

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD JULY 21, 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 and Mayor Barnhart. Absent: Councilor Shepard.

Also present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Rice, Fire Chief Weeks, Public Works Director Bates 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 Lovering motioned to approve the consent agenda noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Piper with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, King, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

Approval of Claims - July 21, 2025 - \$294,053.95

Approval of Payroll Claims - July 18, 2025 - \$226,167.40

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - July 7, 2025

2024 Audit Planning Governance Letter

APPOINTMENTS:

Appointment of Lieutenant and Assistant Safety Officer

Fire Chief Weeks presented two internal promotions within the Columbia Falls Fire Department. Courtney Stuhler, a 12-year veteran of the department, was recognized for her dedication, consistent professional development, and emerging leadership. Based on her initiative and growth, Chief Weeks recommended her appointment to Lieutenant.

Similarly, the appointment of Mr. Grogan to Assistant Safety Officer was proposed. With nine years of exceptional service, Grogan has demonstrated exemplary commitment, a high response rate, and continuous training efforts. His dependability and initiative made him a fitting candidate for the position.

Following these appointments, the Council expressed appreciation to both Ms. Stuhler and Mr. Grogan for their commitment and service.

Recommendation to Appoint Bradley Ruben as Probationary Volunteer Firefighter

Chief Weeks also recommended the appointment of Bradley Ruben as a Probationary Volunteer Firefighter. Weeks cited Ruben's active participation in department training and his enthusiasm for firefighting as strong qualifications.

Councilor King made motion to appoint Bradley Ruben as Probationary Volunteer Firefighter, seconded by Councilor Piper and the motion carried unanimously.

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Paul Kruger of 35 Garnier Lane addressed the Council with concerns regarding the Tamarack Meadows Subdivision, which had received Council approval in January 2023. Kruger cited specific worries related to Condition #18 of the approval, which required preservation of open space adjacent to Tamarack Meadows subdivision. He noted that much of the natural vegetation had been removed, including near Garnier Creek, and that stormwater ponds had been installed. These ponds, according to Kruger, are now filling with groundwater and becoming stagnant, possibly posing a pollution risk.

He emphasized he is not opposed to development, but rather is concerned with environmental protection, particularly regarding Garnier Creek. Despite reaching out to Flathead County, the current jurisdiction, Kruger reported receiving no response. He urged the City to review his submitted correspondence and photographs and to consider coordinating with the County to ensure environmental protections are enforced.

NEW BUSINESS:

Hillside Geotechnical Investigation at 2nd Ave. E.

City Manager Hanks explained that the area had experienced a slope failure in June 2024 due to historic sloughing and a waterline leak compounded by heavy rainfall. As an emergency response, hazardous trees were removed. To evaluate the current hillside stability, staff recommended contracting Alpine Geotechnical to conduct a \$35,000 study, including geo-boring. The challenging terrain complicates access, particularly from below.

Public Works Director Bates added that the steepness of the slope, often one-to-one in grade makes expert evaluation essential.

Councilor Lovering questioned the necessity of the study, suggesting that the funds might be better spent directly on mitigation. Bates responded that understanding soil composition is essential for effective remediation.

Mayor Barnhart noted that the area's water intake problem had been longstanding and that tree removal was done for public safety. He expressed doubt that the proposed expenditure would be beneficial. Councilor Robinson raised the issue of liability, and City Attorney Breck responded that mitigation without a professional study could expose the city to legal risk if property damage or injury occurred in the future. The study would provide expert validation for any remediation steps taken.

Following additional discussion, the Council determined to table the item pending further information from staff.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Approval of FY 2025 Wages, Salaries, and Collective Bargaining Agreement

The Council proceeded with the public hearing regarding fiscal year 2025 wages and the collective bargaining agreement. City Manager Hanks reviewed the wage proposal, which includes a 3% cost-of-living increase, a 2% experience-based step increase for hourly employees, and a 5% salary increase for salaried employees, excluding the City Manager.

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON JULY 21, 2025

Hanks also detailed a three-year agreement reached with the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 6 and Teamster Local Union No. 2. Union membership had ratified the agreement, and Council approval was now required.

Councilor Lovering motioned to authorize the City Manager to execute and sign the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 6, and the Teamster Local Union 2 contracts, seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: King, Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson and Barnhart.

Councilor Lovering made motion to approve the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 6, and the Teamster Local Union 2 contracts, seconded by Councilor Price with council voting as follows. Ayes: Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson, King and Barnhart.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution #1948 - Salary and Compensation of certain city officials and employees

Councilor Price motioned to approve Resolution #1948 Salary and Compensation of certain city officials and employees, seconded by Councilor Lovering with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, King, Lovering, and Barnhart.

Resolution #1949 - Amending General Fund

Amending General Fund, SID 34 Fund, and SID 36 Fund Budgets for the FY ending June 30, 2025 and closing the SID Funds into the General Fund

City Manager Hanks explained that both SID 34 and 36 had satisfied all obligations by June 30, 2025. Per state law, residual balances totaling \$2,805 should be transferred to the General Fund.

Councilor Piper motioned to approve Resolution #1949 Amending General Fund, SID 34 Fund, and SID 36 Fund Budgets for the FY ending June 30, 2025 and closing the SID Funds into the General Fund, seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, King, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

Final Reading of Ordinance #834

Amending the Columbia Falls Zoning Map from CI-1 Light Industrial to CF-2 General Business at 2155 9th Street W. in Columbia Falls.

Councilor Piper made motion to approve the Final Reading of Ordinance #834 amending the Columbia Falls Zoning Map from CI-1 Light Industrial to CF-2 General Business at 2155 9th Street W., seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart. Noes: King.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Lovering inquired about the Rocksund plaque at Horine Park and if staff could get it cleaned up. Piper asked if we can raise it up off the ground.

Councilor Price thanked Public Works staff for addressing a road patch on Talbot Road.

Councilor King inquired about a downed power pole at the Sapa/Johnsrud baseball field. City Manager Hanks clarified that the pole is located on private land in Flathead County.

Councilor Piper announced the Study Commission will meet on Aug. 20, 2025.

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON JULY 21, 2025

Mayor Barnhart discussed potential future cost increases at the landfill if Kalispell begins hauling its waste there. He also suggested that Council members explain their votes, particularly any dissenting ones, for public clarity.

Mayor Barnhart further requested directional signage to Rivers Edge Park and commented on the Meadow Lake Subdivision, stating that photos indicate possible regulatory oversights. He recommended further examination by staff and the City Planner. Councilor Robinson encouraged Mr. Kruger to also contact County Commissioners directly.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks provided a detailed update on the city's ongoing budget process. He also reported on a recent site visit to the CFAC Superfund site with representatives from the EPA and congressional staff.

Regarding infrastructure, temporary construction easement notices for the Gateway to Glacier project had been distributed, and staff would be available on July 25th to answer resident questions. The City continues proactive outreach, including door hangers, to ensure thorough public awareness.

Hanks also noted the Columbia Falls Destination Marketing Organization had introduced a new city map now available at City Hall and other locations. Plans for the 50th anniversary of the Flathead River Wild and Scenic designation are underway, possibly including new interpretive signage at Rivers Edge Park.

The Finance Department is currently engaged in closing out FY25 and managing audit preparations. A recent motor failure at the Horine well was resolved and the system is operational. Dangerous tree removals have been performed citywide, with another scheduled for Pinewood Park later this year.

Hanks reported a successful five-year dam inspection by the DNRC, with no significant issues found. Emergency action plans and floodplain impact discussions were also addressed.

He concluded by offering election preparation resources for City Council candidates and reminding the public of the Montana Department of Revenue's property tax rebate program running from August 15 to October 1.

OTHER REPORTS

Police Chief Stephens shared that Patrolman Austin Green recently graduated from the Law Enforcement Academy in Helena, receiving the Top Shot Award and finishing second in academics and overall performance. Green will begin solo patrol duties this week.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

ADJOURN

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn, seconded by Councilor King and the meeting adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Mayor

City Clerk