

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD SEPTEMBER 02, 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, Councilor Shepard and Mayor Barnhart.

Also present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Rice and Police Sergeant Rice.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

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

Approval of Claims September 2, 2025 - \$559,880.81

Approval of Payroll Claims - August 22, 2025 - \$30,663.41

Approval of Payroll Claims - August 29, 2025 - \$221,056.75

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - August 18, 2025

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Darin Fisher said the Columbus Park playground equipment looks very nice and is getting much use. That park is really coming together between pickleball, basketball, volleyball and the new equipment it is getting heavy use this year. Fisher extended his thanks to staff and council for the upgrades.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Final Budget Presentation

This evening City Manager Hanks presented the proposed tax and non-tax levy schedules for Fiscal Year 2026. The final budget message will be delivered at the September 15 council meeting, but tonight's discussion highlighted the direction we are taking and the decisions that lie ahead.

At the conclusion of tonight's public hearing, the council will consider three resolutions. The first is Resolution 1950, which levies special assessments for street and lighting services. The second is Resolution 1951, which formally adopts mill levies totaling 148.44 mills. The third is Resolution 1952, which authorizes appropriations in accordance with the tax and non-tax levy schedule.

For the General Fund, the City's primary operating fund, appropriations total \$5,483,440. In keeping with council policy, we will continue to maintain a twenty percent reserve, supported in part by resort tax revenues. This reserve is essential to protecting the City's financial stability and ensuring we are prepared for emergencies. This year, the resort tax will offset \$441,480, reducing residential property tax requirements by more than forty mills. The permissive medical levy stands at 38.05 mills, as previously discussed, while the

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emergency disaster and local government review levies remain at zero for the year because reserves are already sufficient to meet state and federal obligations. Compared with last year, appropriations in the General Fund will increase by \$435,420, reflecting the City's commitment to strengthening services while keeping a responsible balance sheet.

Although the City's overall financial position remains stable, there are areas of concern that require attention. The Street Maintenance District continues to operate with insufficient funds despite a modest five percent increase that was approved earlier this year. The fund still relies heavily on gas tax revenue, and this remains a challenge for long-term sustainability. Water and sewer operations are also under financial strain. To preserve debt capacity for future growth, the Sewer Department was forced to cut \$70,000 in critical expenses this year. Water and Sewer Preliminary Engineering Reviews are ongoing. A utility rate study will be conducted in the spring, which will provide a clearer picture of the steps needed to ensure the system remains reliable.

On the revenue side, the city continues to benefit from important federal and state partnerships. This year, the RAISE grant for the Gateway to Glacier project will provide more than five million dollars, which represents roughly sixty percent of the total federal funding awarded for that project. Property tax revenue, which totals about \$1.6 million, accounts for only 6.8 percent of the City's overall budget, underscoring the fact that Columbia Falls relies on a diverse set of funding sources to operate. Intergovernmental grants, charges for services, and cash reserves also play an important role in ensuring stability. Carryover funds remain consistent at about twenty percent of annual revenue, reflecting the City's policy of maintaining a strong cushion for emergencies.

In terms of expenditures, public safety continues to be the top priority. Police, Fire, and Emergency Medical Services account for about half of the General Fund, which reflects both the size of these departments and the critical nature of their work. Operational spending remains healthy and balanced, while capital expenditures are driven largely by major projects such as the Gateway to Glacier Safety and Mobility project and the completion of the sewer facility capital project.

The city is also investing in a series of community-focused improvements. At the pool, operating costs were approximately \$141,000 this year, which included some facility upgrades such as painting and fascia repairs. Looking forward, the pool boiler will be replaced with a more efficient stainless-steel unit at a cost of \$135,000, and aging splash pad fixtures will be updated as well. City Hall will see a fresh coat of exterior paint this year, and plans are in place to modernize outdated restrooms and hallway areas in the coming budget cycle. At the street shop, funds are set aside to address a roof leak and to insulate the cold storage area, while the City Court facility is receiving a new air conditioning unit. These are modest but important steps to maintain safe and functional public buildings.

The River's Edge Fishing Pond Pier remains a priority project, and staff are working with the Rotary Club and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to pursue grants and partnerships to help fund it. Resort Tax revenue is expected to provide a substantial portion of the financing, with additional contributions possible through community and agency partnerships. Other projects in development include additional parking improvements at Columbus Park, signage upgrades for Rivers Edge Park, and continued investment in park infrastructure.

On the equipment side, the city continues to budget carefully to replace aging vehicles. Police patrol cars will be funded through the Resort Tax, and the Fire Department has recently completed the purchase of new radios with restricted cash from the sale of prior equipment. A new fire engine will arrive shortly, representing

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a major upgrade for public safety. Meanwhile, the fleet in the Streets and Parks departments continue to age, and staff is working on a long-term replacement plan that balances immediate needs with the realities of funding shortfall.

The city is also preparing for future street projects. This fall, we will complete a city-wide street condition assessment using the iWork program. The results will form the basis of a street prioritization plan to be presented to the council in October. This plan will allow us to make informed decisions about which roads most urgently need repair, and it will also highlight opportunities to combine street projects with water main replacement to maximize taxpayer value.

In closing the City's finances remain steady, supported by diverse revenue streams and careful fiscal management. At the same time, we face clear challenges in maintaining critical infrastructure. With the support of federal grants, the resort tax, and prudent long-term planning, Columbia Falls is positioned to continue delivering essential services while investing in projects that strengthen our community.

With no public comments Mayor Barnhart closed the Public Hearing at 7:38 p.m.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution #1950 - Levying Assessment upon property within Special Improvements Districts to defray the cost of said SID for the FY26.

Councilor Robinson motioned to approve Resolution #1950 seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering and Barnhart.

Resolution #1951 - Setting and adopting the mill levies on all real and personal property within the City. Councilor Robinson made motion to approve Resolution #1951, seconded by Councilor Shepard with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

Resolution #1952 - Adopting the budget for FY26 and approving appropriations for each fund. Councilor Robinson motioned to approve Resolution #1952, seconded by Councilor Lovering with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper said he had not supported the Resort Tax initially but is glad it is now in place.

Councilor Price asked for an update from PD on illegal parking at 12th Avenue and Talbot Road. Sergeant Rice explained the stop sign is 30 feet from parking, additional signage should help, and while he has not heard when it will be painted, the area sees regular trucking traffic and no parking is allowed along much of 12th Avenue.

Councilor Shepard noted a recent article on the PFAS issue and expressed gratitude that our water system has not been affected.

Councilor Shepard acknowledged the passing of Joe Silva, who worked in the Police Department from 1985 to 1990 and served on council from 1996 to 2003.

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Mayor Barnhart thanked Susan Nicosia for her assistance with the budget and congratulated City Manager Hanks on his strong work.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

On September 11, the Planning Commission will meet with an update on the Montana Land Use Planning Act (SB 382). This is not a kickoff but a chance to align the Commission with where the state and city stand. On September 15, I will brief the City Council with a similar update.

We have signed a contract with our website provider for a new design, which will launch in 45–60 days. The site will be paired with a city communication strategy and social media rollout, making it a central hub for information, including land use planning. The new design is similar to Kalispell, Whitefish, and Polson and replaces an outdated system phased out by CivicPlus.

Finance and Administration has posted an accountant position, now advertised on the city website. We continue to push for strong candidates to join the team.

Public Works and Planning used a rented stump grinder to remove stumps across the city, including at Rivers Edge Park, helping clean up right-of-way and public spaces.

With school back in session, patrols around schools are increasing. Sidewalk safety remains a concern, so the city will begin educating the public on codes regarding blocked sidewalks, followed by stronger enforcement to ensure safe routes for children.

OTHER REPORTS:

Sergeant Rice reported in August that the Police Department reported 15 DUIs, 408 traffic stops, over 9,000 miles patrolled, and 1,105 calls. Traffic accidents are down

Staff will soon begin tagging and leaving door hangers on improperly parked or stored vehicles, giving residents time to resolve issues before citations. City ordinance matches state code, so enforcement will be straightforward.

Finally, e-bike regulation remains a challenge. State law breaks e-bikes into tiers, but local enforcement lacks the tools to measure power levels. We are considering a city ordinance to align with state definitions: pedal-assist bikes are treated as bicycles, while bikes without pedals are motorized vehicles, with helmet requirements for riders under 18. For now, officers are educating riders and contacting parents.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

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

Mayor

City Clerk