

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION
January 6, 2026 – City Commission Special Work Session
Civic Center, Gibson Room 212 Mayor Reeves Presiding

CALL TO ORDER: 4:30 PM

ROLL CALL/STAFF INTRODUCTIONS:

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

Also present were Deputy City Manager Jeremy Jones, City Attorney David Dennis, Finance Director Melissa Kinzler, Planning and Community Development Director Brock Cherry, Acting Fire Chief Mike McIntosh, Police Chief Jeff Newton, and Deputy City Clerk Darcy Dea.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Richard Ecke, City resident, member of the Historic Preservation Advisory Commission and chairman of HPAC's Save the Boston and Montana Barn Committee, read from a prepared statement. There are several positive developments regarding the historic mule barn, the last on-site structure still standing from the original Black Eagle smelter. Mr. Ecke was recently approached by a distinguished Great Falls resident with a proposal. This resident is willing to personally donate the entire cost of fencing two sides of the unique Smelter Hill barn, which City staff had recommended with a promise by the City of Great Falls that it will not demolish the barn.

The City Commission had expressed deep concern over potential liability issues with the barn. A tall fence with barbed wire at the top should do much to assuage those concerns. This will likely require a written agreement with the City. The preservation community urge City staff and the City Commission to seriously consider this generous offer. The committee would love to see this fence in place by the time golfers return this spring to the Anaconda Hills Golf Course.

The committee have asked the HPAC to put the concept of the donation on the agenda for its meeting next week with the possibility that HPAC will make a recommendation in response to this offer. The committee are very excited about this development and hope City staff, officials and community members will be as well.

The Historic Preservation Office and Park and Recreation staff have in recent weeks talked about the idea of a preservation group leasing the barn property for a dollar per year in order to repair and stabilize the building. The committee agrees that a lease would be more

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practical than a sale, which had been talked about earlier. Meanwhile, HPAC's barn committee is in discussions with a preservation group, the nonprofit Big Sky Country National Heritage Area (BSCNHA). Mark Goode, Chairman of the BSCNHA has expressed interest in leasing the city's barn property. The committee are anxious to continue these discussions with Park and Recreation staff on a possible lease with the goal of performing some barn stabilization work this year. The committee have raised nearly \$30,000 in private donations so far, in addition to \$20,000 raised for the barn's architectural study, which was completed in the last two years. No property tax dollars have been tapped for the Barn project.

The Barn Committee is applying for a \$15,000 grant through the BSCNHA from the foundation for Montana History, with a deadline of mid-January. The committee also plan to apply for a State of Montana History grant, which has a February deadline. If granted, receiving the money would not happen until the legislature meets in 2027. The committee appreciates any assistance provided by City staff and would love to see the barn renovated into an interpretive center, which would spotlight the amazing industrial history of Great Falls.

Mayor Reeves commented that securing the property would satisfy him 100 percent.

Commissioner Tryon commented that there still needs to be more discussion about this topic at another time.

Commissioner McKenney commented that he would like to thank Mr. Ecke and his group for working through this. He sees a positive path forward and is looking forward to going down that path.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

1. REGIONAL AIRPORT AUTHORITY BOARD INTERVIEWS

Mayor Reeves announced that members of the Commission would take turns asking questions to the applicants and may include follow-up discussion for clarification.

The City Commission interviewed Elizabeth Whiting, Ryan Villines and Debra Evans at a meeting open to the public. Members of the Commission took turns asking questions to the applicants. Each member of the Commission will weigh the information discussed during the interviews and will either make an appointment to the Great Falls Regional Airport Authority Board at the regularly scheduled City Commission meeting on January 6, 2026, or request that the board position be re-advertised for other citizen interest to fill the vacancy on this board.

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2. GROWTH POLICY UPDATE

Planning and Community Development Director Brock Cherry reported that the Growth Policy Draft will be published on January 12, 2026 for 45 days with Konveio, for online public commenting and engagement, and hard copies will be available in the Planning and Community Development Department. Konveio allows users to search specific topics and items that they are interested in, leave comments, ask questions and it collects data from everyone that sees it. There will be Open Houses on January 12, 2026 at 11:30 a.m. and January 14 and 15, 2026 at 5:30 p.m. in the Civic Center Gibson Room. One of the components of the growth policy that the City has never seen before is a future land use map. A future land use map is similar to a zoning map. It is a guiding document for properties that are rezoned, redeveloped or along the City's periphery.

Director Cherry requested that the Commission read the Draft Growth Policy, look at the future land-use map, implementation, goals and objectives, reach out if it has any questions, and get the word out and share.

Mayor Reeves received clarification that public comment from Konveio would go to the Planning and Community Development Department and the communication specialist would make a sharable post.

Commissioner Tryon received clarification that there should be a light review annually and a more in-depth review every five years of the Growth Policy. He asked Director Cherry to summarize why people felt there was a need to update the growth policy and what a growth policy is.

Director Cherry responded that the 2013 Growth Policy never had any significant review done to it. The environment and momentum have changed since 2013, and people wanted the policy updated. The community wanted a document that had the best, most updated information possible and to have a plan for growth that best meets the community's needs. His goal is to have the Growth Policy completed as close as possible with the state compliance date. Missoula is the only city in the big seven that has everything updated. The growth policy needs to be transparent and detailed because that will create a resilient and defensible document.

The growth policy is a land use-oriented document that will be the City's guiding document for the next 20 years regarding what people want to see Great Falls look like. It will provide guidance to rezones, annexations and the bedrock of change for the City's zoning ordinances. Currently, the City's zoning ordinances are broken because everything that goes before the Commission is a planned unit development.

Commissioner McKenney inquired if the Interstate 15 (I-15) Corridor, developing vacant land, and unintended consequences of zoning would be addressed in the growth policy.

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Director Cherry responded that the I-15 Corridor would not be specifically addressed because the Growth Policy is focused on items from a municipal level, under the jurisdiction of the governing body. It is important to have guidance from the Commission about how it wants to educate the public about the process of development and improving the existing framework for better conversations and outcomes. The growth policy does not speak to unintended consequences of land use decisions; however, it does provide educational components and includes the fiscal impact of growth and budget.

Commissioner Tryon commented that it is important that the growth policy includes information about the pros and cons when presenting ideas for development for approval, because what might be an asset now, might be a liability for the City further down the road.

Commissioner Tryon asked how this Draft Growth Policy would change zoning from the 2013 Growth Policy.

Mayor Reeves responded that more things would be approved at the Planning and Community Development level versus coming before the governing body.

Director Cherry added that the Public Engagement Report indicated that people want home ownership, as well as more speed, predictability and outright approvals with design standards. There needs to be some sort of framework that could be administratively worked through that meets minimum standards and general site compliance. The growth policy will be the basis for this. Once the growth policy is adopted, City staff will do an audit of the City's zoning ordinance and begin those changes as well. The City was awarded a significant amount of money to help with that; however, it has been frozen by the federal government because they want to ensure that it meets the goals and objectives of the current administration.

Commissioner Tryon commented that there needs to be a yearly review of the Growth Policy because of the prospects for population growth and housing needs. He inquired about areas of contention of the Draft Growth Policy.

Director Cherry responded that the Growth Policy provides information about the growth rate so staff can plan accordingly. There was discussion about the City's growth rate being more aspirational because if it is not, how are we going to ensure we have the right tools and infrastructure in place to be ready for the City to be attractive. It is important to review the Growth Policy every year because of the reality of growth that the City is facing. It could be cataclysmic for budgets and everything else if growth stops and a city was banking on growth to happen to fund its essential services. The Growth Policy needs to be a living document and reviewed on an annual basis so adjustments can be made accordingly.

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Commissioner Wilson commented that the Growth Policy Steering Committee was chosen to be a representative of the community; however, they are not the community. She asked what would happen if the draft was not approved by the Planning Advisory Board.

Director Cherry responded that the Steering Committee is not a recommending body, it is made up of individuals that represent different interests and will not be issuing any formal recommendation. The Planning Advisory Board makes recommendations that ultimately goes to the City Commission. Land use in the United States is currently administered in a way where it is done by a democratic republic of elected representatives and not by a vote. Now is the time for citizens to exercise their civic duty to participate in the process.

Commissioner McKenney inquired if the City is going back to mixed-use properties.

Director Cherry responded that it is up to the City Commission; however, the trends are more mixed-use walkable places. Within the Growth Policy, there are goals and objectives that lean towards going back to a more mixed-use, denser framework. The Growth Policy is absent of any power or influence, unless there is change within the zoning ordinance and corresponding documents.

DISCUSSION OF POTENTIAL UPCOMING WORK SESSION TOPICS

Deputy City Manager Jeremy Jones reported that a Strategic Capital Investment Reserve (SCIR) update and Malmstrom Air Force Base (MAFB) Grant study update will be topics for the January 20, 2026 work session. A 2026 Downtown Stormwater/Water Main project update and an ARPA Project update will be topics for the February 3, 2026 work session. An annual update from BID, a Park and Recreation general update and Natural Recourses/Boulevard District update will be topics for the February 17, 2026 work session.

Commissioner Tryon inquired if a Downtown Parking Program update would be a topic for an upcoming work session.

Deputy City Manager Jones responded that there are meetings scheduled for January and February and he would strive to have a plan to present after the meeting in February.

ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Reeves adjourned the informal special work session of January 6, 2026 at 6:35 p.m.