

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION
January 28, 2026 – City Commission Special Work Session
Ranches at Belt Creek – 277 Armington Rd, Belt, MT

CITY COMMISSION RETREAT

Mayor Reeves called the meeting to order at 8:30 AM.

ROLL CALL/STAFF INTRODUCTIONS:

City Commission members present: Cory Reeves, Joe McKenney, Rick Tryon, Shannon Wilson, and Casey Schreiner.

Staff present: City Manager Greg Doyon, Deputy City Manager Jeremy Jones, and City Clerk Lisa Kunz.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

1. FACILITATED SESSION ON COMMISSION PRIORITIES FOR 2026

Facilitator Mark Willmarth provided an overview of the retreat proceedings to include a look back over the past year and review what has been accomplished; discuss the issues and challenges facing the Commission moving forward; and, to develop a set of goals/priorities for the next 12 to 18 months.

He began with a roundtable discussion asking the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to be part of the City of Great Falls Commission?
 - Commissioner Wilson chose to be part of the City Commission due to deep concern about housing insecurity, following the death of a 60-year-old woman downtown who had recently lost her housing. Despite limited ability to help at the time, the situation had a strong impact on her and motivated her involvement in City efforts related to housing and affordability issues, acknowledging that addressing housing issues is challenging.
 - Mayor Reeves reported that he had no prior intention of entering politics or serving on the City Commission. After personal reflection and prayer about how to continue serving the community, he felt a strong calling to run for City Commission. His motivation was rooted in a sense of calling and a desire to serve the community by

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supporting continued growth, economic development, industry, and affordable housing.

- Commissioner McKenney explained that his motivation for public service is not driven by specific issues, noting that issues change over time. Instead, his service is part of his personal life story. Drawing on prior military service and experiences abroad, he expressed a deep appreciation for the United States and a desire to contribute to preserving its quality of life. His involvement in public service is rooted in a sense of duty and commitment to doing his part to sustain these values.
- Commissioner Schreiner expressed a strong commitment to public service. Drawing on extensive experience in public employment and prior legislative service, he has developed significant knowledge of how government functions and feels a responsibility to continue serving the community. He emphasized the importance of community pride, responsive and credible local government, and improving how the community is perceived both internally and externally. While he personally enjoys public service, he also views continued involvement as a responsibility based on his prior experience and willingness to serve.
- Commissioner Tryon shared that he was raised in Great Falls, raised his family here, and observed the community falling short of its potential. He described concerns about a longstanding perception of a “good old boys” culture influencing decision-making within city government and the broader community. He emphasized the importance of addressing both the reality and perception of this issue so residents feel they can make a difference and trust local governance. He noted that progress has been made in recent years and credited the City Manager for those improvements. His desire is to help create a community where young people can remain, thrive, and enjoy the quality of life as it was when he grew up here.

2. What do you want your legacy to be as a City Commission collectively, or as a Commissioner or Mayor individually, five – 10 years from now? What do you want to look back on and say “I helped the City move in a particular direction? What do you envision for Great Falls moving forward?

- Mayor Reeves expressed strong support for improving public safety and noted a personal desire to see expanded resources such as additional fire facilities and increased police and fire staffing. He acknowledged that addressing public safety challenges is difficult and requires community understanding and support. He also recognized ongoing efforts by others to advance these goals.
- Commissioner McKenney agreed with Mayor Reeves and added that his legacy would be continuing to work together, respecting differences, and being an example to the community on how good government works, and then addressing issues will follow.

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- Commissioner Schreiner expressed his vision within five to 10 years is that residents will feel that Great Falls is safer and that their quality of life has improved. He noted that, while some factors affecting community safety and well-being extend beyond the City’s control, there are areas the City can address. He emphasized the importance of working on broader issues that contribute to residents’ sense of safety and overall satisfaction.
- Commissioner Wilson would like to see increased fire department coverage and the addition of another fire station, citing personal experiences with delayed emergency response times. She expressed concern that current coverage and capacity are insufficient to meet community needs, particularly during simultaneous incidents.
- Commissioner Tryon agreed with the prior comments pertaining to public safety. In five to ten years, his hope is that the citizens are past the perception of “Great Falls is not a friendly place for business and development.” He noted significant progress in recent years, attributing improvements to department head hires and positive cultural changes within city departments. He acknowledged that public perception still reflects outdated views from past decades but stated that efforts are underway with improved communication to better convey current realities to the community.

Commissioner Schreiner stated that negative public perception discourages individuals from running for City Commission and expressed a desire to see more candidates willing to serve within the next five to 10 years.

Mayor Reeves agreed, noting that Commission members do not serve for financial gain and that he personally pays \$200 per month to the City of Great Falls to serve as mayor, which he believes should not result in a personal financial loss.

Commissioner Schreiner added that many people are unaware of the financial costs and significant time commitment involved until they are well into the role, particularly for those with standard eight-to-five jobs who must use substantial paid time off to serve.

Commissioner McKenney added that he has been involved with recruiting candidates since the early 90’s. Leadership is a rare trait and very few people want to step up to the plate.

Commissioner Wilson thinks it is society-wide because it is also hard for organizations to get volunteers. Serving on the City Commission is virtually a volunteer position.

Mayor Reeves reviewed the Commission’s goals from last year – City services, public safety, Community Development, Communication/Education, and legislative presence.

Discussion included:

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- Hiring a lobbyist for the legislative session was an accomplishment, and a lobbyist should represent the City’s interest in 2027; department heads should also provide input from their respective organizations.
- Examining the revenue and expenses for City services requiring general fund subsidies is on-going.
- The town hall meetings never came to fruition. The Commission will try to make one or two town halls a priority for 2026.
- Allocating the 3.5 mills towards public safety was an accomplishment.
- Director Cherry is in the process of updating policies and ordinances regarding certain items not having to come before the Commission for approval and making the process more efficient.
- The Commission approved every type of housing development.
- Commissioner Wilson would still like to see a Portland Loo for downtown, adding that the City can apply for TIF funds to make the purchase and install it. She will take the lead to gauge interest from downtown businesses.
- The communications specialist position was a great addition to help with the City’s social media presence. Increasing the modernization of communicating with people and the way they take in information has been really good.

Break 9:45 – 9:56 a.m.

Facilitator Willmarth continued with a roundtable discussion, asking the following questions:

3. What is one accomplishment from last year of which you are most proud? Why? What impact did it have on the City organization and/or community?

Commissioner Wilson noted strong community opinions on both sides of the fireworks issue and advised that a middle-ground approach would have the best chance of voter passage. She stated that the proposed option could address concerns without a total ban, acknowledging that not all stakeholders would be satisfied. She also thinks the Commission works well together, as far as compromising.

Commissioner Tryon expressed concern about the broader implications of the fireworks issue, emphasizing the need for caution in future decisions and in how enforcement by the Police Department is communicated. He noted that the voters passed the restriction on fireworks and the regulations should be enforced, acknowledging there are resource issues. It is a broader issue than just fireworks.

Mayor Reeves stated that, during upcoming budget discussions, the Commission should work with Manager Doyon and Finance to allocate additional funding to support fireworks enforcement. He emphasized that if enforcement is a priority, extra resources—such as funding for overtime shifts—may be needed to allow staff to address fireworks-related calls alongside other service priorities.

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Commissioner Tryon emphasized that it is important to put forth the effort to the people that voted to restrict fireworks to show that the City cares about that and are going to enforce the restriction.

Commissioner McKenney commented that the accomplishments he is proud of are – (1) the culture change of “how do we get to yes” is amazing in Community Development; (2) renegotiating with the Library to come up with a five-year contract; and (3) the active public safety support group that he will elaborate on more later. Those things matter because organizational culture and good governance are constructive paths forward rather than being perceived as a roadblock. Removing the Library issue from consideration every year is an example of addressing community division and demonstrating effective governance. And, learning from mistakes on the failed public safety levy.

Mayor Reeves commented that bringing the 3.5 mills back to public safety was an accomplishment. Also, the Commission showed amazing courage when it raised utility fees last year. That is never popular. The Commission recognized the need for infrastructure and development and took the first step to really invest in the community.

Commissioner Tryon concurred with the prior comments. He added that he is proud of the Commission approving the funds for the growth policy efforts. What he is most proud of is the theme through all of those things is the willingness to get past the “not in my backyard” attitude; the willingness to do what is right instead of what is popular. He emphasized that over the last 10 years, social media has been a real game changer in terms of public awareness, for good and for bad.

Commissioner Schreiner commented that his years of public service have taught him not to criticize groups prior to serving on them, recognizing that elected officials have greater access to information once in office. He shared that, upon being elected, he knew he would be joining a group that already worked well together, having had prior connections with all members, and knew where everyone’s hearts were at by observing the way they functioned.

4. Summarize what the past year to 18-months has been like for the Commission and the community – whether an accomplishment or things that didn’t get accomplished.

Mayor Reeves commented that it was a steep learning curve for him learning now to run a meeting properly and all of the ins and outs. He felt like he had a good grasp on City government working in law enforcement for 25 years. He realized that it was just one tiny box and he had a lot to learn about all the other departments and functions. It has been challenging and oftentimes overwhelming balancing being a good husband and father with working for the School District and being mayor. He thinks he will be able to relax a little more these next two years.

Commissioner McKenney commented that the learning curve never stops. It took him a while to get comfortable. The commission members change, but what’s important is that the

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members work well together. It's okay to agree differently, knowing they all care deeply about the community.

Commissioner Schreiner commented that he thinks things are moving in a good direction – progress has been made.

Commissioner Wilson commented that they all try to work together to do what is best for the community.

Commissioner Tryon sees a better movement of the policies and desires of the City Commission being translated effectively to Manager Doyon and then implemented throughout the City. It is changing the perception of rubber-stamping staff recommendations.

Manager Doyon commented that there is a shift too in that the Commission has been willing to take on greater risk. The organization is highly risk-averse, but noted that the Commission has demonstrated a willingness to try new approaches, accept potential public backlash, and support staff in those efforts. This leadership approach has helped unlock new potential within the organization.

Facilitator Willmarth concurred, adding there were some big issues the Commission was willing to tackle and do something about. He emphasized that doesn't always happen for a lot of elected officials. The can keeps getting kicked down the road.

5. What are questions that need to be answered or matters that need to be addressed over the next 12 to 18 months.

- How do we do economic development going forward?
- How do we get Events and the Park and Recreation Department issues solved, including swimming pools and multi-sports complex? The Commission needs to decide whether or not those funds will be subsidized by the general fund.
- How and when do we revisit a public safety levy?
- How do we address taxpayer concerns about increasing taxes?
- How do we address the upcoming landfill/sanitation issue?
- How do we play offense with the Legislature?
- How do we manage parking in a timelier manner?
- Decide what direction to provide Manager Doyon for the Strategic Development Officer position.
- Do we need to reevaluate any relationships with community partners?
- How do we prepare for what is coming? Re: Three projects coming up that will affect housing and stretch resources and manpower is Mitchell's development on the east side, the Little Shell Tribe project, and the Sentinel project.
- How do we deal with Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and debt service.

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- How do we balance the immediate and short-term needs of long-term sustainability in these policy decisions? Where are sacrifices going to be made? What is the equity to the community?
- Are we balancing the needs for today with future needs (that may or may not happen)?
- What do we do about code enforcement?

Break 10:57 – 11:18 a.m.

6. What are the themes the Commission sees from the questions asked above? After round table discussion, the following themes were established:

- Public Safety
- Development & Economic Development
- Land Use/Housing Development
- Budget – General Fund Subsidies & Priorities
- Legislature/Stay engaged with interim committees

Manager Doyon raised the question of whether public safety should be left off the current focus. He expressed concern that, despite multiple attempts, there has not been sufficient community support to advance changes related to public safety, and that current public sentiment appears to view conditions as acceptable. He noted that past efforts—such as explanations of ISO changes and investments in fire training—have not significantly shifted public opinion. While acknowledging the importance of public safety, he suggested that meaningful progress would require broader community support, which does not appear likely in the near term. He questioned whether it may be more effective to pause this focus for a cycle, continue limited policy and budgetary support, and allow time for advocacy efforts to develop before revisiting the issue.

Discussion followed about Manager Doyon’s suggestion.

Facilitator Willmarth summarized that the group discussed that a public safety levy will likely not be pursued this year. However, public safety remains a priority, and there is interest in identifying and committing to specific public safety actions for the coming year. The focus is on defining clear, achievable commitments so that by this time next year, the Commission can demonstrate actions that were completed.

With regard to code enforcement, Manager Doyon noted that desired improvements in related services cannot be achieved with only one staff member. Efforts across police, fire, code enforcement, planning, and land use, for example, require continuity, coordination, and legal support to be effective. Resource limitations remain a challenge, with ongoing community expectations for increased code enforcement or additional firefighting capacity.

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With regard to general fund subsidies, Manager Doyon expressed concern about uncertainty in future revenues following legislative changes to taxing categories, including limits on taxable valuation, with impacts not expected to be clear until late fall. Additional discussion focused on increasing pressure on the general fund as the community reassesses what services it can sustainably provide. Quality-of-life services, such as parks, recreation, events, neighborhood pools, and parking, have required growing subsidies, creating challenges in balancing these costs with public safety and other core needs.

Manager Doyon clarified that financial assumptions for the new aquatics facility were significantly affected by unforeseen factors such as COVID-related cost increases, wage pressures, utility rate increases, and operational expenses. While management and program structure can be evaluated, external cost drivers played a major role.

Ongoing concerns were also noted regarding deferred maintenance and parking infrastructure, with frustration expressed that issues are often addressed only after failures occur, placing decision-makers in a reactive position despite long-standing communication about these needs.

Discussion continued about the ongoing challenge of balancing limited resources while attempting to meet a wide range of community needs, noting the difficulty of sustaining all core services and quality of life amenities without reducing or reallocating resources from one area to support another.

Lunch break 12:14 – 1:04 p.m.

Facilitator Willmarth continued with the roundtable, open discussion about challenges/issues facing the City Commission.

7. Why are they important? We really need to address . . . and why?

Mayor Reeves – The budget is the biggest challenge; adjusting priorities within the budget.

Commissioner McKenney – The services that are driven by property taxes are a real challenge.

Commissioner Wilson – Consideration needs to be given to the quality-of-life amenities to draw companies and businesses to Great Falls.

Facilitator Willmarth reiterated that it goes back to what the Commission talked about with regard to balancing what the immediate needs are versus what the Commission needs to plan for in the future, and how do you bring the two conversations together.

Commissioner Tryon – Budget priorities and public safety. Drugs are a problem in Great Falls and the driver for a lot of crime and other issues. Drug addiction and mental health are

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part of the public safety discussion. No one will want to invest in the community if we have drug issues, public safety issues and the lack of adequate funding for police and fire.

Commissioner Schreiner – Agreed. Nobody is going to want to invest in a community that won't invest in itself. So, then, the question is “how does the Commission find the resources to invest.” It goes back to the budget discussion.

Manager Doyon added that, per the new legislation, the City can only use 80% of its newly taxable property, and the inflationary factor is only up to 4%. It is too early to tell, but it will be less and Director Kinzler warns that next year will be tougher. He will prepare an exhibit for the Commission during the budget process that illustrates the challenges the city has with regard to the inflationary rate versus revenue.

Commissioner Tryon stressed that the focus should be on the budget this year.

Commissioner Wilson noted that closing neighborhood pools would only fund one officer or firefighter and questioned if that was worth it.

Commissioner Schreiner commented that the question becomes - how does the Commission prioritize development in a way that increases the tax base to shore up the budgetary needs that we have.

Discussion followed that industry and heavy industry is the best development, but that typically goes into a TIF District and tends to be the most controversial from the citizenry.

Commissioner McKenney stated that property taxes from housing do not sufficiently fund the services required.

Commissioner Schreiner added that while approving housing increases opportunity and expands the market for buyers, it also increases budget liabilities because property tax revenue does not cover service costs, thereby worsening the service deficit. He noted that the Commission will need to consider at what point it may no longer be financially feasible to approve all proposals due to service funding constraints.

Commissioner Tryon noted that limitations in the current housing stock deter some potential investors due to a lack of available places to live.

Commissioner McKenney added that the housing shortage is a nationwide issue and emphasized that Great Falls should continue its current approach to increase housing supply. He stated that once the approximately 3,000 housing units approved by the Commission begin construction, the city should see increased momentum.

Manager Doyon summarized the need for growth to expand the tax base in order to support municipal services, noting the challenge of public perception. He described a cyclical issue in which housing is needed, yet population growth remains flat, complicating growth

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management planning. He observed that while Montana is experiencing change, Great Falls is not seeing the same growth patterns as other cities such as Bozeman, Kalispell, or Missoula, creating uncertainty about whether and when growth pressures will occur locally.

He cautioned that growth brings tradeoffs, including increased traffic, potential impacts on public safety, and higher property values and taxes, and noted that residents may not fully consider these consequences. He added that increased development places additional demands on city services, often requiring reactive rather than proactive responses. He concluded that these challenges have persisted over time, have no simple solutions, and must be addressed through careful planning with available resources.

Manager Doyon provided a “State of the City” overview, emphasizing alignment as a key theme, noting that while there is shared vision for a safe and economically growing community, challenges remain in how goals are achieved. He highlighted ongoing alignment and process issues with key stakeholders, including the County, GFDA, the Airport, nonprofits, and defense advocacy efforts.

He outlined several significant policy and operational matters, including growth management planning, code enforcement responsiveness, Little Shell annexation and trust land concerns, City-County Health Department funding, uncertainty around future property tax policy, and internal priorities such as water rights updates, Park and Recreation planning, labor negotiations, and budget constraints.

Additional topics included governance and communication issues with advisory boards, concerns regarding workforce drug use, property acquisition processes, annexation and development review practices, and the long-term fiscal impacts of development and service expansion. He noted progress made in improving the development process, while emphasizing the need to balance growth with sustainable service levels and cost recovery.

Break 2:00 – 2:16 p.m.

Commissioner McKenney provided a handout “Electric City Citizens for Public Safety.” He provided the Commission an update on that group’s efforts, one of which is fundraising for a public safety poll. After brief discussion, there was Commission agreement that a poll needs to happen to gauge community support before deciding about another public safety levy moving forward.

Facilitator Willmarth noted that the Commission and Manager Doyon had covered a wide range of topics. He directed the Commission to focus on five key priority areas, clearly identifying what the Commission will and must do within the next 12 to 18 months, and why achieving these priorities is important. He emphasized connecting these goals to their benefits for the community and the organization, and how they support moving in the right direction.

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Commission discussion commenced and resulted in the following collective priorities:

Great Falls City Commission – 2026 Priorities

Public Safety

We will . . . We must . . .

- Advocate for and support the work of the Electric City Citizens for Public Safety to inform our decisions moving forward.
- Do what we can within the budget to support requests from the Police and Fire Departments.

Why? People want to live in a safe community. It is the role of local government. We need to invest in our community.

Development & Economic Development

We will . . . We must . . .

- Invest in hiring a Strategic Development Officer.
- Prioritize projects that have an immediate impact on the tax base.

Why? Community prosperity. Expansion of tax base. Being more proactive on development.

Land Use/Housing Development

We will . . . We must . . .

- Adopt the Growth Policy.
- Encourage more infill development.
 - How do we incentivize sellers?
- Continue to streamline the development review process.

Why? Reflects efficient, responsible growth.

Budget

We will . . . We must . . .

- Implement recommendations from the Park and Recreation and Events studies, as appropriate.
- Start process of budget earlier to review and discuss all general fund expenditures.
- Hear this year's budget presentations from the Departments.

Why? Because the budget is our most important policy decision.

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Legislature

We will . . . We must . . .

- Work with Legislators to loosen stance of taking local control.
- Work with Legislators to increase state funding for tax credits for housing refurbishment.
- Hire a lobbyist.
- Stay engaged with interim committees and take a more proactive role with the Legislature.

Why? Many of the barriers we face can only be solved at the State level.

ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Reeves adjourned the informal special work session of January 28, 2026, at 3:47 p.m.