots look well cared for.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

The Finance and Administration Department is moving forward with the recruitment process for the City Accountant position. The position will remain open until a suitable candidate is selected.

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

Although unable to attend this evening's meeting, the Fire Chief reported that the Fire Department hosted a well-received 9/11 remembrance event at the rural fire station earlier this week. The event was well attended and generated positive feedback.

City staff met with representatives from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the nonprofit organization People and Carnivores to discuss bear safety. With bear season approaching, staff reviewed the City Code related to the accumulation of uncollected refuse and garbage on private property that may attract wildlife. No changes to the ordinance are recommended at this time; however, staff emphasized the importance of ongoing public education and outreach regarding responsible waste management. The city continues to coordinate with Evergreen Disposal on adjusted collection routes.

Finally, staff is pursuing grant funding to expand the City's bear safety initiatives. Proposed projects include the addition of approximately 10 new bear-resistant trash receptacles, primarily for City parks and updated signage at River's Edge Park to enhance public awareness of bear safety practices.

MISCELLANEOUS REPORT

Chief Stephens said on September 11, a 16-year-old on an electric bike was involved in a collision while passing vehicles at approximately 30 plus mph; this is his second collision on the same e-bike, the first resulting in a negligent driving charge. In response to gaps in state law regarding electric bikes, scooters, and other motorized vehicles, staff is drafting an ordinance for review by the Public Safety Committee and Council. The ordinance will address definitions, sidewalk and park restrictions, speed limits on sidewalks and multi-use paths, and regulation of older or non-compliant vehicles.

The department is also addressing sidewalk blockages through an education-first approach using warning tags to promote compliance and pedestrian safety. Increased officer visibility has contributed to a 25% reduction in collisions in August compared to last year. A Public Safety Committee meeting is scheduled for Monday, October 22, at 6:00 p.m. to review the ordinance and enforcement strategies, particularly for repeat juvenile offenders. Montana law allows pedal-powered bicycles on sidewalks unless prohibited by ordinance, while motorized vehicles are not permitted. House Bill 555 addresses single-wheeled and e-scooter vehicles but does not cover e-bikes or comprehensive motorized sidewalk use.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

Police Department Activity Report - August

Fire Department Activity Report – August

ADJOURN

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn at 7:49 p.m., seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk