



INTERIM PLANNING COMMISSION

Thursday, August 7, 2025 at 4:30pm

Commission Members	Position														
							05/29/2025	06/05/2025	07/03/2025	08/07/2025	09/04/2025	10/02/2025	09/04/2025	10/02/2025	11/06/2025
Dennie Stephenson	Chair					1	-	1	1						
Kimberly Welzenbach	Vice Chair					1	-	1	1						
Daniel Brooks	Commission Member					1	-	1	1						
Roger Gravgaard	Commission Member					1	-	1	1						
David Nordel	Commission Member					1	-		1						
Amber Parish	Commission Member					1	-	1	1						
Josh Sayer	Commission Member					1	-	1	1						
John Staley	Commission Member					1	-		1						
Jim Ronquillo	Commission Member					1	-	1	1						
Wyeth Friday	PCSD Director					1	-	1	1						
Anna Vickers	Planning Div Manager					1	-	1	1						

Please note: "A" stands for excused absence, "1" stands for present, "V" stands for Zoom participation, "C" stands for cancelled

Call the Meeting to Order:

Wyeth Friday, Planning Division & Community Services Director called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m.

Introduction of Planning Board Members and Planning Department Staff

Wyeth Friday called for introductions of the members of the Interim Planning Commission and Planning staff.

Attending Staff: Wyeth Friday, Planning & Community Services Director; Anna Vickers, Planning Division Manager; Brenda Berns, Planning Clerk; Virtual: Tate Johnson, Neighborhood Planner

1. Others in Attendance: City Council member Jennifer Owen; Elizabeth Shumaker; Nicole Cromwell

2. Approval of Agenda.

Motion

Motion made by commission member Gravgaard to approve the agenda as amended, seconded by commission member Nordel. Motion carried unanimously.

3. Approval of Minutes of July 3, 2025

Motion

Motion made by commission member Brooks to approve July 3, 2025 meeting minutes, seconded by commission member Staley. Motion carried unanimously.

4. Public Comment. No members of the public were in attendance.

5. Disclosure of Outside (Ex-Parte) Communication. There were no ex-parte communications.

6. Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest. There were no conflicts of interest.

7. Old Business - There was no old business.

8. New Business

- a. Review of initial stakeholder meetings and consultant trip from August 4th - August 5th
Presented by Anna Vickers.

Anna Vickers, Planning Division Manager, provided an overview of the City of Billings tour that was offered to stakeholders and visiting consultants. The tour began at City Hall, continued through the Heights, Skyway Drive, and the West End, and returned to City Hall. The route highlighted neighborhoods, character types, city and county developments, and the absence of curb and gutter infrastructure in certain county areas.

The tour also showcased commercial developments and their integration into surrounding neighborhoods, with stops that included the Amazon Fulfillment Center and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. The route continued through the established South Side of Billings, proceeded along 6th Avenue, and concluded downtown via Lewis Avenue, where historic streetlights and neighborhood character were noted.

Dan Brooks remarked that the tour provided a comprehensive overview and a strong sense of the community's character, noting both the opportunities and challenges faced by the city—not only along Main Street but also due to geographic features such as the Rims. He emphasized the value of having the consultants present and expressed appreciation to Ms. Vickers for organizing a thorough and well-structured tour.

Ms. Vickers noted that the tour was a team effort and that an effort was made to accommodate as many participants as possible. Outreach was conducted to more than 115 potential stakeholders, with 64 individuals attending. She emphasized that this was the beginning of initial conversations and expressed hope that the Commission will assist in spreading awareness and fostering more in-depth discussions moving forward.

Environmental

- Concerned about sprawl
- Green lawns consume too much water
- Incentivize not water lawns
- Concerned about loss of agricultural land and aquifer replenishing

Economic Development

- Emphasize thinking regionally, not just within city limits
- BNSF is a major hurdle – slow land leases and poor communication
- Downtown land is expensive; developers are hesitant
- East/West traffic connections between Heights and West End are inefficient
- Billings lacks clear identity and under-promotes its strengths
- Lack of off-street parking, fading incentives and rising land prices are major challenges

General discussion noted the inefficiency of east–west traffic flow between Billings and the Heights. Comments highlighted the impacts of sprawl on economic development and the recurring theme of balancing sprawl with density. It was observed that the discussion sought to identify high points and common topics raised by stakeholders. Questions were raised regarding the inclusion of healthcare and higher education representatives, and it was confirmed that outreach to those sectors are planned.

Parks, Trails & Open Space

- Maintenance of parks, trails, and green spaces (county does not maintain trails)
- Our urban forest is hard to maintain
- It would be useful to have trails alongside ditches to connect throughout the city
- Creating a partnership for river access
- There's no local land trust

General discussion included the importance of trees and forested areas, with consideration given to creating additional river access and forming partnerships to manage ditches. It was noted that Billings lacks a local land trust to maintain parks and open spaces. Concerns were raised regarding the large amount of land owned by the railroad, which limits access and development opportunities. It was observed that the railroad generally does not support the concept of an urban forest, and much of its land includes leased buildings. It was further noted that City Parks is responsible for maintaining subdivision entrances.

Housing & Community Development

- Affordable housing has a bad reputation despite being essential for local workers
- Older residents hold onto homes due to limited downsizing options and capital gains taxes
- Infill development is scary due to high land costs; opportunities in underutilized public lands or land trust models could drive growth
- Builders face labor shortages and regulatory challenges
- State-level restrictions prevent local governments from adopting flexible solutions

General discussion focused on factors contributing to housing costs, including labor, materials, and the impact of job growth on where people will live and work. The distinction between affordable housing and low-income housing was noted, emphasizing that affordable housing can also serve professionals such as nurses, teachers, and hospital workers. Additional considerations included homeowners insurance, property taxes, and other factors not directly related to land use.

Participants highlighted challenges in providing housing for local residents while accommodating higher-paid professionals. Regional planning strategies and legislation, including HB318, were discussed, as well as the broader impact on surrounding areas such as Laurel and Lockwood, noting that city and county planning decisions ultimately influence these economic factors.

Utilities & Infrastructure

- Water in the heights is challenging
- Patchwork through city and county subdivisions and extending utilities
- Would like to have a transportation beltloop around the city
- Would like to see infill development for workforce housing
- Heights has a lot of potential for infill but has stormwater issues
- Utilities needs as much heads up as possible for successful design

General discussion emphasized the importance of providing utilities with advance notice to ensure successful design. It was clarified that utilities receive subdivision information at the pre-application stage, and an email reminder may be sent through the planning system. Discussion also addressed site design, with a preference for retail buildings closer to the street, parking located on the side or rear, and the creation of an environment that supports walkability. Differences in long-range transportation planning between the city and county were noted, with the county generally allowing for larger spacing.

Schools

- Funding remains an issue as levies and taxes do not pass
- Billings feels like a layover location, so many do not vote to pass taxes
- There is a lack of mental health services
- Can impact fees be assessed for schools?
- Open enrollment laws have created additional issues for funding
- Busing is an issue for all schools

General discussion focused on school capacity, funding, and related community impacts. It was noted that summer vacation may limit responses from schools. Concerns were raised regarding Billings' high tax rates, public safety, and mental health services, with some discussion of using impact fees to support school infrastructure and staffing. Issues included funding for student transfers, busing restrictions, and the challenges of planning new schools versus providing resources to existing schools.

Participants discussed the role of impact fees, emphasizing that they are generally assessed for capital improvements, not operations, and require a needs analysis for future growth.

Strategies were considered for accommodating new housing development without overburdening schools, including awareness of migration trends, school boundary adjustments, and long-term planning to redistribute students and optimize school capacity.

It was observed that while information is provided to schools regarding capacity, state law limits the ability to deny subdivision approvals based solely on school capacity, highlighting the need for proactive planning and coordination.

Neighborhood Task Forces

- Traffic and safety are major issues
- Advocating for preserving neighborhood character, limiting casinos and car washes, and reusing buildings (Elks, Harper Madison)
- Thoughtfully prioritize infill development over expanding outward
- Ensure all growth supports safe, complete neighborhoods with adequate infrastructure, particularly parks, pedestrian access, and public safety
- There's a strong need for better coordination between development, city services, and neighborhood priorities

Community Character

- 27th St Corridor is a significant historic area
- Yellowstone Art Museum was a former county jail
- Billings parks are great, and more historical information can be put within them
- We need and want large neighborhood parks everywhere
- There's an opportunity for a coordinated strategy between cultural partners

General discussion highlighted the city's historical assets and the potential to showcase them. The possibility of repurposing existing buildings, such as Pug Mahones, was noted; however, cost considerations were identified as a potential barrier to such projects.

Public Health & Services

- Mental health, substance use, and chronic disease are on the rise, with limited access to affordable, inclusive care (senior services)
- Annexation confusion and differences in county vs city infrastructure create public health and safety issues
- Library system needs more branches and space to support population growth, especially for seniors and underserved groups
- Environmental health issues persist – brownfields, air quality, lead pipe connections on private property
- Transportation and accessibility gaps hurt senior and disabled residents – missing sidewalks, poor winter plowing, and limited senior transit

General discussion noted reports that a state-run mental health facility serving the entire state may be established in Billings. Concerns were raised that, based on past experience, the centralization of services could disproportionately impact Billings, potentially creating a larger-than-anticipated demand on local resources.

Council Member Jennifer Owen noted that the 2025 Legislature funded the Eastern Montana Mental Health Facility to complement existing services, although funding remains insufficient. Yellowstone County was identified as an optimal location due to its larger workforce and the presence of the Board of Investments, with operations to be managed by DPHHS. She expressed concern regarding proposals for a “prison-style,” court-ordered facility at the Skyway Drive site, emphasizing that it would not function as a community-linked or self-directed facility. Additional concerns included insufficient appropriations, the potential closure of the Warm Springs facility, and Billings becoming the primary facility. She noted that the site is expected to be announced in August and may utilize state- or trust-owned land, however the Land Use Contrary to Zoning process could be utilized. While acknowledging the community need for such a facility, she cautioned that current planning appears driven by real estate considerations rather than community integration. She advised board members that the project will not go before voters and encouraged engagement with state legislators.

Additional board discussion focused on community recourse and impacts related to the proposed mental health facility. Questions were raised regarding available options, and it was suggested that board members engage with state legislators. It was noted that while a local facility could provide benefits, such as quicker turnaround for individuals exiting the jail system, it also presents challenges and additional responsibilities for the community. Concerns were raised about unfunded mandates and the fact that government facilities often pay less than their fair share, which can place further burdens on local resources.

Transportation & Mobility

- Concerned about the gaps in sidewalk and trails system for those unable to drive and associated ADA compliance
- Traffic calming along safe routes to school routes and older wider streets, limited annual funding
- Issues when county roads become city roads
- Trails in county rights-of-way cannot be maintained
- Maintenance of trails

General discussion addressed recent county actions and infrastructure planning. It was noted that the county has implemented gates on private roads and has begun assessing impact fees on subdivisions. Questions were raised regarding road safety improvements, noting a dirt road two years ago that has since been upgraded to a two-lane road. It was emphasized that identifying and addressing such issues is part of the overall planning process.

Participation in the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) was highlighted as beneficial for collaboration with MDT, with the goal of developing relationships that support community needs.

Public Safety

- Fire and police services are overstretched and underfunded, especially outside city limits in the BUFSA
- Annexation without added resources is straining capacity; both departments support tying growth to funding or limiting expansion (impact fees)
- EMS transport is privately contracted, complicating response coordination and stressing fire personnel
- Police staffing is far below what's needed, forcing prioritization of calls and eliminating proactive work
- Disaster services are minimal, with no dedicated City emergency management team

General discussion focused on emergency response and infrastructure capacity. Concerns were raised regarding limited personnel and resources, noting that a small number of officers and extended travel times can compromise timely response to emergencies. It was observed that the state does not mandate county regulation of EMS, though fire and police are included, and that EMS contracts—such as with AMR—are managed at the city level, with reimbursement for emergency calls only partial. The discussion highlighted connections to ISO ratings and insurance costs, as well as the need for coordinated resource management with Emergency Management agencies to ensure adequate service without overburdening independent providers.

Next Steps

- Hold follow-up stakeholder meetings/conversations
- Send stakeholder survey
- Table Phillips 66 Event
- Table Harvest Festival
- Community Survey
- Public Planning Week this fall

We need your help!

- Presentation to groups
- Handouts to affiliate agencies/businesses to spread the word
- Prizes/incentives for Community Survey

Public Comment

Nicole Cromwell, 1643 Hollyhock St., Billings, thanked the commission for their work and expressed support for thoughtful community planning. She emphasized that while the community is well-structured, efforts should focus on improving neighborhoods through creative approaches that balance new development with the needs of existing residents. She noted the importance of identifying gaps in services and infrastructure to help strengthen the city and enhance quality of life for all residents.

9. Other Business – There was no Other Business

10. Future Agenda Items

Adjournment: 6:04 PM

Brenda J Berns, Planning Clerk