

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD AUGUST 18, 2025

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

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

Also present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Rice, Chief of Police Stephens and Assistant Fire Chief Ross.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

Approval of Claims - August 18, 2025 - \$312,147.55

Approval of Payroll Claims Final Pay - August 8, 2025 - \$3,343.03

Approval of Payroll Claims - August 15, 2025 - \$143,946.45

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - August 4, 2025

Accountant Job Description

CONSENT AGENDA:

Recommendation for Seth Swartzenberger is appointed as a probationary volunteer firefighter.

Assistant Fire Chief Ross said Mr. Swartzenberger's connection to the department is both unique and inspiring. On February 27, 2023, he was involved in a serious motor vehicle accident on Highway 2. Columbia Falls Fire Department personnel responded to the scene and extricated him from his vehicle. Now, Seth is considering pursuing firefighting as a career and has joined CFFD to gain valuable experience toward achieving that goal. Staff recommends approval.

Councilor King motioned to appoint Seth Swartzenberger as Probationary Volunteer Firefighter, seconded by Councilor Piper and the motion carried unanimously. City Clerk Staaland administered oath of office.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Preliminary Budget - Tax Levy and Calculations

City Manager Hanks presented the preliminary Fiscal Year 2026 budget and proposed tax levy. He explained that certified values from the Department of Revenue were used to calculate recommended mill levy rates: 108.55 mills for the General Fund, 1.84 for the Fire Relief Pension, and 38.05 for the Permissive Medical Levy, totaling 148.44 mills, or \$1,607,884 in revenue. These figures reflect mandatory state reporting and are included in the council packet.

Taxable valuation decreased by 11.55 percent due to amended state tax rates, significantly reducing property tax burdens. Reporting illustrates the impact across homes valued at \$100,000 to \$1 million. Graphs provided

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in the packet show reduced tax bills compared with Fiscal Year 2025. The resort tax, implemented in 2022, now accounts for 27 percent of City revenues, with 25 percent dedicated to property tax relief. As a result, residents are paying less today in property taxes than they did in Fiscal Year 2022, while City operations remain adequately funded.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Tamarack Meadows Update

City Manager Hanks updated Council on the Tamarack Meadows subdivision. The development proposal by Schellinger Construction, involved the creation of one hundred and three (103) residential lots with accompanying open space across a total of forty-seven (47) acres. This proposal closely mirrored a subdivision design that received preliminary plat approval in 2006. The City-County Planning Board and the Zoning Commission, after conducting public hearings, reviewed the application, adopted the staff report as findings of fact, and recommended approval of the preliminary plat to the City Council. Following due deliberation on January 3, 2023, and continued discussion on January 17, 2023, the City Council formally adopted the staff report as findings of fact and approved the subdivision plan. In June 2024, the City of Columbia Falls formally relinquished extraterritorial planning and zoning jurisdiction outside municipal boundaries pursuant to Senate Bill 382, thereby transferring full authority over to Flathead County. Consequently Tamarack Meadows Subdivision, including environmental and zoning concerns, rests solely with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Flathead County. Both DEQ and the Flathead County Conservation District have been apprised of citizen concerns and are actively assessing potential environmental impacts. All relevant documentation, including the environmental assessment and the stormwater drainage plan, remain publicly available on the City's official website within the agenda packets from the original public hearings.

Ann Halter, 315 Meadow Lake Dr. expressed concern regarding the transparency of the process, asserting that certain elements of the stormwater retention plan were not adequately presented to the public during the preliminary hearings. She emphasized that such omissions undermine the integrity of citizen participation.

Mayor Barnhart clarified that all relevant materials, including the retention pond plans, had been presented during the initial hearings and were available on the City's website. The Mayor reiterated that the Council has consistently endeavored to ensure transparency and accessibility of materials.

City Attorney Breck stated for the record that in his sixteen (16) years of attending Council meetings, the Council has consistently taken public comment seriously and has acted in good faith in all deliberations. He underscored that Council decisions have always been informed by public participation as required under law.

Scott Lockman, 30 Garnier Lane disputed that the stormwater plans were disclosed at prior hearings, citing noise, environmental damage, and disruption caused by ongoing construction. He and others described significant impacts to Garnier Creek, including sedimentation, destruction of forested areas, and increased noise levels from early morning construction activities.

Mayor Barnhart clarified that the Council did not withhold information from the public. The plat and stormwater drainage plan are posted on the City's website as part of the public packet. He noted the Council relies on experts for technical reviews, which are outside its jurisdiction.

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Barnhart explained that while residents once provided input through the Council when the City and County shared authority, that responsibility shifted entirely to the County in June. He said the City has met its obligations, confirmed jurisdiction with County officials, and emphasized that nothing was withheld or intended to mislead the public.

Julie Mitchell, 20 Garnier Lane referenced Resolution 1891 and its attached conditions, specifically Condition 18, which required that the Garnier Creek buffer remain undeveloped in a natural state. Ms. Mitchell asserted that subsequent alterations to subdivision plans, including placement of stormwater retention ponds, contravened these conditions. She further noted that to her knowledge any modification of Condition 18 would require a new public hearing under Montana Code Annotated § 76-3-615.

City Attorney Breck responded that while the City Council established the original conditions during preliminary approval, ultimate authority for issuance of final plat now rests with Flathead County, which will ensure compliance with stated conditions before final approval is granted.

Paul Kruger 25 Garnier Lane highlighted conflicting interpretations between City and County planning authorities regarding responsibility for enforcement of Condition 18. Mr. Kruger presented correspondence suggesting that both entities had, at times, disclaimed jurisdiction. He urged resolution of this conflict, asserting that failure to preserve the buffer zone had directly harmed Garnier Creek.

Other residents echoed similar concerns, with one citizen testifying to the visible decline of the creek's ecological health, citing loss of fish and amphibian populations. Citizens appealed to the Council to advocate with DEQ and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) on their behalf

Nancy Gresham, 224 Meadow Lake Dr. has concerns regarding increased traffic impacts on Meadow Lake Drive. Residents estimated that subdivision traffic could generate as many as nine hundred (900) additional vehicle trips per day, significantly affecting neighborhood character.

City Manager Hanks noted that traffic studies had been conducted and included in prior Planning Board and City Council agenda packets, all of which remain publicly accessible.

Members of the Council expressed empathy for citizen concerns while reiterating the legal limitations placed upon municipal authority following enactment of Senate Bill 382. Several Councilors acknowledged that while the subdivision was initially subject to City jurisdiction, subsequent statutory changes now place final authority with Flathead County and the State. Councilors encouraged residents to continue engaging directly with DEQ, DNRC, and County representatives to ensure their concerns are addressed.

Geotechnical Evaluation - 2nd Ave E Slope Stability Assessment

City Manager Hanks said on the Geotechnical evaluation update. The City Manager Hanks reported that geotechnical engineers recommended a comprehensive subsurface boring analysis at a cost of thirty-five thousand dollars (\$35,000) to determine slope stability and groundwater impacts. The Montana Municipal Interlocal Authority (MMIA) advised that the City bears a duty to mitigate potential hazards once identified.

The Council discussed three courses of action: (1) monitoring the slope for changes without intervention, (2) undertaking non-engineered mitigation measures, or (3) proceeding with a full geotechnical engineering evaluation. Given liability concerns, the City staff recommended option three.

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Councilor Price made motion to authorize the City Manager to execute the agreement for the Geotechnical Evaluation, seconded by Councilor Shepard with council voting as follows. Ayes: King, Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper noted that the Study Commission meeting would convene on September 11th.

Councilor Shepard reported ongoing efforts to secure land for a veterans' cemetery in northwest Montana, citing the significant veteran population within the region.

Further discussion was held regarding public parking near stop signs, annual operating costs of the municipal pool, and related matters of community interest.

Mayor Barnhart reiterated the Council's commitment to maintaining recreational facilities, including provision of a baseball field for youth sports following removal of the Railroad Street field.

The Mayor concluded by acknowledging the active participation of citizens who continue to attend and voice concerns. While reiterating the Council's limited jurisdiction in certain matters, he emphasized the importance of continued civic engagement and encouraged residents to bring their advocacy to Flathead County and State forums where authority now resides.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks announced that an open house will be held at City Hall on August 27 for the Downtown Parking and Sidewalk Project, which marks Phase 2 of the downtown improvements. Information is available on the city's website and flyer.

He expressed appreciation for Susan Nicosia, who remains under contract with the City, noting her instrumental role in assisting him, the Finance Director, and the entire Finance Department throughout the budget cycle.

The playground at Columbus Park is expected to open within the next few days, pending delivery of the safety chips. All other components are in place, and the community, especially children, is eagerly anticipating its opening.

Fire Chief Weeks and Public Works Director Bates are currently reviewing the City's new fire engine. The vehicle has received high praise and is scheduled for delivery in September.

At the Aquatic Center, more than 70 customer surveys have been submitted, highlighting staff professionalism, affordability, and quality swim programs. Areas for improvement include communication on pool status and scheduling. Plans are in place to enhance electronic updates next year. Survey responses also reinforced the need for facility modernization discussed in the budget process.

The Gateway to Glacier Safety and Mobility Project is advancing with a near-final design, including property adjustments on 13th Street and drainage considerations. The project is expected to go to bid in October, pending federal funding, with construction scheduled from March to November 2026. A December open house will allow residents to meet with city staff, engineers, and the contractor.

The Chamber of Commerce and Destination Marketing Office are conducting a survey through Discover Columbia Falls to gather community input on tourism and local priorities. Results will help guide upcoming city projects, including updates to the growth policy. Residents are encouraged to participate.

In response to Mayor Barnhart's inquiry, the school district has committed to funding sidewalks on its

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property, as federal funds for the downtown project may only be used on City right-of-way. Councilor Price also asked whether Church Women United, which funded the new playground equipment, had been notified of its installation.

OTHER REPORTS

Chief of Police Stephens reported on an August 7 pursuit of a suspected impaired driver that ended in a crash, foot chase, and arrest. The suspect is facing his eighth DUI, required Taser deployment and a physical arrest. Stephens noted the incident underscored the need for proper staffing to handle lengthy evidence processing and highlighted the importance of updated Taser equipment to reduce risks to officers and suspects.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

ADJOURN

Councilor King motioned to adjourn at 8:31PM, seconded by Councilor Piper

Mayor

City Clerk