

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD DECEMBER 15, 2025

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

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

Also Present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, Finance Director Rice, Fire Chief Weeks, Public Works Director Bates and Police Chief Stephens.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

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

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

- Approval of Claims - December 15, 2025 - \$143,623.34
- Approval of Payroll Claims - Dec. 5, 2025 - \$138,062.57
- Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - December 1, 2025
- Contract with Montana League of Cities and Towns - FY 2025 Annual Financial Report
- Contract for Professional Services - River's Edge Park Fishing Pier Construction
Engineering oversight for the River's Edge Park Fishing Pier Project in accordance with the scope of work provided by WGM Group
- Wastewater Treatment Plant Project - HDR Contract Amendment 4
- City staff requests Council authorization to approve Agreement 4 of Wastewater Treatment Plant Engineering Services contract with HDR Engineering for the completion of an Arc Flash Study and extended engineering construction services.
- Pinewood Aquatic Center Boiler Replacement Contract

APPOINTMENTS: Probationary Volunteer Firefighters Kelsey Styler and Nolan Johnson

Fire Chief Weeks said the membership of the Columbia Falls Fire Department has voted to accept Nolan Johnson as a probationary volunteer firefighter. Nolan has completed all pre-hire requirements, attended several of our trainings, and has shown great interest in becoming a firefighter. The department has also voted to accept Kelsey Styler as a probationary volunteer firefighter. Kelsey has extensive experience as a firefighter with Evergreen Fire and is a license paramedic. Kelsey is not available for tonight's meeting and will make arrangements to be sworn in later.

Councilor Piper motioned to approve the appointment of Nolan Johnson and Kelsey Styler as Probationary Volunteer Firefighters, seconded by Councilor Lovering and the motion carried unanimously.
City Clerk Staaland Administer Oath of Office to Nolan Johnson.

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OATH OF OFFICE: City Clerk Staaland administered Oath of Office to City Judge Kristi Curtis for the term of January 1, 2026 - December 31, 2029, and Probationary Police Officer Heidi Reynolds.

Mayor Barnhart stated Councilors Shepard and Lovering have chosen not to run for reelection this year, after very long and appreciative service to the city of Columbia Falls. Councilor Shepard has been on council for approximately 30 years. He's been dedicated to the city of Columbia Falls for many, many years. Councilor Jenny Lovering has been a great addition to the City Council and has served the City of Columbia Falls for 12 years said Barnhart. We're certainly going to miss her and wish her the best after City Council.

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Darren Fisher, 303 3rd Avenue East. Said he had three brief comments. First, regarding the upcoming discussion on Wastewater capacity allocation, he serves as president of the Planning Commission. If questions arise related to our recent discussion, we would be happy to provide clarification at that time. Second, he was pleased to see the e-bike ordinances back on the agenda. City staff did an excellent job preparing them, and he appreciates council taking time to review the public concerns. Lastly, he thanked Councilors Shepard and Lovering for their years of service. He served 12 years on the council with both and greatly valued their dedication, experience, and contributions.

Karla Fisher thanked the departing councilors for their service and said she appreciated them very much.

Linda Miller 96 Trap Lane said Rivers Edge Park has long been a safe sanctuary for families, walkers, and others. Recently, people were throwing golf discs near the boardwalk and water without warning, creating safety concern. Although no one was hurt, it made the area feel unsafe. There is no signage or warning in the area. If this activity continues, public safety should be addressed.

NEW BUSINESS:

Mayor Barnhart read the Proclamation for Arbor Day and proclaimed May 1, 2026, as Arbor Day.

Gateway to Glacier Safety & Mobility Project

City Manager Hanks said the City is excited to be moving forward with the project, noting that not all communities were able to proceed with their federal grants. The City has federally obligated funds in place and is ready to advertise for bids. The project includes more than \$10 million in federal funding with a \$500,000 City match for water and street improvements. A 30-day bid period is planned, with bid openings in late January, an open house in February, construction beginning in March, and completion targeted for November 2026.

Councilor Piper motioned to authorize City Manager to move forward in requesting bids, seconded by Price and the motion carried unanimously.

Wastewater Capacity Allocation

City Manager Hanks reported that city staff, consulting engineers, and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have been working extensively to determine the City's remaining wastewater treatment capacity. Recent growth and development applications submitted over the past three to four months have intensified this challenge and will strain available capacity regardless of the final calculations. The City is nearing its wastewater capacity and felt it was important to provide the public, Council, and developers with a transparent understanding of where the City currently stands, the historical context behind the calculations,

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and why a precise capacity number has been difficult to determine. While no definitive number is available at this time, staff can provide the general scale of remaining capacity and begin discussions regarding priorities for housing types.

At the December 11, 2025, Planning Commission meeting, which was well attended, staff reviewed the history of wastewater capacity dating back to February 2023 as part of the plant expansion and discharge permit process. HDR Engineering calculated the treatment plant's capacity using data through December 2022 and determined the bioreactor capacity to be approximately 630,000 gallons per day, down from the previously assumed 850,000 gallons per day. This reduction was driven by biochemical oxygen demand considerations, as nationwide trends such as low-flow fixtures, improved plumbing codes, and reduced inflow and infiltration have resulted in lower volumes but higher concentrations of wastewater, requiring more oxygen and biological processing. HDR recommended several projects, including the recently completed bioreactor expansion, which increased capacity to approximately 710,000 gallons per day.

In September 2023, HDR released a Basis of Design using a full BioWin model to analyze flows, nutrient levels, and plant performance. The model assumed a service population of 6,576 people, including approximately 900 residents from the Meadow Lake Water and Sewer District and 5,700 within Columbia Falls, using a growth rate of 2.3 percent. A significant factor in the analysis was the June 2022 flood event, which caused peak flows to reach approximately 630,000 gallons per day. That event became a marker for capacity calculations. Without the flood-related data, the system's maximum flow would have been approximately 570,000 gallons per day. The flood event alone represented the equivalent impact of roughly 800 to 900 people. DEQ-approved charts have been used by the City for capacity allocation since that study.

As population increases, additional flow capacity is required. Using a maximum flow of 570,000 gallons per day and the expanded plant capacity of 710,000 gallons per day, the City has projected a total population capacity of approximately 8,174 people. In 2025, Morrison-Maierle Engineering was contracted to complete a PER in support of MLUPA, focusing primarily on the conveyance system rather than full plant modeling due to budget constraints and to recent completion of a wastewater facility expansion project. Because the new system has not yet stabilized, full modeling is planned for Fall 2026 after one full year of operation across seasonal conditions. Based on available data, Morrison-Maierle used the 630,000-gallon peak flow at the November 20 open house, resulting in an estimated remaining capacity of approximately 800 people.

City staff are continuing to work with Morrison-Maierle, HDR, and DEQ to determine the most appropriate capacity calculation. Hanks emphasized that this is a technical determination to be made by engineers in coordination with staff, not a decision for Council. He noted that the bioreactor has been performing significantly better than modeled over the past two months, with improved discharge quality to the Flathead River. There is potential that future modeling in 2026 could show increased capacity.

Mayor Barnhart expressed concern that overly conservative assumptions could unnecessarily halt growth, while Hanks noted that despite extreme peak flows sometimes exceeding 1 million gallons per day the City has not violated its discharge permit during these occurrences. The treatment plant's hydraulic capacity exceeds two million gallons per day, and the limiting factor is nutrient removal, not liquid volume. High-flow events often dilute nutrient concentrations, allowing the plant to perform efficiently while remaining within regulatory limits.

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The immediate challenge stems from development applications submitted in the last three months representing more than 1,500 people. Using current service population estimates of approximately 6,200 people, remaining capacity ranges from roughly 816 people if flood-event data is included to approximately 1,894 people if the June 2022 event is treated as an anomaly. Previously approved subdivisions must retain their allocated capacity, including several townhome and single-family developments. Some preliminary plats are nearing expiration, which could return capacity to the City if not extended.

Additional developments under active discussion include Teakettle Heights, River Highlands, apartment projects, a hotel, and other commercial and multifamily proposals. These applications have largely been paused pending resolution of capacity calculations. Hanks emphasized the need for Council guidance on prioritization, noting options such as housing type preferences, infill versus annexation, phased development, or, as a last resort, a temporary moratorium, which staff generally do not recommend.

Under MLUPA, the City must demonstrate how it will accommodate projected population growth over the next 20 years, identify housing needs, and outline actions to address infrastructure constraints. The City anticipates growth of approximately 2,500 people during that period. As part of this effort, staff plans to develop a wastewater allocation policy defining population assumptions by housing type and ensuring regulatory compliance.

A related concern involves the Meadow Lake Water and Sewer District, which is nearing its contractual capacity of 80,000 gallons per day due to allocated but unbuilt lots, despite currently averaging closer to 40,000 gallons per day. Significant inflow and infiltration issues within Meadow Lake have been documented, with recent data showing disproportionate impacts during storm events. Further analysis and corrective actions will be required, particularly as contract negotiations approach in 2032.

Hanks also discussed a 2023 legislative program allowing for DEQ-approved development plans, which would enable phased development tied to infrastructure milestones rather than requiring full buildout capacity upfront. This approach, currently used by the City of Belgrade, could be particularly beneficial for large, multi-phase projects such as Teakettle Heights. The City is well positioned to pursue this option.

Funding remains a critical consideration, with future utility rate studies and potential grant opportunities playing a role in long-term planning. Hanks stressed that while the discussion is complex, it is necessary to move forward deliberately rather than continue delaying decisions. Planning Commissioners and Councilors echoed the need for defensible policies, alignment with the housing study, and clear direction once engineering determinations are finalized.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution #1957 - Amending Fund 5310 Sewer Enterprise Budget Appropriations for FY 2026

City Manager Hanks said this resolution is to amend the capital improvement program to replace the dump truck when necessary, at the wastewater treatment plant.

Councilor Shepard motioned to Amend Fund 5310 Sewer Enterprise Budget Appropriations for FY 2026, seconded by Councilor Lovering with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, Shepard, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

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Mayor Barnhart stated the next piece of business will be a motion to move Ordinances #835-#840 back on the table for the final reading.

Councilor Lovering motioned to put Ordinances #835-#840 back on the table for final reading, seconded by Councilor Shepard and the motion carried unanimously.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #835 - Exposing Minor Children to Domestic Violence

Columbia Falls Police Department, desires to amend Chapter 9 Part 20 of the Columbia Falls Municipal Code by adding a Section 030 making it a criminal offense to expose a child or children to domestic violence.

City Manager Hanks stated Ordinance #835 was briefed two Council sessions ago, and then he tabled it due to a citizen comment concerning the jail time penalty. We have now investigated it and discussed it with the Montana League of Cities and Legal Review and determined that jail time is appropriate. This Ordinance is specifically about exposing a minor child to domestic violence.

Councilor Lovering motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #835, seconded by Councilor Robinson, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #836- Definitions pertaining to the use and operation of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles and other wheeled devices on public sidewalks, public roadways and public paths and within public parks.

City Manager Hanks said this Ordinance is specific in its definitions, which reference Montana Code. City staff and the Parks and Recreation Committee discussed adding one additional definition at their last meeting to clarify public pathways. While a definition for sidewalks already exists, staff is requesting the addition of a definition for public paths. The proposed language would define a public path as a wider, shared route that safely accommodates two-way pedestrian and non-motorized traffic, unlike a narrower sidewalk intended primarily for one direction of travel. Staff requested a vote on adding this definition.

Councilor Price motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #836, seconded by Councilor Shepard, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, Shepard, Lovering, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #837 - Requiring obedience with traffic control devices by bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public sidewalks, roadways and paths.

City Manager Hanks said the Ordinance addresses obedience to traffic control devices. It requires any person operating a bicycle, skateboard, scooter, or other wheeled device, whether electrically assisted or not, on a public sidewalk, public path, or within a public park to obey all posted speed limits applicable to that area. He explained the ordinance allows the City to post and enforce speed limits on sidewalks, pathways, and within parks. No changes were made from the version presented at first reading.

Councilor Lovering motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #837, seconded by Councilor Piper, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Shepard, Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson and Barnhart.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #838 - Providing penalties that may be imposed by law enforcement for violations of the ordinances contained within chapter 1- part 72.

City Manager Hanks said there are no changes from the first reading and it's specific to violations.

Councilor Piper motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #838, seconded by Councilor Price, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Lovering, Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard and Barnhart.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #839 - Regulating the use of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public sidewalks and paths.

City Manager Hanks said a one-word correction was added for clarity regarding the use of roadways, public sidewalks, public paths, and public parks. The ordinance references Montana Code definitions for bicycles, mopeds, motorized scooters, skateboards, and other wheeled devices. These devices may be operated on sidewalks, paths, and in parks only when under human propulsion and may not be operated if powered solely by an independent power source. He explained the added word "solely" clarifies that pedal-assist or other assistive devices are allowed, provided some human propulsion is used.

Councilor Price motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #839, seconded by Councilor Lovering, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, Shepard, Lovering and Barnhart.

FINAL READING - Ordinance #840 - Regulating the use of bicycles and electrically assisted bicycles and other electrically and motor assisted vehicles on public roadways, public sidewalks, and public paths.

City Manager Hanks said Ordinance #840 has no changes from the first reading.

Councilor Robinson motioned to adopt the Final Reading of Ordinance #840, seconded by Councilor Piper, with Council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, Shepard, Lovering, Piper and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Lovering thanked council and staff for the past 12 years, noting the experience has been educational and expressing hope that more residents will get involved in City affairs. She reflected on the transformation of Nucleus Avenue since she moved to Columbia Falls, describing it as the result of 12 years of work. She asked the council to continue considering the dog park and quiet zone and not let those efforts fall by the wayside.

Councilor Shepard said he was first elected in 1996, at a time when many city streets were unpaved and dust was a major issue. One of the first accomplishments with the City Manager and then Mayor Lyle Christman was addressing infrastructure needs. He highlighted the creation of the 9-1-1 center as one of his most meaningful achievements, noting it came after years of difficulty coordinating a combined center and was ultimately driven by the events of September 11. He also referenced his involvement in the wastewater treatment facility study beginning in 2010, which has now come to fruition with the Lakeside plant. Councilor Shepard reflected on serving with multiple city managers and council members, noting the successful transition to a city-manager form of government. He acknowledged former City Manager Bill Shaw and longtime staff member Susan Nicosia for their contributions and thanked the council for the opportunity to serve.

Councilor Robinson said she appreciated working with Councilor Lovering and Shepard and thanked them for their service.

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Councilor Price said it had been a pleasure working with Councilors Shepard and Lovering. Price asked how many people completed the recent survey. Hanks responded that approximately 245 to 250 responses were received and noted staff was pleased with the participation. Councilor Price also asked about the Hill side on 6th St. E. Public Works Director Bates said the City is waiting on a report from the company and expects an update by the end of the year.

Councilor Piper recalled that the disc golf group had previously presented a course layout to the Parks and Recreation Committee and council, noting the tee boxes and basket anchor points are fixed and not adjustable. He also thanked Councilors Lovering and Shepard for their years of service.

Mayor Barnhart said he read the letter from a constituent regarding frisbee activity in the park and agreed with the concerns raised. He stated the park is intended for walking, peace, and quiet, and while recreational use is allowed, courtesy and respect for others must be shown. He said the issue may need to be communicated to the organization involved.

The Mayor requested that the City Manager and City Attorney report on the outcome of the study commission's work on self-governance authority. City Manager Hanks responded that the Study Commission is scheduled to meet in late January to adopt its final report, after which it will be forwarded to Council. The Mayor requested that clarification be provided to both the Study Commission and Council regarding next steps, regardless of the final decision.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Hall will close at noon on December 24, remain closed on Christmas Day, and be closed on January 1. City Manager Hanks announced that staff will continue working throughout the week. Hanks reported the City will lose its Finance Director, who has accepted another opportunity. He noted she has been a significant part of the City's staff and said the City will move forward aggressively to recruit a new Finance Director.

Finance Director Rice told Council she has greatly valued her year with the City and appreciated working with City Manager Hanks, and the rest of the staff. She emphasized her departure is not due to dissatisfaction with the position, but rather an unforeseen opportunity that placed her in a better situation. She stated she was not seeking another job and that the opportunity came to her.

MISCELLANEOUS

Correspondence

Police Department November Report

Fire Department November Reports

ADJOURN

Councilor Lovering motioned to adjourn the meeting at 8:58 p.m., seconded by Councilor Shepard.

Mayor

City Clerk