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**STUDY COMMISSION MEETING
AGENDA
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2025
COUNCIL CHAMBERS CITY HALL**

STUDY COMMISSION MEETING – 6:30 P.M.

ROLL CALL

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

1. October 22, 2025 Study Commission Minutes

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARINGS/PUBLIC HEARINGS:

2. Notice of Public Hearing
The purpose of the public hearing is to receive public comment on the Tentative Report of the Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission.
3. Tentative Study Commission Report

DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

ADJOURN



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

Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes October 22, 2025

Call to Order: Meeting called to order at 5:03 PM by Chairman Piper.

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

Visitors/Public Comment: None

Approval of Minutes: Commissioner Hopkins made a motion to approve the minutes as presented, second by Commissioner Konopatzke, motion carried with all members voting in favor.

Discussion:

Commissioners reviewed the tentative final report. Commissioner Hopkins questioned whether the certificate section needed to list all statutory options and citations. The Commission agreed to maintain a simplified certification format. Commissioners also reviewed the overall timeline, confirming a public hearing for November 19 and anticipated adoption of the final report on January 21.

Commissioner Hopkins summarized his proposed edits to the final report. Commissioners discussed whether the report should explicitly reference adopting all general government powers under state law. The Commission agreed to request a legal review and recommendations from the City Attorney before finalizing language.

Commissioner Nicosia stated she was still evaluating whether compelling reasons support adopting self-government powers and noted she may prepare a minority report if not persuaded before the final vote. Commissioner Konopatzke expressed support for pursuing self-government powers, emphasizing the advantages of proactive governance, flexibility for future needs, and the absence of identified downsides.

The Commission reviewed the schedule for public engagement on the tentative draft report recommending a transition from general government powers to self-governing powers. Susan confirmed that required public notices would run in the newspaper on November 2 and November 9, and that the revised report would be available by October 31.

Review of Schedule

The Commission will host a Public Hearing on November 19th to receive public comment on the tentative report. The Commission anticipates adoption of the Final Report on January 21st.

Adjourn: Meeting duly adjourned at 5:58PM.

Chair

PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDY COMMISSION**

The Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission will hold a **Public Hearing on Wednesday, November 19, 2025, at 6:30 p.m.** in the City Council Chambers at **Columbia Falls City Hall, 130 6th Street West, Columbia Falls, Montana.**

The purpose of the public hearing is to receive public comment on the **Tentative Report of the Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission**, which recommends that the voters of the City of Columbia Falls amend the City's existing plan of government by adopting **self-government powers** under Montana law.

If approved by voters, adoption of self-government powers would provide the City Government with enhanced flexibility to address future community needs while retaining all general government authority currently exercised by the City.

The Tentative Report summarizes the Study Commission's review process, public survey results, meeting summaries, findings, and recommendations. Following the public hearing and consideration of public input, the Study Commission will finalize its report at its January 21, 2026, meeting, including setting the date for a citywide election on the proposed amendment to the City's plan of government.

Copies of the Tentative Report are available for public review at City Hall during regular business hours and on the City's website in the Local Government Study Commission section <https://www.cityofcolumbiafalls.org/bc-bqa>.

Written comments may be submitted prior to the hearing to:

City Clerk, City of Columbia Falls

130 6th Street West, Columbia Falls, MT 59912

or emailed to cityclerk@cityofcolumbiafalls.org

DATED this 7th day of November, 2025.

PUBLIC HEARING
CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDY
COMMISSION

Item No.2.

The Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission will hold a Public Hearing on Wednesday, November 19, 2025, at 6:30 p.m. in the City Council Chambers at Columbia Falls City Hall, 130 6th Street West, Columbia Falls, Montana. The purpose of the public hearing is to receive public comment on the Tentative Report of the Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission, which recommends that the voters of the City of Columbia Falls amend the City's existing plan of government by adopting self-government powers under Montana law. If approved by voters, adoption of self-government powers would provide the City Government with enhanced flexibility to address future community needs while retaining all general government authority currently exercised by the City. The Tentative Report summarizes the Study Commission's review process, public survey results, meeting summaries, findings, and recommendations. Following the public hearing and consideration of public input, the Study Commission will finalize its report at its January 21, 2026, meeting, including setting the date for a citywide election on the proposed amendment to the City's plan of government. Copies of the Tentative Report are available for public review at City Hall during regular business hours and on the City's website in the Local Government Study Commission section <https://www.cityofcolumbiafalls.org/bc-bca>. Persons may testify at the hearing or submit written comments prior to the meeting. Written comments may be sent to: City Clerk, City of Columbia Falls 130 6th Street West, Columbia Falls, MT 59912 or emailed to staalandb@cityofcolumbiafalls.org DATED this 7th day of November, 2025.



COLUMBIA FALLS MONTANA

COLUMBIA FALLS STUDY COMMISSION TENTATIVE REPORT

To the Citizens of the City of Columbia Falls.

October 22, 2025

The Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission presents to the voters and citizens of the city this *TENTATIVE REPORT* and recommendation.

By a 2-1 vote the three-member commission recommends voters amend the City of Columbia Falls plan of government and approve adoption of self-governing powers. If approved by the voters, self-government powers would provide the mayor, city council and city administration enhanced flexibility to address future community needs without sacrificing any general government authority by which the city currently protects the public health, safety and welfare of citizens.

This report presents a summary of the commission's meetings leading to the recommendation and a counter proposal, a brief history of the evolution of the city's government, discussion of the constitutional and statutory duties of study commissions, the results of public surveys, and describes the next steps required to bring this recommendation to a vote of Columbia Falls citizens.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED

John Piper, Chair (Ex-Officio Member)

Roger Hopkins, Vice Chair

Connie Konopatzke, Member

Susan Nicosia, Member

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III. INTRODUCTION

Montana's Constitution adopted in 1972 provided Montana voters the opportunity to review their local governments' structures every ten years. The review occurs when voters in the local government authorize convening a study commission. If voters elect to have their form of government reviewed citizens seek election to the commission.

On June 4, 2024, in this sixth cycle of local government review, Columbia Falls voters narrowly approved review of the city's form of government. Subsequently, only one candidate, Roger Hopkins, filed for election to the three-member study commission, resulting in the cancellation of the November 2024 election of commissioners. It fell to the city council to seek letters of interest to fill the other two seats. Connie Konopatzke and Susan Nicosia submitted letters and on October 21, 2024, the council appointed Hopkins, Konopatzke and Nicosia to the commission. The council also named Councilor John Piper as the official council liaison and ex-officio, non-voting member of the study commission.

All appointed study commission members were administered the Oath of Office as Study Commissioners by the City Clerk and attended the Montana Local Government Center regional training in Whitefish on December 10, 2024.

As defined in state law, the role of the commission is “to study the existing form and powers of local government and procedures for delivery of local government services and to compare them with other forms available under the laws of the state.” The commission's review is limited to the form of government and not the internal operations, personnel or administration of the city. As the commission learned from surveying community members, this distinction was not well understood. Many of the concerns reported by citizens in their survey responses had to do with city council and administration responsiveness, transparency of operations, and sufficiency of services. These are all matters beyond the scope of the study commission's review, but nevertheless of interest and value to Columbia Falls City Manager Eric Hanks who was hired mid-way through the commission's study and has been helpful and attentive to the review process.

Pursuant to state law, upon completion of this study the commission may: recommend amendments to the existing plan of government; recommend a new plan of government; draft a charter; recommend municipal-county consolidation; recommend disincorporation; or submit no recommendation. **On September 10, 2025, commissioners Hopkins and Konopatzke voted to recommend amending the city's existing plan of government, replacing the current authority for general government powers with self-government powers.**

At that meeting Commissioner Nicosia opposed putting the amendment to the voters, instead recommending that the council consider the need for self-government powers, and if and when necessary, put the amendment to voters at that time. At the October 22, 2025, meeting Commissioner Nicosia voted with the majority to approve the Draft Tentative Report and reserved her right to submit a minority report. **Her minority report is part of this report on page ____.**

Based upon this recommendation the commission, with the assistance of city staff, offers this tentative report, to be presented at a public hearing 7 p.m., November 19, 2025, at Columbia

Falls City Hall. Following that hearing, and after considering public testimony on the tentative report, the commission is set to present a final report at its meeting at 5 p.m. January 21, 2025. This final report by the Columbia Falls Local Government Study Commission will set the date for an election on the proposed amendment to the city's plan of government, most likely during the 2026 federal and state primary election, June 2.¹

IV. REPORT SUMMARY

A. Findings and Summaries of Study Commission meetings.²

January 8, 2025. The study commission began its work after the first of the year with the first meeting on January 8, 2025. The commission formally organized, selecting Councilor John Piper, non-voting member, as Chair. The commissioners reviewed the required bylaws and a timeline as well as the scope of the commission's study. The commission also reviewed the current Commission-Manager form of government with general powers.³

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February 12, 2025. The commissioners adopted bylaws and a timeline and scheduled for March 12, 2025 the first public hearing to obtain public input. Whitefish Government Study Commissioner Scott Wurster attended the meeting and provided public comment regarding his interest in observing the Columbia Falls Commission and evaluating ways in which the two cities might collaborate in their reviews. He noted that Whitefish is reviewing their charter form of government, which is not applicable to Columbia Falls current form of government.

The commission reviewed historical Columbia Falls local government review records although the city staff were unable to locate the 1976 minutes or final report. The commission updated the 2014 Community Survey form and requested Interim City Manager Mark Shrives have the survey prepared and returned prior to the March 12, 2025 public hearing.

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March 12, 2025 public hearing. As with the 2014 Study Commission, the 2024 Study Commission was disappointed with the lack of public interest in the review process after the voters approved of the review. No one wished to comment at the public hearing.

Interim City Manager Shrives presented a staff report with the different forms of government available to Columbia Falls. The commission held an in-depth review of the charter form of government and read the Whitefish City Charter. The commissioner's consensus was that the charter form does not provide the city with anything significantly different than the current form of government. Shrives, formerly a city manager in Polson, offered his opinion that the charter government, operating with self-governing powers, offered no specific advantages.

¹ According to the Montana Secretary of State election calendar for 2026, the city's deadline to put the proposal on the June 2 ballot is Monday, March 9, 2026.

² This summary of the study commission's deliberations and findings are further documented in the public meeting minutes included in Appendix C and in the articles collected in Appendix D as reported by the Hungry Horse News.

³ Rather than wait for the 1994 government study review cycle, a committee wrote a petition seeking voter approval to change from the Commission (Council)-Mayor to the Commission (Council)-Manager form of government. Voters approved the change in 1992, which included electing city council members at large as opposed to election from districts or wards. The new government and city manager took office in January 1994.

Shrives presented the results of the Study Commission Survey, attached in its entirety as Appendix A. There were 123 respondents. In response to the most relevant question, number 10, half (61) said they would keep the city government the same or make a few changes. Forty-eight respondents (39%) said they would “make major changes (or) completely change the form and powers of the City government,” while 9% (11) had no opinion.

Forty-nine respondents provided comments or recommendations for the study commission. The majority of the comments were not related to the study commission’s scope of review but rather responded to the suitability of services. Also noted was that only 70% of respondents indicated that they live within the city limits.

The commission and Interim City Manager Shrives felt that the survey results provided better information for the city manager and city staff than the study commission. The commission asked Interim Manager Shrives to send out a new survey to Columbia Falls citizens seeking more specific input to the commission. This survey was mailed to every utility billing customer emphasizing that the study commission was seeking the community’s views on the city’s current *form* of government.

Also at its March 12 meeting the commission reviewed current interlocal agreements for services between the city and other local governments. These include Building Code Inspections with the City of Whitefish, Animal Control and Drug Task Force with Flathead County, and a Youth Recreation Program with School District No. 6. Additionally, the city council appoints city representatives to the Flathead City-County Health Board and Flathead County Solid Waste Board.

Prior to its dissolution the city participated in the county-wide Flathead Regional Development Office that provided planning and zoning services to the county and all three cities. In the early 2000’s, Flathead County opted to separate county and city zoning, and the three cities formed the Tri-City Planning Office. Planning demands in Kalispell and Whitefish drove those cities to disband Tri-City Planning and form their own individual planning offices in 2005. Since then the City of Columbia Falls has used contract planners to supplement city staff for planning and added the title of Planning/Zoning Administrator to the city manager.

In addition to these formal relationships, city administration, staff, and elected officials maintain open and frequent conversations with Flathead County and “sister” city officials. Commissioner Hopkins said he would attend the next Whitefish Study Commission meeting and report back to the Columbia Falls Study Commission.

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April 16, 2025. The Study Commission reviewed the updated survey results included in its entirety as Appendix B. This survey generated 110 responses along with a few comments about wasting our time with a second survey. Of the 110 respondents: 50% indicated that they had voted for voter review; 75% reported satisfaction with the current Commission/Council-Manager form of government; 52% felt that the current form ensures efficient and smooth operations (25% were unsure); 50% felt the mayor’s role was effective (but again 27% were unsure); 62% responded that they were aware of the current review effort. The Study Commission took note of the community response indicating general satisfaction with the current form of government.

Commissioner Hopkins reported on his attendance at the Whitefish Study Commission meeting on April 2, 2025. Their commission is exploring amendments to their charter. He mentioned his interest in reviewing the benefits of a charter or self-government powers without a charter.⁴ Commissioner Hopkins proposed amending the study commission timeline to form a “working subcommittee” on service consolidation and interlocal agreements, specifically with Whitefish. The consensus of the Study Commission was that the issue of service consolidation and interlocal agreements could be reviewed by the city managers of both municipalities.

Commissioner Hopkins recommended holding a workshop in May with Dan Clark, Director of the Local Government Center at Montana State University, to discuss charters and self-governing powers. Clark and his staff at MSU are Montana's recognized experts in local government and are helping cities and counties who have elected to review their forms of government this year. Mr. Clark had scheduled a meeting for May 14th with the Whitefish Review Commission to go over the city's charter. The commissioners changed their regular May meeting to a workshop on May 15th to meet with Clark.

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May 15, 2025. The workshop was informative as Mr. Clark indicated he no longer recommends adopting charters. He said while there are some exceptions, charters do not significantly enhance governance and can, in fact, hamstring local governments as communities grow and change. The commission thoroughly vetted the topic of self-governing powers with Mr. Clark. While he is no longer a strong advocate of charter governments, he said there are potential advantages for cities to have self-governing powers outside of a charter: "There's no downside to having self-governing powers," he said, because the city would still have all the general government powers by which it currently functions.

Commissioner Hopkins said while neither he nor any of the commissioners propose a charter form of government, adopting self-governing powers could give the council and administration a tool it doesn't currently have to address future problems. Commissioner Konopatzke offered a report she prepared on cities and towns with self-governing powers. Her review revealed that of Montana's 129 cities and towns, 83 have general government powers, 33 have charters with self-government authority, and nine have self-governing authority without a charter. She asked what is it that those cities and towns with self-governing authority are able to do that Columbia Falls cannot? There was no response to her question.

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June 18, 2025. Discussion focused on presenting a recommendation to the city council for the council to put to a vote of the citizens of Columbia Falls the adoption of self-governing powers. While the commission did not identify a current or anticipated need for self-governing authority it was agreed the power of self-government could offer future flexibility to address currently unforeseen challenges and opportunities for the city council.

The study commission's consensus was to provide the recommendation to the city council with a “future election” reference that allows the council to call for the election as provided in MCA 7-3-149. Nicosia volunteered to draft the tentative Final Report for the next meeting in July. The commission also amended the timeline to provide for a public hearing on the tentative report in September and projected adoption of a final report in November, 2025.

⁴ Hopkins' report to the commission, p. ____

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July 16, 2025. Commissioner Nicosia submitted her draft Tentative Final Report shortly before the start of the 5 p.m. meeting. The commissioners thanked her for her initiative and effort to write the report. Upon review the commissioners offered no proposals for substantial changes to the Introduction or Report Summary as presented. Much of Commissioner Nicosia's work on those sections has been incorporated into this report.

The commission's discussion focused primarily upon the report's recommendation, in which Commissioner Nicosia wrote, "The Study Commission found no significant community interest in amending the existing form of government. However, the Study Commission assessment did indicate that the City may benefit from the implementation of self-governing powers. By unanimous vote the commission adopted Commissioner Nicosia's recommendation: **"The 2024 Columbia Falls Study Commission formal recommendation is to pursue, by a future election, self-governing powers without identifying a specific current need for them. The Study Commission acknowledges that the City Council has the authority in 7-3-149, MCA to call for an election."**

While the commissioners agreed that the language of the commission's recommendation was accurate, the report should explain the rationale behind the recommendation for the city to adopt self-government powers. Commissioner Konopatzke proposed adding that the pursuit of self-governing powers would "allow for future flexibility and address currently unforeseen challenges and opportunities for the City Council."

The commissioners questioned the appropriateness of Commissioner Nicosia's personal recommendation for the "City Council (to) direct the reservation of funds from the Study Commission Special Revenue Fund when the fund is closed into the General Fund in compliance with state statute." The commissioners agreed there was no harm in leaving that recommendation in the report.

Also discussed was Commissioner Nicosia's explanation that while she was not formally dissenting, she questioned asking for self-governing powers without providing the public with a clear need for the powers. In her recommendation she noted Dan Clark's observation "that the City of Havre held elections for self-governing powers four times before it passed on the fifth try as the Council had identified a specific need (the ability to amend State Building Codes) for the self-governing powers." The commission decided the reference to the Havre effort to acquire self-governing authority was not needed but agreed to retain Commissioner Nicosia's concern regarding lack of a currently expressed need for the city to adopt self-governing powers.

A day after that meeting Commissioner Hopkins took a deeper dive into the report and the Commission's statutory requirements. He grew concerned that if the study commission stays with the recommendation as written, "at best the commission would shirk its responsibility, or at worst not follow the law, by punting the decision to the council to set a date for an election on the recommendation." Hopkins believed if the commission recommends a change in the plan of government, in this case adopting self-government powers, it is the commission's responsibility to set the date for an election on that recommendation.

Hopkins suggested seeking review of the recommendation and the commission's responsibilities by Dan Clark and/or the Columbia Falls City Attorney. City Manager Eric

Hanks, having been alerted to the discussions between Commissioners Hopkins and Nicosia, sought guidance from Dan Clark and Columbia Falls City Attorney Justin Breck.

City Manager Hanks wrote a staff report to the commissioners that was included with the agenda packet for the September 10, 2025 commission meeting. In that report he summarized the options facing the commission, either of which would be legally permissible. He said the first option, as stated in the draft report, recommends that the city council consider adopting self-government powers and call for an election at a future date, ostensibly at such time that the council sees a need for this authority. The second option: if the commission recommends a change in the plan of government to adopt self-governing powers without recommending the council do so at some future date, then the commission sets an election date for voters to decide the fate of the recommendation. The council's only authority is to officially call for the election by Resolution, the means for putting the question on the ballot.

City Manager Hanks encouraged the commission "to deliberate on the two statutory options, weigh their respective efficacy, and clearly document its final recommendation in the Final Report. A clear and unambiguous recommendation will ensure consistency with statutory requirements and minimize confusion for the City Council and the public," he wrote.

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September 10, 2025. The commissioners met with City Manager Hanks and City Attorney Breck to discuss the options and to vote on the alternatives. Commissioner Hopkins' said when Commission Nicosia's draft report was reviewed by the commission he didn't fully understand the nuance of her recommendation. He said his goal is to give the citizens a decisive opportunity to chose self-government authority now, before an issue requiring flexibility in city ordinance should arise.

Granting that there is no immediate perceived need for this power, Hopkins said with all the rapid changes that are occurring: development and deployment of Artificial Intelligence, usurping of local government control by the state Legislature, pending growth and development in the city, upending of federal government services with changing budget priorities, layoffs and firings of federal employees, it could serve the citizens of Columbia Falls if the city council and city administration had greater flexibility to respond sooner than later to community needs caused by these changes.

Commissioner Hopkins said the only downside he could see to a recommendation to change the city's plan of government is the cost of the election. City attorney Breck noted that in the alternative, if the commission chooses to recommend that the city council decide when or if to seek self-governing authority, it would have to do so by petition. If the petition passes, the proposal would still require a vote of the citizens.

Commissioner Konopatzke said she believes it is the commission's responsibility to make the decision whether to recommend adopting self-government powers. It shouldn't be left to the city council. Having that tool available when needed is better than waiting for the need to arise and hoping the citizens adopt the change. She said citizens voted for the review and the study commission should see it through as the funding as been levied and appropriated.

Commissioner Hopkins made a motion for the Columbia Falls Government Review Commission to recommend a change in the City of Columbia Falls plan of government to adopt self-government powers, seconded by Commissioner Konopatzke. Commissioners

Konopatzke and Hopkins voted yay. Commissioner Nicosia voted no. Commissioner Hopkins volunteered to draft a new Tentative Report.

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October 22, 2025.

The commission reviewed Hopkins' draft Tentative Report and discussed several edits and clarifications. The two most significant changes included making it clear that if voters approve adoption of self-government powers, the city retains all the current powers granted local governments by the Legislature. Secondly, Commissioner Nicosia said she is still thinking about her vote in opposition to the recommendation: "I am still searching for a reason to recommend this change without an immediate need for it."

Commissioner Nicosia voted with Commissioners Konopatzke and Hopkins to approve the amended draft Tentative Report, reserving the right to include a minority report following the public hearing and prior to publishing a final report.

The Commissioners also reviewed the timetable for publishing notice of the upcoming public hearing on November 19, 2025. Commissioner Hopkins thanked Commissioner Konopatzke for her proposed changes, and Commissioner Nicosia for her original draft report, which he said helped significantly in writing the new draft Tentative Report.

B. Self Government versus General Government Powers

In 2015 MSU's Local Government Center prepared a report on the differences between self-government and general government authority. As cited in that report, the power of municipalities with general government authority is limited to the activities allowed by Montana law, specifically MCA 7-1-4123 and 4124. These statutes enable any municipal government to protect the public health, safety and welfare within their community. The statutes also provide that a general-powers municipality may perform any function, provide any service and exercise any power authorized by state law.

In short, local governments with general government authority may only exercise powers specifically granted by the state. If the state Legislature has not delegated the power to a municipality to provide a service or perform a governmental function, a municipal government with general powers is not authorized to do so. In contrast, **Article XI, section 6, of the 1972 Constitution** says that in addition to the powers granted by the state Legislature, local governments with self-government authority "may exercise any power not specifically prohibited by the Constitution, state law, or (a) local government charter."

As noted by the Local Government Center, "At first reading by a municipal official, this sweeping constitutional grant of any power ... would appear to reverse ... (a) municipality's dependence upon a specific legislative grant of governing authority." However, the center reported that over time the Legislature has forbidden local governments from exercising certain powers. MCA 7-1-111 lists 30 such prohibitions as of 2023. It's likely when the 2025 Montana Code Annotated is published municipalities will find even more legislative prohibitions.

The MSU center report says despite these prohibitions, "possession of self-government powers may well enable a municipality to act in the best interests of its citizens under

circumstances where a general powers government would not be able to act." The report lists several examples of local governments that have enacted specific solutions. Among the examples cited: Great Falls gained greater authority to dispose of public lands; Anaconda-Deer Lodge altered its organizational; Libby and Troy were enabled to develop and operate an electric utility; Butte-Silver Bow enabled to acquire and operate electric and natural gas utilities within and outside the boundaries of its jurisdiction. Havre is the most recent municipality to adopt self-governing powers with a charter.

According to the Local Government Center, "The availability of self-government powers to a municipal government will not, in and of itself, solve community problems or improve local government performance. At best, self-government powers will enable a community and its local government to become more effective participants in their own problem solving and governing processes." ⁵

V. CERTIFICATION OF THE EXISTING AND PROPOSED PLANS OF GOVERNMENT AND STUDY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

A. Existing Form – Commission-Manager with General Powers

This government, as approved by the citizens of Columbia Falls, is governed by Title 7, Chapter 3 of the Montana Code Annotated and the following Sections:

- **7-3-301** Commission-manager form;
- **7-3-302** Nature of government. The plan of government submitted to the qualified electors shall determine the powers of the local government unit by authorizing:
 - (1) general government powers.**
 - **7-3-303** Appointment of manager;
 - **7-3-304** Duties of manager;
 - **7-3-305** Employees of commission-manager government;
 - (7-3-306 through 7-3-310 reserved);
 - **7-3-311** Structural suboptions. The plan of government shall define the structural characteristics of the form by **7-3-312** through **7-3-318**.
 - **7-3-312** Appointment to boards. All members of boards, other than temporary advisory committees established by the manager, must be appointed by:
 - (3) the commission.**
 - **7-3-313** Selection of commission members. The commission shall be:
 - (1) elected at large.**
 - **7-3-314** Type of election. Local government elections shall be conducted on a:
 - (2) nonpartisan basis.**
 - **7-3-315** Presiding officer of commission. The presiding officer must be:
 - (2) elected by the qualified electors for a term of office** (1992 voter-selected suboption).
 - **7-3-316** Terms of commission members. Commission members shall be elected for:
 - (2) overlapping terms of office.**
 - **7-3-317** Size of commission and community councils. The size of the commission shall be seven (7), and community councils to advise commissions may be authorized by ordinance (1992 voter-approved provisions).

⁵ See Appendix F.

- **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.

B. Proposed form - Commission-Manager with Self-Government Powers

The proposed plan of government is identical to the current plan of government approved by petition of the voters in 1992 with the following exception:

- **7-3-302** Nature of government. The plan of government submitted to the qualified electors shall determine the powers of the local government unit by authorizing:

(2) self-government powers.

C. Recommendation - Proposed Amendment to the Existing Plan of Government

The successful vote in November 1992 on the petition to change from the Commission/Council-Mayor to the Commission/Council-Manager form of government included several amendments to the current operations. As certified in Section A above, the petition proposed eliminating elections by ward. The proposed plan also called for the mayor to be elected by the voters as well as having the mayor vote on every action and not just to break a tie vote. Additionally, Columbia Falls chose to continue appointing the city judge instead of having the judge elected. The city affirmed that method with an Attorney General's Opinion (AGO Vol. No. 45 Opinion No. 15) on October 22, 1993.

When proposing the change in government the petitioners opted not to select self-government powers, choosing to maintain general government authority. Without knowing the reason for this decision it is safe to assume that convincing voters to approve a dramatic change in how the government operated was enough of a change to ask of the citizens of Columbia Falls.

The 2014 Study Commission also reviewed the question of a charter form of government with self-governing powers along with studying the current form of government. Their final report recommended no change to the current form of government.

The 2024 Study Commission thoroughly reviewed the current form of government and the alternative forms of government in compliance with the statutory duties of the commission specified in 7-3-102, MCA. As noted in the introduction, it is the responsibility of the study commission to submit a report proposing one of the following options: recommend amendments to the existing plan of government; recommend a new plan of government; draft a charter; recommend municipal-county consolidation; recommend disincorporation; or submit no recommendation.

While the study commission found no significant community interest in amending the existing form of government, the commission's study and review did indicate that the City may benefit from the implementation a change in the plan of government by adopting self-governing powers.

Therefore, the 2024 Columbia Falls Study Commission formal recommendation, by a 2-1 vote, is for voters to amend the City of Columbia Falls plan of government and approve adoption of self-governing powers.

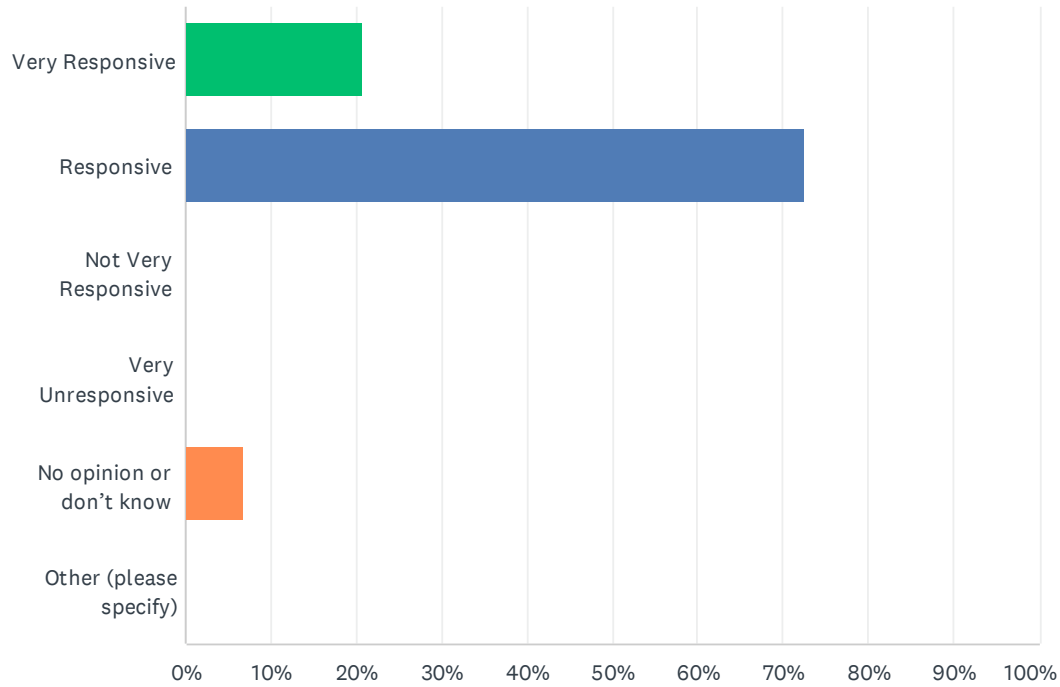
D. Minority Report.

(pending inclusion)

APPENDICES

Q1 In general, how responsive is your Columbia Falls City government to your needs?

Answered: 29 Skipped: 1

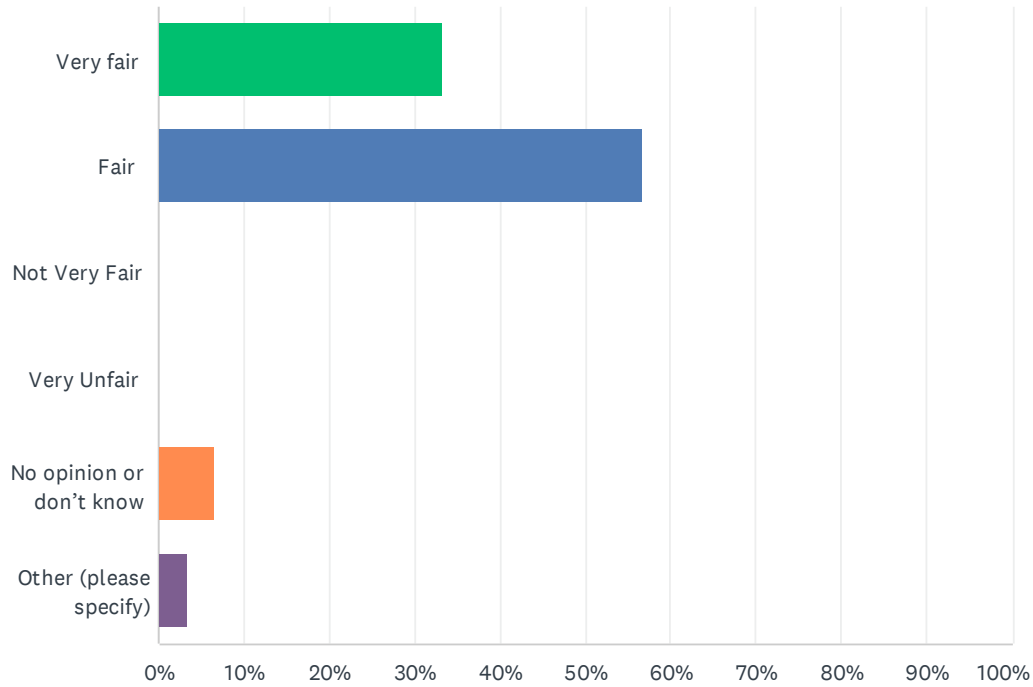


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Responsive	20.69%	6
Responsive	72.41%	21
Not Very Responsive	0.00%	0
Very Unresponsive	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	6.90%	2
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
TOTAL		29

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
	There are no responses.	

Q2 In your opinion, how fair is your City government in dealing with all of the residents of the community?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

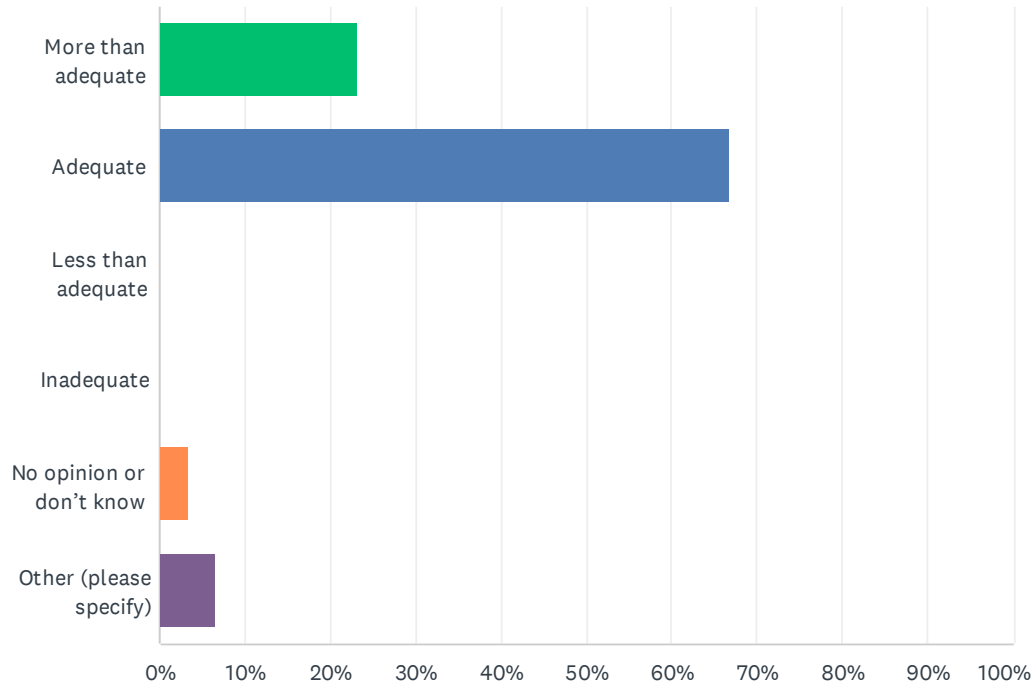


ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Very fair		33.33%	10
Fair		56.67%	17
Not Very Fair		0.00%	0
Very Unfair		0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know		6.67%	2
Other (please specify)		3.33%	1
TOTAL			30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Very Fair: The folks that say "unfair" are more than likely unhappy with the answer rather than the service. This community is very closed-minded and stuck in the past. Then when the city deals with the community they get accused of various wrong-doings because of ignorant citizens.	3/5/2025 5:44 PM

Q3 I believe that City Administration (City Manager, Planning, City Clerk, Cashiers) in our community is:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

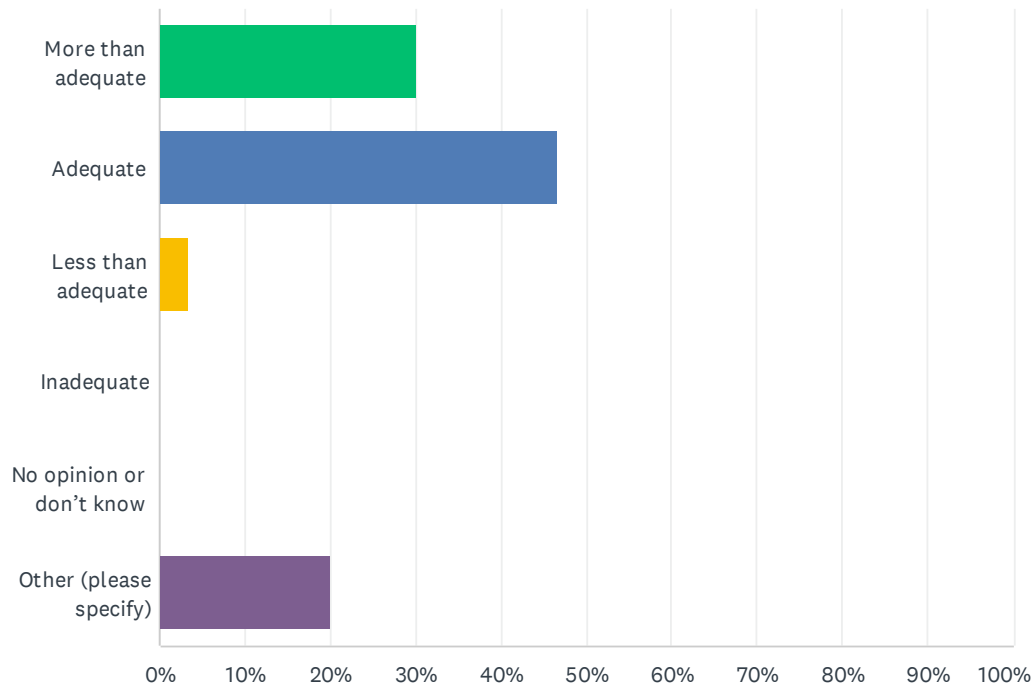


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	23.33%	7
Adequate	66.67%	20
Less than adequate	0.00%	0
Inadequate	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	3.33%	1
Other (please specify)	6.67%	2
TOTAL		30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Adequate: City Manager position up in the air for 8 months. Staffing has been an issue in the Finance Office. We are currently fully staffed and it should get better with proper training. Interim City Managers have helped out tremendously.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM
2	Less than Adequate: Need City Manager	3/5/2025 5:32 PM

Q4 I believe that Law Enforcement in our community is:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

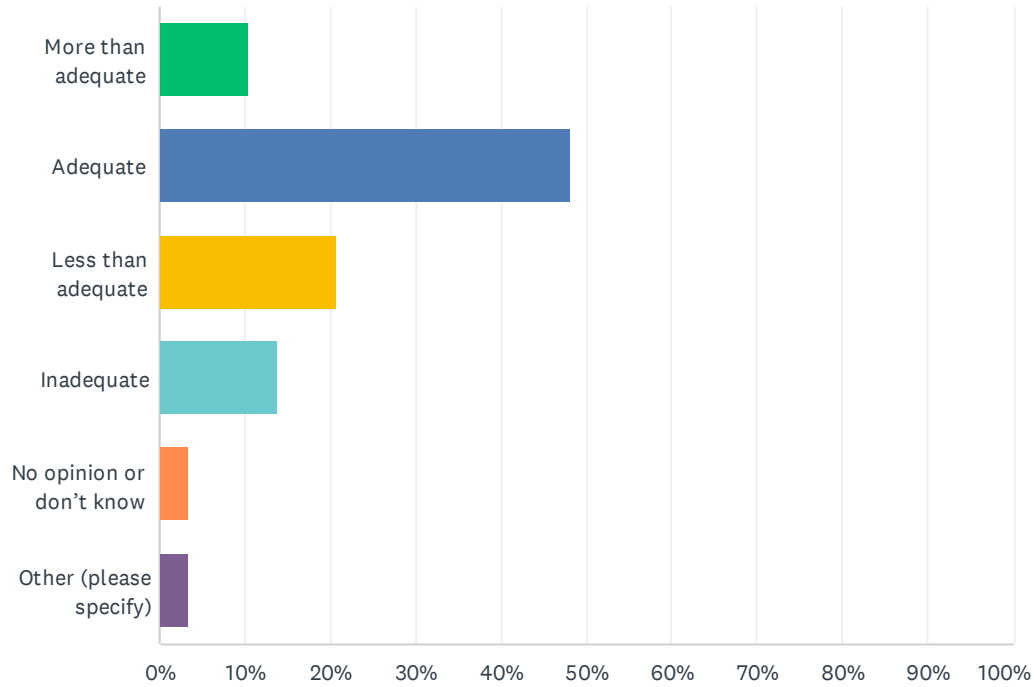


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	30.00%	9
Adequate	46.67%	14
Less than adequate	3.33%	1
Inadequate	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	20.00%	6
TOTAL		30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Adequate: As far as I know, there is only 1-2 officers on a 12 hour shift, if one of them gets busy with a drunk driver for several hours that leaves one officer to respond to calls. This is unsafe and dangerous. Cfalls needs at least 14-15 officers.	3/5/2025 5:47 PM
2	Adequate: An extra officer or two would help on taking calls quickly and more productivity.	3/5/2025 5:44 PM
3	Adequate: New young staff at this time. When training is complete it will be a solid department.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM
4	Adequate: Could tag abandoned vehicles in right of way	3/5/2025 5:32 PM
5	No Opinion: Need to be better at calling in snow conditions.	3/5/2025 5:21 PM
6	Need additional Officers	3/5/2025 5:11 PM

Q5 I believe that maintenance of the streets and sidewalks in our community is:

Answered: 29 Skipped: 1

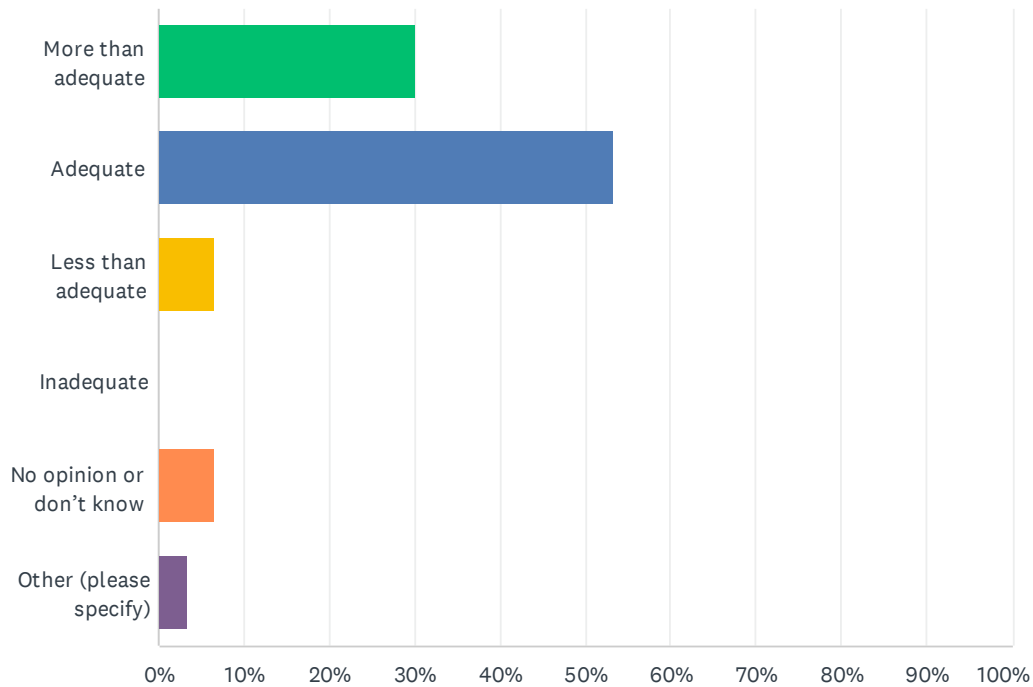


ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
More than adequate		10.34%	3
Adequate		48.28%	14
Less than adequate		20.69%	6
Inadequate		13.79%	4
No opinion or don't know		3.45%	1
Other (please specify)		3.45%	1
TOTAL			29

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Adequate: Need to follow code on all sidewalks.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM

Q6 I believe that the Fire Service in our community is:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

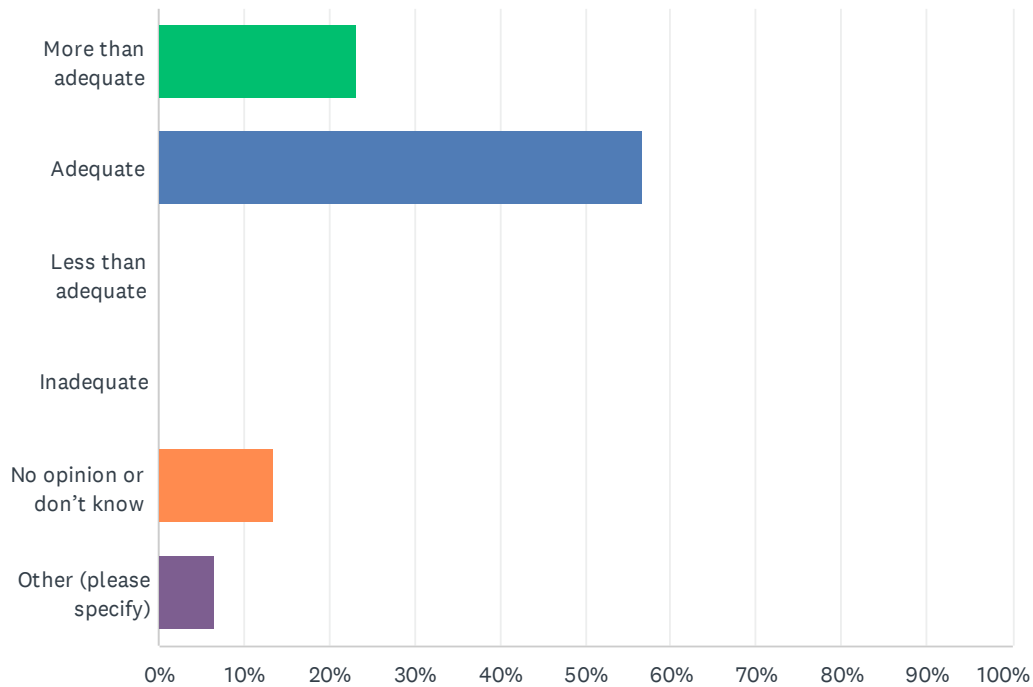


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	30.00%	9
Adequate	53.33%	16
Less than adequate	6.67%	2
Inadequate	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	6.67%	2
Other (please specify)	3.33%	1
TOTAL		30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	More than Adequate: City & Rural Fire work very well together. Volunteers are wonderful and happy to be on our fire depart. Paid staff responds within minutes of page.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM

Q7 I believe that the water and wastewater utilities in our community are:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

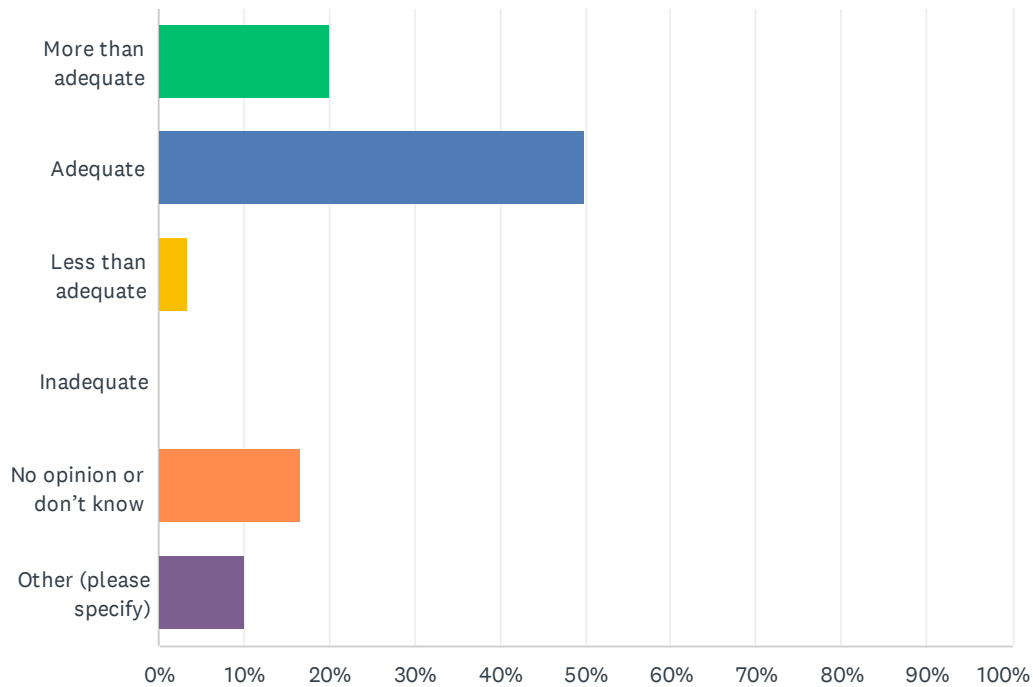


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	23.33%	7
Adequate	56.67%	17
Less than adequate	0.00%	0
Inadequate	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	13.33%	4
Other (please specify)	6.67%	2
TOTAL		30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Less than Adequate: Needs repair throughout the plant (stainless steel is expensive)	3/5/2025 5:21 PM
2	Adequate, but should be constantly looking at upgrades.	3/5/2025 5:15 PM

Q8 I believe that the City Court in our community is:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

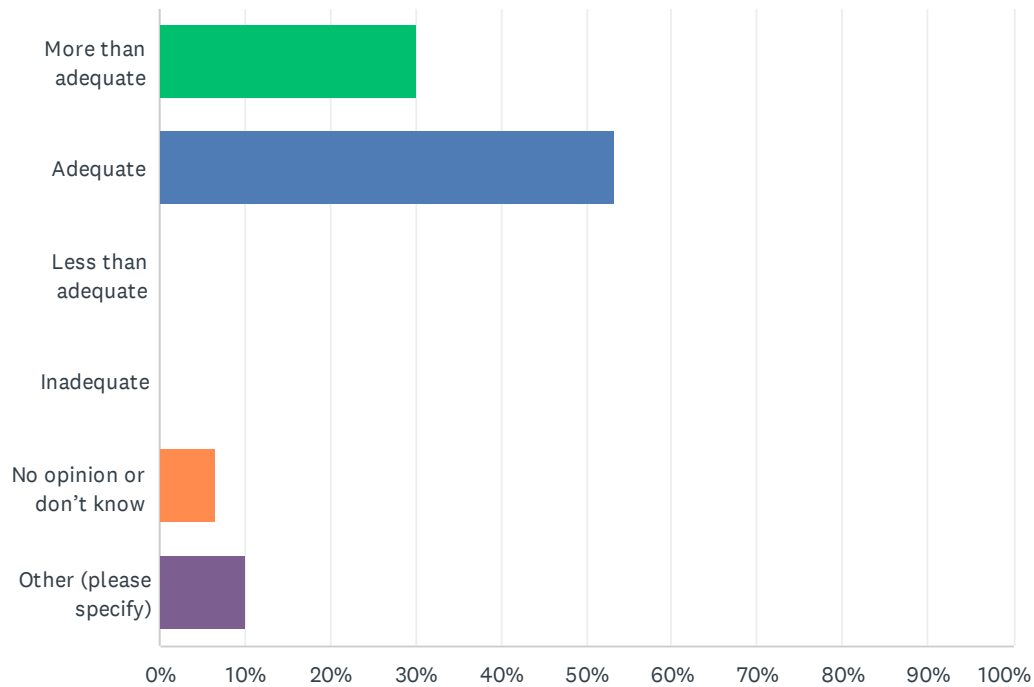


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	20.00%	6
Adequate	50.00%	15
Less than adequate	3.33%	1
Inadequate	0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know	16.67%	5
Other (please specify)	10.00%	3
TOTAL		30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Adequate: more funding and plastic chairs for the gallery would be safe and easier to clean up.	3/5/2025 5:44 PM
2	Adequate: Judge is not in the office at all times.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM
3	Less than Adequate: Prosecutor	3/5/2025 5:26 PM

Q9 I believe that the City parks/pool in our community are:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0

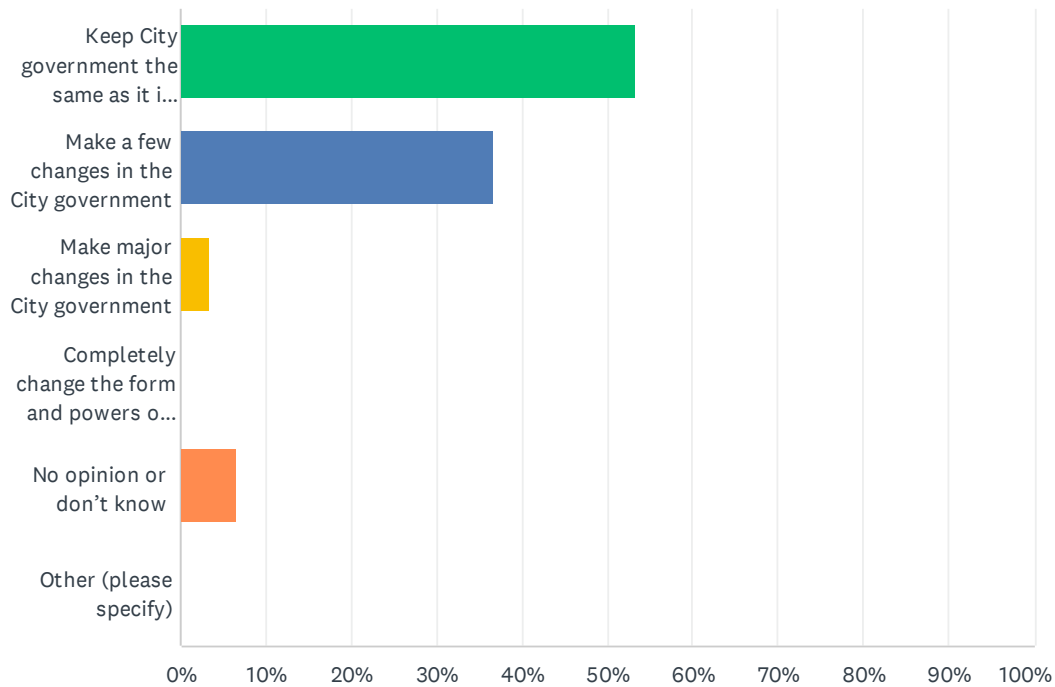


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
More than adequate	30.00% 9
Adequate	53.33% 16
Less than adequate	0.00% 0
Inadequate	0.00% 0
No opinion or don't know	6.67% 2
Other (please specify)	10.00% 3
TOTAL	30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Adequate: Parks. Less than Adequate: Pool needs help.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM
2	Waste of time/money	3/5/2025 5:28 PM
3	No Opinion: Rivers Edge Disc Golf Course	3/5/2025 5:21 PM

Q10 If I had to vote tomorrow, I would vote to:

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Keep City government the same as it is now		53.33%	16
Make a few changes in the City government		36.67%	11
Make major changes in the City government		3.33%	1
Completely change the form and powers of the City government		0.00%	0
No opinion or don't know		6.67%	2
Other (please specify)		0.00%	0
TOTAL			30

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
	There are no responses.	

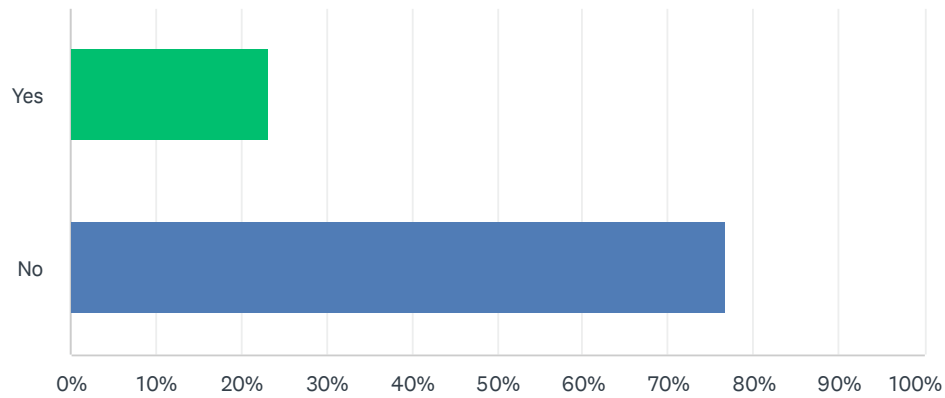
Q11 Do you have any other comments or recommendations for services that you would like the Study Commission to consider?

Answered: 7 Skipped: 23

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	We need a city code enforcement officer to effectively handle quality off life complaints and enforce city ordinances.	3/5/2025 5:44 PM
2	The study commission should not have ex parte communication with the public.	3/5/2025 5:38 PM
3	No	3/5/2025 5:31 PM
4	No	3/5/2025 5:28 PM
5	N/A	3/5/2025 5:24 PM
6	No	3/5/2025 5:17 PM
7	No	3/5/2025 5:12 PM

Q12 Do you live within the City limits of the City of Columbia Falls?

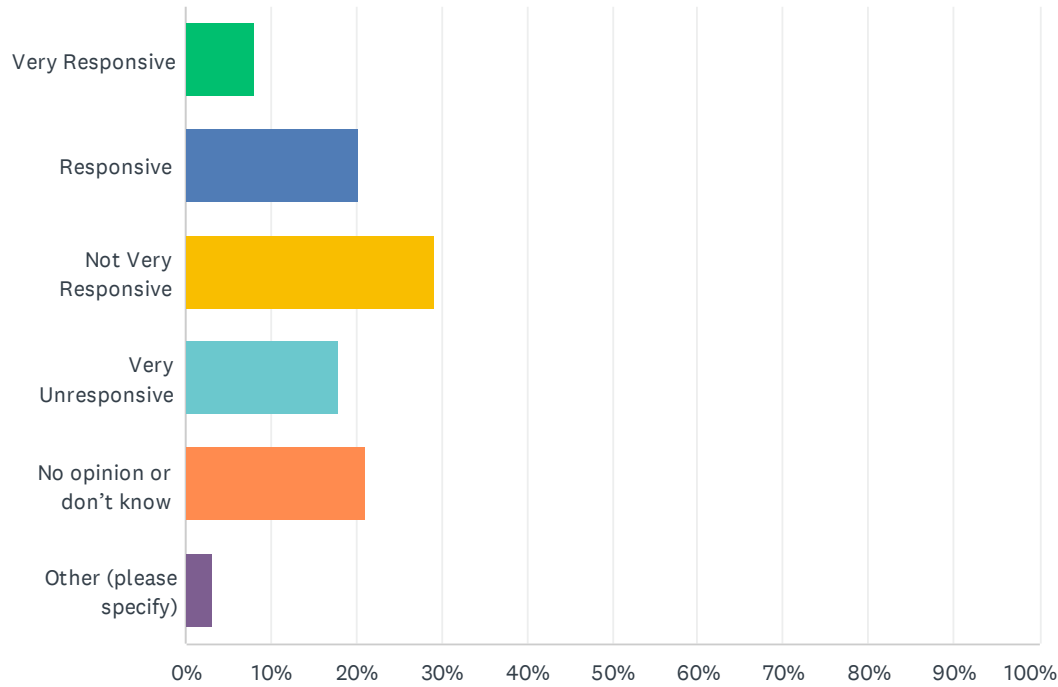
Answered: 30 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	23.33%	7
No	76.67%	23
TOTAL		30

Q1 In general, how responsive is your Columbia Falls City government to your needs?

Answered: 123 Skipped: 0

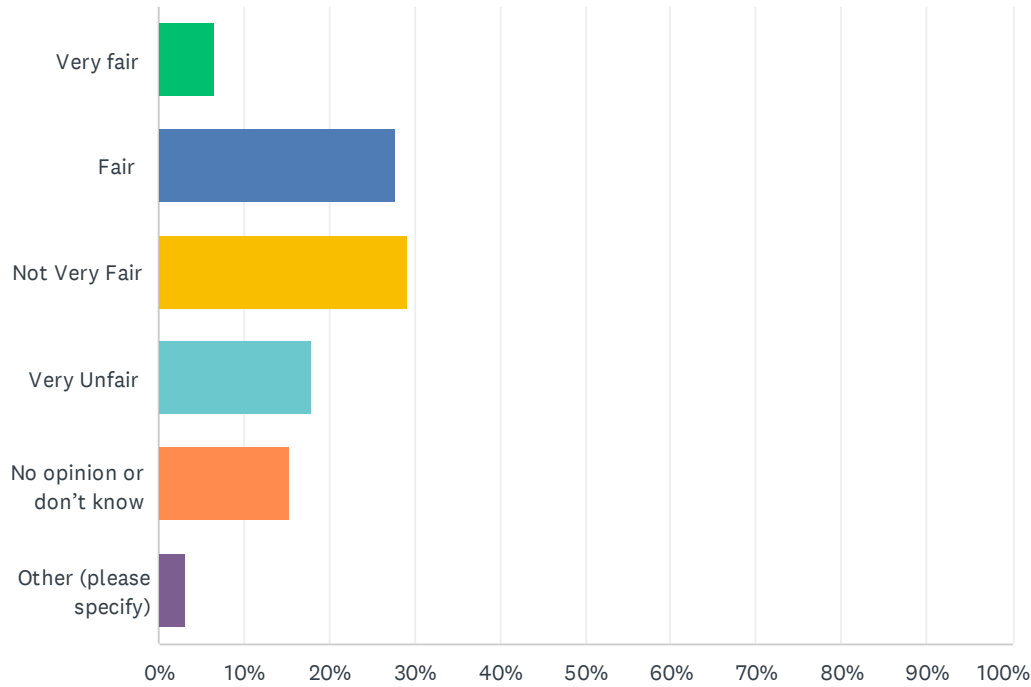


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very Responsive	8.13%	10
Responsive	20.33%	25
Not Very Responsive	29.27%	36
Very Unresponsive	17.89%	22
No opinion or don't know	21.14%	26
Other (please specify)	3.25%	4
TOTAL		123

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA	2/21/2025 7:01 PM
2	I have seen them be both unresponsive and responsive depending on what suits them	2/21/2025 5:28 AM
3	Crap shoot	2/20/2025 1:59 PM
4	When attempting to sell my house, it took 6 weeks to get a deed restriction released that was supposed to have been done 8 years prior.	2/20/2025 11:35 AM

Q2 In your opinion, how fair is your City government in dealing with all of the residents of the community?

Answered: 123 Skipped: 0

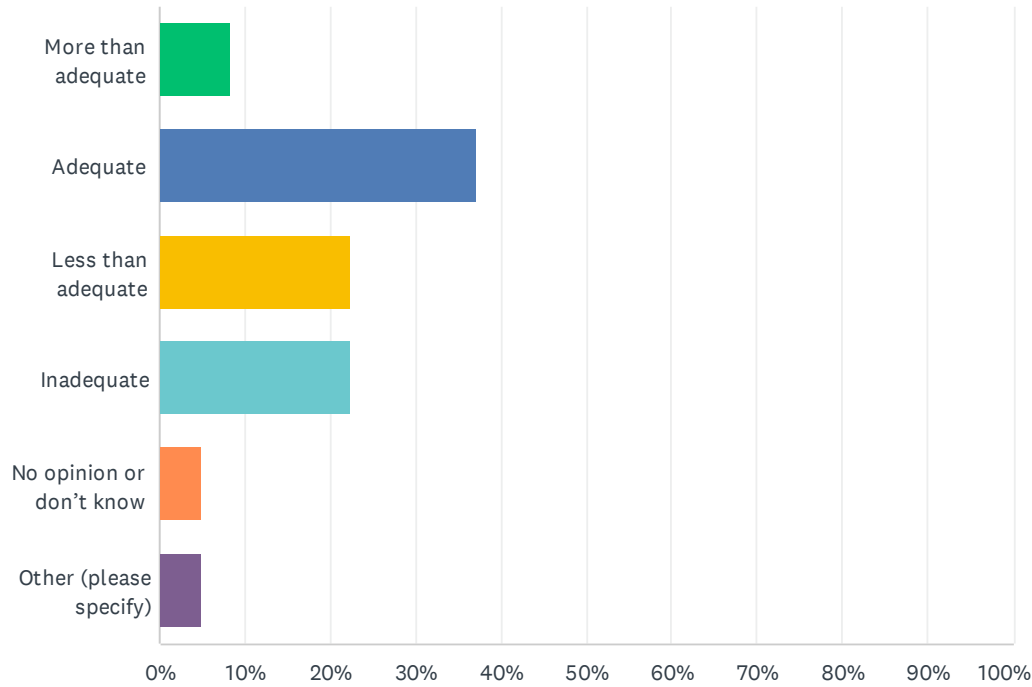


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very fair	6.50%	8
Fair	27.64%	34
Not Very Fair	29.27%	36
Very Unfair	17.89%	22
No opinion or don't know	15.45%	19
Other (please specify)	3.25%	4
TOTAL		123

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Residents with public comments at city council meetings were sometimes dismissed/disrespected	3/3/2025 9:31 PM
2	I do think they cater too much to the known whiners and complainers. I think they should talk with neighbors to find out if the concerns are legitimate.	2/21/2025 8:43 PM
3	it's common knowledge that this town doesn't care about you unless you're rich	2/21/2025 7:01 PM
4	I don't share some of the complaints that I have heard from others. I feel the former city manager Susan Nicosia had her hands full and did the best she could with what she had. Also, I feel they need to find an experienced City Manager	2/21/2025 5:28 AM

Q3 I believe that City Administration (City Manager, Planning, City Clerk, Cashiers) in our community is:

Answered: 121 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	8.26%	10
Adequate	37.19%	45
Less than adequate	22.31%	27
Inadequate	22.31%	27
No opinion or don't know	4.96%	6
Other (please specify)	4.96%	6
TOTAL		121

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	excluding Clerk, Cashiers. Administration does not show transparency, accountability, honesty. Paper may say one thing then what happens is a not the same thing.	3/1/2025 5:45 PM
2	Useless	2/24/2025 7:04 AM
3	Laughable. They do what they want to do even when it harms neighborhoods and then they turn a blind eye to the damage they've causwd	2/21/2025 7:01 PM
4	Bought and owned by developers	2/21/2025 8:14 AM
5	The former Chief I am told is filling in as the interim manager and I feel they need to hire someone with experience	2/21/2025 5:28 AM

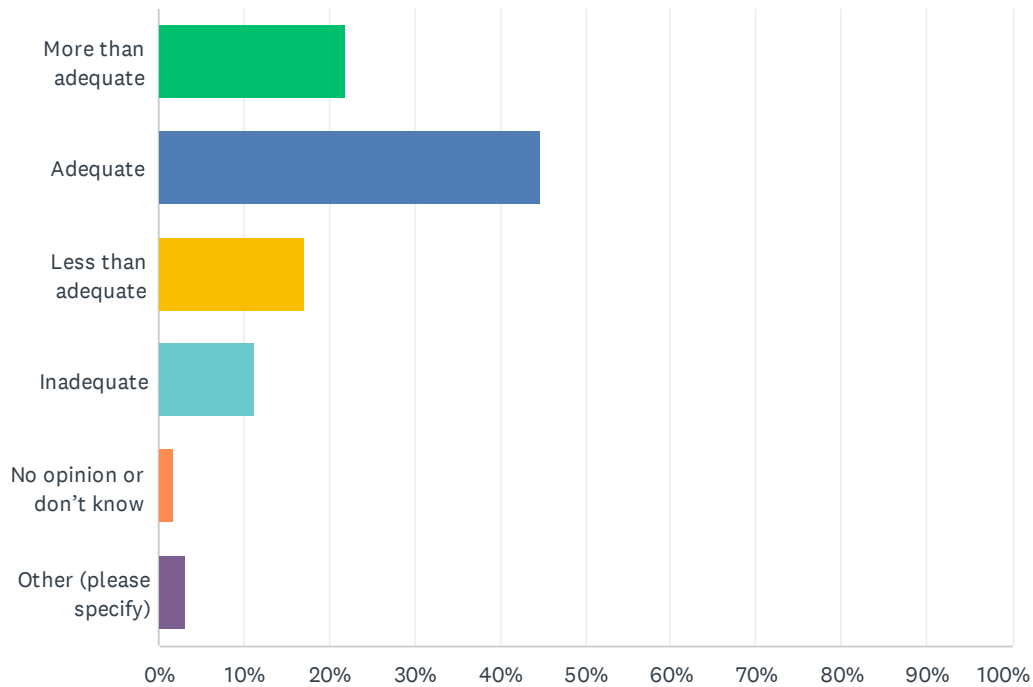
6

We shouldn't rely on Whitefish's planning dept

2/20/2025 6:09 PM

Q4 I believe that Law Enforcement in our community is:

Answered: 123 Skipped: 0

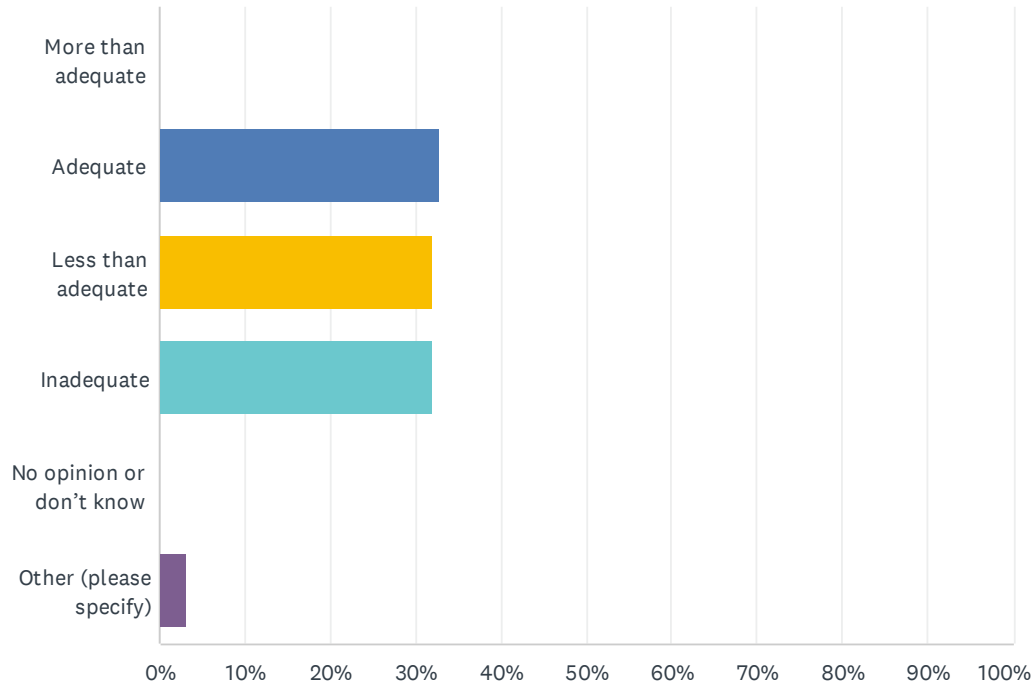


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	21.95%	27
Adequate	44.72%	55
Less than adequate	17.07%	21
Inadequate	11.38%	14
No opinion or don't know	1.63%	2
Other (please specify)	3.25%	4
TOTAL		123

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	We need more law enforcement, too much speeding and other crimes	2/28/2025 1:38 AM
2	They need more help	2/22/2025 12:28 PM
3	Needs severe work/ revamp	2/20/2025 9:34 PM
4	Much improved!	2/20/2025 11:17 AM

Q5 I believe that maintenance of the streets and sidewalks in our community is:

Answered: 122 Skipped: 1

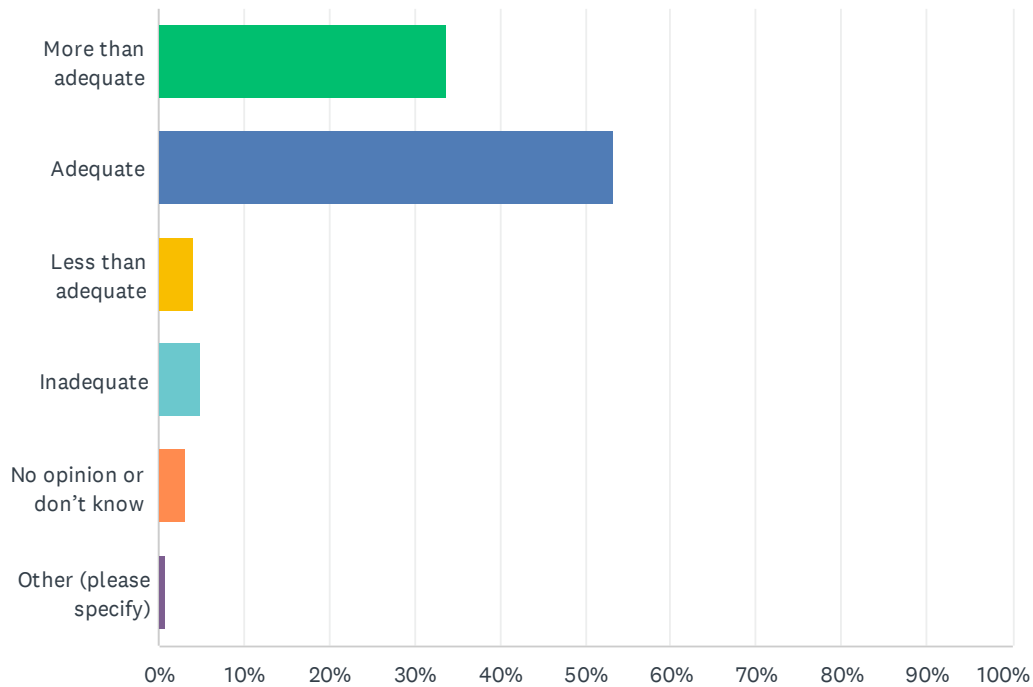


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	0.00%	0
Adequate	32.79%	40
Less than adequate	31.97%	39
Inadequate	31.97%	39
No opinion or don't know	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	3.28%	4
TOTAL		122

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Using a front-end loader is not the best way to plow snow.	3/4/2025 8:46 AM
2	inadequate- chuck holes not getting repaired, favoritism with snow plowing, avenues not getting plowed. sidewalk clearing is being abused. Traffic is a mess.	3/1/2025 5:45 PM
3	Sidewalks are fine, roads suck!	2/28/2025 1:38 AM
4	I think the guys who plow our cul-de-sac do an amazing job. I do wish they could leave the snow hills longer though for kids to play. (I do understand the safety concerns also but you just need to keep an eye on your kids)	2/21/2025 8:43 PM

Q6 I believe that the Fire Service in our community is:

Answered: 122 Skipped: 1

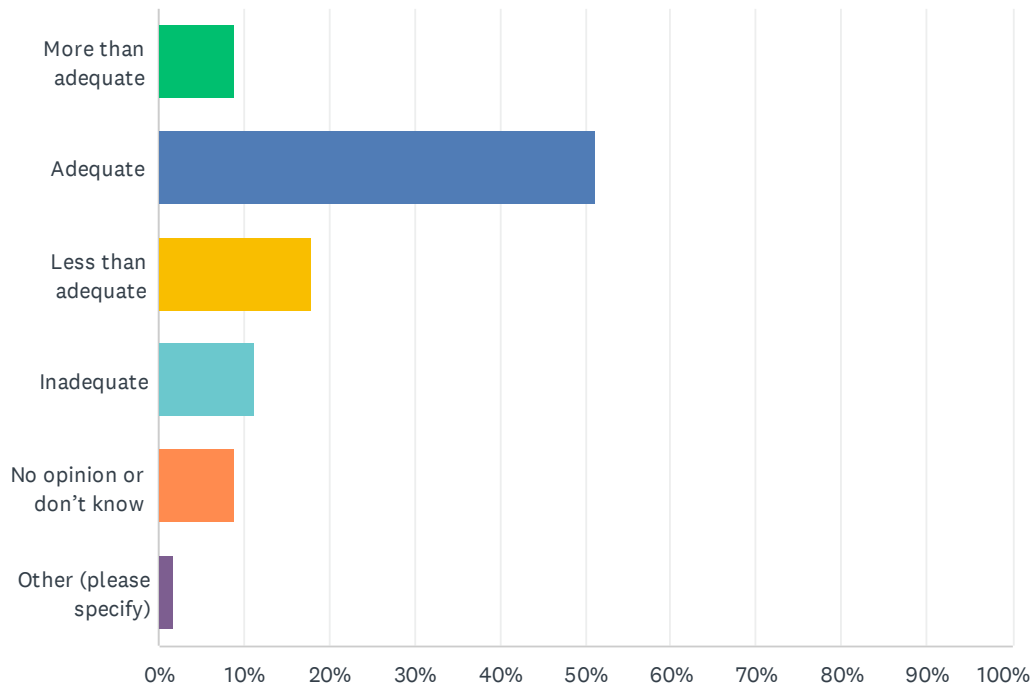


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	33.61%	41
Adequate	53.28%	65
Less than adequate	4.10%	5
Inadequate	4.92%	6
No opinion or don't know	3.28%	4
Other (please specify)	0.82%	1
TOTAL		122

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Needs more help	2/22/2025 12:28 PM

Q7 I believe that the water and wastewater utilities in our community are:

Answered: 123 Skipped: 0

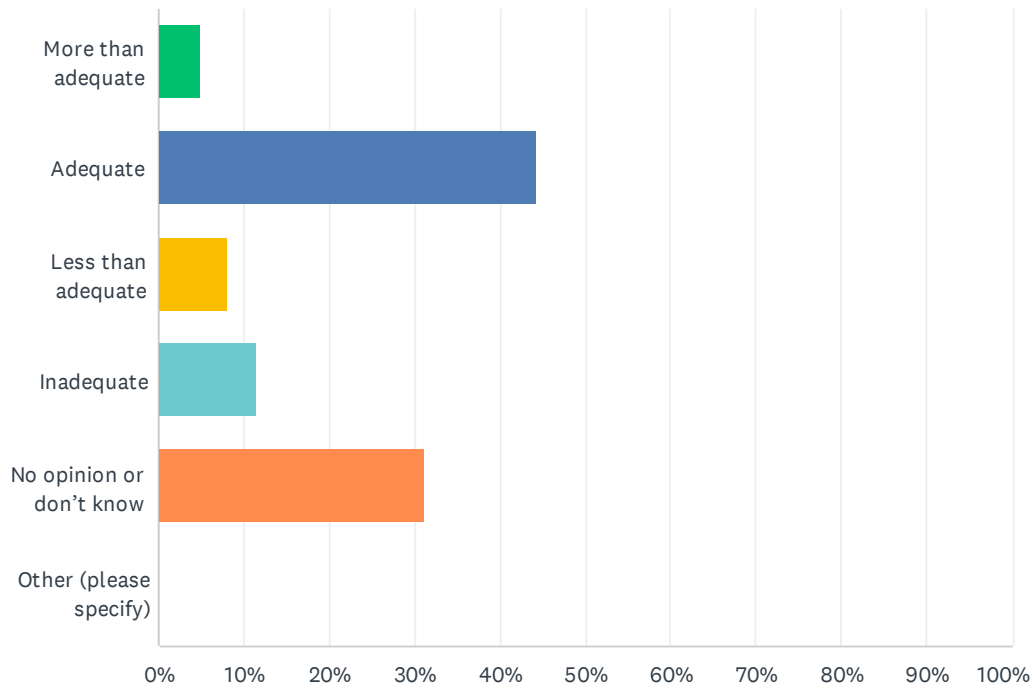


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	8.94%	11
Adequate	51.22%	63
Less than adequate	17.89%	22
Inadequate	11.38%	14
No opinion or don't know	8.94%	11
Other (please specify)	1.63%	2
TOTAL		123

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	adequate- it is with the planning and council showing poor planning on utilizing the existing utilities.	3/1/2025 5:45 PM
2	I think the yearly backflow check that almost costs as much as a new backflow valve is ridiculous. Maybe every 3 years I could see but there is far more risk for people with no backflow and a garden hose than someone who has a backflow valve.	2/21/2025 8:43 PM

Q8 I believe that the City Court in our community is:

Answered: 122 Skipped: 1

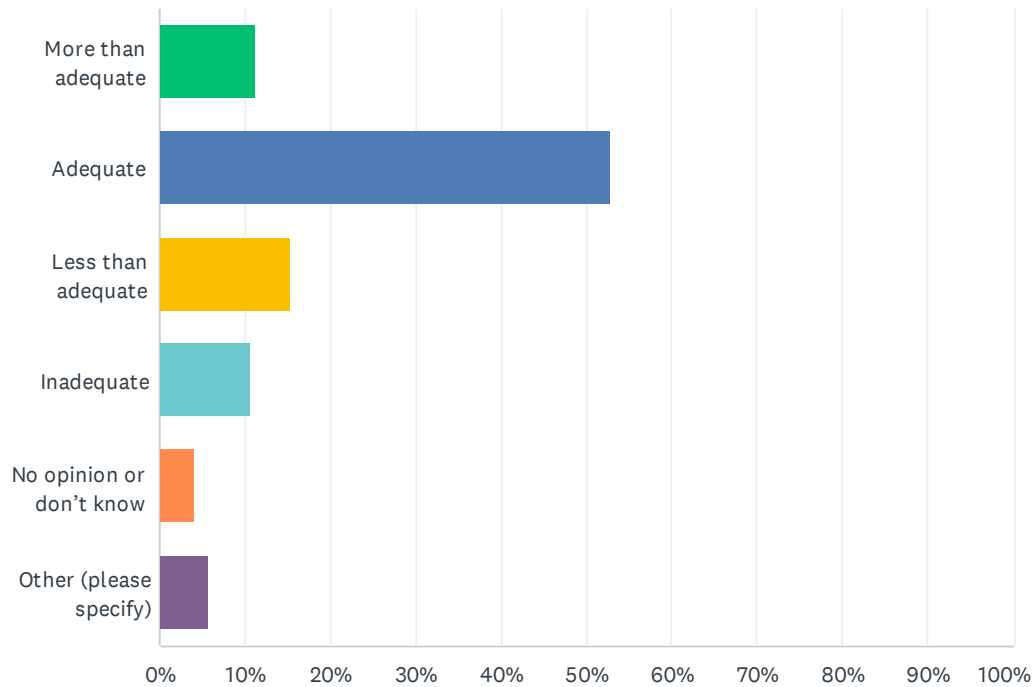


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	4.92%	6
Adequate	44.26%	54
Less than adequate	8.20%	10
Inadequate	11.48%	14
No opinion or don't know	31.15%	38
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
TOTAL		122

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
	There are no responses.	

Q9 I believe that the City parks/pool in our community are:

Answered: 123 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More than adequate	11.38%	14
Adequate	52.85%	65
Less than adequate	15.45%	19
Inadequate	10.57%	13
No opinion or don't know	4.07%	5
Other (please specify)	5.69%	7
TOTAL		123

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	less than adequate. without raising taxes, we need to establish a foot or bike park ranger/officer to stop loose dogs, vagrant campers. establish a dog park.	3/1/2025 5:45 PM
2	We need a bigger pool	2/28/2025 2:55 PM
3	The pool needs to be an indoor pool for year round use	2/27/2025 11:15 AM
4	Need to let the swim team have different hours	2/22/2025 12:28 PM
5	Adequate but would like to see more for kids to do. Maybe an indoor pool if that was ever something that could be done.	2/21/2025 8:43 PM
6	They destroyed the nice baseball field in front of the high school and gave it to the high school to use for tennis. Locals have nowhere to play tennis now because the students take up all the	2/21/2025 7:01 PM

parking, laugh at people when the play, or the PE classes are using the court.

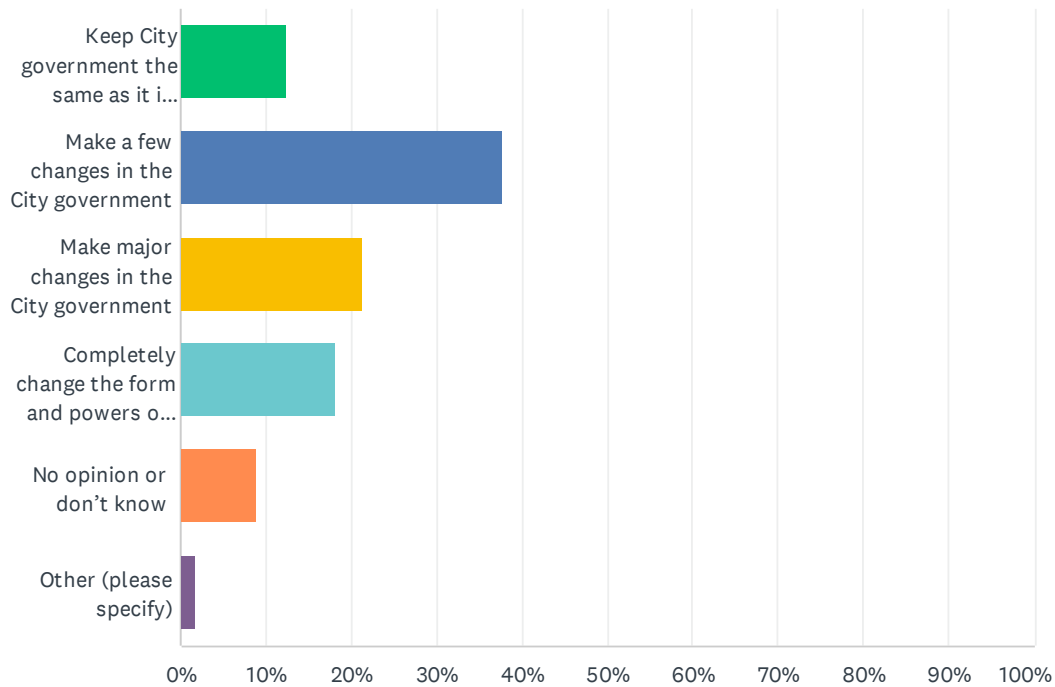
7

Park maintenance is More than adequate, The parks being available to large community events is not adequate

2/20/2025 4:16 PM

Q10 If I had to vote tomorrow, I would vote to:

Answered: 122 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Keep City government the same as it is now		12.30%	15
Make a few changes in the City government		37.70%	46
Make major changes in the City government		21.31%	26
Completely change the form and powers of the City government		18.03%	22
No opinion or don't know		9.02%	11
Other (please specify)		1.64%	2
TOTAL			122

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Change City Manager position to a City Administer position	3/4/2025 8:46 AM
2	Need qualified people in administrative positions	2/19/2025 2:50 PM

Q11 Do you have any other comments or recommendations for services that you would like the Study Commission to consider?

Answered: 49 Skipped: 74

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	Places for people to set when we need to. They should be totally responsible for the watering and maintenance of our new sidewalk greenery.	3/4/2025 2:54 PM
2	The city needs a seasonal code enforcement officer. Numerous City code violations and no enforcement	3/4/2025 8:46 AM
3	Need to make sure that the officials don't play favorites with there friends and family	3/4/2025 12:08 AM
4	I lived in cfalls six years ago and recently moved back and i think the city has improved! I think that i would like better communication about city council and board meetings or at least have them recorded or able to be viewed in real time. I feel like zero outreach has been done about the growth plan required by the state.	3/3/2025 8:17 PM
5	Nearly everyone in local government is related, by blood or marriage, and often have conflicts of interests when making decisions about ...everything. I have researched the familial connections if local people, while doing genealogy on our own. I'd love to show you sometime. I'm located at 4 Diane RD in substandard, overpriced housing with "local" neighbors who display their entitlement and preferential treatment on the regular. It appears this neighborhood was sold and approved as a path to home ownership for low income, then most the building were sold to trust funds and corps. Nobody bothered to check if all the rezoning that was approved resulted in the intended consequences. The whole goverment is a fraud and deserves an audit.	3/3/2025 4:00 PM
6	How can this survey help being fair (non bias) to all of the city, when we have 2 PAST CITY MANAGERS, PAST CITY CLERK, AND CITY COUNCIL MEMBER recommending our future growth. When the problems the citizens are experiencing happened on your watch!	3/1/2025 5:45 PM
7	Stop letting developers ruin our town!!	2/28/2025 1:38 AM
8	Better communication with residents regarding city infrastructure plans	2/27/2025 5:28 PM
9	No	2/27/2025 11:15 AM
10	I think i would just like to see more ease of access to the various meetings that occur. For example, most of the time i cant make the city council or land planning meetings but i would like to know what is going on with them. It seems as if the website is never really updated either. I know it is probably due to staffing which i totally understand. It would just be nice to know what is going on!	2/27/2025 7:04 AM
11	Roadwork for a start for higher taxes and a resort tax feel that should be in great condition	2/26/2025 9:13 PM
12	I believe city planning should have new construction on bigger projects pay for things like traffic light and other services.	2/26/2025 1:46 PM
13	Please stop spraying toxic weed killer around town/in the parks, it is a waste of funds and causes disease.	2/26/2025 12:58 PM
14	More speed enforcement, especially residential streets	2/25/2025 8:36 PM
15	Follow city ordiances that are on the books.	2/25/2025 5:43 PM
16	Keep sidewalks clear on 4th for the kids walking to school. The road between the two tall buildings west of Smiths, Nucleus, needs to be ONE WAY.	2/24/2025 4:13 PM
17	Maintain the walking the trails just as the city expects residents to maintain their sidewalks. When water is over walking trails or snow remains on walking trails - the city should be liable for falls or accidents that occur. Enforce snow removal in residential areas.	2/24/2025 2:37 PM

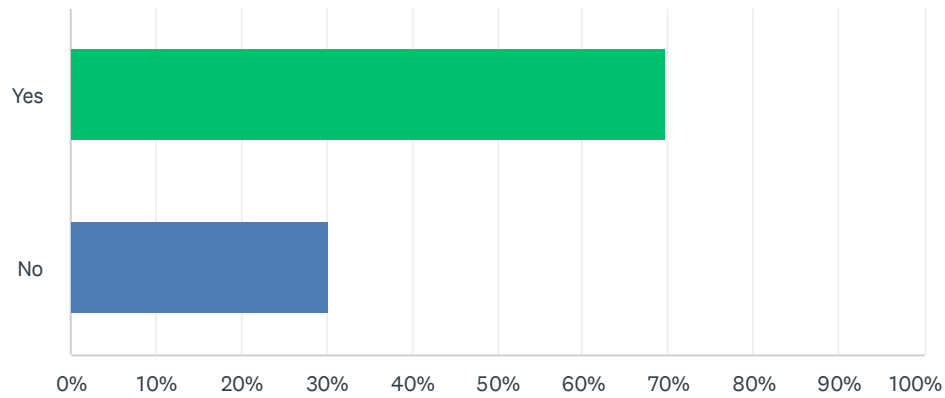
18	Stop trying to make us whitefish	2/24/2025 1:30 PM
19	No	2/22/2025 5:42 PM
20	Our town has grown beyond the traditional small town that we liked. We need more law enforcement and more opportunity beyond tourism.	2/22/2025 4:02 PM
21	Have council and mayor learn the make up of government they swear to uphold.	2/22/2025 2:51 PM
22	Community ice rink	2/22/2025 9:57 AM
23	Thank you to those that work and serve our city. Keep up the excellent work.	2/22/2025 9:44 AM
24	Look at restricting some of the outrageous building that's been going on. Look into limitations and restrictions for Airbnb and vacation rentals.	2/21/2025 8:43 PM
25	Do they consider everything? They pretend to care, then ignore people's concerns.	2/21/2025 7:01 PM
26	I went to a hearing about zoning. The zoning board completely ignored what the residents had to say and rammed another development down the citizens throats that went against the intent of what people were told when they previously purchased their property. I will vote against the public servants that allowed this to happen.	2/21/2025 1:02 PM
27	Stop giving developers reduced fees for hookups or PUDs to reduce setbacks, building heights, and parking requirements. They make money on it but we suffer. Not enough parking along Nucleus Ave - we need to implement parking requirements in the central business district.	2/21/2025 12:26 PM
28	Have the infrastructure in before you keep building and letting people move here. Have the police do their jobs and bust people for speed and traffic violations. there	2/21/2025 6:43 AM
29	No	2/21/2025 5:47 AM
30	Steadily increasing taxes with no accountability for spending.	2/21/2025 3:08 AM
31	Actually listen to the people who live here. OH AND TURN ALL THE DAMN TURN ARROWS ON IN TOWN	2/20/2025 10:20 PM
32	Kick out Mr. Ruiz and his crooked ways. Hold him accountable for his lies about adequate parking and make him move his scaffolding from the lot behind the old Columbia bar. Wasn't his building across the street approved by using the old Columbia parking lot?	2/20/2025 10:16 PM
33	Parking violations on nucleus Lack of law enforcement, and the lack of new buisness in town. We have have enough banks, auto parts stores and hardware stores.	2/20/2025 9:38 PM
34	No	2/20/2025 9:34 PM
35	Water sewer improvements	2/20/2025 9:19 PM
36	No sewer lines over the river. Slow down on development. Require more low income housing in all building projects.	2/20/2025 8:33 PM
37	Accountability in making decision that enhances the community not just building banks	2/20/2025 8:04 PM
38	Ban all vbos	2/20/2025 6:05 PM
39	Focus on kids and kids sports	2/20/2025 4:27 PM
40	Types of communication the city has with the public. I find that public outreach from the city is very minimal and could be greatly improved.	2/20/2025 2:19 PM
41	More bike lanes/wider streets	2/20/2025 1:59 PM
42	x	2/20/2025 1:01 PM
43	Reasonably priced housing	2/20/2025 12:07 PM
44	The problem with everybody speeding through town and police not doing anything	2/20/2025 11:36 AM
45	No	2/20/2025 11:35 AM
46	Ordinance enforcement would be nice.	2/20/2025 11:17 AM

Item No.3.

47	NO	2/19/2025 6:27 PM
48	You have GOT to do something about junk vehicles and other debris in yards!!!!	2/19/2025 2:15 PM
49	It seems as if the City has completely abandoned the concept of snow removal in the last few years.	2/14/2025 11:08 AM

Q12 Do you live within the City limits of the City of Columbia Falls?

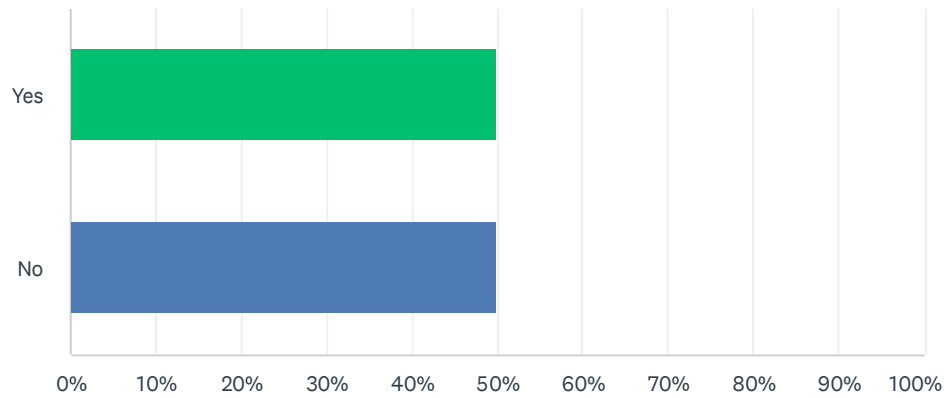
Answered: 122 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	69.67%	85
No	30.33%	37
TOTAL		122

Q1 Did you vote for the Local Government Review?

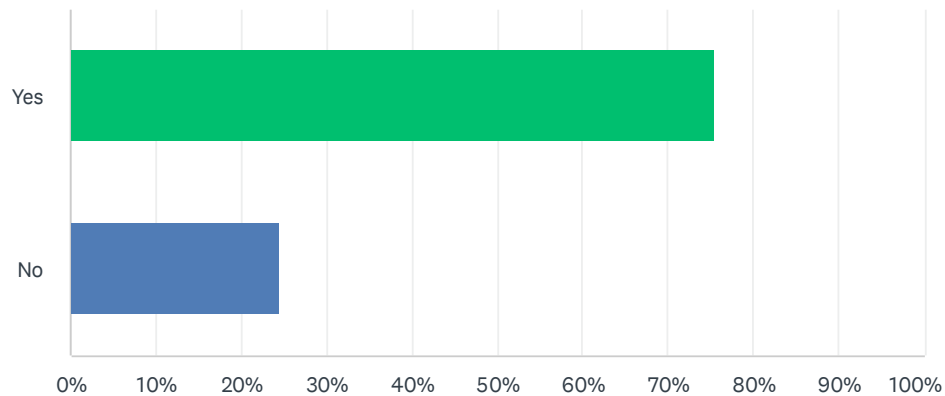
Answered: 110 Skipped: 5



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

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

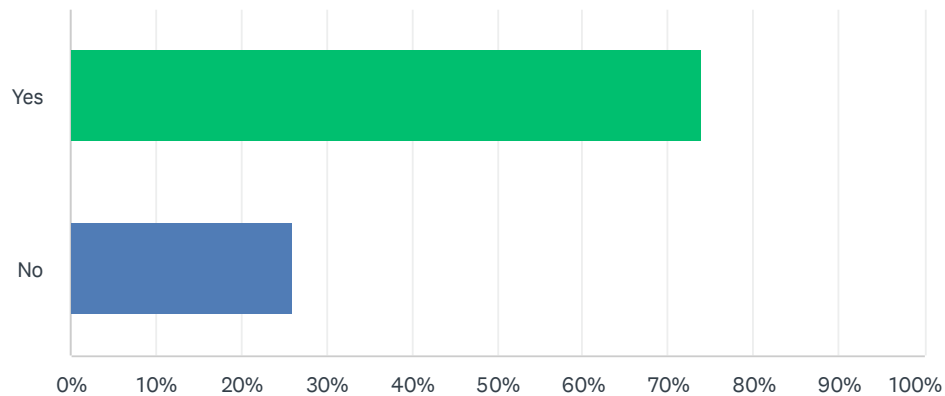
Answered: 110 Skipped: 5



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?

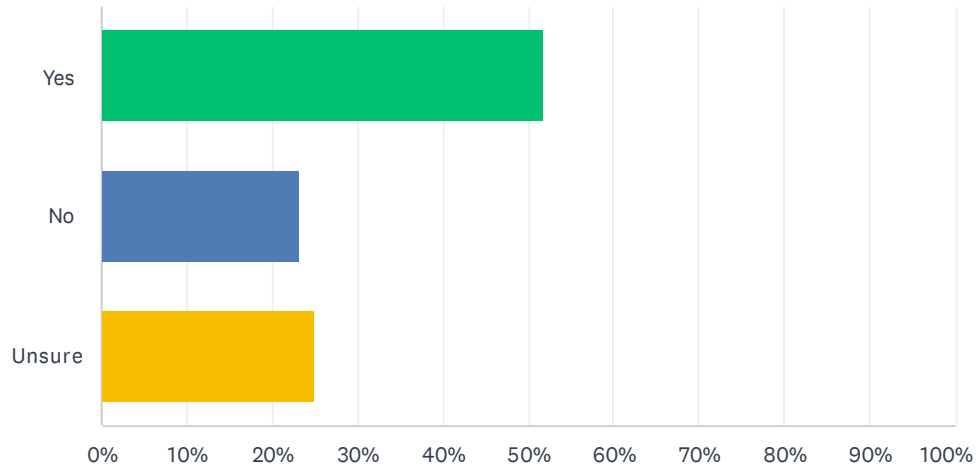
Answered: 108 Skipped: 7



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?

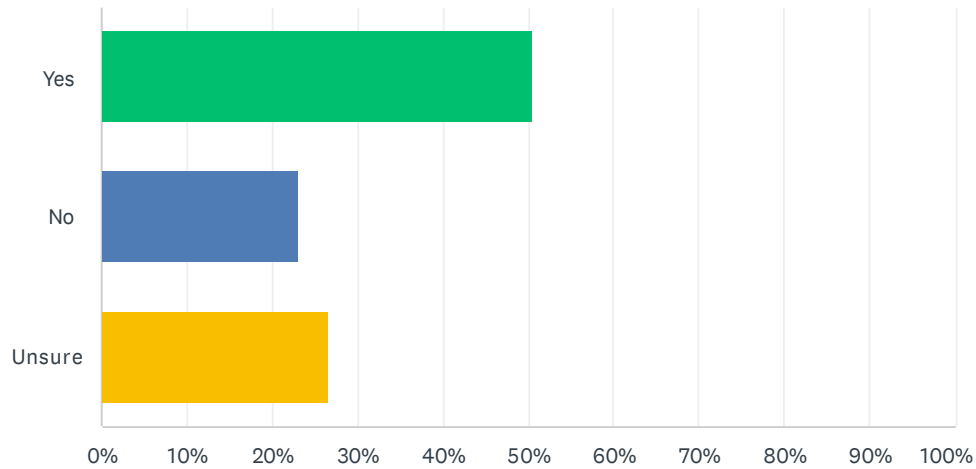
Answered: 112 Skipped: 3



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?

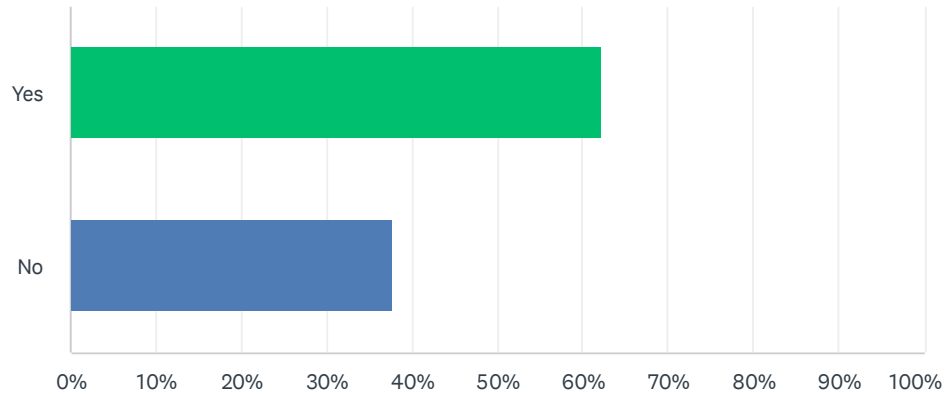
Answered: 113 Skipped: 2



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



City of Columbia Falls
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Columbia Falls, MT 59912
Phone: (406) 892-4391

**Columbia Falls Study Commission
Workshop Minutes
January 8, 2025**

Roll Call – Meeting called to order at 5:05 pm. Present: Study Commissioners Hopkins, Konopatzke, Nicosia and Piper. Also present: Interim City Manager Shrives

Nominate Chair and Vice-Chair – Konopatzke nominated Piper to serve as Chair and moved nominations closed, seconded by Hopkins. All members voted in favor of the motion. Konopatzke nominated Hopkins as Vice-Chair, nominations closed; seconded by Nicosia. All members voted in favor of the motion.

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

New Business:

Adopt Bylaws- Commission reviewed the draft by-laws from the Local Government Center (LGC) and edited as needed. Commission will adopt final at the February 12, 2025 meeting.

Adopt Budget – Commission reviewed the budget as adopted by the City council in their regular budget process for Fund 2350 Study Commission. Konopatzke made a motion to approve the budget as adopted by council; seconded by Nicosia. All voting in favor of the motion.

Adopt Timeline – Commission reviewed timeline requirements from LGC. Commission will adopt final timeline on February 12, 2025.

Review Current Form of Government – Commission briefly discussed current manager form of government and will complete review of the 2014 Study Commission Final Report as well as the adopted 1994 Ordinance. Hopkins indicated he was interested in looking at the 1976 report that recommended disincorporation.

Next agenda – adopt final bylaws, adopt timeline and review survey questions.
Meeting duly adjourned at 6:30 pm.

Chairman

Adjourn



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Item No.3.

Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes February 12, 2025

Roll Call – Meeting called to order at 5:00 pm. Present: Study Commissioners Hopkins, Konopatzke, Nicosia and Piper. Also present: Interim City Manager Shrives

Approval of Agenda – Motion to approve by Hopkins, second by Nicosia. Motion passed.

Public Comment (for Items not on the agenda)

– Scott Worchester commented that he is a member of the Whitefish Study Commission, and he was attending tonight to watch the Columbia Falls process and also wanted to make a recommendation that the Whitefish and Columbia Falls Study Commission might be able to collaborate.

Unfinished Business –

1. **Adopt Study Commission Bylaws** – Motion to pass bylaws as presented made by Nicosia second by Hopkins. During discussion it was noted that a correction needed to be made to the Procedures Section. It should be numbered as III. Motion passed noting correction to be made.
2. **Adopt Study Commission Timeline** – Motion to approve timeline made by Nicosia. Second by Knopatzke. Motion passed
3. **Review Historical Documents** – Documents from last Study Commissions were provided to the Commissioners. There was discussion regarding either minutes or the Final report from the 1976 Study Commission. City staff was unable to find those documents. Staff will conduct another search before the next meeting. No further discussion regarding the historical documents.

New Business –

1. **Schedule Public Hearing for the March 12, 2025, meeting to receive public input** – Public Hearing was scheduled for March 12, 2025. Notice will be published in the newspaper and posted on the City Website. Prior to the Public Hearing, City Staff was requested to provide a report explaining the forms of government available for municipalities in Montana. Interim City Manager Mark Shrives noted he will provide that report at the next meeting.
2. **Review 2014 Survey Questions** – Commission reviewed the 2014 survey questions and made some modifications to the questions. Commissioners asked that a survey be prepared

and distributed for citizen input. Deadline for the survey to be returned to the City was set at March 3, 2025. Survey results to be provided and reviewed at the March 12, 2025, meeting. It was also asked that a separate survey using the same questions be provided to city employees and to also have those results available for review at the March 12, 2025 meeting.

Item No.3.

Next Agenda –

1. Hold Public Hearing for Citizen Input
2. Review Survey Results
3. Discuss possible collaboration with the Whitefish Study Commission.

Meeting duly adjourned at 5:35 pm.

Chairman



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Item No.3.

**Columbia Falls Study Commission
Workshop Minutes
March 16, 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



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Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes May 15, 2025

Call to Order - Workshop called to order by Chair Piper at 1:03 pm.

Roll Call - Present: Study Commissioners Hopkins (via Zoom), Konopatzke, Nicosia and Piper. Also present: City Manager Hanks, MSU LGC Director Dan Clark

Montana State University Local Government Center Director Dan Clark discussed Self-Governing Powers at the request of the Study Commission. Mr. Clark reported that not all governments with self-governing powers have charters. Mr. Clark noted that he no longer recommends adopting a separate charter. Mr. Clark noted that the City of Havre had submitted the question of self-governing powers to their voters four times before it was adopted in 2021. The community was having difficulty addressing abandoned and boarded buildings pursuant to the general government powers in state statute; so, they adopted self-governing powers to adopt code that could address the issue, patterned after the Butte Silver Bow code. Clark noted that a government with self-governing powers has “shared sovereignty with the state” as defined by the Supreme Court in the Madison County lawsuit after they adopted self-governing powers in 1976.

The Study Commissioners discussed whether there were any issues that the City of Columbia Falls could address with self-governing powers. Hopkins felt that the city might want self-governing powers to give tools to future city councils. Nicosia noted that it would be difficult to present self-governing powers to the voters without a specified need, such as the Havre example. Konopatzke reviewed the information she had prepared on self-governing power communities in preparation for this workshop. The Study Commission will formally discuss recommendations at their next meeting in June.

Chair Piper asked if there was any Public Comment on the workshop discussion:

Scott Wuerster, Whitefish Study Commission – Interested in discussion.

Shirley Folkwein – Interested in learning more about self-governing powers.

Matt Hutcheson – Interested in knowing what voice the public has if the City has self-governing powers. Chair Piper noted that all municipal code changes require a public hearing and two readings before the adoption of any new codes and that process would remain the same with self-governing powers.

Adjourn: Duly adjourned at 1:40 pm.

Chair



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Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes April 16, 2025

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

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

Approval of Agenda – Motion made by Commissioner Nicosia to approve agenda, seconded by Commissioner Konopatzke. All voted in favor of motion.

Approval of Minutes – March 12, 2025 - Commissioner Nicosia motioned to approve the minutes as presented, seconded by Commissioner Hopkins. All voted in favor of the motion.

Public Comment (for Items not on the agenda) – Chris Peterson, Hungry Horse News, shared historic reflections of a 1975 newspaper article about the first government review meeting following the 1972 constitutional changes.

New Business:

Updated Survey/Hopkins Report: City Manager Hanks provided a summary of the public survey responses from 110 community responses, noting the 75% satisfaction with the current form of government. The survey results did not include any comments on changes that the public would like to see. The commissioners had in-depth discussion of the efficacy of self-government powers within the State, including in the discussion the information provided by Commissioner Hopkins. Seeking specific examples, the commissioners agreed to invite the Montana State University Local Government Center to present self-government case studies from other cities on May 15th. Commissioner Hopkins had previously spoken to Mr. Clark, and he was available to speak to the Columbia Falls Study Commission on that day.

Commissioner Comments/Proposals for Next Agenda:

Nicosia made a motion to hold a workshop on May 15th in the afternoon with Dan Clark, MSU LGC, and move the regular May meeting from May 14th to the May 15th workshop, seconded by Konopatzke. All voted in favor of the motion. City Manager Hanks will schedule the May 15th workshop.

Chair Piper stated that he had reviewed the adopted by-laws and believes there is no need to amend them as proposed by Commissioner Hopkins regarding public comment to the Commission.

Adjourn: Motion made by Commissioner Konopatzke to adjourn with a 2nd by Commissioner Hopkins. The meeting adjourned at 5:49 pm.

Chair



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Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes June 18, 2025

Call to Order: Meeting called to order at 5:10 pm by Chairman Piper.

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

Visitors/Public Comment: None

Approval of Minutes: Konopatzke made a motion to approve the minutes as presented, second by Hopkins, motion carried with all members voting in favor.

Discussion:

Self Governance/Call for a Public Hearing

The Commission thoroughly discussed the self-governance issue as reviewed in the workshop with Dan Clark in May. Hopkins wished to pursue self-governing powers to provide the city council with another tool in their toolbox if needed in the future. Konopatzke reported on other cities with self-governing powers. Nicosia reported that she too had researched the question and did not find anything that stood out at this time, such as adding the Juneteenth holiday, something the legislature has not done.

Konopatzke and Hopkins were in favor of recommending to the Council to submit to the voters the question of adopting self-governing powers. Nicosia noted the difficulty that Havre had in passing self-governing powers, finally passing on the 5th election submitting the question to the voters; elections are expensive, and Nicosia was not in favor of holding an election just for the sake of holding an election without an apparent need for the self-governing powers. Nicosia also noted that the last few legislative sessions have seen considerable additions limiting self-governing powers. Piper noted that pursuant to state law, 7-3-149, MCA, the council calls for the election.

After additional discussion, Konopatzke made a motion to draft the tentative report recommending to the city council a future election on the matter and formally amending the Study Commission's original timeline to accommodate the additional study on self-governing powers by calling for the public hearing in September, 2025, adopting final report in October and holding the final meeting in November and publishing the final report, motion seconded by Hopkins, motion carried with all members voting in favor. Nicosia volunteered to draft the final report for review by the Commission at the regular July meeting.

City Manager Hanks reported on receiving an invoice for \$1,240 for Local Government Center Dan Clark's participation in the May workshop. The invoice was surprising as the Commission originally understood from Commissioner Hopkins that Mr. Clark stated that he would already be in the area for full workshops in other cities and that he could just stop in for a shortened Columbia Falls Study Commission discussion. During event coordination with the City Manager and Hopkins, Mr. Clark did not disclose any fees or any expectation that Columbia Falls would incur equal cost-sharing of expenses with the cities hosting full workshops.

Adjourn: Meeting Duly adjourned at 6:42 pm.

Item No.3.

Chair



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Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes July 16, 2025

Call to Order: Meeting called to order at 5:05 PM by Chairman Piper.

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

Visitors/Public Comment: None

Approval of Minutes: Nicosia made a motion to approve the minutes as presented, second by Hopkins, motion carried with all members voting in favor.

Discussion:

Review of Draft Final Report

The Commission discussed a draft version of the Final Report prepared by Commissioner Nicosia. No substantive changes were made to the Report Summary, which recaps the Commission's process for reviewing the existing form of government.

The Commission once again discussed the community's limited involvement and perceived lack of interest in pursuing a change in government despite the majority voting to establish this Commission to study the existing form of government. Commissioners agreed that while the proposed language in the final recommendation was accurate, the report should include additional context explaining the rationale behind the recommendation. Commissioner Konopatzke proposed adding expanded language noting that the pursuit of self-governing powers would "allow for future flexibility and address currently unforeseen challenges and opportunities for the City Council."

The Commission also discussed Nicosia's decision to document her informal dissent in the report. Nicosia explained that she wanted the record to reflect her concern with recommending self-governing powers without presenting the public with a clear and immediate need for those powers.

Review of Schedule

The Commission targeted a schedule for a Public Hearing on September 4, 2025 to receive public comment on the draft version of the Final Report. On November 12th, the Commission plans to adopt the Final Report and before submission to the City Council.

Adjourn: Meeting Duly adjourned at 6:20 pm.

Chair



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Columbia Falls Study Commission Workshop Minutes September 10, 2025

Call to Order: Meeting called to order at 5:00 PM by Chairman Piper.

Roll Call: Present: Study Commissioners Hopkins, Konopatzke, Nicosia and Piper. Also present: City Manager Hanks and City Attorney Breck

Visitors/Public Comment: None

Approval of Minutes: Nicosia made a motion to approve the minutes as presented, second by Hopkins, motion carried with all members voting in favor.

Discussion:

City Manager Hanks provided a staff report summarizing the staff and City Attorney's review of options following persistent debate over the last several Commission meetings. The report summarized the Commission's challenges to reach consensus over the last several months based on various interpretations of Montana Code Annotated and the Commission's responsibilities.

Recognizing inconsistent language in the tentative Final Report, Commissioner Nicosia motioned to amend the draft formal report to say the Commission "does not recommend a change in the Plan of Government; however, we are recommending the City Council use their powers under 73149 to pursue self-governing powers, if they see the need for future flexibility and unforeseen challenges." The motion was not seconded and the motion died.

Commissioner Hopkins stated that he has studied the statutes and believes that self-governing powers could be a benefit to the City, he would be willing to author a new tentative Final Report. He stated that he would use much of the verbiage in the current version but with a clear recommendation for a change in the Plan of Government. Commissioner made a motion to draft a new tentative Final Report. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Konopatzke. Commissioner Nicosia voted against the motion.

The Commission continued the ongoing debate between the lack of a specific current need for self-governing power versus the importance of having the flexibility of self-governing powers for an unforeseen, urgent need that may arise in the future.

Review of Schedule

The Commission will adopt the tentative Final Report on October 22. The Commission will host a Public Hearing on November 19th to receive public comment on the tentative report. The Commission anticipates an adoption of the Final Report in January.

Adjourn: Meeting duly adjourned at 5:32PM.

City government review public hearing coming up in March

Feb. 19, 2025
Hungry Horse News

CHRIS PETERSON

The Columbia Falls City Government Commission will hold a public hearing at 5 p.m. March 12 to take public input on how the city might operate better and whether it should change its current form of government.

The commission, made up of Roger Hopkins, Connie Konopatzke, Susan Nicosia and ex officio member John Piper, all of them volunteers and appointed by the Columbia Falls city council, met last week to talk further on the subject.

The board tweaked questions of a resident survey that will be available both in hard copy and online on the city's website (see below).

The survey covers a variety of topics of importance to city residents.

The commission decided that it would be best if the city did the survey before the public hearing.

They also heard from Scott Wurster of Whitefish, who suggested the two cities could cooperate on matters. Wurster is on Whitefish's government review commission.

The government review commission was approved by voters in 2023. The question of whether a review is necessary is mandated by state law every 10 years.

The city last looked at the topic in 2014 and the commission recommended at that time to make no changes.

Right now the city, like many cities in Montana, has a commission-manager form of government, where a city manager runs the city on a day-to-day basis and the mayor and council oversee the manager who serves at the direction of the council, which has the authority to remove the manager if need be.

One thing the city might additionally consider is self-governing powers, which allow cities to pass their own laws, provided they don't trump state and federal laws.

For example, Missoula is self-governing and has a law that makes it a misdemeanor if a person that is pulled over for DUI refuses a breath test. The law was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court.

The city would form a charter and then it would need to be passed by voters.

Another form of government is the executive form.

In this statutory form, the mayor as chief-executive is obliged and empowered to enforce state law and

local ordinances and has the responsibility of carrying out and administering the policies and resolutions adopted by the council.

Additionally, and unlike the national and state models of government, the mayor serves as the presiding officer of the city or town council and may take part in council discussions but may cast a vote only to break tie votes of the council. The mayor does, however, enjoy veto power with respect to the ordinances and resolutions adopted by the council. However, an executive veto is subject to a two-thirds override vote by the council.

After the March public hearing, the commission will craft its recommendations and issue a final report and then hold an additional public hearing in June. The goal is to have a final report completed by early August.

Mixed results from city survey; as a third of respondents don't live in city limits

CHRIS PETERSON

Columbia Falls has some work to do in some areas, but is adequate in others, according to a recent survey.

The survey comes with a significant caveat, however. About 30% of the people who responded admitted they don't live inside the city limits. There was no way to parse the data, either.

Having said that, when asked about how responsive the city was to people's needs, just under 30% said not very responsive and about 18% said very unresponsive.

On the other hand, about 30% said it was responsive.

In that vein, about 30% said the city was unfair in dealing with residents and 18% said it was very unfair. Thirty percent said it was fair.

"Residents with public comments at city council meetings were sometimes dismissed/disrespected," one person commented. Another claimed the city only caters to the rich.

But another person had a different take.

"I do think they cater too much to the known whiners and complainers. I think they should talk with neighbors to find out if the concerns are legitimate," a person said.

Still, others commended the city administration.

"I don't share some of the complaints that I have heard from others. I feel the former city manager Susan Nicosia had her hands full and did the best she could with what she had. Also, I feel they need to find an experienced city manager," a respondent said.

About 45% of people said the city administration was adequate or more than adequate, while 44% said it was less than adequate or inadequate.

Law enforcement and the fire departments, however, were generally well regarded. Sixty-seven percent said the police department was adequate or more than adequate and 87% said the fire department was adequate or more than adequate.

City sewer and water was also deemed adequate or more than adequate by about 60% of those that responded and city parks were adequate or more than adequate by about 63% of responders as well.

Response to the survey in general was low, with 123 bothering to take the survey. The city has 1,800 households.

A public hearing hosted by the Columbia Falls Study Commission earlier this month on the survey saw no one from the public attend other than the Hungry Horse News.

The commission went over portions of the survey, but many of the questions, members noted, were beyond the scope of the commission's charge, which is to examine whether the city should change its form of government, or make any other changes.

The commission may try to tweak the survey to drill down on more basic government change questions (a new survey was recently mailed out), but as it stands now, the commission didn't see the need for any wholesale changes to the city government structure. For example, the commission went over city charters crafted by Choteau and Whitefish, and both had language that mirrored existing state law.

The commission, if it so chose, could make a host of recommendations to council, from changing the structure of city government, such as a "strong mayor" like what Missoula has, where an elected mayor runs the city, with an administrator.

One option, though entirely disregarded, would be to dissolve the city entirely, where it would then be just part of the county.

Commission considering city self-governance

April 29, 2025
Hungry Horse News

CHRIS PETERSON

The Columbia Falls government review commission plans to hear from an expert next month on whether the city should consider having self-governing powers.

Self-governing would allow the city to craft its own laws, as long as they were not contrary to state or federal laws.

The city hopes to have a representative from the Local Government Center of Montana State University speak to the commission at its May 15 meeting on self-governance and other issues.

Commission member Roger Hopkins noted that Havre recently approved self-governance and it allowed that city to write tougher laws on junk vehicles.

The state in the past few years, however, has made it tougher and tougher for cities to have self-governance, as the Legislature continues to pass laws that exempt about 30 subjects from self-governance,

Still, Hopkins noted it deserved some discussion. Self-governing powers would have to be approved by the voters.

The commission earlier this month issued another survey, this time by mail, to about 1,500 residents and businesses in the city on whether they were satisfied with the city's current form of government, which includes a mayor and city council with the day-to-day operations run by a city manager.

About 75% of the 110 people who took the time to answer the survey saying they were satisfied with the current form. Having said that, they were a little more split when asked if it resulted in smooth city operations, with about 52% saying it did, while 23% said no and the remainder were unsure.

Like a previous survey, opinions on city functions were all over the place and had little to do with reviewing city government.

For example, one person complained about ice on their streets, another hated the resort tax and another said the city did a "p--ss poor job" of enforcing decay ordinances. Another said everyone should be replaced and they should all be, from the city manager to the chief of police, elected.

But several comments seemed to say things were working well, though some complained about developers, while others complained that there was a lack of public notice when it came to public hearings and the like. They wanted the city to have more of a presence on social media.

Many of the comments, noted new City Manager Eric Hanks, were useful.

Study commission endorses city self governance in split vote

Sept. 17, 2025
Hungry Horse News

Chris Peterson

After a bit of a debate and examining the minutiae of state law, the Columbia Falls government review commission voted 2-1 in favor of moving forward with a recommendation for city self-governing powers.

Self-governing powers allow municipalities like Columbia Falls to adopt laws that aren't expressly forbidden by state or federal law. The state has already listed about 30 areas of law where are restricted in the laws cities can pass, but some cities have found self-governing powers useful.

A recent example comes from Havre, which adopted a law that gave the city more power to address abandoned and boarded up buildings there. Under state law, the city only had so much recourse to address the blight. But Havre voters, after four previous attempts, adopted self-governing powers, which, in turn, allowed city leaders to address the blight.

Commission members Roger Hopkins and Connie Konopatzke voted to move forward with a recommendation to city council for self-governing powers, while Susan Nicosia voted against it.

Nicosia suggested the commission issue a recommendation to endorse self-governing powers, but city council would bring the matter to voters at a later date.

But state law doesn't allow for that, noted city attorney Justin Breck. If they're going to recommend self-governing powers to council, then the commission has to set a date for an election under state law soon. It can't be delayed a few years down the road.

The commission's recommendation is just that — it would still need to be approved by city voters for final ratification, which may or may not be successful. Voters in 2024, by a narrow margin, did approve having the commission look at the structure of city government, with self-governing powers being one facet of the analysis.

There is a cost that comes with a ballot measure, as the city would have to pay for the election, most likely on the primary ballot in the spring of 2026.

Between now and then, Hopkins agreed to take a report already written by Nicosia and revise it to endorse self-governing powers. That should be completed by the next meeting at 5 p.m. Oct. 22.

There will then be a public hearing at 7 p.m. Nov. 19.

After receiving public feedback, a final report to council will likely come at the commissions January meeting.

Hopkins and Konopatzke both noted that currently there is no need for the powers, but with things rapidly changing in society with artificial intelligence, technology and other matters, it could prove useful in the future.

“I can be sympathetic to the fact that we don’t have a specific example,” Hopkins said for self governing powers in Columbia Falls. “But our job was to review our current plan of government, survey the community and take an outside look at what may be available.”

The review commission was approved by voters in the last election. Under state law, voters can seek to review city and town government structure every 10 years.

In the broader view, most city residents seem satisfied with current city manager form of government according to recent surveys.

Self-governing powers are separate from the form of city government. Some cities have strong mayors, for example, but they also have self-governing powers.