

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS
CITY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
HELD MARCH 02, 2026

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

ROLL CALL: Councilor King, Councilor Piper, Councilor Price, Councilor Robinson, Councilor Semok, Councilor Stob and Mayor Barnhart.

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

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

APPROVAL OF AGENDA: Councilor King motioned to approve the agenda, seconded by Councilor Semok and the motion carried.

CONSENT AGENDA: Councilor Price made a motion to amend February 17th minutes with a name correction and noted the financial claims appeared to be in order, seconded by Councilor Semok and the motion carried.
Approval of Claims - March 2, 2026 - \$114,992.78
Approval of Payroll Claims - February 27, 2026 - \$135,447.17
Approval of Regular City Council Minutes - February 17, 2026

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION:

Chief Stephens awarded a Certificate of Commendation for investigative excellence to Detective Craig McConnell.

Chief Stephens explained that in 2023 the Columbia Falls Police Department received a report of sexual assaults against juveniles by a youth hockey coach. Detective McConnell led the investigation and determined the assaults occurred over several years at multiple locations in Montana.

Detective McConnell coordinated with state, local, and federal agencies to establish probable cause for the suspect's arrest. The suspect was later detained by United States Border Patrol while attempting to enter Canada with a group of youth hockey players.

The case went to trial in late 2025. Detective McConnell worked closely with the Office of the Attorney General to provide testimony and evidence. The suspect was found guilty and, in late February 2026, was sentenced to 300 years in prison.

Chief Stephens commended Detective McConnell for his dedication, professionalism, and commitment to seeking justice for the victims. Mayor Barnhart presented Detective McConnell with a Certificate of Commendation and thanked him for his service to the community.

VISITORS/PUBLIC COMMENT (Items not on agenda)

Shirley Folkwein, 285 Shooting Star Dr., addressed the council regarding criteria used when reviewing zoning and subdivision regulations. While reviewing the staff report for the conditional use permit proposal for apartments on Meadow Lake Boulevard, she referenced statutory criteria previously used for zone changes, EDUs, and preliminary plats.

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Folkwein said she contacted Eric Mulcahy regarding whether these criteria would remain under the new Montana Land Use Planning Act. City Planner Mulcahy indicated the city has not yet reached that stage of updating the zoning and subdivision regulations but agreed it could be reviewed.

Folkwein emphasized the process is a land use plan, not solely a housing plan, and encouraged consideration of other potential land uses such as parks, community facilities, open space, and wildlife habitat.

Mike Burr, 560 Talbot Road, thanked Mayor Barnhart for his vote related to the County Health Department septic system issue and expressed appreciation for the mayor's position on the matter.

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING:

Request for a Conditional Use Permit to construct 40 Apartment Units - 302 Meadow Lake Blvd.

Deputy City Planner Donna Valade presented Staff Report CCU-26-01 as the Findings of Fact. The request from Norton Luxury Homes, LLC. is for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) to construct a 40-unit multifamily apartment complex on 2.251 acres along Meadow Lake Boulevard. The project includes two two-story buildings with a height of 34 feet 8 inches, below the 35-foot zoning limit. The units would consist of 36 two-bedroom units and 4 one-bedroom units.

The property previously received CUP approval for 36 units, but the permit expired and the project was not constructed. The site remains zoned CRA-1 (multifamily residential) and is currently vacant.

The property is located in a transitional area between industrial uses to the east and single-family residential uses to the west. Adjacent zoning includes CR-5 residential to the north, CI-1 and CB-2 to the south, industrial uses to the east, and single-family residential to the west. The 2019 Columbia Falls Growth Policy identifies the area as multifamily residential.

City sewer service is available and city water will be extended approximately 300 feet along Meadow Lake Boulevard. Solid waste will be handled by a private contract hauler, and the Columbia Falls Police and Fire Departments serve the area.

The proposal meets zoning requirements. The development would result in 23% lot coverage, below the 45% maximum allowed. Parking requirements call for two spaces per unit, and the applicant proposes 82 spaces.

Access will be from Meadow Lake Boulevard, a county-maintained collector road. A Traffic Impact Study estimates 270 daily vehicle trips and minimal impacts to intersection levels of service. Fire Chief Weeks reviewed and approved the circulation plan.

A sidewalk along the property frontage is required due to nearby developments installing sidewalks that will eventually connect south to Highway 2. The site is generally flat with no significant environmental constraints. Drainage will be maintained onsite.

Landscaping includes buffer areas and a six-foot privacy fence along the north, south, and west property lines. Native vegetation will be retained where possible. The project also includes a tot lot and dog park and is expected to generate approximately 14 school-aged children.

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The Planning Commission reviewed the proposal on February 12 and forwarded a unanimous recommendation of approval, including Condition #18 prohibiting short-term rentals.

Councilor Price noted that when the project was originally discussed, a sidewalk and crosswalk were considered. Mayor Barnhart said earlier discussions did not account for nearby developments, and with those now planned, a crosswalk would no longer be necessary. City Manager Hanks explained that sidewalks will be constructed through the industrial park, hotel area, and commercial district to Highway 2. During Planning Commission discussion, it was noted that a crosswalk at this location would lead to an area without sidewalks, essentially a “crosswalk to nowhere.”

Mayor Barnhart opened the Public Hearing at 7:26 p.m.

Patrick Conover, architect and representative for Norton Luxury Homes, asked how far the sidewalk would need to be extended, noting that running it to Highway 2 would be extensive. Hanks clarified that the sidewalk requirement would only apply along the frontage of their property. He added that sidewalks have already been required for the industrial park and hotel developments to the south, and this requirement would connect those segments.

Mayor Barnhart noted that three letters had been received regarding the application.

Mayor Barnhart closed the public hearing at 7:28 p.m.

Councilor Piper asked whether city services would run on the west or east side of the road. Public Works Director Bates said the water main currently runs up the east side of Timber Creek Village and ends there. The business park across Meadow Lake Boulevard will extend the line across the boulevard to the west side, where it will continue north to serve the subject property. Sewer service is already located on the west side.

Councilor King asked about the MDOT letter dated February 5 and whether compliance should be included in the Conditional Use Permit. City Planner Valade explained that developments connecting to a highway must coordinate with the state to determine if access improvements are required based on anticipated traffic.

Councilor Price expressed concern about lighting along Meadow Lake Boulevard, particularly if a sidewalk is installed in an area that is currently dark. Bates explained the sidewalk would be separated from the roadway by a boulevard strip and that lighting would typically be addressed through the city’s street lighting district rather than specific sidewalk lighting.

Councilor Stob asked who would install stop signs on the road. Hanks stated Meadow Lake Boulevard is a county road and the county would be responsible.

Councilor Robinson asked if speed limit signs are posted on the road, and Bates confirmed they are.

Council held further discussion on lighting, speed reduction, sidewalks, and the possibility of the city eventually assuming ownership of Meadow Lake Boulevard, including responsibilities for snow removal and lighting.

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City Attorney Breck said the city cannot require a private developer to install lighting on county right-of-way without county approval. Mayor Barnhart noted that if the city assumes ownership of the road in the future, a lighting district could be created.

Mayor Barnhart suggested adding conditions requiring bear-resistant garbage containers and addressing future street lighting. Valade stated conditions must be supported by the findings of fact, and requiring bear-resistant containers would be reasonable due to wildlife concerns.

Councilor Robinson motioned to adopt Staff Report #CCU-26-01 as Findings of Fact with the addition of:

Condition 19: Installation of bear-resistant refuse storage required for solid waste disposal.

Condition 20: In the event that ownership and control of Meadow Lake Boulevard is released and/or turned over to the City by Flathead County, Applicant shall install a street/sidewalk light at the approach of a type and size and in a location as determined by the City to be sufficient for safety purposes.

Seconded by councilor King with council voting as follows. Ayes: Piper, Price, Robinson, Semok, Stob, King and Barnhart.

ORDINANCES / RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution #1959 - CUP 302 Meadow Lake Blvd.

Councilor Piper motioned to approve Resolution #1959 with the addition of:

Condition 19: Installation of bear-resistant refuse storage required for solid waste disposal.

Condition 20: In the event that ownership and control of Meadow Lake Boulevard is released and/or turned over to the City by Flathead County, Applicant shall install a street/sidewalk light at the approach of a type and size and in a location as determined by the City to be sufficient for safety purposes.

Seconded by Councilor Stob with council voting as follows. Ayes: Price, Robinson, Semok, Stob, King, Piper and Barnhart.

NEW BUSINESS:

City Website - New and Upgraded Features

City Manager Hanks demonstrated the new city website, highlighting the "Notify Me" feature, which lets users receive text or email alerts for new documents, calendar events, agendas, pool closures, or emergency notifications. Users can unsubscribe at any time.

The site includes a basic document search and five main buttons for quick access: city codes, forms/permits, bill payment, "Notify Me," and news flashes. Emergency alerts appear in a red banner. The calendar lists upcoming meetings and events, and links are provided to MALUPA, city GIS maps, Flathead County GIS, the Flathead Basin Commission, and regional recreation sites.

Short-term rental applications and forms have been simplified, with further discussion planned at future council and planning commission meetings. The Construction Projects section will provide updates on major projects, including Gateway to Glacier, the swimming pool, and River's Edge Park.

Residents can report code violations and submit public comments online. The city is also exploring an online police reporting system. Zoom links for meetings will remain available through the agenda and calendar.

REPORTS / BUSINESS FROM MAYOR & COUNCIL

Councilor Piper said he would like to revisit the discussion about left-hand turn signals with MDOT.

He also noted there will be a Local Government Study Commission meeting on March 18, where a final report is expected to be presented. It has been reported that the Local Government Center will attend via Zoom.

Councilor Price asked if there is a fine for not picking up after pets.

Councilor Stob said she recently walked to Rivers Edge Park and observed signage near the golf course. She noted that holes 1 and 6 cross the path, and hole 9 has discs landing in the water, which could be problematic.

Councilor Robinson asked about the truck route, Best Way and Meadow Lake Boulevard and suggested discussing snowplowing with Dave Prunty to get his thoughts.

Mayor Barnhart requested that the tree lights on Railroad Street be unplugged.

Mayor Barnhart reported on his work with the City-County Health Department Environmental Health Committee, which reviews restaurant and septic system regulations to improve permitting efficiency. Barnhart noted that septic system permits can currently take six months to a year due to staffing shortages.

Discussions included proposals to reintroduce gravity septic systems, which Barnhart opposed. He explained they were phased out in 2004 in favor of pressure systems to better distribute nitrates and protect groundwater. Environmental health staff also oppose returning to gravity systems. The committee vote to forward the recommendation to county commissioners was 8–1, with Barnhart dissenting, citing concerns that gravity systems could allow outdated technologies such as cesspools and outhouses.

He noted that property owners in areas without power, such as Moose Creek, can request a deviation for alternative systems through the Environmental Health Department. Barnhart emphasized the importance of protecting the Flathead Valley's groundwater, including lakes and aquifers, and said he has communicated these concerns to county commissioners. He added that residents are particularly concerned about older systems in high-water-table areas, including CFAC.

Barnhart also mentioned a historical structure on private property in Columbia Falls currently used as a storage shed and suggested the city explore historic recognition or inclusion on the historic register.

CITY MANAGER REPORT

City Manager updates on city matters and upcoming activities.

Environmental and Septic Concerns

Staff has identified three high-risk areas for unpermitted or aging septic systems: Aluminum City, the high-density areas west of the Flathead River, and locations near surface waters and floodplains. Connecting properties in these areas to the city wastewater treatment plant could significantly reduce environmental risk. Risks from unpermitted systems continue east of the river in areas with unsuitable soils. These findings are detailed in the 2024 environmental report.

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Planning and Development

The Planning Commission will discuss future land use maps and subdivision zoning regulations on March 12. Hanks will present staff recommendations on short-term rentals to the council on March 16, based on Planning Commission feedback and alternative options.

An open house for short-term rental discussions was held recently. Attendance was low, with fewer than 30 participants, though discussions with engineers, staff, and the contractor Nelcon Construction were productive. Social media engagement has been limited, and staff will continue outreach efforts.

Transportation and Meetings

City Manager and Mayor Barnhart will attend the Montana League of Cities Executive Forum in Livingston from March 3–6.

On March 11, staff will meet with MDT regarding outstanding traffic studies, upcoming projects, and priorities for the Transportation Coordination Committee. Meadow Lake Boulevard remains a high-priority project due to recent development.

Fiscal and Staffing Updates

The Fiscal Year 2025 audit is currently underway and is expected to be completed on schedule.

The Fire Department has offered a position to a highly qualified firefighter from Great Falls, formerly a captain. The Police Department is conducting interviews for new candidates this week.

Gateway to Glacier Project

Preconstruction meetings have been completed. Barricades will be installed on 4th Avenue Thursday, with full construction starting Monday between the school and Highway 2. Tree removal for the north portion of the project will occur over the next two weeks to comply with nesting bird season restrictions. Nelcon Construction will distribute flyers to residents with contact information for construction questions, and staff will monitor and assist as needed.

MISCELLANEOUS REPORT

Chief Stephens reported a busy weekend for the Police Department, including alcohol compliance checks at 21 locations in coordination with the Montana Department of Revenue. Four violations were addressed, and follow-up enforcement will continue with the businesses involved.

ADJOURN

Councilor Robinson motioned to adjourn the meeting at 9:10 p.m., seconded by Councilor King.

Mayor

City Clerk