

**CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS  
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES  
HELD FEBRUARY 17, 2026**

Mayor Barnhart called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

**CALL TO ORDER:** Councilor King, Councilor Piper, Councilor Price, Councilor Robinson, Councilor Stob (via zoom listening in only) and Mayor Barnhart. Absent Councilor Semok.

Also Present: City Manager Hanks, City Clerk Staaland, City Attorney Breck, City Finance Director Farrell, Police Chief Stephens and Public Works Director Bates.

**ROLL CALL**

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA:** Councilor Piper made a motion to amend the agenda switching items #6 and #7, second by Councilor Price and the motion carried.

**CONSENT AGENDA:** Councilor King made motion to approve the consent agenda noting all claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, King, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

Approval of February 17, 2026, Claims - \$333,880.81

Approval of Payroll Claims - February 13, 2026 - \$121,758.88

Approval of Regular Council Meeting Minutes - February 2, 2026

Approval of City Council and Planning Commission Workshop Minutes - January 26, 2026

Approval of City Communications contract. The City completed a 3-month pilot project, and the City Staff is recommending continuing this contract.

**VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)**

Anne Higgins of Fran Lou Park Lane requested an update on the items she brought forward at the February 2, 2026, council meeting. She noted that many Police Department policies are already in place. She also expressed the need for public transit service between the communities of Columbia Falls, Whitefish, and Kalispell.

Elizabeth McBride, 1229 9th Ave. W., stated she read an article in the Hungry Horse News urging the city to pass a resolution regarding ICE actions. She strongly disagreed with Ann Higgins' statements in the article, asserting that enforcement is not occurring outside constitutional standards. She referenced HB200, signed in 2021, and stated it is not the role of municipal governments to challenge the Montana Constitution. She urged the Mayor and Council not to consider an illegal immigration resolution.

Roger Hopkins, 94 Vans Ave., spoke on behalf of the Government Study Commission. He reviewed the commission's discussions on whether to recommend adopting self-governing powers. While commissioners saw potential benefits, they did not identify an immediate need. After several shifts in opinion, he concluded that the most effective approach is to call for a public vote in the November election to allow more time for public awareness and council discussion.

Bug, 313 4th Ave. W., stated the requests in the proposal written by Ann Higgins are legal under Montana and federal law. He emphasized that the request is not for a sanctuary city designation but for greater accountability and adherence to existing court regulations, noting concerns about multiple legal violations by federal authorities.

**NEW BUSINESS:**

**Hillside Geotechnical Investigation**

Presentation of the findings of geotechnical investigation of hillside.

Cliff Clark with Alpine Geotechnical, LLC provided a summary of findings related to the hillside failure on Second Avenue East in Columbia Falls, which occurred approximately a year and a half ago. He explained the failure was likely caused by a combination of intense rain events and a long-term leaking water service line.

Alpine Geotechnical LLC completed a subsurface investigation using sonic drilling to collect continuous soil samples and evaluate slope stability. Upper layers consisted of road and embankment fill, followed by gravelly fill and then native dense gravel, consistent with regional expectations. However, at depths of approximately 38–40 feet, the drilling encountered softer silts and fine-grained clays, which was unexpected and warranted deeper investigation. Borings were extended to approximately 80–85 feet, exceeding the total slope height of about 70 feet, to ensure accurate slope stability analysis. Testing indicated the failure was shallow in nature and not representative of a large, catastrophic slope failure.

Mr. Clark explained that Alpine Geotechnical would not perform excavation work but would define and stake excavation limits to assist contractors with estimating quantities. Alpine Geotechnical could also assist the city with preparing an RFP and recommended that engineering oversight be provided during construction, preferably by Alpine Geotechnical, since they developed the recommendations. He noted that while heavy rain contributed, the leaking water service was likely the primary cause of the observed instability.

Public Works Director Bates presented a change order request for \$5,000 to cover additional laboratory testing and field investigation required due to the unexpected soil conditions. After further council discussion on the condition of the hillside and the remediation along with the approval of the Change order for \$5,000 for additional laboratory testing and field investigation.

Councilor Robinson made motion to approve the additional \$5,000 for additional laboratory testing, seconded by Councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Robinson, King, Piper, Price and Barnhart.

**FY26 Mid-Year Budget Update**

City Manager Hanks provided mid-year budget update. This presentation also serves as an update as the City moves into the third and fourth quarters of the fiscal year, focusing on current financial status and notable changes.

Hanks introduced Amy Farrell, the City's new Finance Director. Hanks highlighted changes since the final budget presentation, including contract updates. Council was encouraged to ask questions throughout.

The budget percentages shown in the packet reflect approximately seven months of activity. Percentages ranging from 58% to 62% indicate the city is generally on target for the fiscal year.

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Personnel Services and Staffing - Hanks highlighted personnel services, wages, and benefits, noting that the City had seven highly competitive hiring processes in FY26 and expressed satisfaction with both candidate quality and diversity. Current applicant pools include:

- Seven police officer applicants
- Nine firefighter applicants

Recent hires include:

- Finance Director
- New City Accountant (new position added this fiscal year)
- New Water Operator

Information Technology and City Hall Improvements - The IT services and computer systems budget line has been delayed for several years. Finance Director Farrell has significant IT experience, and staff will begin planning over the coming months to transition from an ageing server to a more cloud-based system, improving functionality for both staff and residents.

Planned City Hall improvements for Fiscal Year 2027 include:

- Courtroom improvements
- Restroom upgrades
- Hallway flooring

Police Department and Overtime Management - Hanks emphasized changes to overtime tracking, noting overtime is now broken into categories (training, court, call-outs, and holidays), allowing for better identification of cost drivers.

The City and Rural Fire Board previously approved hiring an additional firefighter; however, the City did not receive the SAFER Grant, which would have funded three years of salary.

Capital Projects and Public Works Highlights

- City Hall Parking Lot Alley: Not funded this fiscal year; staff will explore future opportunities.
- Sidewalk and Path Repairs: A problematic sidewalk near Julie's Park was addressed using a lifting company, resulting in significant cost savings compared to full reconstruction.

The Fishing Pier Accessibility Project will appear on a future council agenda. Key details include:

- Engineer's estimate: \$141,040
- Low bid: \$110,933
- Grant funding: \$70,000 from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks through the Bill Camp Memorial Fund

Staff noted the contractor intends to begin work soon to take advantage of low water levels.

Parks and Recreation Projects

- Columbus Park: No work planned this fiscal year due to workload constraints.
- Swimming Pool Boiler: Bid came in lower than expected.
- Splash Pad Features: Equipment is currently in shipment; staff is coordinating installation and foundation work. The current pool budget is considered appropriate.

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FY26 Revenue Update - Resort tax revenues to date:

- Bar and restaurant: 83% of budget (ahead of pace)
- Lodging: 79%
- Retail: Approximately 60%, likely undershooting projections

Overall resort tax revenue is expected to meet or slightly exceed budget.

Property tax revenue represents approximately 6% of total City revenue, with resort taxes generating a comparable amount

**River's Edge Park Fishing Pier Accessibility Project Contract Award** - Staff and project engineers recommended awarding the contract to Mountain Trades Contracting for \$110,933. The bid process was conducted by WGM Group, with five bids received ranging from \$110,933 to \$247,713. Reference checks were completed, and staff expressed confidence in the contractor.

Councilor Price motioned to award to Mountain Trades Contracting for \$110,933 for Rivers Edge fishing pier and all slab alternatives, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, King, and Barnhart.

### **Garnier Heights Preliminary Plat Extension Request**

A request was made for a **two-year extension** of the preliminary plat approval (Resolution #1851), set to expire July 2026. Staff confirmed the developer has completed required engineering, secured floodplain and conservation permits, and made substantial progress.

Discussion included statutory authority under MCA 76-25-409, previous City policy, wastewater capacity considerations, and development context.

Councilor Piper motioned to two-year extension of the conditional approval for the preliminary plat for the Garnier Heights, seconded by Councilor Robinson with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, King, Piper and Barnhart.

### **REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL**

Councilor Piper requested additional dog waste bag stations at Columbus Park. Public Works Director Bates stated that three additional stations have been ordered. Piper also requested additional garbage containers throughout town. Piper reported that the Local Government Study Commission is nearing completion and that Council should receive the final report soon.

Councilor King reported that the Tree Board met and announced that the Arbor Day celebration will be held at Marantette Park on May 1 at noon, with a mayoral presentation.

Councilor Price reported that local business owner Cody Mallory organized a community garbage cleanup meeting at Nucleus, resulting in approximately nine bags of trash collected. Price noted appreciation for the positive community engagement.

Mayor Barnhart reported attending a pre-construction meeting for the Gateway to Glacier project and expressed confidence in the contractor and engineering team. The Mayor also noted safety concerns with heaving and uneven pavement on the asphalt path west of the first clearing and requested staff evaluate and address the issue.

**CITY MANAGER REPORT**

City Manager Hanks reported that the Gateway to Glacier Safety and Mobility Project open house will be held from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. the following evening. Notifications were sent via mailers, door hangers, email, and media coverage. City staff, engineers, and the contractor will be present.

Hanks reported that the Local Government Study Commission continues working toward completion of its final report for Council consideration.

Staff will bring forward a short-term vacation rental discussion and presentation in the near future. He also reported that the Planning Commission meeting was well attended and included productive discussion. A joint Council and Planning Commission workshop scheduled for April 13 may need to be canceled.

Hanks noted ongoing discussions regarding utility PERs and are anticipated to be completed in the May to June timeframe.

The City's new website is now live, though users may intermittently see either the old or new version during the transition.

Hanks reported that he attended two productive meetings related to land use planning, including a meeting with Representative Ryan Zinke to discuss land use planning and potential opportunities for congressional support. He also met with airport leadership to discuss the City's land use planning efforts and ensure coordination with another major regional stakeholder.

Regarding the Police Department, Hanks reported that staff reviewed the federal immigration-related proposal received at the prior Council meeting and provided comments. He stated that staff and the Police Chief are willing to meet with members of the public to discuss the proposal. Hanks noted that most elements of the proposal are already addressed within existing City police policies, with the exception that staff does not support the acceptance of alternative forms of identification such as utility bills or vehicle registration that do not include a photograph or other valid law enforcement identification.

Hanks concluded by noting that the project sequencing map for the Gateway to Glacier project shows a two-year construction timeline and will be discussed further at the open house.

Mayor Barnhart commented on the recent Planning Commission discussion regarding short-term rentals, stating it was a strong and informative meeting and that it would have been beneficial for the broader community to hear the discussion. He encouraged staff to bring forward a structured proposal for Council consideration rather than presenting a broad list of options without direction. He expressed confidence that staff has the experience to develop a solid proposal that Council can refine as needed.

**CITY ATTORNEY REPORT**

City Attorney Breck reported that he listened to the entirety of the Planning Commission meeting and agreed that it was a productive and well-managed discussion. He stated that he did not observe any concerning legal issues and felt the discussion provided a thorough review of available options.

**MISCELLANEOUS**

Fire Department - January 2026 Reports

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Police Department January 2026 Report

**ADJOURN:** Councilor Robinson motioned to adjourn the meeting at 8:44 p.m. seconded by Councilor King.

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Mayor

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City Clerk