

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD OCTOBER 20, 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 Stalaand, Deputy City Attorney Breck, Fire Chief Weeks and Police Chief Stephens.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

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

Approval of Claims - October 20, 2025 - \$157,336.38

Approval of Payroll Claims - October 10, 2025 - \$122,613.13

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - Oct. 6, 2025

Plant Investment Fee 5-year Agreements - Innov8Housing, LLC

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Roger Hopkins, 949 Vans Ave. invited Mayor and council to participate in an open discussion with the City Council candidates on October 28, 2025 at 6:15p.m. at the HUB in Columbia Falls. Mayor Barnhart expressed interest in conversing with City Attorney Breck on current council and City Manager involvement in attending such meeting.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Lane, asked if she was able to ask questions during the City Managers report on the Land Use Planning Consultant Contract.

APPOINTMENTS: Fire Chief Weeks reported that the Columbia Falls Fire Department voted to accept Jacob Thomas as a probationary Volunteer Firefighter. Mr. Thomas has completed all pre-hire requirements and demonstrated a strong interest in joining the department. He is currently employed at GPIA and holds an ARFF certification. Chief Weeks stated that Mr. Thomas would be an excellent addition to the team and recommended council approval.

Councilor Piper motioned to appoint Jacob Thomas as probationary Volunteer Firefighter, seconded by Councilor Shepard and the motion carried unanimously.

City Clerk Stalaand administered Oath of Office to Mr. Thomas.

NEW BUSINESS:

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES HELD ON OCTOBER 20, 2025

Land Use Planning Consultant Contract in support of MLUPA

City Manager Hanks reported that a contract selection committee consisting of Planning Commissioner Fisher, Councilor Price, Mayor Barnhart, himself, and Eric Mulcahy reviewed six proposals for land use planning services. Five firms were highly qualified, with significant experience in Montana cities. The committee unanimously selected Cushing Terrell as its top choice based on qualifications.

Hanks explained the process was proposal-based, with contract price negotiated afterward. Cushing Terrell's initial proposal totaled approximately \$184,000, exceeding the city's budget. Using funds from the city's Pro-Housing Grant (\$392,000 total, with \$100,000 allocated for the land use consultant), Hanks negotiated a reduced \$100,000 contract that focused on essential elements of the project.

He noted that while some portions of the proposal had to be cut, such as a traditional in-person open house public participation will still be prioritized through virtual open houses. City Hall will be open for residents to attend these virtual sessions in person, and Hanks will facilitate the meetings locally.

The kickoff workshop is tentatively planned for November 13, 2025, as a joint session of the City Council and Planning Commission, where the consultant will outline the engagement process, data collection, and review of current and future land use maps.

Hanks emphasized that there would continue to be numerous opportunities for public engagement, including in-person events tied to the upcoming water and sewer PER discussions in November, as well as through regular Planning Commission meetings. Additional sessions may be scheduled as the project advances.

He clarified that some technical work, such as GIS mapping, utility data, and housing analysis, will utilize existing city and county data rather than being redone to save costs. The Housing Study and utility PERs will serve as baseline references for the consultant's work.

Mayor Barnhart commended the quality of the proposals, noting that four of the five finalists had University of Montana connections and that Cushing Terrell's regional experience made them the clear choice.

Councilor Lovering suggested displaying maps during public discussions to help residents visualize zoning and infrastructure issues. Hanks confirmed large-format utility, zoning, and floodplain maps will be available at City Hall and posted online.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Dr., expressed concern about the removal of in-person open houses and emphasized the importance of early public involvement. Hanks assured that the city is committed to inclusive engagement, with both virtual and in-person opportunities throughout the process.

Resident Glenn Wehe, 267 Roberts Road, asked whether public gatherings would still be allowed during virtual meetings. Hanks confirmed that City Hall will be open for participation, and materials such as maps and consultant presentations will be displayed to support meaningful discussion.

Staff recommended authorization to enter a \$100,000 contract with Cushing Terrell for land use planning services.

Councilor Piper motioned to authorize the City Manager to execute the contract with Cushing Terrell for Land Use Planning Services, seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, King, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor King said she is pleased with the number of volunteer firefighters approved over the past few months.

Councilor Price inquired about parking concerns on 12th Avenue. Chief Stephens responded that officers would increase patrols in the area to monitor misuse of parking. Price also asked about the downed light pole at the baseball field. City Manager Hanks explained that the light pole is in the county and not under city jurisdiction. Price announced the upcoming Ladies Shopping Night on November 11th from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Councilor Shepard reported that speeding continues to be an issue on Railroad Street.

Mayor Barnhart concurred with Shepard that speeding remains a problem but noted an increased police presence in that area. Mayor suggested providing new firefighters with copies of both the United States Constitution and the Montana State Constitution prior to taking their oath of office.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks reported there will be an increased police presence on Halloween to ensure public safety. The City, Police, and Fire Departments will share safety reminders on social media encouraging drivers to slow down, use crosswalks, and watch for children.

He noted recent vandalism and arson incidents at Horine and Marantette Parks are under investigation. Staff are evaluating security camera options for the parks.

The Government Study Commission will meet October 22 to review its final report, with a public hearing to follow. The report will be presented to the City Council on November 3.

Staff is updating the street condition and prioritization plan to identify maintenance needs over the next few years. A public-facing document and map will outline upcoming projects and snow removal routes, distinguishing city, county, and state responsibilities.

Upcoming items include the Land Use Planning Consultant project kickoff with Cushing Terrell on November 13, and a utility infrastructure open house in the third week of November featuring city engineers and consultants discussing water and sewer system modeling.

Hanks said the Gateway to Glacier Safety and Mobility Project is awaiting federal fund obligation, with bidding expected in November and construction anticipated to begin in March 2026.

The city is transitioning its phone service from Verizon to T-Mobile, saving approximately \$4,000–\$5,000 annually and improving connectivity.

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The wastewater treatment plant expansion is nearing completion, with operational bioreactors and strong performance results. Bids are open for the Downtown Sidewalk and Parking Project, with a pre-bid meeting scheduled in the Council Chambers on October 29.

Hanks welcomed Roger Elliott as the new City Accountant, effective October 27, and commended staff for their Fire Prevention Week outreach.

He concluded by summarizing discussions from the Montana League of Cities and Towns Conference, highlighting sessions on property tax reform, TIF regulations, and the Montana Land Use Planning Act. He also noted statewide challenges with Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad (BNSF) regarding delays, permits, and coordination affecting local projects such as the 12th Avenue crossing.

MISCELLANEOUS REPORT

Fire Chief Weeks reported the department has been busy conducting tours and school education programs. He noted the department currently has 27 volunteers, with two additional recruits expected to join in the coming weeks.

Police Chief Stevens stated that Officer Friesen has transitioned into the STEP Grant position as the full-time DUI enforcement officer. He also announced the resignation of Officer R.J. Thompson, who is relocating for family reasons and will be greatly missed. The department has begun the hiring process to fill two patrol positions. In addition, the department is upgrading outdated computers, making FECC system improvements, and implementing the Axon upgrade, which includes new body cameras, in-car cameras, and a digital case management system for officers.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

ADJOURN: Councilor Lovering made motion to adjourn at 7:53 p.m. seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk