

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD MARCH 18, 2024**

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

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

Also present: City Manager Nicosia, City Clerk Staland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Bates, Fire Chief Weeks, and Police Chief Peters.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor King made motion to approve the consent agenda noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Shepard with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

Approval of Claims - \$71,043.98

Approval of Special Payroll Claims - \$608.70 - March 8, 2024

Approval of Payroll Claims - \$113,900.49 - March 15, 2024

Approval of March 4, 2024, Regular City Council Meeting Minutes

Approval of Agreement for Temporary Construction Easement Agreements and Authorize City Manager to Execute

APPOINTMENTS:

Appointments - Probationary Volunteer Firefighters and Oath of Office - Melissa Johnson and Tanner Kienas
Fire Chief Weeks said Melissa Johnson submitted her application a couple months ago and is already an EMT plus has experience with the West Glacier Fire Department. Tanner Kienas has been on the Somers Fire Department for a couple years and also comes with Fire Department experience.

Staff recommend appointment of the two applicants.

Councilor Lovering motioned to appoint Melisa Johnson and Tanner Kienas as probationary Firefighters, seconded by Councilor King and the motion carried unanimously. City Clerk Staland administered the oath of office to the candidates and the Council and Administration welcomed them to the City.

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

James Livingston, 175 4th Ave, EN, said he is opposed to making the Railroad St. baseball field into housing and provided council with a petition with several names on it. Mr. Livingston said the baseball field is well used and green space is needed in the neighborhood. Mr. Livingston wants to know who is authorizing the sale of the property or who offered to buy the property.

Craig Tucker, 2305 Columbia Dr. said he is with the Columbia Falls Baseball League and the league has not heard anything from the city but read about the proposal on social media and Hungry Horse News. Mr. Tucker said he contacted the School District and they said they received a phone call from the City Manager, and nothing was approved. Mr. Tucker said the cost to use the school baseball field is \$2,000 - \$4,000 per year,

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which is much more than they pay the city. Tucker said the T-ball and Rookie teams have doubled in size this season. Tucker said he is here to get answers to better understand what is going on at the ball field.

Mr. Tucker read a letter from Brad Neilson President of the Columbia Falls Baseball League stating he is opposed to relocating the baseball field from Railroad Park to the school. Losing this field will put this league under pressure to operate year to year. There has been no contact from the city about the effect it will have on the league. Mr. Neilson urges the council to consider a project priority that best serves the community.

Mark Lampman, 160 6th St. EN, said he has used the ball field a lot for several sports over the years. A few years ago, the city put money into the park by installing a two-inch tap with an irrigation system. Mr. Lampman is opposed to making the park into housing for 8 units and would like to keep the green space on the east side of town because once it's gone it's gone, said Lampman.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Dr. said she is representing the Coalition for a Clean CFAC and wanted to bring council up to date on recent meetings. Recently they met with EPA and DEQ leadership regarding the proposed plan for CFAC cleanup and had the opportunity to share goals and ideas in the cleanup process. It was a productive meeting resulting in cooperation and desire to work together, said Folkwein. The list of 1400 petition signatures and 12 organizations representing 15,000 constituents was presented to the Council. The response from the Environmental Quality Council members was encouraging, with them offering to help with our effort.

Councilor Piper asked if the city has a cost for the Columbia Falls Baseball League to use the ball field at the school. He is uncomfortable not having all the information before proceeding. Piper believes we need to provide when we take away.

Councilor King said she does not like the idea that the league will have to go to the Jr. High and does not like the idea of closing the park. King said the proposed housing is needed and it is affordable.

Mr. Tucker said due to Covid they lost a \$14,000 grant from Flathead Electric to help with safety at the park. The Jr. High is a better option, but funding is a problem.

City Manager Nicosia said the City does not have a written agreement with the School District for the baseball field as it would not be the city contracting for the school property. However, Nicosia noted that the question from the City Council was if there was a location to relocate RR Street Ballfield. Nicosia noted that city staff reviewed and while there was room for another field at Fenholt, there is limited parking. Per extensive conversation with the SD 6 Athletic Director, there is space on school district property to relocate the field. There is currently a field with a backstop at the Jr. High that is available now. Mr. Bowman had 3 different possible locations for the league. Nicosia also noted that Northwest Community Land trust is working on grants to help move the field, it was not the city's intent for the baseball league to lose the field and incur significant cost. The baseball league has not applied for city park use for this year, but the Railroad field will be available for this season.

Councilor King would like to have more collaboration between the Baseball League and the City.

Councilor Robinson said it is her understanding that the city owns the land and is not selling it. City Manager Nicosia said after the houses are built, the property would be deeded to the Land Trust, ensuring affordability in perpetuity. The other part of the proposal is there is a half-acre designated for a public park with playground equipment, said Robinson.

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Robinson said she is for having space for the Baseball League as it is a worthy cause for the kids but is still a proponent of affordable housing. It is the only piece of property the city has to offer. Should this fail Robinson said she doesn't want to hear any more about affordable housing as a council goal.

Councilor Shepard said the council has been beat on about housing. He is not thrilled about losing the field but has seen half hazard use over the years. The city needs affordable housing, and we need to remind the School District there should not be a cost to T-ball to use a school baseball field.

Councilor Lovering concurs with Robinson and Shepard and feels finding a solution for baseball is doable. We are going to lose teachers because they cannot afford housing in Columbia Falls. Lovering said she loves and wants green space but also wants people to live in Columbia Falls. The City has more parks than any city in the Flathead. The housing proposal includes a public park, it may not look the same, but it is still green space. We owe it to the young people that want to stay in this area to have affordable living options.

Mayor Barnhart said when this was brought forward, he stated he could not support it unless there was a location for the kids. We haven't gotten all the information such as place and cost for the baseball league. He has lived in the area for many years and folks in the area do not want to lose the green space. Mayor Barnhart noted that the City has not transferred the property. Mayor Barnhart said he is torn between the two at this point. Lovering asked if there could be a compromise with a larger green space.

Councilor Robinson also noted that the agenda and minutes are always posted before each meeting, council gets beat up for not informing residents of what's going on, but people need to be more responsible and active in the community, go to the city website and see what's on the agenda and read prior meeting minutes. Councilor Robinson would like to see greater public participation.

NEW BUSINESS:

Approval of Eagle Scout (Merrick Fairchild) Project Concept and Authorize City Manager to Sign Project Form

The City Parks Committee has reviewed the project and has recommended a site location. The Parks Committee recommends approval of Ms. Fairchild's proposed project concept. The Parks Committee and City Staff will review and approve the final design and location.

Merrick Fairchild, Life Scout with Troup 1941 G said she is proposing a children's memorial garden at Wildcat Park. She plans to work very closely with the Parks Committee to create a low maintenance design that requires minimal care but is beautiful from spring to late fall. Ms. Fairchild believes the city will benefit from the project to celebrate the lives of community children. The location is highly visible within the school zone and a nice neighborhood said Ms. Fairchild.

Councilor Lovering motioned to authorize City Manager Nicosia to sign the project form for Merrick Fairchild's Eagle Scout project, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Council Absence

Councilor Piper has announced his retirement from his PERS-covered position at the Montana Veterans Home. Pursuant to PERS rules, Mr. Piper must have a 90-day separation from all PERS-covered employment, including Council. Therefore, Mr. Piper must have a 90-day separation from his elected position. The council may grant a 90-day leave without vacating his position.

Councilor Lovering moved to approve Mr. Piper's 90-day separation, seconded by Councilor Shepard and the motion carried unanimously.

Letter of Support – 2024-2025 MBCC NW Montana Drug Task Force

City Manager Nicosia said this is an annual renewal request for the NW Montana Drug Task Force. Mayor Barnhart asked do we receive money for being a member. Police Chief Peters said we do not receive financial assistance as we do not have an officer assigned to work with the Task Force, but we utilize the Task Force on a regular basis, and they are very important to our operation.

Councilor King motioned to approve the letter of support to the NW Montana Drug Task Force, seconded by Councilor Robinson and the motion carried.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Second and Final Reading - Ordinance #829 - Amend Title 13 - Water/Utility Accounts

City Manager Nicosia said there have been no changes to Ordinance #829 since the March 4th council meeting. There have been additional conversations with landlords and property owners with City staff and they don't believe there will be much of a change. The ordinance will be effective 30 days after passage and our goal is to have it fully operational by July 1, 2024. Mayor Barnhart asked if the property owner and the tenant will both receive a bill and if the tenant changes, they won't have to come into the city. Finance Director Bates said that is correct, it will be the owner's responsibility to let the city know if there are new tenants.

Councilor Piper made a motion to approve the final reading of Ordinance #829, seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Robinson, and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper said his last day on council before his required PERS 90-day absence is April 1, 2024.

Piper thanked the Police Officers for their help with residents at the Veterans Home. They make safe decisions on helping residents out.

Councilor Shepard asked Nicosia to follow up with the baseball association on the ballfield. The parking at the current field is atrocious.

Councilor Shepard said as a council we have dealt with the CFAC cleanup for 9 years. Shepard said the worst thing we can do is delay the process. They have a track record of what they are doing because of the plants in Oregon and Washington. Shepard said the worst thing they can do is to dig it up.

Mayor Barnhart said the EPA response letter answered a lot of questions the Coalition had for them.

Mayor Barnhart didn't realize so many folks near the Railroad ballfield were against the proposed housing project. River's Edge Park is nice, and folks were utilizing it well, Mayor asked if the bathroom was in service. Nicosia said we are waiting for parts, but it is scheduled to be repaired. Barnhart noted there is a lack of trash cans at the park, and he would like to see more. The other thing we need to be aware of is the benches need to be moved back.

Mayor Barnhart would like to get the street opened at 1st Ave E and 6th St. E.

Councilor Shepard commented on the skateboard park petition submitted to Council, it has been in the paper for a few months now.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

Nicosia reported that the City Planning Commission held their first meeting last Thursday and adopted their bylaws and appointed a president and vice president. There is still one opening for a city resident on the commission. They set their monthly meetings for the second Thursday of each month. Nicosia said there were three people in attendance at the meeting.

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The City was not successful on the RTP grant application on the bike path/sidewalk by the school and Ruis property but will keep it on the project list and seek other funding sources.
Kudos to the Police Department, they are out heavily patrolling throughout the community as shown in the Police report.

MISCELLANEOUS REPORT

Chief Peters reported that there have been multiple thefts from unlocked vehicles, he asked HHN to put out a notice about keeping vehicles and property locked and secure.
Chief Peters noted that the city talked about proactive community policing and with current staffing, we are getting there. Additionally, the officers are averaging 10 – 20 traffic stops a day.
Chief Peters said they are extremely short at the 911 center, but employees recently received a \$3 per hour wage increase. The hope is they can get fully staffed very soon.
Mayor Barnhart asked about people burning debris within the city, is that complaint driven. Chief Peters said if we see it, we can stop and talk but it helps when folks call it in.

MISCELLANEOUS

Police Department - February 2024 Activity Report
correspondence

CLOSED SESSION - PERSONNEL MATTER

Mayor Barnhart closed the meeting at 8:23 PM so the Council may review the City Manager applications.
Mayor Barnhart noted that the applicant's right to privacy exceeds the public's right to know at this stage of the selection process.

ADJOURN

Mayor Barnhart opened the meeting and seeing no other business to come before the Council, Councilor Shepard motioned to adjourn the regular council meeting, seconded by Councilor Lovering and the motion carried.

Mayor

City Clerk