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AGENDA
CITY PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
THURSDAY, JANUARY 08, 2026 6:00 PM
COUNCIL CHAMBERS CITY HALL

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

1. Approval of the December 11, 2025 Planning Commission Regular Meeting Minutes

VISITOR OR PUBLIC COMMENT: (An opportunity for the Public to comment on any items not on tonight's agenda)

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

2. Wastewater System Capacity Allocation Update & Discussion Template

ADJOURNMENT

Next Regular Planning Commission Meeting – February 12, 2026

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES HELD DECEMBER 11, 2025

REGULAR MEETING – 6:00 PM.

Fisher called Meeting to order at 6:00 PM

PRESENT: President Fisher, Vice President Ping, Commissioner Johnson, Commissioner Kavanagh

ABSENT: Commissioner Berube

Also present: City Manager Hanks, Contract Planner Mulcahy, Public Works Director Bates, Public Works Clerk Sobczak

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Approval of September 11, 2025 Planning Commission Regular Meeting Minutes

Motion made by Kavanagh to approve the September 11, 2025 minutes as presented, Seconded by Ping. Motion carried with all present voting AYE.

VISITOR OR PUBLIC COMMENT: (An opportunity for the Public to comment on any items not on tonight's agenda)

None.

NEW BUSINESS:

City Manager Eric Hanks presented the differing opinions and approaches for City of Columbia Falls Wastewater Treatment Plant capacity.

A February 2023 HDR study, revised existing capacity downward to 0.63 MGD – in the 2017 PER performed by HDR bioreactor capacity was 0.85 MGD. This reduction was seen around the nation based on higher BOD concentrations due to water conservation. In the same report engineers projected post-bioreactor expansion capacity around 0.71 MGD assuming a future policy choice to not accept porta-potty waste. At 0.7 MGD, the system can serve about 8,174 people, the City's baseline service population in 2022: ~6,576 (including Meadow Lake Water and Sewer District). DEQ uses a 30-day rolling average for maximum month flows. HDR found that the maximum 30-day rolling average flow was 0.57 MGD, after excluding a major June 2022 storm event. Including the June 2022 storm event yields a maximum month flow of 0.63 MGD instead of 0.57 MGD. City flows exceeded 0.6 MGD only three times: an event around 2016, an event in 2017 and a record rainfall event in 2022.

In 2025, the city hired Morrison-Maierle to prepare a wastewater PER required by MLUPA. The focus was on the conveyance system rather than re-modeling treatment processes. Morrison-Maierle chose 0.63 MGD as the maximum flow, including the June 2022 event. With a current service population assumption of about 6,280, HDR 2023 basis of design: ~8,174 people at 0.7 MGD. Morrison-Maierle: ~7,392 people. Difference of roughly 780 people arises from how the June 2022 event is treated. The upgraded bioreactor is performing better than modeled, especially for nitrogen removal. If strong performance continues through the high summer flows, a fall 2026 remodeling may show higher practical capacity.

Commissioner Kavanagh had a question on the City and Meadow Lake flow average. Hanks answered that the City is 67–69 gpcd (gallons per capita per day), Meadow Lake is 50–55 gpcd. This discrepancy raises concern that Meadow Lake's assumptions may be masking either underestimated population, or significant I&I that distorts average flows. Inflow and

Infiltration (I&I) in Meadow Lake is high, 190-200 thousand gallons to the treatment plant with a normal summer non-rain day being 50-55 thousand gallons. This is directly impacting the City's ability to support new and existing capacity. The City believes Tamarack Meadows build-out brings Meadow Lake close to its 80,000 gpd contractual limit. Despite the rain events the increase in stormwater lowers the BOD of the treatment plant and allows for faster processing and the permit was not exceeded. Plant bioreactor treatment capacity: ~0.71 MGD but the hydraulic capacity ~2 MGD. The City will not serve additional Meadow Lake development at the expense of capacity needed for growth inside city limits. Addressing this is essential for future growth.

City Manager Hanks presented the current capacity ledger and the Commission discussed. Current wastewater capacity allocation ledger is based on a service population of 6,280. Available capacity depends on how the June 2022 rain event is treated: Including the event in modeling gives capacity for 816 additional people. Excluding the event as an anomaly gives capacity for 1,894 additional people. Current reserved capacity allocation is for 540 people. In near term development applications and active discussions could demand capacity for about 1560 additional people. Combining existing service population, reserved capacity, and the near-term pipeline: Including June 2022 rain event in capacity modeling gives estimated deficit of about 1,200 people. Excluding June 2022 rain event as an anomaly gives estimated deficit of about 200 people.

Commission discussion led to lift stations and the City utility conveyance system. City lift stations are 3-4 times oversized which can cause downstream surges if multiple stations start simultaneously. Planned projects include downsizing lift stations (reduced pump GPM, possible wet-well changes) to smooth flows. I&I reduction will be a major component of the wastewater PER and future capital projects. Standards for any new development is: Proper manhole placement and construction. Ensuring stormwater is handled onsite and does not enter sanitary sewers. Avoiding use of sewer and storm drains as a convenient place to dump runoff. Treatment performance is strong and has performed extremely well historically and has not been close to exceeding the permits, but oversized lift stations and I&I drive hydraulic stress. The current PER will prioritize conveyance improvements and I&I reduction.

City Manager Hanks presented the MLUPA & MCA policy that City Staff will need help with. In summary the land use plan must show how the city will accommodate projected population over 20 years, including housing, services, facilities, economic development, resources, and agriculture. The housing section must: Analyze existing and projected housing needs. Provide regulations enabling development of needed units. If constraints (e.g., wastewater capacity) mean need cannot be fully met, the city must identify a minimum number of housing units it can provide over 20 years and describe actions to remove constraints. City Staff acknowledge: Current wastewater capacity will not support the full 20-year housing projection. Constraint identification and mitigation (e.g., expansion, I&I projects) must be addressed in the PER and land use planning.

The key policy dimensions identified for future decision are, Housing type priorities: Single-family vs apartments vs townhomes vs hotel rooms. Location priorities: Infill and redevelopment within city limits vs annexation and outward growth. Timing considerations: Submittal date of applications and a short build-out (2 years) vs long build-out (7-10 years) relative to current housing needs and future expansions. Alignment with housing needs study: Using the study to guide which projects best address documented needs.

A future planning tool exists called a DEQ Utility Development Plan. Could allow Columbia Falls, with DEQ approval, to: Approve developments that technically exceed current capacity if backed by a clear capital plan for utility improvements. Phase large projects over a 20-year horizon with triggers for design and construction milestones. Fall 2026: Update facility design capacity modeling, assuming continued strong performance (currently about three times better than expected on some metrics). After 2026 modeling the City will likely pursue a DEQ Utility Development Plan. Some major future projects include additional bioreactor or equivalent capacity expansion, lift station and conveyance upgrades, I&I reduction projects, a utility rate study in spring 2026 for city and Meadow Lake and early negotiation with Meadow Lake ahead of 2032 contract expiration.

Public Comment was opened on this brief by President Fisher at 6:48 PM.

Chris Peterson representing the Hungry Horse News. Curious if the City will consider the past 3 days as an anomaly. How much does Meadowlake pay the City as of now. City Manager Hanks answered that they pay 125% of what a City resident pays. There are other things in the contract, such as PIFs, that are beneficial to Meadow Lake and these will be reviewed in the upcoming negotiations.

Shirly Folkwein 285 Shooting Star Dr, Columbia Falls. Curious what would happen when the next rain fall event happens and the treatment plant cannot handle the capacity. Public Works Manager Bates and City Manager Hanks answered that the plant has a surplus of capacity and does not overflow. The bioreactor is sized for .71 mgd and the hydraulic modeling is 2 mgd which is significantly more flow. The treatment is aimed at reducing nitrogen and with an influx of stormwater low in nitrogen it will be processed faster and expelled into the Flathead River. The DEQ permit for the treatment plant is 37.1 lbs. of nitrogen per month, this allows for the peak events to happen. The plant monitors a peak nitrogen outflow into the river per day, and routinely the Columbia Falls treatment plant is at ~10 lbs. even during these peak events. The treatment plant also has an equalization basin that allows for storage of a heavy surge.

Mike Burr, 560 Talbot Rd, Columbia Falls. Hopes the Commission will consider that throwing the anomaly out is not right. Does not believe the City will receive public input on this issue. President Fisher said that more engineering will be required in this current study before public input on this issue can be received. Burr continued saying that there is not sufficient public feedback, and the City should ask for an extension on the May 2026 MLUPA deadline.

Nathan Dugan, representing Livable Flathead, 121 Wisconsin Ave, Whitefish. This is a unique situation, helpful to think about growth outwards or infill and the infrastructure might be better served with a more condensed tax base in the City for maintenance and improvements.

Shirly Folkwein 285 Shooting Star Dr, Columbia Falls. Follow up, looked at Plan of Action public needs more clarification on which meetings the public will be allowed to have input. From September 11 Planning Commission meeting minutes: No clarity on what will happen if the City does not meet the May 2026 MLUPA deadline. City Manager Hanks answered that every single one of the scheduled events there will be a chance for public comment. Hanks talked to the League of Cities today about the appeals process. If there is an appeal there is an opportunity for the public to comment on those appealed aspects of the application. The idea that there will be no opportunity for public comment on applications in the future is incorrect.

Charles Lapp 3230 Columbia Falls Stage, Columbia Falls. Encourages the Planning Commission to fix the capacity issue because people will keep moving here. Make developers responsible for infrastructure improvements.

Public Comment was closed at 7:07 PM.

The Planning Commission discussed the brief as presented.

Commissioner Kavanagh would like to receive more information on the engineering process and numbers that were received and the arguments on including or excluding these events. He feels that it is hard to give direction without knowing this information. It is important to address infiltration issues in current and future developments in more detail than has been done previously. He is interested in the Utility Development Plan and encourages the City to explore how the City can embrace a plan like this.

Commissioner Johnson needs the capacity numbers to be dialed in more before this difficult decision of what is prioritized can be made.

Vice President Ping said it is difficult to talk about public engagement for the current applications within a timeframe for this process and what will be needed for an infrastructure upgrade. Less about a 5-10 year frame for growth and more a 10-20 year frame for growth. The City does not necessarily want to approve everything that is coming through the door. Worried taking the public input out of the review process loses the spirit of MLUPA. Need to hold developers at bay and pause everything before meaningful discussion on this issue can take place. The current survey is absent to the reality of the Cities constraints.

President Fisher sought clarification that the current applications would be on the old set of rules and would have a complete review process and approval by the Planning Commission and City Council with a chance for public comment? Planner Mulcahy answered that is correct until the new rules are adopted in the spring. Commissioner Kavanagh expressed the need for legal council from the City Attorney on the matter of postponement of development.

Planner Mulcahy for the Commissions information a letter of insufficiency was issued for the biggest current application due to this capacity issue, and it has been put on hold. To City Manager Hanks point the developers have a significant amount invested in these projects and want answers so the City is walking a tight rope. Development did not stop in any other city while MLUPA is being initiated but this situation in Columbia Falls is unique.

President Fisher commented that if the point was reached that the Commission had to pick winners and losers, he would want to refer to the Housing Study as a start. Kavanagh would like to create more infographics with input from the Housing Study and PER engineers that would help convey this information in a more accessible manner.

City Manager Hanks followed up saying that most of the current developments are in permitted zoning uses so they would be following the same rules that have been established and would go through the same process as the last 10 years. In the future there would be an application submitted, an administrative review would be performed then it would be publicly published, and the public will have a period to submit an appeal if desired. Hanks expects most applications to be appealed and need to go through Planning Commission and Council review.

President Fisher noted that the City Council will be discussing this on Monday December 15th 2025.

City Manager Hanks presented the Land Use Plan Calander update. The survey closed today with around 240 responses. The survey is an entry point and not meant to be holistic of the entire MLUPA process, there will be other discussions. Multiple focus groups are scheduled in January and February. All future meetings will have a public comment period.

Clerk Sobczak has created an Existing Land Use Map and would like input on corrections from any member of City Staff, the Planning Commission, City Council and the public. He can be reached at 406-892-4432 or sobczakc@cityofcolumbiafalls.com. The existing land use map will be on the City website in the near future.

ADJOURNMENT – Meeting duly adjourned at 7:33 PM

President

Attest:

Public Works Clerk



COLUMBIA FALLS MONTANA

Item No.2.

Agenda Item Summary

Title: Wastewater System Capacity Allocation

Date: December 30, 2025

Staff Contact: City Manager Hanks; Wastewater Supervisor Grady Jenkins

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) is nearing its calculated capacity to meet all requirements for previously committed wastewater capacity allocation and new requirements within current development applications. The City staff is requesting Planning Commission and City Council guidance on interim wastewater allocation priorities prior to staff completing review and scheduling of current development applications. Planning Commission and Council should **consider the 2025 Housing Study** in developing guidance and priorities.

- **Schedule:**

- Jan 5th – Capacity update; Staff will brief intent to move forward with current CB-2 permitted use at Lazy Days Court.
- Jan 8th – Planning Commission review and discussion.
- Jan 20th – City Council review, discussion, and guidance for development applications.

- **Baseline Data:**

- The current WWTP design capacity is 0.71 million gallons per day (MGD) and can support a projected service population of **8,174**.
- Current estimated WWTP service population is **6,280**, which includes Meadow Lake Water & Sewer District.
- Remaining WWTP allocation capacity is **1,894** people.
- Previously approved committed wastewater allocation is **540** people.
- Current/near-term development applications include **1,560** people.

Risk Assessment

- Approaching 100% WWTP capacity allocation increases risk of regulatory non-compliance with nutrient limits not with hydraulic handling or sanitary sewer overflows of the basins.
- The WWTP facility design flow capacities translation to population projections are not exact and are appropriately conservative calculations influenced by population assumptions, residents per household by type, gallons per day per capita usage rates, use of annual vs peak seasonal flow averages, etc.
- Extraordinary peaks in daily/weekly flowrates are due to Inflow & Infiltration (I&I) into the system from ground flooding from across the wastewater system caused by high peak rainfalls and/or peak snow melting caused flooding.
 - The most likely cause of Columbia Falls I&I is flooding over manhole covers.
 - The WWTP facility does not have significant I&I at the facility. There is extremely low risk of Flathead River floods inundating the WWTP facility.
 - During peak I&I events, the sewage concentration entering the WWTP facility is significantly decreased from sewage concentrations during average flows.

- Ongoing capacity allocation decisions will not impact permitted by-right developments of individual residential properties within the City.

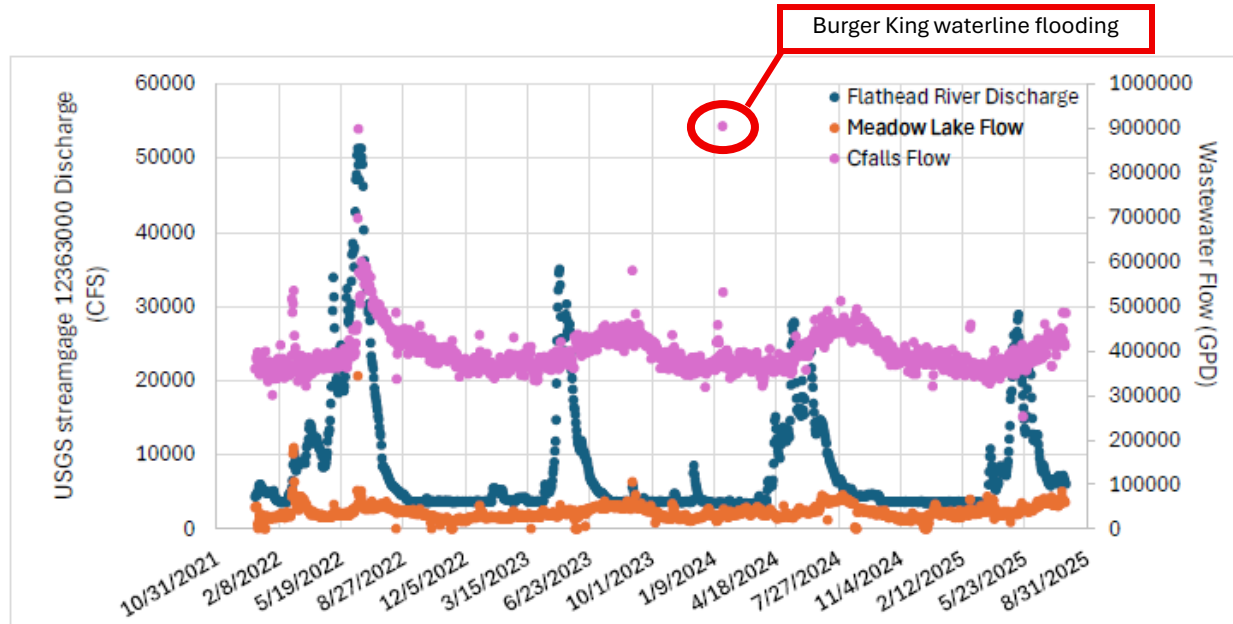


Figure 1-4: Wastewater Flows and Flathead River Discharge

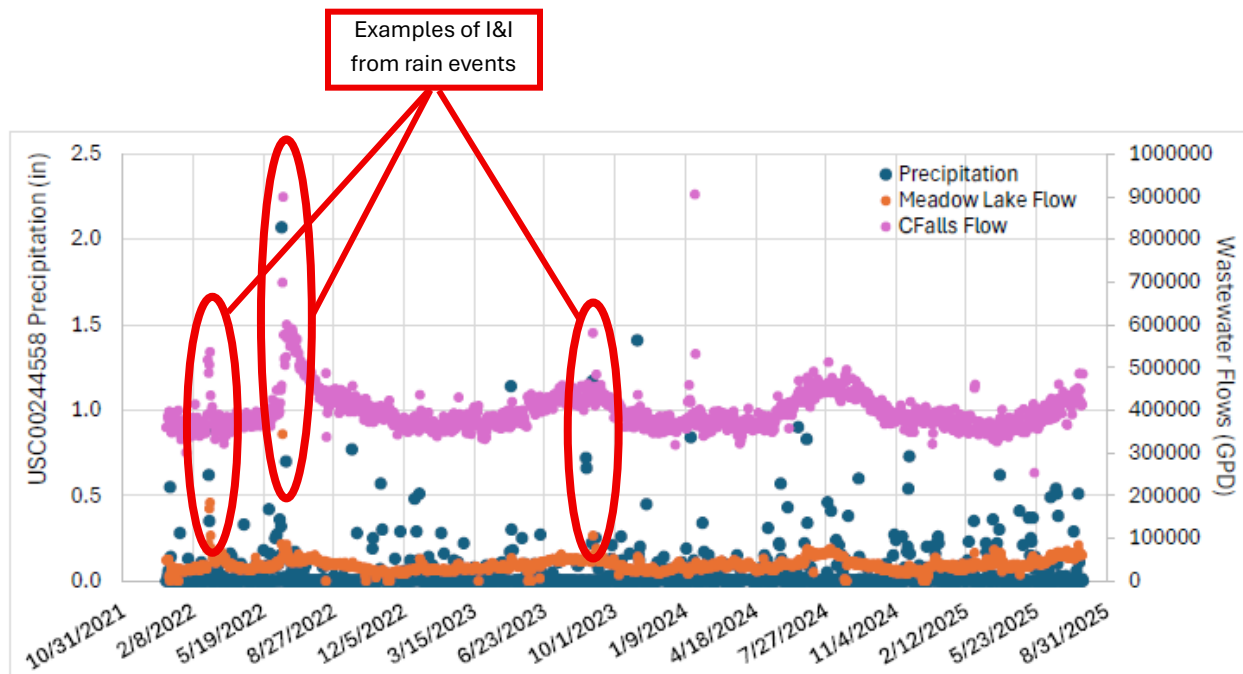


Figure 1-5: Wastewater Flows and Precipitation, measured at Kalispell Glacier Airport

WWTP Capacity Analysis

- Update from previous reporting: The June 2022 rainfall events were included and significantly impacted the 2023 Basis of Design facility modeling and calculations.
- The City and the 2025 Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) will use the 2023 Columbia Falls Basis of Design for modeled WWTP facility capacity calculations.
 - The 2025 PER was not scoped to build a WWTP facility model because of the recent 2023 Basis of Design modeling and another planned study of the facility performance in Fall 2026. The Fall 2026 study will analyze the Bioreactor Expansion project's first year of performance.
 - The 2025 PER is contracted and prioritized to create a Wastewater Conveyance System model to analyze the conveyance system capacity.

Table 4: Projected Population and Flows

Year	Estimated Population ¹	Cumulative Growth	Average Flow (MGD)	Maximum Month Flow ² (MGD)	Maximum Day Flow ³ (MGD)	Peak Hour Flow ⁴ (MGD)
2022	6,576 ⁵	-	0.44	0.57	1.01	1.37
2023	6,733	157	0.45	0.58	1.05	1.40
2024	6,892	316	0.46	0.60	1.07	1.42
2025	7,055	479	0.47	0.61	1.10	1.45
2026	7,205	629	0.48	0.62	1.12	1.48
2027	7,358	782	0.49	0.64	1.15	1.51
2028	7,514	938	0.50	0.65	1.17	1.53
2029	7,674	1,098	0.51	0.66	1.20	1.56
2030	7,837	1,261	0.52	0.68	1.22	1.59
2031	8,004	1,428	0.53	0.69	1.25	1.62
2032	8,174	1,598	0.54	0.71	1.27	1.65
2033	8,348	1,772	0.55	0.72	1.30	1.68
2034	8,526	1,950	0.57	0.74	1.33	1.71

Wastewater Capacity Allocation Ledger & Current Development Applications

- Current assumed service population of **6,280** allows **1,894** available population capacity.
- Current Approved Reserved Allocation: 540 people
 - 30 people = 12 Townhomes @ 2.5/unit (812 4th Ave W)
 - 50 people = 20 Townhomes @ 2.5/unit (274 Meadowlake Blvd)
 - 255 people = 26 SFH and 76 attached @ 2.5/unit (Garnier Heights – Meadowlake Blvd)
 - Preliminary plat expires in June 2026
 - 258 people = 103 SFH @ 2.5/unit (Tamarack Meadows – MLWS)
 - (-53 people) = Recovered capacity from Lazy Days Court Trailer Park
- Current/Near-Term Development Applications: 1,560 people
 - 844 people = 421 units (Teakettle Heights)
 - 240 Apts / 56 Townhomes / 125 SFH
 - 438 people = 175 SFHs @ 2.5/unit (River Highlands)
 - 68 people = 40 apartments @ 1.7/unit (302 Meadowlake Blvd)
 - 160 people = 107 hotel rooms @ 1.5/unit (Lazy Days Court)
 - 20 people = Commercial (Lazy Days Court)
 - 30 people = undisclosed multi-family

City Manager Recommendation

- Allocate up to **95% of projected population capacity** (+1,500 people total allocation)
- The City intends to provide allocation to the two Lazy Days Courts projects. These projects are permitted use in current CB-2 zoning and the projects are redevelopments of a property that previously had wastewater allocation.
- Approve allocation to 302 Meadowlake Blvd (apartments) which is a reapplication of a previously approved development application that expired. Development of this project is directly related to the success of the 274 Meadowlake Blvd (apartments) approved project.
- Coordinate with the Teakettle Heights developer to reduce requested capacity in current application. Allow Garnier Heights' application to expire in June 2026 and re-capitalize allocation for consideration within the Teakettle Heights application.
- Once this batch of development applications are considered, the City intends to adopt a moratorium on new multi-family developments (or other high wastewater flow applications) until further analysis can be completed.

Way Ahead

- Policy Guidance Needed:
 - Jan 8th – Planning Commission review and discussion.
 - Jan 20th – City Council review, discussion, and allocation guidance.
 - Planning Commission and City Council should **consider the 2025 Housing Study** in developing guidance and interim priorities. Considerations could include:
 - Housing type (Single Family, Townhomes, Apartments, Hotels, etc.)
 - Zoning Use
 - Infill development vs. Annexation
 - Construction and Occupancy timeline

Planning Commission Wastewater Capacity Allocation Discussion Template

Planning Commission: The following template is meant to be a starting point in our discussion of wastewater capacity allocation at our January 8th meeting. This document should by no means be considered a recommendation to the commission or council, I look forward to robust discussion to refine and adjust these preliminary ideas.

At the end of our discussion on January 8th, we should have a deliverable recommendation of wastewater capacity allocation to pass along to the City Council.

Legal Considerations

Foremost in our discussions should be any legal precedent that governs these decisions. We must be sure that any recommendations we make pass muster with competent legal counsel and are reasonable and defensible.

Reservation of capacity for smaller infill residential and commercial use

We should be sure that allocation calculations don't inadvertently prevent the allowable and legal construction of small infill development that is already allowable through zoning. That is, we should retain a small reserve in capacity so that if a lot owner wants to construct a home or ADU that is allowed by right through zoning, that modest construction isn't curtailed by all previous allocations to larger developments

Also, what are the implications for commercial use? If a new restaurant or grocery store or bar wants to open in town, do we reserve capacity for that as well?

Housing Type

Broadly, we should prioritize housing that is most likely to fulfill our current and future housing shortfall, as outlined in the March 2025 Housing Needs Study. We should prioritize housing that is most affordable for residents of Columbia Falls, referencing the capital gaps as noted in the Housing Needs Study for both renters and purchasers.

A simplified hierarchy based on costs and long-term housing might look like this:

Apartments > Townhomes > Single Family > Hotels

Zoning Use

What uses are allowed by right as currently zoned? For instance, a hotel or other short-term housing may not be as important to community goals as long term housing, but if someone is building a hotel in an area currently zoned for a hotel, is there any defensible legal basis for denying that application because we want to save the wastewater allocation for long term housing?

Infill vs. Annexation

Broadly, infill is more desirable than annexation. Not having to run city services to areas far from the city saves on costs, which reduces the cost of development.

But, the city is limited with infill opportunities. And, even if there are larger parcels in city limits that may be appropriate, the city can't force anyone to develop their property even if it would be a good spot for housing.

Construction and Occupancy timeline

What priority to we give to construction timelines? Is it more important that homes be built sooner rather than later? How does phasing of larger developments affect how applications are approved?

Cumulative effects

It may be important to consider cumulative effects of the aforementioned issues, and how they interact with each other. That is, some of these issues may add up to greater or less than the sum of their parts if viewed through a strict rubric. It may be beneficial to think about cumulative effects, and we can discuss this more in person at the meeting.

Once again, this is just a starting point on our discussions on January 8th. I am sure I did not cover all of the relevant information, and I look forward to the public and the Planning Commissions thoughts. I anticipate working through these issues together and making a solid recommendation to the City Council of Columbia Falls.

Darin Fisher, Planning Commission President