

CITY OF BILLINGS
CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION MINUTES
October 6, 2025 – 5:30 P.M.
Council Chambers – City Hall, 316 N. 26th Street

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Bill Cole called the Work Session to order at 5:30 P.M.

Councilmembers present: Gulick, Neese, Owen, Kennedy, Rogers, Aspenlieder, Tidswell, Boyett, Rupsis and Mayor Cole

Councilmembers absent: Shaw

Staff present: City Administrator Chris Kukulski; Assistant City Administrator Kevin Iffland; Chief Rich St. John, Billings Police Department; City Attorney Gina Dahl; Finance Director Andy Zoeller; Public Works Director Debi Meling; Wyeth Friday, Planning Director (via Zoom).

Guests: Senator Danny Yakawich; representatives from Downtown Billings Partnership (DBP), South Billings Urban Renewal Association (SBURA), and Billings Industrial Revitalization District (BIRD); members of the public.

PRELIMINARY BUSINESS

City Administrator Update – Animal Shelter & Incinerator Room:

Administrator Kukulski reported ongoing cleanup of the incinerator room at the Animal Shelter. A contract was being finalized with an industrial firm to complete remediation per Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) standards, with Northern Industrial Hygiene overseeing testing and certification for the Certificate of Fitness. Work was expected to conclude within the week or shortly after.

Police Department Update – Drug Enforcement Operation:

Chief Rich St. John provided a detailed report on a recent multi-agency drug enforcement operation under the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program. Two search warrants were executed simultaneously in Worden and King Avenue East, involving local, state, and federal task forces. A total of 53 firearms were recovered, 17 of which were confirmed stolen. The operation was conducted under strict procedural review with no injuries reported. Allegations of property damage and resident mistreatment were found to be unfounded, supported by body camera footage and third-party review. Chief St. John clarified that Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) was present in an advisory capacity only and that there were no immigration enforcement actions.

Council commended BPD and associated agencies for professionalism, restraint, and removing firearms from circulation.

PUBLIC COMMENT (General)

Gary Buchanan spoke regarding his involvement as an anonymous donor for the Yellowstone Valley Animal Shelter, expressing frustration over a private conversation with Councilmember Aspenlieder. He raised concerns about professionalism and the handling of shelter operations.

Councilmember Aspenlieder responded publicly, stating that his call was made to seek perspective and solutions for the shelter issue, not to influence anyone. He reaffirmed his support for the shelter and his commitment to ethical service.

Mayor Cole thanked both parties and reaffirmed Council's collective support for the Animal Shelter and its employees.

Senator Yakawich commended City staff for South Side infrastructure projects, parks, and library improvements, and invited Council to attend a behavioral health planning session on October 7 at the CIL building.

Paul Clark, a South Side resident, expressed concern about the proposed Animal Shelter site at Wilson Park, citing contamination concerns and urging reconsideration of alternative sites such as the old Sam's Club. He also praised police efforts in addressing community safety issues.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – Urban Renewal District Agreements

Presenter: City Attorney Gina Dahl, with input from City Administrator Chris Kukulski.

Attorney Dahl presented the draft Urban Renewal District (URD) Agreements, replacing expired MOUs with the Downtown Billings Partnership (DBP), South Billings Urban Renewal Association (SBURA), and Billings Industrial Revitalization District (BIRD). These align with updated state TIF statutes and set consistent funding structures and reporting standards. The proposed term extended through June 30, 2029, with prorated funding from November 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026.

Council Discussion Highlights

- Proposed shortening the term to one year with annual renewal options for years two and three.
- Annual review, emphasizing clear notice procedures for renewal or termination, efficiency and high administrative costs across districts, suggesting exploration of consolidated management.
- Tying funding to annual budget approval rather than multi-year escalations.

- Emphasized including prevailing wage (Little Davis-Bacon) language where applicable.
- Consensus formed to align contract terms with the fiscal year and require a 60-day renewal notice.

Urban Renewal District Representative Statements

Downtown Billings Partnership (DBP): Executive Director Katie Schreiner emphasized that DBP's work extends beyond administrative grant processing to include business recruitment, developer coordination, and community engagement. She stated DBP supports one-year agreements and maintains transparency through annual budget presentations.

Billings Industrial Revitalization District (BIRD): Heather Doty, Liaison, highlighted the district's direct community involvement addressing housing and infrastructure needs, helping foster redevelopment in a historically underinvested area.

South Billings Urban Renewal Association (SBURA): Representative Dick Zier supported annual budget flexibility, emphasizing successful project outcomes such as new warehouses and affordable housing developments on the South Side.

Public Comment and Council Direction

Kevin Nelson criticized administrative costs of TIF management and urged consolidation under a single city-managed structure.

Council reached consensus to:

1. Adopt one-year agreements with annual renewal options tied to the City's fiscal year.
2. Remove multi-year funding escalations and link payments to the Council-approved annual budget.
3. Include a 60-day notice clause prior to renewal.
4. Clarify the purpose statement to reflect that URD partners assist in implementing Urban Renewal Plans, not merely processing grants.
5. Direct staff to finalize revised agreements for Council approval.

HIGHLIGHT UPCOMING AGENDA ITEMS

COUNCIL DISCUSSION

Councilmember Kennedy requested inclusion of Zero-Based Budgeting on the next Budget & Finance Committee agenda.

City Administrator Kukulski noted upcoming review of the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in November and initial Zero-Based Budgeting discussions later in October.

Council also discussed appointing City representatives to TIF advisory boards, agreeing the Mayor will recommend appointments for Council approval.

City Attorney Dahl clarified that the recent civil case settlement related to the 2024 officer-involved shooting was separate from the pending coroner's inquest.

- Councilmember Rupsis reiterated the importance of exploring TIF management consolidation for fiscal efficiency.

PUBLIC COMMENT (Non-Agenda Items)

Kevin Nelson commended MDT's work on the 6th Street Underpass, noting improved traffic flow and drainage. He also expressed concerns about racing and excessive noise on Shiloh Road and King Avenue West, urging stronger enforcement.

No additional public comment was offered.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:24 P.M.