

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD AUGUST 04, 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, 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 Piper made motion to approve the consent agenda noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Price with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, King, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

Approval of Claims - August 4, 2025 - \$559,880.81

Approval of Payroll Claims - August 1, 2025 - \$142,909.89

Approval of the Regular Council Meeting Minutes - July 21, 2025

Correction of Legal Description on Ordinance #833

Approval of Blue for Days LLC Plant Investment Fee Agreement, 1128 3rd Ave. E. and authorize City Manager to Execute

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

The Council heard comments from several residents regarding the Gateway to Glacier Safety and Improvement Project and other neighborhood concerns.

Andy Zimmerman of 805 13th Street West expressed concern about the proposed roadway cross-section for the project, which he believes would result in significant loss of green space and unnecessary widening. He noted that 13th Street West is already one of the widest residential streets in the city and questioned why adjacent property owners had not been contacted for input. Mr. Zimmerman also inquired why Columbia Falls is the only municipality in the county that does not publish contact information for elected officials.

Amber Renfro of 733 4th Avenue West urged the City to protect existing greenery and mature trees in her neighborhood. She emphasized the importance of maintaining natural areas for habitat, shade, and visual appeal, warning against a shift toward an overly industrial appearance.

Janelle Brooks of 713 4th Avenue West echoed Ms. Renfro's comments and voiced concerns about the long-term impact of removing established trees. She questioned why alternatives, such as widening the existing truck route, were not considered to avoid taking private residential property.

Christine Debarros of 811 13th Street West supported the creation of safe routes to school but requested adjustments to the design that would reduce the loss of residential yard space.

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Amanda Johnson of 706 3rd Avenue West stated she values the existing trees and does not support removal of healthy specimens. She expressed concern that the loss of shade would alter the small-town character and noted conflicting information she had received from the City regarding tree removal.

Mylie Ferguson of 611 6th Avenue East raised the issue of hillside stability in her neighborhood, reporting that residents are anxious about the potential for slope movement. She asked the City to explore mitigation options.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Preliminary Budget - Water and Sewer Enterprise Funds; Debt Service

City Manager Hanks reported that the City has received its certified tax values, reflecting \$3.4 million in new growth for the year. He outlined the preliminary budget for the Water and Sewer Enterprise Funds and associated debt service.

For the Water Enterprise Fund, Mr. Hanks explained that the City benefits from high-quality, untreated water, which reduces operational costs while providing safe drinking water. However, critical infrastructure, including the main transmission line from the water storage tank near the reservoir, is aging and will require replacement within the next decade. The City is also considering the addition of a second water tank to improve redundancy, with preliminary cost estimates approaching \$10 million.

The City continues to face challenges with water loss. Locating leaks is particularly difficult given local soil conditions and the expense of detection. The water department is implementing improved utility billing monitoring to identify potential losses earlier. Current water rates, set in 2018, have remained flat, resulting in stagnant revenue despite inflation and rising operational costs. Mr. Hanks recommended commissioning a professional water rate study following completion of the Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) to determine necessary rate adjustments and funding strategies for future capital projects.

Significant current-year items include the \$10 million RAISE grant project to replace water mains on 13th and 4th Avenues, unexpected repairs to the Horine well totaling \$55,000, and the planned \$30,565 water rate study.

For the Sewer Enterprise Fund, Mr. Hanks emphasized the City's compliance with Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) discharge requirements into the Flathead River. The 2018 Sewer PER identified five major projects, of which only one has been completed due to funding constraints. The ongoing \$5 million bioreactor modernization project is in its final stages.

The County landfill will be increasing biosolid disposal rates by three percent annually over the next five years, raising annual costs from approximately \$33,000 to \$48,000. New regulations may also require increasing solids content from 15 percent to 18 percent before disposal, which will necessitate additional polymer usage, increase equipment wear, and add operational complexity.

Planned expenditures include a \$27,000 sewer rate study and a \$125,000 updated Sewer PER. Mr. Hanks concluded that while both enterprise funds are currently healthy, proactive planning and grant pursuit are critical to meeting future infrastructure needs.

Mayor Barnhart said at this time the Public Hearing will remain open.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Lovering expressed support for conducting the hillside stability study despite its cost and requested that flexibility be maintained in the Gateway to Glacier safety plan to address community concerns. She also shared public praise for the cleanliness and quality of facilities at Columbus Park. Lovering would also like to inquire about bear safe containers at local businesses.

Councilor Price asked for clarification on tree replacement within the Gateway to Glacier project. City Manager Hanks responded that while the project does not mandate a one-for-one replacement, the City will preserve as many trees as feasible and may consider adding new plantings if project costs allow.

Councilor Piper noted that many of the trees in the project area are within the City's right-of-way and some are in poor health. Mayor Barnhart stated that while he values the City's trees, public safety requires removing trees that damage sidewalks or pose hazards.

Mayor Barnhart encourages folks to come into City Hall to discuss the project with staff.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks reported that the Government Study Commission will meet on August 20. An open house for downtown parking and sidewalk projects is scheduled for August 27. Regarding the Gateway to Glacier project, public outreach continues, and adjustments are being made during the transition from 60 percent to 90 percent design. Arborist evaluations have been conducted for all potentially impacted trees, with preservation prioritized when feasible.

Mr. Hanks noted that a geotechnical report and funding options for hillside stabilization will be presented at the next Council meeting. Updates will also be provided on the Tamarack Meadows subdivision and two ongoing speed studies being conducted by the Montana Department of Transportation. The City's tourism survey remains open until September 14, and results will inform future planning decisions.

Recent legislative changes will impact municipal authority over parking requirements, building heights, and zoning regulations. Mr. Hanks advised that the City will need to revise ordinances accordingly within the next 18 months.

CITY ATTORNEY REPORT

City Attorney Breck announced that he, Deputy City Attorney Stephanie Breck, the City Prosecutor, and leadership of the Columbia Falls Police Department are arranging joint training sessions to improve procedural clarity and coordination between the legal and law enforcement teams.

OTHER REPORTS

Police Chief Stephens reported 10 collisions along Highway 2 in the past 90 days, none of which were directly linked to recent traffic changes.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

Fire Department July Reports

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Police Department July Reports

ADJOURN

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn at 7:58 p.m., seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk