



City of Columbia Falls
130 6th Street West
Columbia Falls, MT 59912
Phone: (406) 892-4391

COLUMBIA FALLS STUDY COMMISSION
AGENDA
WEDNESDAY, April 16, 2025
COUNCIL CHAMBERS
5:00 P.M.

1. Call Meeting to Order
2. Roll Call
3. Public Comment (for items not on the agenda)
4. Approval of Minutes of Study Commission Meeting on March 12, 2025
5. New Business
 - a. Review Results of Updated 2025 Survey
 - b. Vice Chair Hopkins report of Whitefish Study Commission Meeting on April 2, 2025.
6. Commissioner Comments and Proposals for Next Agenda
7. Adjournment



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Item No.1.

COLUMBIA FALLS STUDY COMMISSION
Minutes
WEDNESDAY, March 12, 2025

Call to Order - Meeting called to order at 5:00 pm.

Roll Call - Present: Study Commissioners Hopkins, Konopatzke, Nicosia and Piper. Also present: Interim City Manager Shrives

Approval of Agenda – Motion made by Commissioner Nicosia to approve agenda, With a 2nd by Commissioner Konopatzke. All approved

Consent Agenda – Approval of minutes from previous meeting. Commissioner Nicosia motioned to approve the consent agenda, with a 2nd by Commissioner Hopkins. All approved

Public Comment (for Items not on the agenda) - None

Notice of Public Hearing:

Interim City Manager Mark Shrives provided a staff regarding types of Local Governments in Montana. During his presentation there was a question asked about what was included in the Charters of some cities. The Commission took some time and reviewed the City of Whitefish Charter. It was the consensus of the Commission that there wasn't really anything in the Whitefish Charter that the City of Columbia Falls can't do under the Executive – Manager form of government. The Interim City manager provided the results of the survey that had been conducted to receive input regarding the City. The Public Hearing was opened for public comment. No comments were received. The Public Hearing was closed.

New Business: There was discussion regarding possible collaboration between the two study commissions of Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Roger Hopkins said he will attend the next meeting of the Whitefish Study Commission and will report back at the next meeting.

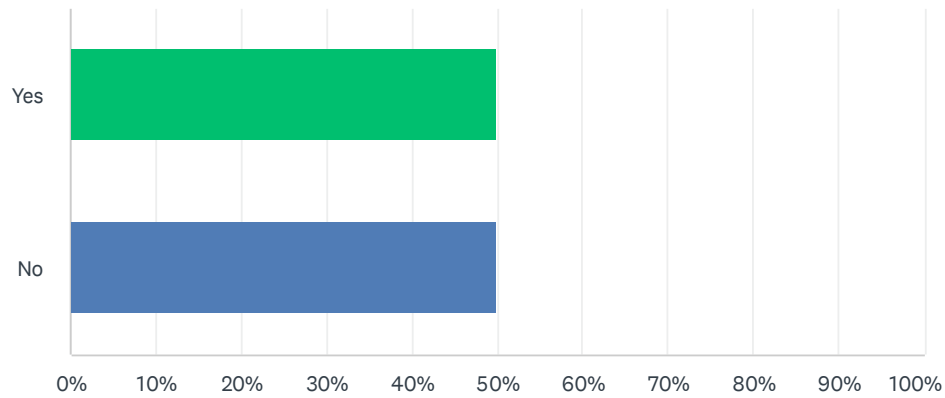
Miscellaneous: There were no agenda items proposed for the next meeting.

Adjourn: Motion made by Commissioner Nicosia to adjourn with a 2nd by Commissioner Hopkins. The meeting adjourned at 6:46 pm.

Chairman

Q1 Did you vote for the Local Government Review?

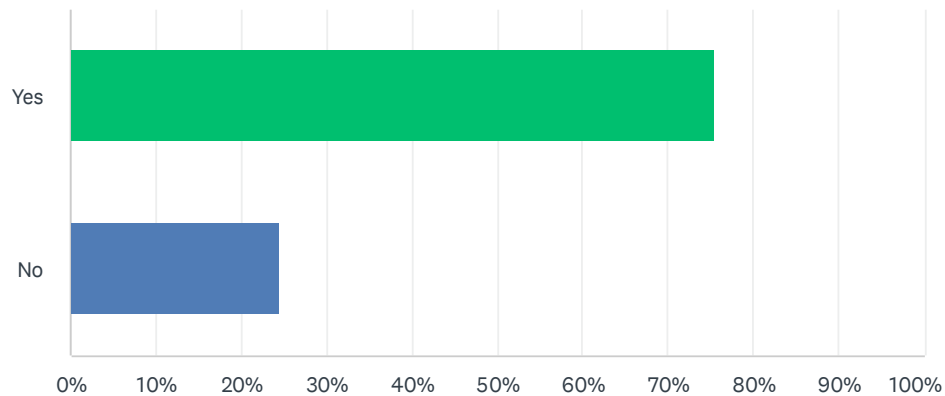
Answered: 110 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50.00%	55
No	50.00%	55
TOTAL		110

Q2 SATISFACTION WITH GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE: Do you you feel the current form of government (Commission-Manager form) provides the best management for City operations?

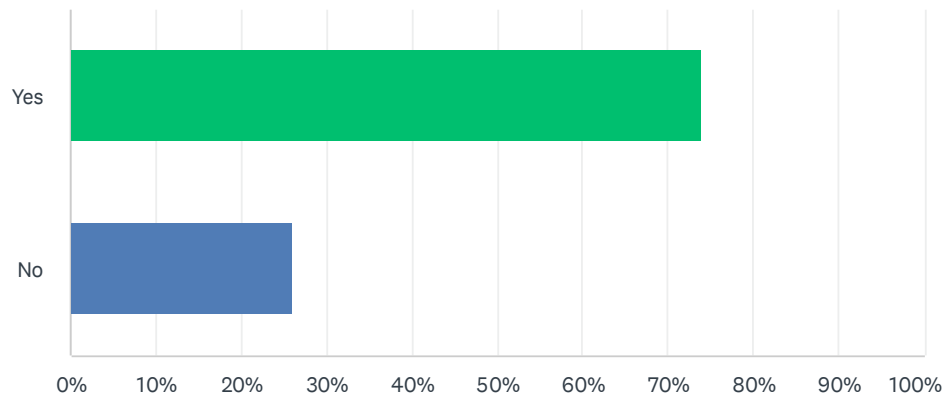
Answered: 110 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	75.45%	83
No	24.55%	27
TOTAL		110

Q3 ROLE CLARITY:In your view, are the City Councilors and the City Manager appropriately operating within their roles as defined in the Commission-Manager form of government?

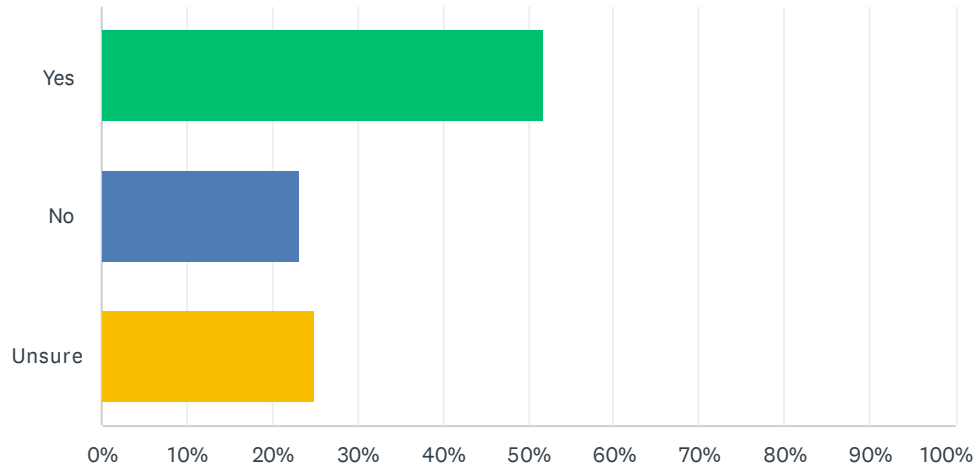
Answered: 108 Skipped: 7



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	74.07%	80
No	25.93%	28
TOTAL		108

Q4 EFFICIENCY OF CITY OPERATIONS: Do you think the Commission-Manager system ensures efficient and smooth city operations?

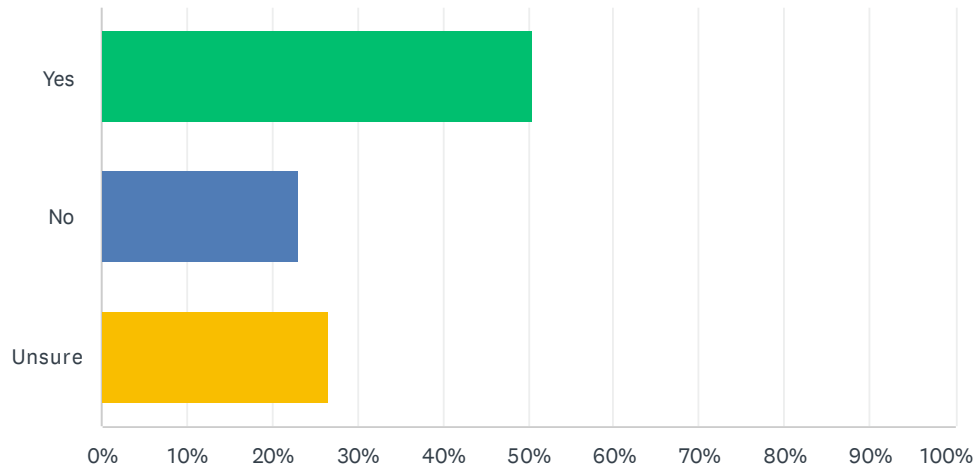
Answered: 112 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	51.79%	58
No	23.21%	26
Unsure	25.00%	28
TOTAL		112

Q5 MAYOR'S ROLE: Do you feel the role of the mayor in the current system (being part of the City Commission) is effective in representing Columbia Falls?

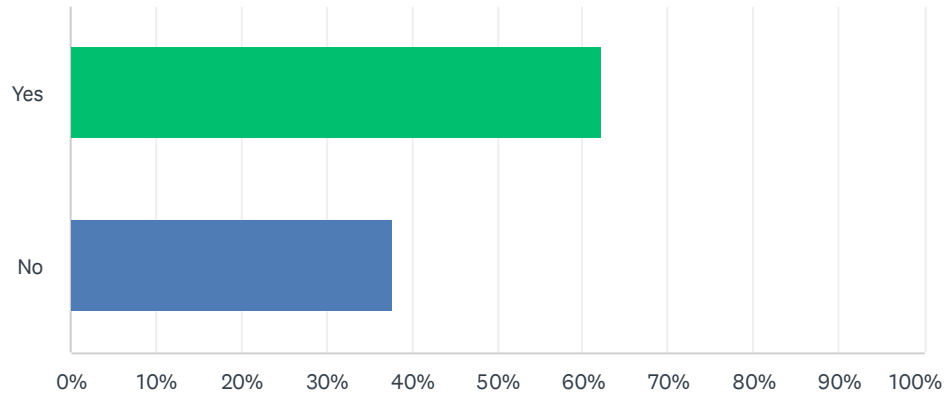
Answered: 113 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50.44%	57
No	23.01%	26
Unsure	26.55%	30
TOTAL		113

Q6 PUBLIC AWARENESS OF GOVERNMENT REVIEW: Were you aware that the City is currently reviewing the form of government?

Answered: 114 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	62.28%	71
No	37.72%	43
TOTAL		114

Q7 ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: Do you have any other comments or suggestions about Columbia Falls' current form of government?

Answered: 66 Skipped: 49

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	Council just needs to be aware of what actions the manager is up to.	4/9/2025 6:08 PM
2	I thought you would be reviewing financial and operating expenditures. Every winter we have inches of ice on my street. Going to the mailbox or walking the dog becomes hazardous as does kids walking to & from school. Also our water pipes are leaking and no one seems to have a clue about solving that so we have to insure our water & sewer pipes! My road never gets repaired. Yes I have questions!	4/9/2025 6:07 PM
3	Not really, except if the system you have is working well, leave it as it is. In other words if it isn't broken, don't try to fix it.	4/9/2025 6:05 PM
4	A better social media presence is needed to keep the citizens informed with accurate information instead of hearsay.	4/9/2025 6:04 PM
5	STOP selling off Columbia Falls!! You have all allowed our beautiful town to be sold to the highest bidder/RUIS! STOP IT. We have no historical beauty anymore. SHAME ON YOU!	4/9/2025 6:02 PM
6	The cost of housing may be difficult to hire a manager. It seems to have taken a long time.	4/9/2025 5:53 PM
7	Most of City Council haven't even lived here for most of their lives, unlike the most of us! How about asking the long-time locals about all these changes, you think are so good for our town you have WRECKED this town for the locals. Unless you are MICK RUIS you don't have a say in this town! Lived here all my life of 58 years I'm not a transplant! But I have no say in this town. Like most.	4/9/2025 5:52 PM
8	VERY pissed off about local tax & especially that it is being allowed on some food/edible items, which I feel should be illegal! & we are NOT a tourist town! The tax hurts locals & is unfair.	4/9/2025 5:49 PM
9	I believe the mayor should be in charge of the city and the manager is an added expense that is not accountable to the people.	4/9/2025 4:38 PM
10	In her work as City Manager, Nicosia played a fairly political role, making recommendations that seemed as much political as oriented towards efficiency. I would like to see a system where elected officials played a larger role. I understand this might create some costs so that elected officials could afford to spend more time in running government, but think it would be worth it.	4/8/2025 8:45 PM
11	We should use a TOWN MEETING style government, so all residents get a say in how our city is run. We are obviously UNHAPPY with how it is run currently, as the votes should be telling you. Lexington, Massachusetts has a town meeting style city government, with a population of 30,000-ish. We are MUCH smaller, so we can pretty easily do this TRULY democratic form of government here with our population of 5,000 or so. Our city added sales tax but isn't using it properly, especially not PLOWING THE ROADS IN WINTER!!!! Most buildings aren't even up to code for ADA compliance, even NEW buildings. Something must change.	4/8/2025 5:39 PM
12	Just like to see more noticed "public hearings" regarding developments and ordinances.	4/8/2025 4:33 PM
13	I think the Commissioners are doing the job that is needed. I am concerned with stating that a lack of involvement by the community means we do not care or agree with what is happening. It has been disheartening to see the influence of out of state developers on not only our City but the Valley as a whole and then to see quotes by the Commissioners saying they are frustrated that people only show up or voice an opinion when it is the big projects. Most people do not have the time for to dedicate to show up outside of their work life and trust that those representing us will do what is right. That has been questionable as of late with all the approved development that does not fit with what this City is or used to be. Development is essential, but it is not at the rate we have seen and it is not at the expense of the community	4/7/2025 8:26 AM

those of us who chose to live here want to see maintained. Columbia Falls has never been and most would hope will never be one with high density development, that can be found down the road in the communities that do not have the small town feel of CFalls. I also find it discouraging that the City was disappointed with the turnout of responses to the the initial survey as it just goes to show the City is not looking internally but blaming residents for lack of input. I am very active in the development world as well as keep an on what is happening in the community I live and I was completely unaware of this until I received the notice in the mail and then saw the Hungry Horse article (again where City Commissioners stated they were disappointed in participation). Stop blaming residents who have full time jobs during the day and then many raising kids at night or enjoying the little free time they have away from work and do the job you were elected/hired to do knowing that a majority of the community does not want to see continued growth at the rates we are experiencing or high density developments and stop catering (or seemingly catering) to out of state developers who's only aim is to line there pockets in a boom location and not care about what they are doing to the community that is already here.

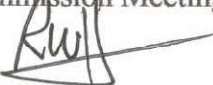
14	Why don't you pave the whole streets instead of leaving 6 feet of gravel up to the sidewalks? We pay taxes for our city streets to be taken care of efficiently.	4/6/2025 2:12 PM
15	Be more aggressive in annexations.	4/6/2025 10:55 AM
16	none	4/5/2025 10:49 AM
17	I think our current system works well for us. I'm not sure why I voted for the review other than that it always seems like a good idea to keep an eye on government, and to allow anyone with suggestions for improvement to be heard.	4/5/2025 9:21 AM
18	I feel every resident should be notified by mail about any meeting involving change in the city government, housing approval, major real estate purchases by developers, better control over homeowners using their property as a dump, which brings down property value. Thank you, John Latchaw - 1301 3rd Ave W.	4/4/2025 5:52 PM
19	You do a piss poor job of policing decay ordinances. The people live next door to junkyards have to build tall fences to block the view. They shouldn't have to spend their own money to do that. Take a look at 1606 4th Ave W, since you NEVER answer an email!	4/4/2025 5:49 PM
20	No	4/4/2025 5:47 PM
21	The City Manager form of government is responsible for the disaster downtown. People in town hate the ugly condos & no parking downtown.	4/4/2025 5:46 PM
22	Current & past city government in the past 10 years has turned a nice little town into a place I wouldn't want to raise my children. The almighty dollar has taken over the city council. It is such a shame. I have lived here my whole life!!!	4/4/2025 5:42 PM
23	Thank you to our City workers! Keeping everything running smoothly, without notice.	4/4/2025 5:40 PM
24	As it is now I am happy with the Mayor and elected City Council members. I am satisfied with Columbia Falls form of Government. Susan Nicosia was an excellent City Manager. We will see about the new guy.	4/4/2025 5:39 PM
25	Manager form of government working efficiently and effectively for the City of Columbia Falls.	4/4/2025 11:57 AM
26	This seems like a waste of time and money	4/3/2025 5:50 PM
27	Please add description of mayor role and manager role to city website. Currently we, the citizens, don't have a way to know the answers to the questions above, need someway to publicize city status.	4/1/2025 7:17 PM
28	Speeding in Columbia Falls is not being enforced. Tourist season is almost here and 25 MPH on main 9th is not enforced. Try to drive 25 MPH and see how many pass. Also Judge for life (elect).	4/1/2025 4:45 PM
29	No need to change C Falls form of govt.	4/1/2025 4:43 PM
30	No	4/1/2025 4:42 PM
31	Replace all city government!! People vote on all positions, even city manager, mayor, chief of police, no placements or appointees all must be voted in by the people.	4/1/2025 4:41 PM

32	Continued research about cost of housing here. Implement proven strategies to bring down the cost of rentals for seasonal workers. 1. Limit # of short term rentals & assign the job of monitoring illegal rentals. 2. Encourage infill for long term rentals like garage apartments, and mother-in-law tiny houses. Thank you - you are doing a great job!	4/1/2025 4:40 PM
33	It seems that this works so long as we can identify and hire quality city managers. I know that issue has recently been resolved, hopefully for the long run!	4/1/2025 4:38 PM
34	They are self centered and unthoughtful to the real needs of the city - when approached with a problem - they meet behind closed doors - when confronted during meetings they always take things under advisement - I quit going to meetings when I was informed that I was picking on them - they do things under the table then inform the public when things are done - Then they lie about it.	4/1/2025 4:36 PM
35	I would think people on the "inside" of the city government would have the best breadth of perspective to make judgments or comments or provide informed constructive criticism & suggestions. I am certainly not on the inside and would not have that perspective.	4/1/2025 4:34 PM
36	I don't like the way City Counsel went behind our backs and voted for the baseball field to be torn apart and used for homes. That field is over 70 years old. I don't like the way they "back stabbed" us into thinking nothing was happening and the very next day it was in the paper saying they were going ahead. They are liars.	4/1/2025 4:32 PM
37	Concerned that out of town non-city residents, think they can dictate what form of government we have! Just because they are Col Falls PO Box #'s and SD#6 does not mean they pay my way in the City! Be careful they do not like us!	4/1/2025 4:28 PM
38	Just keep doing a great job for Columbia Falls.	4/1/2025 4:26 PM
39	City Administrator would be more effective.	4/1/2025 4:24 PM
40	I think that I was misinformed about the ballot item. I had read this process as more of an internal program assessment/audit rather than a public forum. I think taking the time and resources needed to adequately assess is worthy of the money on the ballot but I think the expertise within the city council likely has much more weight than my uneducated opinions.	3/31/2025 7:50 PM
41	I understand change is inevitable, but Columbia Falls is growing too fast and buildings are being put up where there isn't any parking. It's like we're becoming California! It needs to slow down. Way down!	3/31/2025 5:05 PM
42	There needs to be more transparency with some of the city business, land sales and purchases, and oversight of planning.	3/31/2025 3:10 PM
43	I am mostly satisfied with the way the Columbia Falls city government operates. I would however like to see the # of county commissioners upped from 3 to 5 to better serve the constituents of the county, and specifically those issues that affect the citizens of Columbia Falls.	3/31/2025 10:20 AM
44	Is there a website or place where citizens can view all information and tasks the government is working on? To ensure the highest level of transparency.	3/30/2025 10:53 PM
45	I have seen the mayor, on at least two occasions, yell at city constituents and state this was his city council. We do not work for you, mayor. You work for us. There is a fine line between maintaining control and being arrogant, and he crosses this line quite often.	3/30/2025 12:57 PM
46	I see the commission not really paying attention to what residents want in shaping the future of our community. It seems to me that they want to be another whitefish while residents want to remain a friendly, rural type town	3/30/2025 9:00 AM
47	Too much power is put into one persons hands with current form	3/30/2025 8:48 AM
48	I am appreciative of our cities governance and the men and women actively participating in the work of governing our city. My hope is that we can continue to foster and promote active participation from residents.	3/30/2025 8:30 AM
49	We just moved here so we haven't had a chance to get acquainted with city government. We are supportive of this commission but we feel like we haven't lived here long enough to form an opinion of city government.	3/29/2025 8:23 PM
50	Stop allowing housing/apartments/duplexes where parking is overcrowded	3/29/2025 7:57 PM

51	I would like a bio of all of the members and how long they have been in their position. I would also like to know where to find information about meetings and meeting minutes when and how often there are elections. As a resident of Columbia Falls, I would also like to know if they have any conflicts of interest And how they handle those situations when they arise.	3/29/2025 7:07 PM
52	Tighten the budget and reduce expenses! We need less police and less management and more boots on the ground!	3/29/2025 5:12 PM
53	What's the purpose of an elected mayor if the operations of the city are administrated by a city manager? Doesn't the city manager just seek to keep their job by pleasing the commission therefore the operations of the city are not influenced by the residents through elections of the one (city manager) who actually manages the operations. I would like to see the city government construct a 20 year strategic plan with investments and growth strategies, not just bending the knee and making exceptions to developers like Ruis. I would prefer developers be held accountable for what they state their original intentions are. Such as maintaining historic restaurants and affordable long term housing for locals. The developers should be required to contribute to the development of infrastructure not just place a strain on it with water, sewer and parking demands which raises taxes on the local residents for services.	3/29/2025 3:53 PM
54	The survey questions are all loaded questions , they are about the government "structure" , commission-manager "system", mayor's effectiveness in the current "system". I believe the survey was written so that no individual would take any criticism. The review cost the taxpayers 50,000 dollars ! ? It's not hard to understand why property taxes are so high ! Columbia Falls is on it's way to becoming another Whitefish .	3/29/2025 3:32 PM
55	Stay the course Ensure communication is shared Thank you	3/29/2025 3:29 PM
56	The City of Columbia Falls should be following the MCA and not creating their own expansion plans that don't keep within the rules set forth by the County. The Mayor, City Manager and Council should not make any decisions without the input of the entire community. It seems that in the past, these three entities made important decisions that only/mostly benefited themselves.	3/29/2025 10:29 AM
57	It seems that people wanted to vent their broad frustrations by voting for a review, but likely lacked and understanding of what a review constituted or any suggestions or visions regarding the status quo beyond lower taxes, less development, affordable housing.	3/29/2025 9:29 AM
58	Please create incentives for blue collar work to return to Columbia Falls. We will never surpass Whitefish as a destination town please stop trying. Plum Creek and CFAC where driving forces in providing employment and quality of life improvement for our community and a handful of snobby coffee shops and a few Logan Health satellite clinics cannot fill the void. P.S Ruiz is trying and doing well but he won't fill the void either. Please bring back Blue Collar Work through insentives and non hostile town business policies, we need and deserve a return to prosperity not a decline into fashionable gentrification.	3/29/2025 8:07 AM
59	The City of Columbia Falls does little to nothing to invite or inform residents and property owners about issues and concerns before it. While our family voted nearly 10 months ago, this is the first we have learned the outcome of that vote or of the workings of the Commission. The survey could have but did not even include a link or schedule of the Commission's work. The historic relationship between the City Manager (Ms. Nicosia) and the City Commission was dysfunctional. She carried too much power for a non-elected person. She was never a friend to the average person. Never cared about their property rights verses a developer. Its that relationship that must change moving forward. Likely beyond personality and its structural.	3/29/2025 6:19 AM
60	The current decision to give up park space to stuff in more houses along Railroad Street shows the short-sightedness of our Council. We should be maintaining and enhancing our outdoor spaces for residents to get outside, breathe, relax, move and enjoy where they live, not get rid of open spaces to increase the density of people per block in our town. It's no wonder people get stressed and shoot each other. Think back to Psychology 101. What did the mice in the boxes do when they were crowded? They got aggressive and eventually harmed or ate each other. The city never followed through on the "Pit to Park" project, north of Weyerhaeuser, from years ago, when they allowed then, Plum Creek Lumber, to dump bark in the area near the public works shop. It's not the city's job to attempt to solve the 'housing problem', but it is the city government's job to manage the resources and finite assets of the city.	3/29/2025 5:14 AM
61	Why is it so hard to find accountability and transparency? What are you spending our	3/28/2025 9:17 PM

increased taxes on?

62	The structure of the council-manager form can well in theory, but any system is only as effective as the people in power and the checks in place. Oversight and transparency have clearly broken down in our current setup. I strongly recommend the study commission evaluate not just the form of government, but also whether those in current leadership are held accountable, and are acting in the best interest of the public. A government that the public no longer trusts is already failing. For example in 2023 the resort tax alone generated \$1.13 million in revenue far exceeding projections. Yet they still don't plow the streets of snow.	3/28/2025 4:55 PM
63	I am very satisfied with how the current form of government is working, much better then than the last form of government.	3/28/2025 3:03 PM
64	Transparency and checks and balances of power are important in a democracy.	3/28/2025 11:56 AM
65	I am curious what alternative forms of local government we might consider? I also think when I voted I thought this would be less about the form of gov and more of an efficiency / engagement audit.	3/28/2025 11:48 AM
66	I am happy with the current structure and functioning of the City government. I was surprised that the review passed.	3/28/2025 11:35 AM

TO: Chairman Piper, Columbia Falls Study Commissioners Nicosia and Konopatzke
 RE: Whitefish Study Commission Meeting April 2, 2025
 From: Vice-chair Hopkins 
 Date: April 7, 2025
 CC: City Clerk Barbara Staaland

The Whitefish Government Study Commission met 5:30 April 2 at Whitefish City Hall¹. Attached to this report (p.3) is the commission's agenda. During public comment I spoke briefly about exploring possible interlocal agreements with the WGSC Commission, which is one of the areas of review suggested in the scope of study outlined in MCA 7-3-185, specifically 7-3-185(2)(b)(iii)². I also mentioned my interest in reviewing the benefits of either a charter or self government powers without a charter. Commissioner Scott Wurster mentioned he had attended our commission meeting in February.

The members of the WGSC are exploring ways their charter could be amended and any benefits of doing so. As part of this effort the commission voted to arrange a Zoom call with the staff of the MSU Local Government Center to review charters and local government powers either on or before their next meeting May 7.³

The Whitefish Commission adopted a one-year timetable to complete their work⁴ (see page 4). With a deadline this month to adopt a tentative report, and May to hold a second public hearing, June to adopt a final report and provide a ballot certificate to the county clerk and recorder if changes are proposed, Scott and commissioner Sandra Alessi voiced concern about the timetable with so much work left to do.

At their meeting the commissioners: reviewed proposed changes and updates to the study commission's webpage to include a public survey; approved the mailing of a survey to all 59937 zip codes⁵ to gather additional community input; will be interviewing stakeholders (see table, attachment p. 5); are planning an open house for April 24 at the Whitefish

¹ At their March 12 meeting the WGSC voted to change the commission's meeting from the second Wednesday of the month to the first Wednesday. This was done so as not to conflict with our meeting schedule, thus providing an opportunity for commissioners from both study groups to attend each other's meetings. Scott mentioned that ironically, at the last meeting, our commission voted to change our meeting time to the third Wednesday of the month to accommodate attendance from the WGSC.

² Should both commissions determine some benefits to consolidation of services and potential areas for interlocal agreements, both commissions would follow the provisions of MCA 7-3-190: "**Supplementary reports**. "A study commission may prepare separate reports in addition to its final report. These reports may recommend consolidation of services and functions and indicate potential areas for interlocal agreements. Such reports shall be submitted to all appropriate governing bodies for reaction within 1 year."

³ The WGSC signed up for the \$2,000 "Gold Starter Bundle" package of services from the MSU center which provides for two online training sessions; I said if possible I, and possibly other CFalls commissioners, may be interested in joining that call.

⁴ There has been debate, which continued at this meeting, whether the commission wanted a one-year or a two-year timeline. Scott maintains the commission voted at its January meeting to consider a two-year timeline. However, the minutes of the February meeting show the commission received in its agenda packet a one-year timeline, which passed on a 4-1 vote at that meeting. That said the commissioners concurred that should they want to extend their timeline it can be amended and republished.

⁵ Considerable discussion about sending a survey with the water bill or seeking broader input, even from outside of city, as well and potential value of the information v. cost, estimated at around \$4,000.

Performing Arts Center, agreed to conduct a planning session April 17th at 5 p.m. to develop an agenda for that open house. As a means to publicize the work of the commission, three commissioners will participate in a podcast Wednesday April 9 at 7 p.m. at the Montana Tap House in Whitefish⁶. Commission chair Kevin McDowell will contact the editor or reporter at the Whitefish Pilot for a story about the commission's survey, schedule and upcoming meetings⁷.

In new business the commission asked city manager Dana Smith to discuss the city's interlocal agreements, and what she could see as possibilities for new ones with Columbia Falls. She said she intends to meet with our new city manager to discuss the contracted building inspection Whitefish does for Columbia Falls with the idea of reopening that agreement, for which she said Columbia Falls currently pays \$2,000 annually. She said there may be some opportunities to discuss extending the city's trail system to connect with Columbia Falls. She also mentioned discussion of public transportation and housing, although she had no specific suggestions. She said she would think of some other possibilities.⁸

Overall I found the meeting to be very informative and helpful in thinking of ways we might consider expanding our inquiries in the community, such as reaching out to some of our local "stakeholders" in similar roles locally as those identified for personal interviews by the Whitefish commissioners (again see p. 5). These could include Columbia Falls School District superintendent Cory Dziowgo, our local lending leaders such as Don Bennett, major employers such as SmartLam, Weyerhaeuser, Summit, etc., and developer Mick Ruis. Also, I'd be interested in hearing from Eric Mulcahy and any other contracted staff. Also, once the Montana State Legislature adjourns, from Whitefish/Columbia Falls Senate District 2 Sen. Dave Fern.

While Whitefish City Clerk Michelle Howke is the appointed ex-officio member of the WGSC, she neither votes nor participates in the conversation unless she is asked for information. She takes notes, writes the meeting minutes, prepares the agenda packets, and handles the legal requirements for publication of commission meetings and agendas. She says she does so on a "flex-time" schedule that Whitefish City staff has, meaning she is paid by the city for her time administering the commission's activities and takes other time off when she wants to account for her meeting time with the study commission.

I mention this for two reasons: it seems unfair to have Susan take notes and prepare our minutes and I would like to discuss an alternative, perhaps asking Barb to do so, either as part of her normal duties or on a contracted basis. Also, while Michelle appears to refrain from deliberation and discussion, I very much appreciate our ex-officio member's participation in our discussion and deliberations.

⁶ This event will be noticed as an official meeting as three commissioners compose a quorum.

⁷ Kevin asked if I would be willing to talk to the Pilot reporter about the Columbia Falls Study Commission, to which I agreed.

⁸ Following the meeting I chatted with Dana a bit and mentioned the Columbia Falls interlocal agreement with Columbia Falls School District and wondered if there might be some coordination with Whitefish's robust recreation and after school programs, especially in light of the project that has developed and is developing at the old Columbia Falls Jr. High School.

**GOVERNMENT REVIEW STUDY COMMISSION
COUNCIL CONFERENCE ROOM
418 EAST SECOND STREET
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 2025
5:30 PM**



- 1) Call to Order
- 2) Communications from the Public - (This time is set aside for the public to comment on items that are either on the agenda, but not a public hearing or on items not on the agenda. City officials do not respond during these comments but may respond or follow-up later on the agenda or at another time. The presiding officer has the option of limiting such communications to three minutes depending on the number of citizens who want to comment and the length of the meeting agenda)
- 3) Approval of March 12, 2025, Minutes
- 4) Old Business
 - a) Review LGR webpage – provide input to Michelle
- 5) New Business
 - a) Set open house date/time for the Tap House – late April
 - b) Set formal public meeting date/time/location – Performing Arts Center is available
- 6) Review City Charter (Standing Agenda Item)
- 7) Public Comment
- 8) Communication to or from Study Commissioners
 - a) Commissioners provide report from individual group meetings
- 9) Next meeting: April (TBD), 2025 – Open House
May 7, 2025 – Commissioner Meeting
- 10) Adjournment

Timetable for Study Commission Deliberations and Actions

This timetable for the deliberations and actions of the Whitefish Study Commission is established as required by 7-3-186, MCA for the purpose of assuring full public information concerning the Local Government Review process in our City and enabling informed citizen participation. To participate, receive news and updates, please register and subscribe to the website [Engage Whitefish website].

All meetings of the Study Commission are open to the public.

Date	Action
11/21/2024	First Study Commission organizational meeting
12/10/2024	Montana State University Local Government Center regional Study Commission Trainings
12/21/2024	Regular monthly Study Commission meeting, Town Hall. And thereafter the second Wednesday in each succeeding month at 5:30 pm
2/19/2025	Timetable established and published within 90 days of organizational meeting
March 2025	First Public Hearing —to gather citizen input on the form, functions, powers, and problems of city government and the adequacy of city services.
April 2025	Meeting with various city officials, city staff, partners
April 2025	Adopt a Tentative Report
May 2025	Second Public Hearing —to gather citizen response to Tentative Report
June 2025	Adopt the Final Report Publish summary of findings and recommendations once each week for two successive weeks.
DEADLINES IF STUDY COMMISSION RECOMMENDS NO CHANGE	
August 2025	Deadline to publish and distribute Final Report -The final report must be published and distributed within 60 days of its adoption. Copies must be prepared for public distribution
August 2025	Study Commission term ends -If the commission recommends no alternative plan, the term ends 30 days after submission of the final report.
DEADLINES IF STUDY COMMISSION RECOMMENDS CHANGES	
June 2025	Provide County Clerk and Recorder with a ballot certificate
July 8, 2025	File Final Report
August 22, 2025	Deadline for issuing a call for election
August 2025	Prepare public education materials to help citizens understand the proposal and compare the proposal with existing governmental form, structures, and powers
September 2025	Approve public education materials and conduct public forum
October 2025	Make final report available to electors
November 4, 2025	Election on proposed alternative or amendment
November 13, 2025	If the proposed alternative is approved by the voters, the study commission term is extended 90 days after the vote. The Study Commission prepare a transition plan for the new government
November 24, 2025	Deadline for governing body to meet, approve the new plan of government, and order the election to elect officials required under the new plan. The first election must be held in accordance with Title 13, Chapter 1, Part 4. A primary election may not be held.
February 2, 2026	Study Commission term of office ends. All minutes and other study commission documents must be filed with the County Clerk and Recorder office.
November 3, 2026	Next general election
January 2, 2027	First meeting of the new governing body

Nathan: City staff other than department directors; high school students (Mr. Webb), local business owners/employees; renters; local developers.

Kevin: Logan Health, WF Mtn Resort Board members, CVB/Explore WF, Chamber of Commerce

Saundra: Would like to team up with Kevin. Whitefish Theatre Company, Alpine Theatre Company, Senior Center.

Dakota: WF Lake Institute, Whitefish Trails, WF Mtn Resort, (recreation/conservation organization), Explore Whitefish, and is interested in joining Scott door to door.

The table below reflects which commissioners will team up to meet with each group. Groups can be added to the list at any time.

Group	Kevin	Nathan	Scott	Dakota	Saundra		
Mr. Webb	X	X					
Renters/WHA/Housing WF/ Etc		X			X		
Health Care (Logan/Glacier Med/Etc.	X		X		X		
Explore WF_CVB/Heart of WF/WF Foundation	X			X			
WF Manor/Springs/Mtn View Manor/Etc.			X		X		
WLI/WLP/Recreation Conservation			X	X			
Economic/Chamber/Businesses	X		X				
Fraternal Organization	X			X			
Art -Theatres				X	X		
School Board	X				X		
City staff (not department directors)	Dana suggests sending surveys to city employees prior to meeting as a group.						
	Contact Dana prior to reaching out to employees to set up a meeting.						

b) Discuss and review survey questions

After some discussion the Commissioners agreed on questions for the City Council, Department Directors and the Community Survey. The questionnaires and the survey are attached to the minutes.

Commissioner Whitman made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Dugan to approve the Community Survey, with the caveat that Commissioners McDowell and Alessi will work on the introduction and City Attorney Jacobs will work on a disclaimer statement. The motion carried.

c) Review City Charter

Remains as standing agenda item.

d) Review LGR webpage – provide input to Michelle

PART V. Public Hearings

4. All testimony shall be directed to the presiding officer who has the discretion to limit testimony to three minutes.
5. At the conclusion of any individual testimony a commissioner may ask the presiding officer for permission to ask questions of the audience member who has provided testimony. If granted, such exchanges between a commissioner and an audience member shall comport with the provisions of PART VI, paragraphs 4 and 5, and shall be limited to three minutes. Upon request by a commissioner, the presiding officer may grant additional time for the commissioner to ask questions of an audience member who provided testimony. The presiding officer may end the colloquy between the commissioner and the audience member at any time thereafter.
- ~~5.6. Upon a call for additional public comment or testimony, hearing none, the~~
presiding officer shall close the public hearing.
7. Following the presentation of all testimony and public comment, the Study Commission may: (1) Continue the hearing to a date certain to allow additional information to be submitted to the Study Commission; (2) Close the public hearing and proceed to Study Commission discussion of the matter; (3) Continue the Study Commission discussion to a date certain; or (4) shall then, upon a proper motion and second, vote on the matter.
- ~~6. The Study Commission shall then upon a proper motion and second, vote on the matter.~~

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Memorandum

Re: Vice-chair Hopkins' ponderings (for discussion) 
 To: Chairman Piper, Commissioners Nicosia and Koropatze
 Date: April 7, 2026
 CC: City Clerk Barb Staaland

As I am more of a writer than a speaker, it is helpful for me to put my thoughts in writing and to share them with the commission for discussion and consideration. The following, in no particular order, lists some goals I would like to undertake with the concurrence of the commission. These have in some part come to mind as a result of my attending the Whitefish Study Commission meeting on Wednesday, April 2. A report on that in a separate memo.

1. Learn about all interlocal agreements and who manages them (Susan, our resident city archivist and historian, listed them all verbally at our last meeting but I'd like to see a list and know who is the liaison with the city and our other government partner(s), and who the city's liaison is if that assignment is delegated by the city manager)
 - a. meet with Eric Mulcahy
 - b. meet with the person/staff member who conducts our building inspections
 - c. meet with the School District regarding recreation program services and explore other possible service agreements.
2. Have a list of all our boards and current memberships, including other government boards that Columbia Falls city officials also sit on.
3. Interview individually and/or invite community leaders to an "open house" to discuss the community's needs and how/if any changes to the form of government could facilitate addressing them (this is far from a comprehensive list)
 - a. housing
 - b. daycare (can we initiate a local grant program to offset operator's costs?)
 - c. transportation.
4. Engage in more community outreach (HHN column - I'd be happy to write and have the commission vet); radio, tv, service organization meetings, etc.
5. Take a deep dive into consideration of either adding local government powers to the Council-Manager form of government or writing a charter.
6. Identify and possibly survey (another survey ... ughh!!!) other specific changes under our current form of government that the study commission could consider from each of the choices listed in 7-3-312 through 7-3-318
 - a. **7-3-312. Appointment to boards.** All members of boards, other than temporary advisory committees established by the manager, must be appointed by: (1) the presiding officer with the consent of the commission; (2) the manager with the consent of the commission; or (3) the commission (*currently appointed by the manager*)
 - b. **7-3-313. Selection of commission members.** The commission shall be: (1) elected at large; (2) elected by districts in which candidates must reside and which are apportioned by population; (3) elected at large and nominated by a plan of nomination that may not preclude the possibility of the majority of the electors nominating candidates for the majority of the seats on the commission from persons residing in the district or districts where the majority of the electors reside; or (4) elected by any combination of districts, in which candidates must reside and which are apportioned by population, and at large (*currently elected at large*);

- c. **7-3-314. Type of election.** Local government elections shall be conducted on a: (1) partisan basis; or (2) nonpartisan basis (*currently nonpartisan*);
- d. **7-3-315. Presiding officer of commission.** The presiding officer of the commission must be: (1) elected by the members of the commission from their own number for a term established by ordinance; (2) elected by the qualified electors for a term of office; or (3) selected as provided by ordinance (*put to voters as a suboption and the voters opted to elect the mayor*);
- e. **7-3-316 Terms of commission members.** Commission members shall be elected for: (1) concurrent terms of office; or (2) overlapping terms of office (*currently overlapping terms*);
- f. **7-3-317 Size of commission and community councils.** The size of the commission, which shall be a number not less than three, shall be established when the form is adopted by the voters, and: (1) community councils of at least three members shall be elected within each district to advise the commissioner from that district. Local governments conducting elections at large shall district according to population for the purpose of electing community councils; or (2) community councils to advise commissioners may be authorized by ordinance (*currently the size of the commission is seven and voters gave the council the option to establish community councils by ordinance*).
- g. **7-3-318. Terms of elected officials.** The term of office of elected officials may not exceed 4 years and shall be established when the form is adopted by the voters (*no option for change*).

In light of these goals I believe we should amend our timeline. Doing so will also give us more time to interact with and review ideas or suggestions our new city manager may have as he starts to dig into city operations. Extending our timeline begs the question as to whether the other commissioners agree with the proposals I've put forth and either support no change to our form of government and/or do not support the tasks outlines above.

Whether we agree to extend our timeline into 2026 and have a recommendation and petition for changes to our existing form or to write a charter, or prepare a report without recommending any changes, I would suggest setting a new timeline that assumes a vote on changes in time for the 2026 primary election rather than waiting until the 2026 general election. I don't have any particular reason for doing so other than to keep us pushing along through the winter and not having to go back to the council for 2026-2027 budget authority.

Lastly, if the Whitefish Government Study Commission does not extend its timeline there will not be enough time for a working subcommittee on service consolidation and interlocal agreements to review opportunities and potentially write a recommendation before the current end of their timeline. The same is true for our study commission under our current timeline. That said, whether we decide to amend our timeline, and not knowing if Whitefish will extend theirs, I would nevertheless like to **add to our April 16 meeting agenda discussion about creating a subcommittee to review and potentially recommend consolidation of services and functions and indicate potential areas for interlocal agreements with the City of Whitefish.** This would at least inform the members of the WGSC of our interest in such a project. While it may lead to a presumption that we will amend our timeline, if such an amendment does not occur by the time of our second public hearing June 11 then this committee, along with the study commission, will dissolve.

Study Commission Timeline

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Activity:</u>
January 8, 2025	Regular Meeting
February 12, 2025	Regular Meeting
March 3, 2025	Finalize Survey Survey Deadline
March 12, 2025	Regular Meeting Public Hearing (Input)
April 9, 2025	Regular Meeting
Mid-May	Tentative Report Adoption
June 11, 2025	Regular Meeting Public Hearing (2 nd) – on Report
July 9, 2025	Adopt Final Report & Submit to City Council
August 9, 2025	Final Meeting/Publish Final Report