

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
PLANNING COMMISSION WORKSHOP MINUTES
HELD SEPTEMBER 12, 2024**

HOUSING STUDY WORKSHOP – 6:00 PM.

President Fisher called Meeting to order at 6:01 PM

PRESENT: President Darin Fisher, Vice President Justin Ping, Commissioner Mark Johnson, Commissioner Sam Kavanagh

ABSENT: Commissioner Dulcie Berube

Also present: Interim City Manager Mark Shrives, Contract Planner Eric Mulcahy, City Attorney Justin Breck, Public Works Clerk Caleb Sobczak

COLUMBIA FALLS HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT PRESENTATION:

President Fisher asked WSW Consulting to begin their presentation.

Wendy Sullivan with WSW Consulting introduced herself and her team; Andrew Coburn with Urban Rural Continuum and Sarah McClain with Open Spaces.

Sullivan and her team presented a power point regarding the contents of the Housing Study beginning with an overview of the study purpose and process and continuing to the study goals and outcomes where she sought feedback from the Commission on their needs and hopes from this study.

Vice President Ping asked if temporary or seasonal housing needs for employees a part of the analysis? Sullivan said that it is looked at as its own segment.

President Fisher has observed that his employees have problems with housing in this community and would like to know if the anecdotal evidence he sees is correct or not.

Commissioner Kavanagh would like to see different financial levels broken out because he believes the housing we do see is not necessarily based on the local income. There are a disproportionate number of houses that are being used as second homes and vacation rentals and he is curious if there is statistics on vacation rental homes. Sullivan answered that vacation rentals will be looked at.

Commissioner Johnson wants to get a feeling of what is driving the gap of the housing cost being well over 30% of household income and how much a market and driver is short term rentals.

Vice President Ping would like it looked at not just from an STR perspective but a secondary and tertiary residence as well.

The next part of the presentation on roles, tasks and timing was turned over to Coburn.

McClain then presented more information on the employer survey.

Sullivan spoke on the planned meetings and deliverables from this project as well as the next steps of the study.

Commissioner Johnson asked how to account for remote workers in the 59912 zip code area.

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Sullivan answered that the survey would be targeting employers in the 59912 area and the survey will not be distributed to the Whitefish or Kalispell areas. There is secondary data sources that helps them understand the cross-commuting and the extent to which residents of 59912 are working in other communities. The employer survey will be paired with the secondary data to get into detail.

Commissioner Kavanagh wondered about the National Park Service and Forest Service as seasonal employers and there might be more employees living in our community versus other communities due to our proximity to Glacier Park so they might be a unique employer to look at.

Vice President Ping had a procedural question on who will receive the draft surveys. Sullivan stated that Contract Planner Mulcahy will be the primary contact between WSW Consulting and the City. Mulcahy expanded by saying that he will run drafts by the Commission via email.

President Fisher wondered about the best way for the public to get their ideas to the City.

Mulcahy said to send it to Public Works Clerk Sobczak and he will send to himself in a large batch.

Commissioner Kavanagh commented that we run the risk of not capturing the complete picture if building or septic permits are excluded to city limits only. Sullivan had a follow-up question on where to obtain information on the building in the adjacent area. Sobczak answered that the County would need to be contacted and they do not have a building department so no permits are required for residential projects and commercial projects obtain State building permits. Kavanagh said that an accurate attempt would have to be made by finding new septic permits. City Staff agrees.

City Attorney Breck stated that the previous planning boundary will have to be factored into this study. Mulcahy has spoken to Sullivan and Coburn on this and there is good data in the census but the census blocks around the City can be cumbersome and Sullivan will work through these challenges. She wants to look at the entire 59912 zip code to be able to pull in these wider trends around the City with a closer look around city limits and "the donut".

VISITOR OR PUBLIC COMMENT: President Fisher opened public comment at 6:44 PM

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Ln, Columbia Falls. Donut will need to be included as much as possible and it is crucial to look at the subdivisions that have been approved by City Council but development has not begun. Vacant land will need to be looked at in the donut area. Need to consider the type of land and if it is appropriate for housing. Mulcahy said that this will not be looked at in the housing study but will be looked at during the Growth Policy update for Senate Bill 382. Public will need to be involved in input to the housing study. Will there be other points that the public will be informed? Mulcahy said yes, during outreach and draft dissemination, but a lot of this is data crunching by the consultants. President Fisher reminded everyone that this is just one piece of Senate Bill 382. Public portal on the website is difficult and needs to be streamlined. More housing equals price going down and would like to see data on this. Wants to know if there will be a survey of current City services? Mulcahy answered that this will be required in Senate Bill 382 but is not a part of this housing study.

Gary Hall, did not give address. Concern on annexation. Had good meeting with the County Planning Board regarding Columbia Falls residents and gave them opportunity for input. The public wants to be part of the process even though they are outside of city limits.

Mike Burr, 560 Talbot Rd, Columbia Falls. Concern on the public input, local residents need to be interviewed. Everyone says to not get hung up on this little segment but many little segments make a whole. Second homes need to be identified.

Dee Flemming, 24 Diane Rd Unit C, Columbia Falls. Concerned about adhering to people that have 30% of income for housing but mortgage lenders are looking at people that have more because it is difficult to qualify. Asks survey to include mortgage lenders. Average price of a home in Flathead Valley is \$540,000 for a 3 bedroom house. Doubts there

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are very many people that can qualify for that. Bozeman has new employee housing that employers provide. Would like a tax credit to local business to provide housing because it is hard to find housing especially in the summer.

Gary Hall, did not give address. Wondering if Meadowlake will be a part of the survey process. Mulcahy answered yes.

Marissa Getts, 1306 3rd Ave W, Columbia Falls. Would like to offer to work with Sullivan to support her having worked with her previously in Whitefish. A housing crisis leads us to see any open lands as appropriate for housing and would like to encourage thinking about special ecological and cultural lands and prioritize incremental development using local developers and investments.

President Fisher closed public comment at 7:06 PM and asked Sullivan if she had any comments or needs from the Commission. Sullivan answered no, she has gotten a lot of good information and notes from the public and is excited to get started.

ADJOURNMENT – Meeting duly adjourned at 7:08 PM

President

Attest:

Public Works Clerk