

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD DECEMBER 01, 2025

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

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

Also present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Rice, Public Works Director Bates and Police Chief Stephens.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

APPROVAL OF AGENDA: Councilor Piper motioned to amend the agenda to include the Notice of Public Hearing amending the 25-26 FY Budget right after Visitor/Public Comment, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried.

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor Lovering made motion to approve the consent agenda noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Shepard and the motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Claims - Dec. 1, 2025 - \$155,421.90

Approval of Payroll Claims - Nov. 21, 2025 - \$198,607.97

Approval of November 17, 2025, Council Minutes

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Gary Hall thanked City Manager Hanks for his Manager's Report included in the council packet.

Kyle Tradoffer, 626 7th Ave W., said the alley behind his house is 8th Avenue. He stated he had heard the City would be reviewing it for maintenance and was checking on the status of that information.

Notice of Public Hearing: Amending the 25-26 Fiscal Year Budget

Mayor Barnhart read the Notice of Public Hearing.

Finance Director Rice explained that the proposed budget adjustment relates to unforeseen issues with a dump truck at the wastewater treatment plant. Staff recommend transferring funds from the operating account to the capital account to be prepared if a replacement is needed. The notice was published for the required two consecutive weeks. Rice stated the resolution will come before council on December 15th.

The City Manager reported staff has been working on the dump truck and believes it can remain operable for the next several months. Although a purchase may not be necessary, staff recommend proceeding with the amendment as a precaution.

With no public comment Mayor Barnhart opened and closed the public hearing at 7:06 p.m.

Councilor King motioned to approve the Budget Amendment, seconded by Councilor Price with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Nexus CPA Group has completed the independent audit of the City of Columbia Falls' financial statements for Fiscal Year 2024, ending June 30, 2024. The audit was conducted in accordance with Generally Accepted Auditing Standards (GAAS) and the requirements of the Montana Department of Administration.

Finance Director Rice stated the City had findings related to timeliness but has resolved the issue and is now back in compliance. Nexus will also begin work on the FY 2025 audit.

Councilor Price asked about the 51-year promissory note with Teakettle Vista. Rice explained that an external firm conducts their required annual audit and submits it to the City. Price also asked about building permit fee calculations; Attorney Breck said the city follows the uniform code.

Councilor Robinson made motion to approve the Nexus CPA Group Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Audit Report, seconded by Councilor Lovering with council voting as follows. Ayes: Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson and Barnhart.

Downtown Sidewalk and Parking Project Phase II

Requesting authorization to sign a contract with Knife River for construction of the Downtown Sidewalk and Parking Phase II project in 2026.

City Manager Hanks reported that three bids were received. The low bid from Knife River was \$699,699, well below the engineer's estimate of \$967,000. Other bids included LHC at \$871,000 and J.D. Thinning at \$904,000. Staff recommend awarding the contract to Knife River. Hanks noted staff will continue increased public outreach in the affected areas.

Councilor Piper made motion to authorize the City Manager to sign a contract with Knife River for construction of the Downtown Sidewalk and Parking Phase II project in 2026, seconded by Councilor Lovering with Council voting as follows. Ayes: King, Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard and Barnhart.

NEW BUSINESS:

River's Edge Fishing Pier Grant Award Memorandum of Understanding

Requesting authorization to accept a \$70,000 matching grant award from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) William Kamps Fund for a public fishing pond accessibility upgrade at River's Edge Park.

City Manager Hanks reported he has been working closely with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) on the fishing pond. From the original construction, the intent was always to add accessibility features. Staff presented the project as part of the City's FY26 Parks and Recreation priorities, and FWP was supportive. FWP secured a \$70,000 matching grant from the William Camps Fund for construction of an accessible fishing pier.

Mayor Barnhart asked about asphalt access to the site, noting only one side currently has asphalt. The project includes the fishing pier, concrete slabs that function as steps into the pond, and ADA-accessible fishing stations. These items will be reviewed further at the Parks and Recreation Committee meeting scheduled for December 8, where all River's Edge projects for 2026 will be discussed said Hanks.

Mayor Barnhart also asked about long-term maintenance responsibilities and whether resort tax funds would be used. City Manager Hanks recommended using the general fund for ongoing maintenance and reserving

resort tax revenue for targeted capital projects. He noted similar FWP projects in Region 1 have required very little maintenance.

Hanks added that the city will use the same engineering firm for construction engineering oversight, as was done for the skate park and other projects.

Mayor Barnhart asked if any significant environmental permitting costs were anticipated, such as through the Army Corps of Engineers or DEQ. Public Works Director Bates stated he does not expect any major costs associated with required permits.

Councilor Lovering motioned to authorize the City Manager to sign a MOU with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to accept a grant award for \$70,000 for the River's Edge Fishing Pond Accessibility Project, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard, King and Barnhart.

Road Condition Structural Assessment and Street Project Updates

City Manager Hanks reported that he and Public Works Director Bates will be providing informational updates on road and street conditions twice annually, once during the budget cycle and once at this time of year to review upcoming fiscal year projects and current street assessments. The City uses the iWorks pavement management software to evaluate road conditions and plan future projects.

Based on current assessments, the City has approximately 1.75 miles of critical roadway (shown in red on the map), mostly short one-block segments; 1.25 miles of deficient roadway (shown in yellow); and one unpaved roadway, 4th Avenue East, which was originally designed as an alley. Staff will explore options over the next year to plan a capital improvement project to construct that roadway. Two areas of critical drainage deficiency were also identified: Talbot/4th Avenue and the south portion of Meadowlake Boulevard.

Hanks reviewed several major projects:

- Safety and Mobility Project: A \$10.5 million project (with \$10 million in federal funding and \$500,000 from the city), including 1.3 miles of roadway, 1.7 miles of sidewalks, and one mile of multi-use pathways. The project also replaces critical water mains and improves parking and stormwater drainage.
- Downtown Sidewalk & Parking Project Phase II: A \$700,000 project previously discussed, improving sidewalks, parking, and stormwater drainage around Nucleus Avenue.
- Railroad Street Multi-Use Path (MDT-Led): A \$1.6 million project extending the multi-use path from 4th Avenue/Truck Route north along Railroad Street to the viaduct. Construction is anticipated in 2026, with more information forthcoming from MDT.
- Chip Seal Program: \$235,000 budgeted from the gas tax fund for chip seal work in several areas highlighted in blue on the map.

Hanks also presented financial considerations showing the limits of the street maintenance fund relative to the high cost of full street reconstruction.

Mayor Barnhart asked Public Works Director Bates to address the earlier inquiry from Kyle Tradoffer regarding the alley behind his property. Bates stated he does not believe it is classified as a street but will take a closer look and meet with Mr. Tradoffer at a later date.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #835 - Columbia Falls Police Department, desires to amend Chapter 9 Part 20 of the Columbia Falls Municipal Code by adding Section 030 making it a criminal offense to expose a child or children to domestic violence.

City Manager Hanks explained that the proposed ordinance defining exposure of a child or children to domestic violence as a criminal offense would be open for public comment, but staff recommended that Council delay the second reading. Additional information was identified over the past week that requires further research to ensure alignment with state law. He noted that he, the City Attorney, and Police Chief Stephens will continue reviewing the matter over the next two weeks and bring it back for a second reading at a later date.

Police Chief Stephens reviewed Ordinances 836 through 840. Ordinance 836 outlines definitions of bicycles, motor scooters, e-bikes, mopeds, sidewalks, and wheeled devices under the Montana Code Annotated. Ordinance 837 requires compliance with speed limits on sidewalks and public pathways. Ordinance 838 establishes penalties for violations. Ordinance 839 clarifies that any vehicle operated on a sidewalk or pathway must be propelled by pedal power and may not rely solely on an electronic drive, except for personal mobility devices such as electric wheelchairs. Ordinance 840 requires all riders of bicycles or similar vehicles to obey the rules of the road and requires riders under 18 years of age to wear a helmet.

Ed Albright, 1010 Nucleus Avenue spoke regarding the e-bike ordinances. He described his long involvement with e-bikes and noted that issues on trails are often caused by user behavior rather than the bikes themselves. He stated that e-bikes can cause less trail damage than traditional bicycles, depending on how they are ridden. He expressed concern that a few bad actors are driving policy decisions and urged the Council not to restrict responsible users. He described the difficulty in visually distinguishing e-bikes by class or speed capability and questioned the feasibility of enforcement. He suggested training and certification for riders under age 16, as well as voluntary inspections or identification stickers to help address improper use. He emphasized the potential impact on seniors and people with disabilities, on local bike shops and e-bike rental businesses, and on tax revenue. He also noted differing federal policies between the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service and mentioned ongoing ADA considerations related to e-bike access.

Councilor Shepard asked for clarification about the recent incident involving a youth rider. Police Chief Stephens confirmed it involved an e-motorcycle traveling approximately 40 miles per hour on a sidewalk. Shepard also asked about the ADA implications raised by Mr. Albright. City Attorney Breck explained that ADA protections for mobility devices apply only to individuals with qualifying disabilities, though exceptions exist for safety concerns. He added that ADA protections do not extend to general high-speed recreational use.

Mayor Barnhart stated that the intent of the ordinances is to reinforce existing traffic laws and to enhance safety, including requiring helmets for anyone under age 18. He noted that the goal is not only to prevent accidents but to protect both riders and pedestrians.

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON DECEMBER 01, 2025

After further council discussion Mayor Barnhart made a motion to table ordinances 835-840 until further research is completed, seconded by Councilor Price with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, King, Lovering and Barnhart. Noes: Shepard.

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #836 - Adding a Section 070 providing definitions pertaining to the use operation of bicycles, electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically assisted and motor assisted vehicles and wheeled devices on public sidewalks, public paths, and within public parks.

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #837 - To amend Chapter 10 Part 72 Section 040 of the Columbia Falls Municipal Code requiring obedience with traffic control devices by bicycles, electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically assisted and motor assisted vehicles and other wheeled devices on public sidewalks, roadways, and paths.

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #838 - To amend Chapter 10 Part 72 of the Columbia Falls Municipal Code by adding a Section 080 providing penalties that may be imposed by law enforcement for violations of the ordinances contained with Chapter 10 part 72.

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #839 - To amend Chapter 10 Part 72 Section 050 of the Columbia Falls Municipal Code regulating the operation of bicycles, electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically assisted and motor assisted vehicles and wheeled devices on public sidewalks, public paths, and within public parks.

Tabled - SECOND READING - Ordinance #840 - Regulating the use of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public roadways, public sidewalks and public paths.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor King reported she will be absent from the December 15th council meeting.

Councilor Price said this Friday is the Night of Lights Parade at 6:00 p.m.

Councilor Shepard noted he drove along Highway 2 today and was impressed by the number of businesses clearing snow from their sidewalks.

Councilor Lovering expressed concern about children entering the street during the upcoming parade to collect candy, especially with icy conditions. She asked the Chief Stephens about safety measures. Chief Stephens stated the department will monitor the parade route and work to keep people back, though it is challenging over such a long area. Attempts to use rope and delineators last year were ineffective, and he hopes parents will help monitor their children.

Mayor Barnhart emphasized the importance of having the State remove the snow berm down the center of Nucleus Avenue.

Mayor Barnhart also noted that while some businesses are diligently shoveling their sidewalks, others have not made any attempt.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

The City Manager provided an update on several ongoing projects and upcoming meetings:

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON DECEMBER 01, 2025

- November 20th public utility infrastructure meeting was well attended, with over 30 participants. The engineers provided a helpful overview of current infrastructure conditions and addressed numerous questions.
- December 8, 5:00 p.m. - Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting: Discussion will focus on the River's Edge Master Plan projects, along with the e-bike topic.
- December 11 - Planning Commission: The commission will review utility infrastructure capacity allocation in relation to current development needs.
- December 15 – City Council Meeting Agenda Items:
 - Continued discussion on utility infrastructure capacity.
 - Swearing-in of the judge for the next year.
 - Swearing-in of two new firefighters, bringing staffing to 29 of 30 positions.
 - Swearing-in of one new police officer, with another officer scheduled for January. Both police candidates have passed all required testing.
- Study Commission: The next scheduled meeting for final adoption of the Local Government Study Commission report is January 21. There is discussion about adding another meeting before January 21; information will be posted on the city website once confirmed.
- Engineering / PER Progress: Staff continues to work with both engineering teams on their Preliminary Engineering Reports. Clarification of existing- and current conditions data is underway, with follow-up meetings planned over the next one to two weeks.
- Meadowlake District Meeting: City staff will meet with the Meadowlake Sewer & Water District Board on December 12 to discuss wastewater service and review current engineering study findings.
- Public Works & Planning: Interviews for the Water Operator position will be conducted tomorrow. One applicant applied and appears to be a qualified candidate.
- Highway 2 Sidewalks: The Streets Crew cleared snow from several areas along Highway 2 where businesses had not yet cleared their sidewalks. Staff also did excellent work clearing roads after the recent heavy snowfall.
- Land Use Planning Act – Plan of Action & Milestones: An updated POA&M was provided in the City Manager's report.

The Planning Commission will join the City Council's second January meeting to review survey results and the existing-conditions report for the Montana Land Use Planning Act. A debrief will also be provided.
- Community Survey: The community survey closes December 11. Additional promotions will continue through social media this week. Current response levels (165–170) remain below the preferred target of 250–300 for a city of this size.

MISCELLANEOUS:

Mayor Barnhart noted that the recent interview posted on the City's Facebook page was well-received by the community. He also highlighted the popularity of Officer McConnell's reading to elementary students, which garnered approximately 14,000 views.

Finance Director Rice clarified the HOME grant. The city sponsored Tea Kettle through a 1% HOME program loan, with repayment not guaranteed. Payments received are used to support other low-income housing projects, including Mitchell Way and 3rd Avenue East. Revenue is recognized only when the loan reaches its balloon payment, and payments are required only if the borrower can afford them. The funds involved are entirely federal grant dollars, not local taxpayer money.

ADJOURN:

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn at 8:21 p.m. seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk