

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD NOVEMBER 17, 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 and Police Chief Stephens.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor Piper made motion to approve consent agenda amending the claims to \$200,704.41, seconded by Councilor Price and the motion carried.

Approval of Claims - Nov. 20, 2025 - \$200,704.41

Approval of Payroll Claims - Nov. 7, 2025 - \$126,133.96

Approval of Regular Council Minutes - Nov. 3, 2025

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Roger Hopkins, 949 Vans Avenue, reminded the Council that the Study Commission Public Hearing will be held on Wednesday, November 19th, 2025, at 6:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers to review the tentative final report.

Mr. Hopkins announced the Rotary Club's Brunch with Santa on Saturday, December 6th, 9:30 a.m., at Timber Creek Village.

Darin Fisher 303 3rd Ave. E. praised Sergeant Stufflebeem and city staff for excellent service.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Mayor Barnhart read the - Notice of Public Hearing - Amending the FY 25-26 Budget

The City is proposing amending 5310 Sewer Enterprise Fund appropriations for the purchase of a replacement dump truck. After the adoption of the budget, the City's Sewer Fund dump truck became unusable and must be replaced.

Finance Director Rice stated the purchase will not exceed \$125,000 and will be funded from available cash in the Sewer Fund.

NEW BUSINESS:

Utility Billing Adjustments Due to City Error and Update City

City Manager Hanks reported two recent utility billing errors and requested Council authorization to issue full refunds: Residential account: Apartment meters were installed incorrectly, resulting in a ten-year overcharge of approximately \$900. Commercial account: Billing system error caused a \$4,000 overcharge for water usage. Staff recommended full refunds despite exceeding the traditional six-month limit, citing ethical governance and a commitment to customer fairness. A future city code amendment will clarify refund policies, differentiate types of errors, and establish a standard look-back period with administrative exceptions.

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Councilor Price inquired about the long delay in identifying the residential issue. Hanks and Rice explained the delay involved coordination between residents, landlords, and city staff. Improved internal controls and a new tracking module in utility software will help prevent future errors.

Councilor Robinson motioned to authorize the Finance Director to issue credits for both accounts, seconded by Councilor Lovering and the motion passed unanimously.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution 1956 - Banking Authority and Credit Card Authorization Glacier Bank

With recent staffing changes, the City of Columbia Falls must update its account authorizations at Glacier Bank, the City's primary financial institution, to ensure current employees have proper authority to conduct financial transactions on behalf of the City.

Finance Director Rice explained the resolution to update Glacier Bank account authorizations to be position-based rather than individual-based, reflecting recent staffing changes. It also authorizes five department specific credit cards (limit \$50,000 total) to improve operational flexibility and allow departments to manage budgets directly. Department heads are responsible for their assigned cards.

Mayor Barnhart inquired, was this suggested by the auditor? Rice replied no it was not.

Councilor Piper made motion to adopt Resolution #1956, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering and Barnhart.

Resolution #1955 - Special Revenue Fund 2955

Highway Traffic Safety and adopting the related budget appropriations for Fiscal Year 2025–26 pursuant to the approved grant agreement.

Finance Director Rice presented a new Special Revenue Fund 2955 to track grant revenue and expenditures for the DUI Officer program. The city was awarded \$165,263, with FY 2025–26 revenue of \$123,000, covering salary, overtime, equipment, training, and other DUI-related expenses.

Councilor Lovering motioned to approve Resolution #1955, seconded by Councilor Piper with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

FIRST READING - Ordinance #835 - Exposing Minor Children to Domestic Violence

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

Chief Stephens explained that the ordinance aims to end the cycle of domestic abuse. He noted that children exposed to domestic violence, even if not directly abused, are at significantly higher risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence later in life. Exposure is classified as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), with studies showing boys exposed to domestic violence are ten times more likely to become abusers and girls exposed are six times more likely to be sexually abused. The ordinance is intended to hold adults accountable for committing acts of domestic violence in the presence of children.

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Mayor Barnhart asked whether other departments have similar policies. Chief Stephens replied that no other departments have such measures. Current state law only considers child exposure to domestic violence in sentencing, with no separate crime established for the exposure itself.

City Attorney Breck stated that the City has general powers under Article XI of the Montana Constitution, including authority to act for the health, safety, and well-being of the community. Breck emphasized that the ordinance is supported by state law and scientific research and is intended to prevent harm to children using powers already granted by law, not to overstep City authority.

Councilor Shepard made motion to adopt the First Reading of Ordinance #835, seconded by Councilor Lovering and the motion carried unanimously.

FIRST READING - Ordinance #836 - Definitions pertaining to the use and operation of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles and other wheeled devices on public sidewalks, public roadways and public paths and within public parks.

Chief Stephens explained amendments clarify the rights and responsibilities of riders of bicycles, electric bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, mopeds, and other motorized or wheeled devices on public sidewalks, roadways, paths, and parks. All operators under 18 are required to comply with helmet laws (NCA 618-020-N2).

Councilor Piper made motion to adopt the First Reading of Ordinance #836, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried unanimously.

FIRST READING - Ordinance #837 - Requiring obedience with traffic control devices by bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public sidewalks, roadways and paths.

Chief Stephens stated the ordinance allows the City to establish speed limits for bicycles and motorized devices on sidewalks and pathways, addressing safety concerns for pedestrians and cyclists. Amendments clarify that all devices, including e-bikes, scooters, skateboards, and motor-assisted vehicles are included.

Councilor Lovering made motion to adopt the amended First Reading of Ordinance #837, seconded by Councilor Shepard and the motion carried unanimously.

FIRST READING - Ordinance #838 - Providing penalties that may be imposed by law enforcement for violations of the ordinances contained within chapter 1- part 72.

Chief Stephens explained that non-pedal-powered vehicles, such as fully motorized e-bikes without pedal assist, are prohibited on sidewalks, including paths. Violations carry graduated penalties: \$50, \$100, and \$175, with parental responsibility applied for minors. Councilor Lovering asked if this includes Rivers Edge Paths. Chief Stephens replied yes.

Councilor Price made motion to adopt the amended fine amount on First Reading of Ordinance #838, seconded by Councilor King and the motion carried unanimously.

FIRST READING - Ordinance #839 - Regulating the use of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public sidewalks and paths.

Chief Stephens clarified that pedal-powered bicycles and pedal-assisted e-bikes are allowed, while certain devices, such as electric personal mobility devices (e.g., wheelchairs or scooters for disabled persons), are exempt.

Councilor Piper made motion to adopt the First Reading of Ordinance #839, seconded by Councilor Lovering and the motion carried unanimously.

FIRST 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.

Chief Stephens reviewed definitions for bicycles, mopeds, motorized scooters, electric-assisted bicycles, sidewalks, and wheeled devices, consistent with Montana Code Annotated.

Councilor King made motion to adopt the First Reading of Ordinance #840, seconded by Councilor Piper and the motion carried unanimously.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Shepard thanked staff for their work on bicycle-related ordinances and noted a recent incident involving two juveniles riding electric dirt-bike bicycles at excessive speeds who collided with a vehicle. He emphasized the safety risks these devices pose, including hazards associated with the batteries.

Councilor Price asked about recurring water on the roadway at 4th and Talbot. City Manager Hanks reported that staff is aware of the drainage issue involving the dry well. Street prioritization is underway; however, new information has been received, and staff will delay the prioritization discussion for one additional meeting.

Councilor Price also asked about sharing the online Land Use Planning survey, noting her attempt to post the link on Facebook had been removed. Hanks stated he did not know why the post was taken down and would follow up. He confirmed the survey is posted on the city's social media platforms. There are no restrictions on participation, and broad community input is encouraged.

Councilor King asked whether the Local Government Study Commission meeting would be available via Zoom. Hanks confirmed that it will be.

Councilor Piper reminded the Council that the Study Commission meeting will be held on Wednesday, November 19, at 6:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers. The meeting will include a public hearing and presentation of the tentative final report. Piper encouraged public participation and thanked Hungry Horse News for sharing the survey link.

Mayor Barnhart clarified that the Study Commission's final report serves as a recommendation to the City Council. Hanks explained that once the Study Commission forwards its recommendation, the Council's role is to accept it and place the measure on the ballot. The Council cannot prevent the matter from proceeding to election if recommended by the Study Commission.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

The City Manager provided the following updates:

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- November 19th at 6:30 p.m. Study Commission Meeting:
- November 20th Columbia Falls Ahead 2045 Utility Infrastructure Meeting: The public meeting will begin at 5:00 p.m. Engineers preparing the Preliminary Engineering Reports for water and wastewater will present an overview and answer questions. The City Manager noted challenges in the water system related to the storage tank and main transmission line. He reported more significant concerns with wastewater treatment capacity due to an increase in development applications that would require additional service. A future discussion with the Council regarding wastewater capacity needs is anticipated. The meeting will be recorded and posted on the city website.
- December 11th Planning Commission Meeting: The Planning Commission will review utility infrastructure challenges. Staff will work with the Commission to prepare a recommendation for Council consideration at the December 15th Council meeting regarding infrastructure and upcoming development proposals.
- Gateway to Glacier Project: The city is awaiting federal obligation of funds. An update is expected later in the week or early next week. The project remains on schedule for a 30-day bid period, an open house in late January, and construction beginning in March 2026.
- Public Works Staffing: The City Manager announced the city is accepting applications for a Water Operator position.
- Geotechnical Work and Street Closures: Geotechnical boring will occur over the next three days on 6th Street East. Additional city testing will take place on 2nd Avenue East below the hillside.
- The City Manager recognized significant work completed by the Police Chief and City Attorney in preparing several ordinances over recent months, noting that the complexity of the material reflects the thorough effort made to ensure accuracy and alignment with community needs.
- Land Use Plan / Growth Policy Development: A joint session was held on November 13. Further meetings with the land use planning consultant are scheduled this week. The City Manager encouraged continued participation in the community survey, noting its importance in guiding future planning discussions. Staff anticipates possible breakout sessions with neighborhood associations, recreation groups, businesses, builders, realtors, and other stakeholders.
- Downtown Sidewalk and Parking Improvements – Phase II: Bid opening is scheduled for Wednesday, November 19. Construction remains planned for early 2026.
- River's Edge Park Projects: The City Manager reported tentative approval of the FWP matching grant for the fishing pier. Upon final confirmation of the award, the project will move to bid for spring 2026 construction.

The Flathead River Alliance was awarded \$10,000 from American Rivers for signage and an interpretive trail along the boardwalk. Plans will be brought to the Parks and Recreation Committee before public release.

People and Carnivores received full funding for a joint grant, which includes funding for 10 bear-resistant trash cans and concrete bases and \$5,000 for bear-awareness signage at River's Edge Park and potentially other parks.

The disc golf course has begun installation of tee boxes and panel locations, with community use already underway.

- Pool Boiler Project: Bids are currently open for the pool boiler replacement. The City Manager noted significant interest from contractors and anticipates a competitive bid process, with installation planned for spring 2026.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

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Police Department - October Report

Fire Department - October Report

ADJOURN

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn at 8:06 P.M. seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk