

**CITY/COUNTY PLANNING BOARD**

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2025 at 6:00pm**

|                                           | Position                   | 01/14/2025 | 01/28/2025 | 02/11/2025 | 02/25/2025 | 03/11/2025 | 03/26/2025 | 04/08/2025 | 04/22/2025 | 05/13/2025 | 05/28/2025 | 06/10/2025 | 06/24/2027 | 07/08/2025 | 07/22/2025 | 08/12/2025 | 08/26/2025 | 09/09/2025 | 09/23/2025 | 10/14/2025 | 10/28/2025 | 11/12/2025 | 11/26/2025 | 12/09/2025 | 12/23/2025 |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Jim Ronquillo</b>                      | Billings Ward I            | 1          | A          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Roger Gravgaard<br/>President</b>      | Billings<br>Ward II        | 1          | 1          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Dennie Stephenson</b>                  | Billings<br>Ward III       | 1          | 1          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>John Staley<br/>Vice<br/>President</b> | Billings<br>Ward IV        | V          | 1          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>David Nordel</b>                       | Billings<br>Ward V         | A          | V          | V          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Troy Boucher</b>                       | YC District 1              | A          | A          | A          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Dennis Cook</b>                        | YC District 2              | A          | 1          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Vacant</b>                             | YC District 3              | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          |
| <b>Vacant</b>                             | YC District 4              | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          |
| <b>Woody Woods</b>                        | YC District 5              | 1          | 1          | 1          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Alexis Bonogofsky</b>                  | YC District 6              | 1          | 1          | V          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Morgan Tuss</b>                        | YC District 7              | A          | A          | A          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Vacant</b>                             | Y County<br>Cons. District | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          | -          |
| <b>Scott Reiter</b>                       | Ex-Officio<br>SD2          | A          | A          | A          |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |

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

**Call the Meeting to Order:** President Gravgaard called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.

**Introduction of Planning Board Members and Planning Department Staff**

President Gravgaard called for introductions of the members of the Planning Board and staff.

**Attending Staff:** Wyeth Friday, Planning & Community Services Director; Anna Vickers, Planning Division Manager; Brenda Berns, Planning Clerk

**1. Others in Attendance:** Elizabeth Meredith, Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology; Boris Krizek, PW Environmental Affairs.

Virtual: Kurt Zeiler, Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology; Mack Drzayich, Alta Planning

**2. Approval of Agenda:**

**Motion**

Motion made by Board member Cook, seconded by Board member Staley to approve the agenda as submitted. Motion carried with a unanimous vote.

**3. Approval of Minutes:** January 14, 2025

**Motion**

Motion made by Board member Stephenson, seconded by Board member Cook to approve the minutes of January 28, 2025 as submitted. Motion carried with a unanimous vote.

**4. Public Comment:** As required (3 minutes maximum per person). Any member of the public might be heard on any subject that is not on the agenda. The Planning Board will not take any action on these items at this time but could choose to add an item to the next meeting agenda for discussion. There were no comments from the public.

**5. Disclosure of Outside (Ex-Parte) Communication**

**6. Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest**

**7. Old Business**

**8. Public Hearing**

**b. Billings Area Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plan. Submitted by Elyse Monat, Transportation Planner.**

Presented by Mack Drzayich, Alta Planning and Design

Mr. Drzayich shared that the vision of the plan is a safe, convenient, and connected active transportation network consisting of bikeways, trails, and sidewalks that serve people of all ages and abilities and trips of all purposes, improving the economic, physical, and mental health of the community and its citizens.

The objective of the plan is to develop a pedestrian and bicycle system that provides useful connections, serves a wide variety of people, improves the safety and health of the community, supports the efficient and sustainable execution of policies and initiatives, and broadens transportation options.

Mr. Drzayich provided a brief update on the progress of the pedestrian and bicycle plan, highlighting the addition of 8.6 miles of bikeways, 33 miles of sidewalks, and 14.5 miles of shared-use paths. During plan development, Alta did an assessment of projects and policies implemented since the adoption of the 2017 Billings Area Bikeway and Trails Master Plan, which was this Plan's predecessor. He noted that staffing shortages, lack of external funding, and maintenance challenges may continue to be limiting factors in getting projects done.

Several outreach efforts were conducted to gather community input on preferences and attitudes regarding bicycle and pedestrian improvements, which helped guide the development of the recommendations. Phase I public outreach included an open house, an online survey, and an interactive webmap. Phase 2 included a pop-up protected bike lane on Poly Drive which doubled as an open house, an online interactive map, and a table at the Billings Strawberry Festival. There were a handful of projects that were added to the master plan as a result of the interactive maps.

The Plan includes high comfort routes (discussed below) which will include shared use paths which will provide a safe place for pedestrians to walk or run. The plan also provides guidance, leaning on the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) for pedestrian crossings based on roadway context. This table can be used to figure out the appropriate level of treatment for when a shared use path comes to a major street crossing. Additionally, there are previous plans that identify pedestrian projects such as the Safe Routes to School Plans, City of Billings Complete Streets Policy, and the City of Billings Subdivision Regulations. The future City of Billings "Transportation Master Plan" may identify specific cross sections for different types of pedestrian environments.

Mr. Drzayich explained that cyclists are categorized based on their comfort level and their preference for physical separation from traffic. This Plan, following an approach from FHWA, took the approach of identifying the purpose of a corridor first before selecting a facility type. This resulted in a high-comfort network that can accommodate the majority of pedestrians (on routes that end up with shared use paths) and riders, and a supplemental network that will accommodate more confident cyclists. This approach offers a more flexible and streamlined process for creating a low-stress network, and allows the roadway designer to identify the specific facility type during design. The previous plan identified facility types, and sometimes during design, constraints came up that made it difficult or impossible to implement that exact facility type.

The Plan used several criteria to prioritize projects. Criteria included establishing connections to Downtown; closing gaps in the high comfort network, connections to schools; connections to transit hubs; serving major commercial, recreation, or civic destinations; and serving geographies where people may rely more on active modes. The plan prioritizes the implementation of each project according to its level of project benefit when evaluated against the prioritization criteria, and project readiness.

## **Questions**

Board member Woods thanked the Planning staff, especially Elyse Monat for including the Lockwood district into the master plan.

Board member Staley inquired about the availability of external funding for these projects. Ms. Monat explained that it depends on grant funding. She mentioned that the USDOT provided a \$3.5 million Safe Streets for All grant, which is supporting several projects, including Safe Routes to School and some bikeway projects to help children travel to school.

Board member Nordel pointed out that there are existing safety issues that need attention. He asked if the plan addresses improvements in these areas. Wyeth Friday, PCSD Director, responded that the City is aware of spots around town which the city is actively reviewing, but that Board Member Nordel could pass along additional locations. Mr. Friday noted that additional funding in the coming years would support Safe Routes to School and Safe Streets for All initiatives. Board member Nordel specifically mentioned the intersection of Bell and Shiloh, which has visibility concerns. Mr. Friday confirmed that the updated pedestrian and bicycle plan and the upcoming transportation corridor master plan is considering both of the issues of transportation with land use, with the goal of coordinating efforts to avoid duplication.

Anna Vickers, Planning Division Manager, clarified that she believes Board member Nordel is seeking resolution and construction. Mr. Nordel responded that he did not want the plan to be fragmented and lacked cohesion. He expressed concerns that the Bike plan doesn't align with the existing city streets and that high-risk areas have not been addressed with adequate signage. He believes there is both an opportunity and funding available to address these issues.

President Gravgaard noted that Montana Avenue is a Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) maintained road. He raised concerns about crosswalk visibility due to trees, making pedestrians hard to see until they are already in the street. He also mentioned that, in the evening, crosswalks in the east/west direction have blind spots for drivers, making it difficult to see pedestrians.

Board member Woods acknowledged that there have been plans to separate pedestrians from traffic but emphasized the need for collaboration between the highway department and the city.

Lora Mattox, Transportation Planning Coordinator, mentioned the opportunity to test the addition of the flashing beacons on Montana Avenue. While MDT doesn't install many of these beacons, more may be added in the coming years. She stated that as construction on Montana Avenue progresses, the activated signals will benefit pedestrians and help improve the flow of bike traffic.

President Gravgaard asked if there were any members of the public that wished to speak at the public hearing. There were none. President Gravgaard closed the public hearing.

## **Board Discussion**

Board member Cook highlighted concerns about some of the Safe Routes to School routes, specifically the stretch from Wicks Lane to Bitterroot. He noted that the area is poorly lit, lacks streetlights, and has no sidewalks, raising concerns about the risk of children being hit by a vehicle. He inquired whether there are any available grant funds to cover the costs of adding sidewalks along this school route.

Ms. Mattox responded that the issue has been on their radar for several years. She explained that the previous development in the area was completed by a private developer. She agreed that it would be an excellent project and mentioned that further research on right-of-way and easements would be needed to move forward.

## **9. New Business**

### **a. West Billings Groundwater Study Modeling Results – Elizabeth Meredith, Hydrogeologist, Ground Water Investigation Program, Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG)**

Wyeth gave an overview of where the project is at with the building of a model and anticipating returning in the spring to provide a presentation of the model scenarios.

Elizabeth Meredith stated the project was brought to their attention by the City of Billings and testing occurred in 2022 and 2023. There were two aspects of the study, to evaluate the aquifer to sustain future groundwater development and identify the extent and source of nitrates in the study area.

Ms. Meredith provided an overview of the geology of the Billings area, focusing on surface water monitoring and groundwater interaction. She explained that tests were conducted for salinity, nitrates, and nitrate isotopes to differentiate between human and livestock waste. The results showed increased nitrate concentrations in several subdivisions' wells and public water supplies, while others saw no change or a decrease. She also noted that chloride concentrations, which have various natural sources, did not provide a clear distinction between waste sources in Billings.

Kurt Zeiler from MBMG presented the Geochemistry Report and Groundwater-Flow Modeling Report, covering the area from 80th Street to Downtown. Mr. Zeiler explained the relationship between surface water and groundwater interaction, highlighting that Terraces 2 and 3 are the main water aquifers.

Mr. Zeiler then presented the West Billings groundwater model and aquifer flow projections as the city continues to expand. He discussed potential scenarios related to groundwater level changes in response to land use changes and development over the coming years, including the effects of city services and exclusive reliance on groundwater.

The next steps include:

- Model calibration using measured groundwater levels and stream/canal flows.
- Running predictive scenarios.
- Distributing the report and model files.

### **Questions**

Board member Woods asked whether the wells shown were current or replacements. He noted that during the subdivision review process, wells are sometimes indicated by the public as going down and needing to be drilled deeper. Ms. Meredith explained that while drillers occasionally record this information, corrective actions may not be reflected as replacements. She added that aquifer drops usually occur only near gravel pits. Based on their experience, significant water level declines have been anecdotal. Looking back over the past 20 years, there hasn't been a noticeable drop in water levels unless near rock quarries. The only area showing a land-use-related drop in water levels appears to be near Elysian School, which is close to the Annafeld subdivision. This area, previously flood-irrigated

cropland, shifted to pivot irrigation. After the pivots were removed and the subdivision was developed, the water levels dropped. However, Ms. Meredith emphasized that this is a land-use issue, not a consumptive one.

Board member Woods remarked that most concerns are centered on the west side of Billings. He mentioned that there are no controls in place for wells versus cisterns and doesn't expect a simple solution anytime soon. He believes that future development will determine water availability for growth.

Board member Nordel asked if, when reviewing plats, the board could receive a brief overview of the groundwater situation before the Planning Board meeting. Mr. Friday responded that it wouldn't be feasible right now. However, with the forthcoming data from the models in the next few months, they expect a clearer understanding. He mentioned that the State, DNRC, and DEQ will be reviewing the information over a broader area, and they anticipate increased involvement from these agencies. Regarding nitrate levels, he noted that they're impacting septic systems, requiring more complex systems. This information will help them better understand how the State might address the issue moving forward. They've had discussions with city council, county commissioners, DEQ, and DNRC, and anticipate more involvement with these agencies. Additionally, there's ongoing legislation concerning wells, including exempt wells, across the state—not just in Billings.

Board member Staley inquired about the lowering water levels in the Annafeld subdivision, asking whether it was due to lawn watering with wells or city water. Ms. Meredith clarified that the change is related to "recharge" levels. Previously, the area had irrigated cropland, but the irrigation switched to pivots. Once the pivots were removed and the subdivision was developed, the water levels dropped again.

Board member Stephenson emphasized the importance of canals for groundwater recharge and asked if the canals themselves or the farmers using them for irrigation were the primary contributors. Ms. Meredith explained that it's a combination of both, and they hope the model will accurately account for both the irrigation supplied by the canals and the groundwater levels.

## **9. Other Business**

Mr. Friday stated the March Planning board meeting will be held in Council Chambers on the 5<sup>th</sup> Floor.

## **10. Future Agenda Items**

### **ADJOURNMENT: 7:45PM**

*Brenda J Berns, Planning Clerk*

*--Draft to be approved by motion at the next scheduled meeting.*