



CITY/COUNTY PLANNING BOARD

TUESDAY, April 8, 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
Jim Ronquillo	Billings Ward I	1	A	1	1	A	1	1																	
Roger Gravggaard President	Billings Ward II	1	1	1	1	1	1	1																	
Dennie Stephenson	Billings Ward III	1	1	1	1	1	1	1																	
John Staley Vice President	Billings Ward IV	V	1	1	1	1	1	1																	
David Nordel	Billings Ward V	A	V	V	A	V	A	1																	
Troy Boucher	YC District 1	A	A	A	A	A	A	A																	
Dennis Cook	YC District 2	A	1	1	1	1	1	1																	
Vacant	YC District 3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vacant	YC District 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Woody Woods	YC District 5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1																	
Alexis Bonogofsky	YC District 6	1	1	V	1	V	1	1																	
Morgan Tuss	YC District 7	A	A	A	A	A	A	A																	
Vacant	YC Cons. District	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Scott Reiter	Ex-Officio SD2	A	A	A	A	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 6:00 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; Lora Mattox, Transportation Planning Coordinator; Brenda Berns, Planning Clerk

1. Others in Attendance

2. Approval of Agenda

Motion

Motion made by Board member Staley, seconded by Board member Cook to approve the agenda as submitted. Motion passed unanimously.

3. Approval of Minutes: March 25, 2025

Motion

Motion by Board member Stephenson, seconded by Board member Woods to approve the minutes of March 25, 2025 as submitted. Motion passed unanimously.

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 – There was none.

6. Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest – There was none.

7. Old Business – There was none.

a. Discussion. Recommendation. 2024-2028 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

Amendment 2 - Lora Mattox, Transportation Planning Coordinator

Lora Mattox provided an update on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Amendment 2. The TIP serves as the federal budget plan for transportation projects from 2024 to 2028, covering various funding categories such as urban dollars, congestion mitigation, carbon reduction, and transportation alternatives. The amendment process is a routine update that occurs frequently to incorporate new projects and adjust existing ones.

This amendment includes:

- Grand Avenue Reconstruction – Recently discussed and proposed for federal funding.
- King Avenue & 48th Street West Roundabout – Requested by MDT as a highway safety improvement project.
- Southern Riverfront Park Trail – Added as part of the Recreational Trails Program, for which funding was recently secured.

In addition to new projects, the amendment also reflects necessary modifications, including funding adjustments and schedule updates as projects progress. The TIP document must be revised regularly to ensure accuracy, which is why updates occur multiple times each year.

Transit Program Updates

Although Rusty Logan was not present, it was noted that the transit department must also update its portion of the TIP, as it receives significant grant funding. The specific program updates are highlighted in the TIP document attached to the staff report.

Review and Approval Schedule

- The TIP Amendment and Grand Avenue project will be presented to the City Council on Monday.
- The County has already approved both items earlier today.
- The Policy Coordinating Committee is scheduled to review the amendment on April 15th.

Questions

A board member inquired about the process by which a project is elevated to receive federal funding, using King Avenue and 48th Street West as an example. They expressed interest in understanding the criteria and decision-making involved in selecting projects for federal dollars.

Ms. Mattox offered clarification on the process, explaining that projects begin with a planning study, which includes safety assessments such as crash data analysis. If a project scores highly in these evaluations, it may be nominated—typically by the state—for inclusion in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which qualifies it for federal funding.

For state-nominated projects, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) submits the proposal to the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which then incorporates it into the TIP. In contrast, projects nominated by the city—such as Grand Avenue—must first be added to the urban system to be eligible for federal funds. Once included, the nomination is submitted to the State and Highway Commission for final approval.

The discussion then shifted to specific intersections, including Blue Creek Road. The Planning Department noted that intersections must meet strict warrants for improvements, often requiring speed studies or intersection analyses. MDT has conducted speed studies in some locations, but further evaluation may be necessary to determine whether additional improvements are warranted and whether the project could qualify for federal funding in the future.

Motion

Motion made by Board member Stephenson, seconded by Board member Cook to recommend approval of 2024-2028 TIP Amendment 2. Motion passes unanimously.

b. Planning Board Training (Part II) – MPO Designation and Involvement –

Lora Mattox provided an overview of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), explaining that an MPO is designated when a community's population exceeds 50,000. Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula were the original MPOs in Montana. After the latest census, Bozeman and the Helena-East Helena area also became MPOs, bringing the state's total to five. While this increase reflects Montana's growing population, it may impact the allocation of planning funds across existing MPOs. However, Billings has not faced funding shortages and has completed projects within its allocated resources.

The discussion covered key aspects of MPO boundaries:

- **Urban Boundary:** Defines the urbanized area based on census data, slightly different from city limits.
- **Planning Boundary:** Determines eligibility for federal funding, including urban and congestion mitigation funds.

Currently, the Billings MPO is staffed with a Transportation Planning Coordinator and a Transportation Planner, with plans to add a Multimodal Transportation Planner to support planning efforts for transit and non-motorized transportation.

The urban boundary has been updated, reflecting growth beyond the city limits, which affects eligibility for federal funding sources like urban and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) dollars. The update to the planning boundary is ongoing and is the first since 2016. Additionally, growth trends suggest that by the next census, the MPO could expand to include the Billings-Laurel area, prompting adjustments in governance and planning processes.

The transportation planning process is critical for securing federal funding. While some may feel these plans are not actively used, they are frequently updated and referenced. The Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), which spans at least 20 years, is the foundational document that includes traffic modeling and growth projections to identify priority projects. The latest update (2023) identifies over \$1 billion in transportation projects, all of which are fiscally constrained, with projected funding availability by 2045.

The approval process for projects involves multiple stages:

1. **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC):** Provides technical input and recommendations.
2. **Governing Bodies Review:** City and county officials review recommendations and offer feedback.
3. **Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC):** The final decision-making body, consisting of key local and state officials, approves the plans.

This multi-step review process can take up to two months, though efforts are underway to streamline it, especially for amendments to the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

Key Planning Documents:

- Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP): Updated every five years, covering a 20-year outlook.
- Transportation Improvement Program (TIP): Outlines the construction budget for projects.
- Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP): Details staffing and funding for MPO operations and planning efforts.
- Other Plans & Studies: Includes pedestrian and bikeway plans, underpass studies, and public participation efforts.

The Planning Department provided an overview of the various transportation system designations within the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), ranging from national highways to local roads. They shared funding allocations for transportation projects, noting that urban and federal construction funds are distributed annually. A significant portion of recent funding has been allocated to the Billings Bypass project, impacting the ability to fund other city projects.

There was discussion on the long-term financial planning required for major road projects, such as Grand Avenue, which has an estimated cost of \$28 million. Given the annual funding levels, it takes several years to accumulate the necessary resources. Past projects such as Bench Boulevard and Skyline Trail were highlighted, and the increasing cost of the Billings Bypass was acknowledged.

The conversation then shifted to the boundaries of the MPO and how they are determined. Urban planning boundaries are primarily set by the Federal Highway Administration and the Census Bureau, with updates occurring every ten years following the census. Adjustments can be made in response to significant growth or development. The Planning Department works with state and federal agencies to ensure the boundaries align with urban expansion and funding eligibility.

Specific areas, such as Blue Creek and Briarwood, were discussed in relation to urban designation and potential future annexation. It was noted that while annexation can occur through city processes, adjustments to the MPO boundary require census-based changes.

The department provided an update on the boundaries of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), explaining how recent expansions were based on census data. The next census, slated for 2030, could potentially alter the MPO's boundaries, particularly in growing areas such as the West End, which could eventually push the boundary further westward.

A key point of discussion was the potential integration of Laurel into the MPO. While this would not immediately push the population to the threshold for becoming a Transportation Management Area (TMA), it could lead to an increase in federal funding for transportation projects. The integration of Laurel would also bring their projects into the MPO's planning process, which could result in quicker project prioritization for the area.

The meeting then shifted to the MPO's process for developing its transportation plans.

The Planning Department explained that the board's involvement in these plans is generally limited to reviewing completed documents. However, opportunities for input begin early in the planning process, starting with the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP), which sets the yearly agenda for transportation planning.

A significant change discussed was the shift in responsibility for managing the MPO's planning process. Following the implementation of the Montana Land Use Planning Act, the MPO will be transitioning from the current Planning Board structure to the Transportation Policy Coordinating Committee. This change will streamline decision-making by moving the responsibility from multiple boards to a more focused, direct governing committee.

The makeup of the new PCC was also discussed. The committee would likely include representatives from the city and county governments, the mayor, public works departments, and other relevant agencies, expanding the number of members from the current configuration. The goal of this restructuring is to ensure a more efficient and collaborative approach to transportation planning.

Subdivision Regulations and Planning Process – Anna Vickers, Planning Division Manager

Anna Vickers opened by outlining the Planning Department's responsibilities, which include both short- and long-term planning efforts such as annexation, zoning, and subdivision reviews, along with broader neighborhood and transportation planning. A newly established Neighborhood Planner position will now focus specifically on neighborhood plans. Transportation planning continues to be coordinated through the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

Land use planning, she explained, is a layered process that begins well before the review stage. One area the department emphasized was the update to subdivision regulations—particularly those modified after City Council approval, which hadn't been previously reviewed by the group. These updates are intended to streamline development processes and promote consistency, especially in support of affordable housing, an ongoing priority in Billings. The department has even been recognized by peer jurisdictions for its efficiency in managing these processes.

The planning and development process typically begins with a pre-application meeting. Developers present preliminary plans that may involve significant investments in surveys, site layouts, and groundwater assessments. These meetings bring together departments such as fire, engineering, public works, and planning, to collaboratively address issues like parkland dedication, road layout, and site design. This early coordination helps identify and resolve potential challenges upfront.

Among the more notable updates to subdivision regulations is the incorporation of block size standards directly into subdivision design, aligning them with zoning code requirements. Other significant changes include new limitations on cul-de-sacs—restricting them to no more than 20% of total road miles to improve connectivity and emergency access—and a new requirement for streetlights in all residential subdivisions. These lights must not exceed 25 feet in height, and developers must comply with standards for brightness and spacing to enhance safety and reduce crime.

The department also revised standards for road widths. The default width for residential streets is 34 feet, but there is new flexibility to reduce that size under certain conditions.

These exceptions aim to lower upfront development costs while maintaining safety. For example, a 24-foot width may be allowed in golf course areas where on-street parking isn't needed. In low-traffic zones, roads may be narrowed to 31 feet with parking on both sides, assuming emergency access remains intact. For areas with development on only one side, like those next to a drainage ditch, a 29-foot width could suffice with parking on one side only. These adjustments can significantly reduce construction costs, savings that ideally benefit future homeowners.

Board members, however, raised concerns about the potential safety impacts of narrower roads. Examples were cited from the Heights, where on-street parking on narrow roads causes congestion and limits access, especially for larger vehicles. While the intent is to cut costs, the board stressed that public safety must remain a top priority, particularly when considering emergency response capabilities.

The Planning Department responded by emphasizing the importance of balance by reducing unnecessary paving and long-term maintenance costs while preserving safety and functionality. As newly constructed roads fall under the city's long-term maintenance responsibility, minimizing excess asphalt also supports stormwater management and sustainability goals.

Attention then turned to potential regulatory gaps when county developments are later annexed into the city. Differences in standards—such as road widths and sidewalk requirements—can result in expensive upgrades for residents and infrastructure inconsistencies for the city. Historical references were made to the former “donut rule,” which once allowed the city to apply its standards within a 3.5-mile radius to prevent these mismatches. Past developments, like those in Blue Creek, continue to present infrastructure challenges due to initial planning under less strict county rules.

The discussion reaffirmed the need for collaborative, forward-looking planning to avoid repeating these issues. Developers must consider that areas built today could be annexed in 15 to 20 years. The goal is to ensure the infrastructure they leave behind is sustainable and safe for the long term. The board shared concerns about past developments where corner-cutting led to narrow roads and inadequate parking—problems still unresolved decades later.

There was agreement that more coordination is needed between city and county planning, especially when annexation is likely. The department pointed to areas like Bell street, where sidewalks are inconsistent and parking enforcement is weak, as examples of the challenges that emerge without unified planning.

Looking ahead, the board emphasized the importance of maintaining dialogue and providing input to influence how regulations evolve. Even though changes ultimately go through legislative processes, feedback from the Planning Board can make a meaningful impact. Past successes—such as integrating sidewalk requirements into zoning rules—were achieved through this collaborative approach.

Finally, the Planning Department reiterated that while it works within existing standards, flexibility is sometimes necessary. Adjustments, like cash-in-lieu options for parkland, are guided by context and available resources. But throughout the planning process, the core mission remains: to balance development needs with long-term public safety, sustainability, and infrastructure integrity.

8. New Business

9. Other Business.

Wyeth Friday, Planning & Community Services Director advised the board of the Open House on the 2-Way Street Conversion on Thursday, April 10, 2025 from 4:00 – 6:00pm.

10. Future Agenda Items

ADJOURNMENT: 7:54 PM

Brenda J Berns, Planning Clerk.