

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD JANUARY 05, 2026**

City Clerk Staaland administered Oath of Office to - Donald Barnhart, Paula Robinson, Marijke Stob, and Christopher Semok for four-year terms.

REGULAR MEETING – 7:00 P.M.

Mayor Barnhart called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m.

ROLL CALL: Councilor King, Councilor Piper, Councilor Price, Councilor Robinson, Councilor Semok, Councilor Stob and Mayor Barnhart.

Also Present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, Police Chief Stephens and City Attorney Breck via zoom.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

APPROVAL OF AGENDA: Mayor Barnhart noted amendments to the agenda-adding new hire Tyler Henry in the Police Department and electing a Pro Tempore of the council. Councilor Robinson motioned to approve the amended agenda, seconded by Councilor Price and the motion carried unanimously.

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor Piper made motion to approve the consent agenda, noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried.

Approval of Claims - January 5, 2026 - \$110,668.59

Approval of Payroll Claims - December 19, 2025 - \$204,292.31

Approval of Payroll Claims - December 26, 2025 - \$1,811.26

Approval of Payroll Claims - Jan. 2, 2026 - \$126,470.64

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - December 15, 20225

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION: Kelly King - Public Works Street Department - 10 years of service
Mayor Barnhart recognized Kelly King for his 10 years of service in the city street department, presenting him with 10 years of service pen and thanking him for his dedicated service.

APPOINTMENTS:

The Columbia Falls Police Department conducted applicant testing for the position of Probationary Police Patrol Officer. Throughout the intensive interview and following background investigation, Tyler Henry stood out and was selected as our newest Police Patrol Officer. Tyler has three years of experience with the Cut Bank Police Department and is a native of Flathead Valley.

City Clerk Staaland administered Oath of Office to Probationary Patrolman Tyler Henry.

Councilor Robinson made motion to appoint John Piper as Pro Tempore, seconded by Councilor Price and the motion carried unanimously.

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Dave Peterson, 201 4th Ave E., addressed the council to congratulate them and express his excitement about the new council composition, emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives, particularly on housing and affordability issues. He also raised concerns about the implementation of a frisbee golf course at River's Edge Park, highlighting safety issues and the potential impact on the park's riparian area. Despite initial reservations, Peterson expressed support for the concept after observing young families enjoying the activity, suggesting a well-managed course could attract more visitors.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: Wastewater Capacity Allocation Update - The Wastewater Treatment Plant is nearing its calculated capacity to meet all requirements for previously committed wastewater capacity allocation and new requirements within current development applications. The city staff is requesting Planning Commission and City Council guidance on interim wastewater allocation priorities prior to staff completing review and scheduling of current development applications.

City Manager Hanks provided an update on wastewater treatment capacity, explaining that the plant is approaching its calculated capacity for existing and new development commitments. He clarified that while the facility is near full capacity for nutrient removal processes, there is no risk of regulatory non-compliance or environmental disaster, as the system has adequate hydraulic capacity to handle peak flows. The discussion emphasized that the current capacity calculations are based on a specific population baseline of 1,894 people, with inflow and infiltration from ground flooding being the main cause of peak flow events.

Hanks explained that the current wastewater capacity allocation would not impact single-family homes but would affect large subdivisions and commercial uses with high water volume. He provided charts showing wastewater flow rates and peak events, clarifying that the June 2022 rainfall event was included in the 2023 engineering report and influenced the decision to use the 1894 design flow number, which is currently approved by DEQ. Hanks recommended allocating up to 95% of the wastewater capacity for an additional 1,500 people, leaving 400 people as a safety margin. He also discussed the development applications for Garnier Heights and Lazy Days Court, emphasizing the importance of approving the Meadow Lake Boulevard property to avoid impacting another approved project in the same area.

The council discussed wastewater capacity issues, recommending a moratorium on large annexation developments while planning for future capacity increases. The council addressed infrastructure inflow and infiltration problems.

D.J. Zor, 372 Bedrock Dr., stated that the system is currently at 100% nutrient capacity for DEQ compliance, not hydraulic capacity. He asked what the consequences would be if the City became noncompliant with DEQ or EPA requirements and what the City's plan is to remain in compliance.

He emphasized that his intent is not to inhibit growth or development but to also ensure the City maintains compliance with the operating permit. He was asked whether studies have been done on seasonal peak usage and I & I event, noting increased use from ADUs and short-term rentals during high-demand periods.

City Manager Hanks replied that the City has not violated DEQ permits during high-peak rainfall and high flow events. He noted that the City has not approached levels that would trigger DEQ compliance issues. Hanks acknowledged a clear spike in wastewater flow during the summer season at Meadow Lake, which reflects

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seasonal population changes. He explained that projections and calculations vary depending on whether the City uses summer seasonal population or annual averages, which affects the flow numbers.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Dr. said she has questions on the 4th Ave. W. apartments applications is on the list. Hanks confirmed the apartments are on the provided allocation list.

NEW BUSINESS:

Council Committee Assignments: Initial discussion of Council Committee requirements and assignments and discussion at the scheduled January 20, 2026, Council meeting.

Local Government Study Commission Informational Briefing: City Attorney Breck explained the statutory process governing study commissions and charter amendments. He noted that an amendment to a self-government charter constitutes a change in the form of government under § 7-3-131, and that an alternative plan proposed by a study commission is handled as provided in § 7-3-149. Throughout the statutes, the study commission's role is described as making recommendations.

Section 7-3-149 requires the governing body, the city council, to call an election on a change recommended by the Study Commission. While the council calls the election by resolution, the Study Commission's recommendations are intended to be specific, including the proposed election date.

Sections 7-3-185 and 7-3-186 authorize the Study Commission to examine the municipal government and require it to establish a timetable within 90 days of its first meeting. That timetable must include setting the date for the election on adopting the recommended plan.

The election must comply with Title 13 election requirements, including authorized election dates and the requirement that the election be held at least 85 days after the council's resolution calling it. The City Council may also authorize the election to be conducted by mail. While the council formally calls the election, the statutes provide limited discretion to alter the Study Commission's recommendations.

City Manager Hanks stated that the election would need to be conducted as a polling place election and would cost the City approximately \$10,000. He noted that funding is available to cover the cost.

Councilor Robinson commented that the format of the election would depend on whether the City chose a mail ballot or a polling place election. She noted that the measure would appear on the county's ballot and would not be a separate city ballot. Adding that holding the election during the primary could require two ballots, potentially doubling costs, whereas holding it during the general election would require only one ballot. Robinson further explained that ballots are provided to all registered voters, which increases costs, and that the difference between primary and general election costs is significant.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper asked whether sidewalks along Highway 2 had been cleaned, noting improved conditions near Pizza Hut. City Manager Hanks confirmed that crews worked in the area for several days and significantly cleaned it up.

Councilor Piper asked if staff had contacted the disc golf community regarding park etiquette and safety. He expressed support for shared park use and suggested outreach through an association. City Manager Hanks

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said he had not contacted them directly but noted they are aware of the concerns and explained that, as with pickleball courts and the skate park, the City remains responsible for enforcement.

Councilor Price inquired about the report on the hillside on 6th St. E. City Manager Hanks stated the hillside report for 6th Street East has not yet been received and is expected in January.

Councilor Price praised Chief Stephens' Facebook outreach, noting increased engagement and improved public connection.

Councilor Stob shared concerns about the disc golf course layout, particularly near water and pedestrian areas, and suggested working with the disc golf association to explore adjustments.

Mayor Barnhart thanked Councilor Robinson for committing to another four-year term. He emphasized the importance of public participation planning and noted updated materials have been published on the City's website. He requested updated council and employee contact information and raised the idea of exploring secure email or alternative communication methods to improve public access while protecting privacy.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks reviewed upcoming meetings and planning activities. He stated that a joint workshop with the Planning Commission and City Council will be held on Monday, January 26, to review survey results and existing conditions for the Land Use Plan. This will be a workshop night, not a regular council meeting.

Hanks noted that supporting documents for the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MALUPA) are available on the City's website, including the 2019 Growth Policy, public participation plan, housing study, and educational materials from the Montana Department of Commerce. He explained that the Land Use Plan and Growth Policy are functionally the same for the City and emphasized that Columbia Falls is updating a relatively recent and well-written policy.

Hanks announced that the City's website will transition to a new platform in early February, allowing greater flexibility, including an option to shield council email addresses through a forwarding system while maintaining public access.

Upcoming dates include a Planning Commission meeting on January 8; the next City Council meeting on Tuesday, January 20, due to the holiday; and a Government Study Commission meeting on January 21 to adopt its final report. On January 20, the Fire Chief and Police Chief will present annual reports and 2026 goals. A mid-year budget update is scheduled for February 16.

Hanks reported ongoing coordination challenges related to county landfill biosolids, with a meeting scheduled for January 14. He also noted that the City is recruiting for a Finance Director, with Roger Elliott serving as interim.

Land Use Planning focus groups will be held on January 21, 28, and 29. Participation will be confidential to encourage open discussion. Capital improvement updates included progress on pool modernization, with a new boiler and three new splash pad features ordered and expected before swim season.

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Hanks highlighted training opportunities for elected officials, including live training on January 23, reference materials provided to council members, and an invitation for the Mayor and City Manager to attend the Montana Executive Forum in March.

During closing discussion, the City Attorney advised that emails related to City business, including those sent from personal accounts, should be retained as public records.

The meeting concluded with an opportunity for additional comments under Good of the Order.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

ADJOURN

Councilor Robinson motioned to adjourn at 8:35 p.m., seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk