

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD JANUARY 20, 2026

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

ROLL CALL: Councilor King, Councilor Piper, Councilor Price, Councilor Semok, Councilor Stob and Mayor Barnhart. Absent Robinson.

Also Present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, 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 Price and the motion carried.

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

Approval of Claims - January 20, 2026 - \$94,793.51

Approval of Payroll Claims - Jan. 16, 2026 - \$133,622.24

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - January 5, 2026

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Chris Peterson of the Hungry Horse News stated that the retaining wall at the newspaper office will be removed and replaced with a sloped lawn area, with work expected to begin this year.

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Drive, requested confirmation of the start time for the joint City Council and Planning Commission workshop. City Manager Hanks confirmed the meeting will begin at 6:00 p.m.

Sherry Peterson, 80 13th Street East, requested letters of support for a Montana Tourism Development Grant. She described plans to purchase the Station Eight building and establish an inclusive developmental center for individuals with developmental disabilities, featuring small-scale production, retail, and consignment opportunities. Council agreed to direct City Manager Hanks to draft a letter of support.

Sam Kavanaugh, 1405 Columbia Drive, thanked the city for its continued support of the Gateway to Glacier Trail system. He reported trail usage averaging 100 to 150 users per day and approximately \$700,000 raised over six years for trail infrastructure.

Residents Bug Schwartz, Liz Heneghan, and Anne Higgins expressed concerns regarding federal immigration enforcement activities and urged the city not to cooperate with agencies such as ICE or Border Patrol, citing due process, community safety, and impacts on residents.

Roger Hopkins, 949 Vans Avenue, thanked the Police Department for maintaining a visible presence during a community march earlier in the day. He reported that the Study Commission will not recommend placing self-governing powers on the ballot and that a public hearing on a revised draft report is scheduled for February 25. He also noted that the filing deadline for school board candidates is February 9.

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Matt Hutcheson, 227 Third Avenue East, requested clarification on the City's position regarding the proposed AI center in Columbia Heights and raised concerns about utility impacts, park use, dog access, and enforcement of existing traffic and bicycle regulations.

Mike Burr, 560 Talbot Road, expressed concern about limited opportunities for public communication with Council members outside of meetings and encouraged the city to explore additional communication options and increased opportunities for public comment during meetings.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Council made council committee assignments. Mayor Barnhart will continue serving on the Flathead County Board of Health and the Flathead County Solid Waste Board.

Wastewater Capacity Allocation Update:

City Manager Hanks provided an update on wastewater capacity allocation, noting no change to baseline data and minor updates based on recent permitted uses. Current reserve capacity totals approximately 720 people, with applications totaling approximately 1,380 people. He reported increased developer interest, including a potential affordable housing project for residents aged 55 and older.

Staff recommended allocating approximately 95 percent of total capacity while reserving 400 people for future projects, emphasizing prioritization rather than a full moratorium. Planning Commission recommendations prioritize multifamily and attached housing, infill development near existing infrastructure, and maintaining reserve capacity for future mixed-use or innovative housing proposals.

Planning Commissioner Kavanaugh explained the Commission's recommendation to reserve up to 600 people of capacity to preserve flexibility and avoid a moratorium, emphasizing consistent regulatory incentives and minimizing infrastructure expansion beyond current service areas.

Mayor Barnhart stated that the discussion is intended to provide prioritization guidance rather than adopt a formal policy or resolution. He emphasized housing affordability as the primary concern and expressed support for prioritizing subsidized housing and efficient land use over imposing a moratorium.

Councilors Piper and Semok concurred with staff recommendations. Councilor Price supported holding additional reserve capacity, expressed concerns about narrowing street standards, and stated her support for multifamily housing based on the housing study.

City Manager Hanks concluded by stating that staff will communicate Council priorities to developers to guide future applications and noted that infrastructure improvements north of the railroad could enhance future industrial and economic development.

NEW BUSINESS:

2025 Fire Department Recap

Fire Chief Weeks reported that in 2025 the department responded to 433 calls for service, including 65 in December, the busiest month on record. This represents a 42 percent increase in call volume since 2020. Calls included 32 structure fires, 96 motor vehicle crashes, and 9 vehicle fires.

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Staff remains strong, with eight new volunteer firefighters added in 2025, bringing the total to 29 volunteers, with a capacity of 30. Three career staff positions are filled, with an additional firefighter scheduled to begin next month. A waiting list for volunteers has been established for the first time in over 20 years, with anticipated retirements in July.

Volunteers contributed more than 7,400 documented service hours in 2025, representing the equivalent of nearly four full-time employees. Officer response rates have improved significantly, with incidents lacking officer presence reduced from nearly 16 percent in 2021 to under 5 percent in 2025.

The Firefighters' Association invested over \$40,000 in equipment donated to the city, including bunker gear, radios, thermal imaging cameras, and tools for the new engine. Chief Weeks emphasized the value of the City–Rural Fire District partnership, noting shared staffing costs and fiscally responsible service delivery.

Looking ahead to 2026, the department has begun recruitment for another career firefighter and will conduct a firefighter academy taught primarily by department staff, increasing internal training capacity.

Chief Weeks stated that the department is meeting growing service demands through strong leadership, volunteer commitment, and effective partnerships.

Mayor Barnhart asked about the status of standby generators for the Fire Department, Police Department, and City Hall. Chief Weeks reported that a Department of Homeland Security grant application reached the final review stage and was forwarded by the State for funding consideration, but federal funding uncertainty remains. If funding is not confirmed soon, the city may be unable to meet the project completion deadline. The city may reapply if funding is reopened.

Mayor and Councilors commended the Fire Department for its performance, professionalism, and community service.

2025 Police Department Recap

Police Chief Stephens reported that four officers were hired in 2025, with one remaining vacancy currently being filled. The department obtained \$17,146 in equipment through non-City funding sources, including portable breath testers, lidar units, trauma kits, breaching equipment, and first aid kits.

The STEP grant was expanded from \$16,000 to \$165,263, funding a full-time DUI officer position, wages, benefits, and additional DUI enforcement overtime. The position became effective October 19, 2025.

The department implemented monthly in-service training and recorded 1,036 training hours in 2025, significantly exceeding state training requirements. Chief Stephens reported improved performance and preparedness as a result.

A new digital evidence system was implemented, significantly reducing time spent on evidence storage and transfer and saving hundreds of staff hours annually. Chief Stephens recognized Sergeant Wayne Stuffelbeem, and staff member Angela Burns for their leadership in the transition.

Two officers received lifesaving awards in 2025 for Narcan administration and emergency medical intervention.

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Activity statistics showed increases in arrests, DUIs, drug offenses, traffic stops, and felony investigations, with a decrease in juvenile arrests and citations.

Chief Stephens briefed Council on a vehicle pursuit involving a stolen vehicle that entered the city at high speed and resulted in a collision with another vehicle. Officers provided immediate medical aid until fire personnel arrived. A formal pursuit review found no policy violations. The pursuit lasted approximately 80 seconds. Chief Stephens reported that PIT maneuver training is planned for future training cycles.

Mayor Barnhart and Council members noted improvements in training, morale, and departmental performance.

RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution #1958 - Railroad Field Park Land Transfer to Northwest Montana Community Land Trust
Resolution authorizing the land transfer of Railroad Field Park to the Northwest Montana Community Land Trust to facilitate the development of deed-restricted, owner-occupied affordable homes to be constructed by Habitat for Humanity.

City Manager Hanks presented Resolution #1958, authorizing the transfer of Railroad Field Park property to the Northwest Montana Community Land Trust to facilitate the development of deed-restricted, owner-occupied affordable housing constructed by Habitat for Humanity, consistent with City Resolution #1942 approving the preliminary plat. He noted the Council had previously provided verbal approval and that this resolution authorizes execution of all necessary title documents.

Kim Morisaki, representing the Northwest Montana Community Land Trust, thanked the Council for making the property available and emphasized the importance of using Community Land Trust as a long-term affordability tool. She stated the Trust will own the land in perpetuity, Habitat for Humanity will initially construct six homes, and the Trust will manage the properties thereafter. She noted this project builds on the Trust's first Habitat partnership in Columbia Falls and will increase the number of Community Land Trust homes in the valley to 76.

Councilor Price motioned to approve Resolution #1958, seconded by Councilor Semok with council voting as follows: Ayes: Piper, Price, Semok, Stob, King and Barnhart.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper provided an update on the Study Commission and the status of its recommendation to Council. He noted that public comments on agenda items are appropriate. Councilor Piper also thanked the Planning Commission for their hard work during monthly meetings.

Councilor King encouraged community involvement by suggesting volunteering time and effort toward affordable housing projects within the city.

Councilor Stob expressed her appreciation to the residents of Columbia Falls for trusting her in this position. She stated that she looks forward to working with and learning from fellow council members.

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Councilor Price remarked that Council members are community members and are striving to make Columbia Falls a great place for everyone. She asked whether all easements for the Gateway to Glacier sidewalk project had been secured and whether property owners were aware of the project.

City Manager Hanks responded that not all temporary construction easements have been secured. Approximately ten property owners have not responded despite multiple outreach efforts, including phone calls, door hangers, and letters. Another round of engagement will occur prior to the open house. He clarified that the missing easements are not critical to the project but would affect the ability to create smooth transitions between private property and the sidewalk or right-of-way.

Price noted that, as a member of the Parks Committee, discussions often focus on the complexity of moving projects forward and making ideas a reality. Price also expressed enthusiasm for the City's expanded use of social media by the city, Police Department, and Fire Department to share accurate and timely information with the community.

Mayor Barnhart stated that he and City Manager Hanks discussed making several procedural improvements. One proposed change is for committees to provide reports to Council and the public at the following Council meeting. He also discussed improving the process for acknowledging written public comments received prior to meetings by formally noting them during the public comment agenda item.

Mayor Barnhart acknowledged initial concerns about repurposing park land but emphasized the need to address housing affordability. He expressed interest in exploring underutilized city-owned land for future land trust projects as a means to support long-term affordability. He also reminded Council members of upcoming training opportunities, noting a county-hosted training on February 5 and emphasizing the value of the sessions.

Mayor Barnhart additionally shared that he received a phone call from a constituent and stated that he is willing to share his contact information with residents who wish to reach him directly.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager Hanks reported that the January 21st Study Commission meeting has been rescheduled to January 28th at 5:00 p.m.

On January 26 at 6:00 p.m., a joint City Council and Planning Commission workshop will be held. The land use consultant will present survey results and analysis, along with a draft of the existing conditions section of the land use plan. The draft will be published online for public review and comment for at least two weeks, after which comments will begin to be addressed in accordance with the public participation plan. Follow-up items from the workshop will be addressed at the February 12th Planning Commission workshop before returning to Council.

At the February 12th Planning Commission meeting, there will also be a discussion on short-term rentals. Current data analysis is being finalized, and the Planning Commission will begin considering future policy recommendations related to short-term rentals and zoning regulations.

City Manager Hanks highlighted that an Open House for the Gateway to Glacier Mobility Improvement Project is scheduled for February 18th. A contractor will be selected on January 26th, with Council approval

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anticipated on February 2nd. He noted that the substantial completion date for the project has been extended from November 2026 to September 30, 2027, to allow for flexibility due to construction timing near school facilities.

Regarding land use planning and related studies, City Manager Hanks stated that federal funding previously anticipated has not yet been received by the State. The City has invested approximately \$392,000 in planning and related efforts, and discussions are ongoing with the Department of Commerce and the Montana League of Cities regarding the funding path forward.

He concluded by noting that stakeholder interviews and focus groups are ongoing and that summaries will be provided by the land use planning consultant.

MISCELLANEOUS

Police Department -- December 2025 Activity Report

Fire Department - December 2025 Activity Reports

ADJOURN - Councilor Price motioned to adjourn at 8:40 p.m., seconded by Councilor Semok.

Mayor

City Clerk