

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS  
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING MINUTES  
HELD APRIL 10, 2025**

**REGULAR MEETING – 6:00 PM.**

**President Fisher called Meeting to order at 6:01 PM**

PRESENT: President Fisher, Vice President Ping, Commissioner Johnson, Commissioner Kavanagh, Commissioner Berube (late arrival)

ABSENT: None

Also present: City Manager Hanks, Public Works Clerk Sobczak, City Planner Mulcahy, City Attorney Breck

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

Approval of December 12, 2024 Regular Meeting Minutes

Vice President Ping moved to approve the minutes of the December 12, 2024 meeting as presented. Commissioner Johnson seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

**VISITOR OR PUBLIC COMMENT:** (An opportunity for the Public to comment on any items not on tonight's agenda)

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Drive, Columbia Falls. expressed concerns regarding the short notice provided for the meeting's agenda, which she felt was insufficient for public awareness and participation. She also referenced the participation plan approved in May 2024, emphasizing the need for improved informational outreach, particularly through social media, and highlighted the importance of gathering feedback from residents. Shirley encouraged the Commission to ensure broader public engagement and suggested conducting surveys to better understand housing challenges faced by residents.

**PUBLIC HEARINGS AND ACTION:**

**Columbia Falls Housing Needs Study – An element of the Columbia Falls Land Use Plan Update:** A request by the City of Columbia Falls to adopt the Columbia Falls Housing Needs Assessment. The Housing Needs Study is an element of the future Land Use Plan the City of Columbia Falls is working towards in compliance with SB 382. The Housing Needs Study estimates housing needs for Columbia Falls and surrounding areas and provides a number of options that the City can work towards to meet the needs. The Housing Needs Study is just one part of the future land use plan which will also include Land use analysis of the land use map, vacant lands, and zoning.

Wendy Sullivan with WSW Consulting presented the final report on the Columbia Falls Housing Needs Study. She gave a summary of the available 80+ page report using a slideshow. Key highlights included:

- An analysis of housing affordability using the standard that housing is considered affordable when monthly payments do not exceed 30% of gross household income.
- A review of market trends, including a significant rise in home sale prices (averaging 17% per year since 2019), rental increases (about 9% per year), and a growing gap between housing costs and wage growth (wages rising about 6% per year).

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- Discussion of current housing shortfalls, with approximately 8% of housing needs unmet and about 54% of employees commuting into the area for work. Employer surveys indicated that 76% of employers are affected by the lack of affordable housing for employees, and 37% of commuting employees would prefer to live locally if housing were available.
- Identification of concerning trends, such as a 6% decline in families with children over the past decade (compared to a 3% decline countywide), increased pressure from low-paying tourism sector jobs, and a high percentage (60%) of renters who are cost-burdened.
- Projections regarding future needs, including the impact of retiring employees (estimated 6% of workforce over five years, equating to about 170 housing units needed for replacements), and the need for a significant portion of new housing to be priced below current market rates to address affordability.
- Exploration of potential strategies such as partnerships with public institutions, non-profit developers, and local organizations (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, Northwest Montana Community Land Trust, Whitefish Housing Authority); funding opportunities including resort tax allocations, tax increment financing, and general fund flexibility; incentives like density bonuses and infill development; and preservation initiatives to maintain existing affordable housing stock.
- Emphasis on the complexity of housing issues, the need for a balanced approach that supports both market-rate and affordable housing, and the importance of leveraging incentives and partnerships to achieve community goals.

Following the presentation, discussion ensued among Commission members and Staff.

President Fisher asked City Staff if this study complies with Senate Bill 382. Inquired whether the study satisfies SB 382 requirements. City Planner Mulcahy confirmed that it does and noted that it will serve as a foundational element in updating the City's Growth Policy. Future steps include development of capital improvement plans (CIPs) for sewer and water, and issuance of an RFP for a land planner.

Vice President Ping questioned the calculation of needed affordable housing units. Sullivan clarified that while 1,000 affordable units are needed, this does not necessarily translate to a 5,000-unit total—10% would be a more realistic proportion. She also addressed a follow-up question about renter retention, noting that many renters may relocate within five years without access to homeownership opportunities.

Commissioner Kavanagh asked about the availability of vacant vs actual buildable lots. City Planner Mulcahy answered that this has been looked at by City Staff but there is a significant amount of ground-truthing involved in this and it is much more complicated than just counting the number of vacant lots available. 50% of available vacant lots being buildable may be too high of a figure.

Public comment was opened at 7:15 PM.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Dr, Columbia Falls. Expressed support for the housing study and Senate Bill 382 compliance, encouraged continued public engagement, and raised questions about the process for updating the Growth Policy and the scope of public interviews conducted for the study. Sullivan clarified that while employer and HR input was prioritized, the study also incorporated broader community perspectives where possible.

Public comment was closed at 7:22 PM.

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A motion was made by Kavanaugh, seconded by Ping, to move the Housing Study to the City Council for an additional public hearing and potential adoption at its May 5th meeting. Vice President Ping seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

**ADJOURNMENT – Meeting duly adjourned at 7:27 PM**

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President

Attest:

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Public Works Clerk