

CITY OF BILLINGS

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION SUMMARY

February 17, 2026 – 5:30 P.M.

Council Chambers – City Hall, 316 N. 26th St., Billings, Montana

Council Present:

Councilmember Shaw
Councilmember Nicholson
Councilmember Neese (via Zoom)
Councilmember Pitman
Councilmember Aguirre
Councilmember Kennedy
Councilmember Aspenlieder
Councilmember Lindley
Councilmember Boyett
Councilmember O'Donnell
Mayor Nelson

Staff Present:

Chris Kukulski, City Administrator; Kevin Iffland, Assistant City Administrator; Mac Fogelson, City Engineer; Ken Ard, City Engineer; Jessica Fust, Building Official; Trishia Mae, Facilities Manager; Wyeth Friday, Planning and Community Services Director; Anna Vickers, Planning Manager;

PUBLIC COMMENT (Agenda and Non-Agenda Items)

The following constituents spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail:

Jim Nichols spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Joe Womack spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Suzanne Albano spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Doug Madro spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Ace Olszowka spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Ryan Stark spoke in support of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Beverly McHugh spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

Paul Clark spoke of street light repair needed in his neighborhood.

Everett (no last name given) spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

James Kordonowy spoke in support of the proposed plans for Stagecoach Trail.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – W.O. 24-37 Stagecoach Trail Design Update

Presenter: Mac Fogelson, City Engineer; Ken Ard, City Engineer; Brian Johnson, HDR Engineering

Staff presented the 30% design update for the Stagecoach Trail, outlining route alternatives and cost estimates.

Key points included:

- The project connects Rimrock Road to the Skyview Trail.
- Total construction budget is approximately \$4.7–\$5 million, primarily funded through a \$4.8 million federal Transportation Alternatives Grant, with matching funds from Billings TrailNet and City funds.
- Three alignment options were evaluated. The “Stagecoach Rise” (switchback alignment) is the preferred option due to manageable grades (approximately 8–8.5%), lower rockfall risk, and cost feasibility.
- Other routes were determined to be either cost-prohibitive or excessively steep.
- Estimated construction timeline targets bidding in late 2026 with potential construction in 2027.

Council discussion included:

- Budget capacity and potential cost overruns.
- Possibility of shortening the route if bids exceed budget.
- Long-term maintenance costs.
- Parking considerations.
- Safety concerns for cyclists and trail users.
- Privacy concerns from adjacent homeowners.
- Risk of having to reimburse grant funds if the project is not constructed.

General Council direction supported continuing with the preferred alignment and remaining within the existing budget.

AGENDA ITEM #2 – Montana Avenue Update

Presenter: Mac Fogelson, City Engineer

Staff provided an update regarding coordination with the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) on an upcoming chip seal project and potential roadway modifications.

Key points:

- Traffic studies indicate Montana Avenue could accommodate a road diet; however, striping-only modifications would not achieve desired traffic calming.
- Angle parking was reviewed but not recommended due to traffic volume and safety concerns.
- No conversion to two-way traffic is currently proposed.
- MDT will proceed with chip sealing and sidewalk repairs.
- Staff is coordinating with MDT to enhance visibility of crosswalks and pedestrian safety features.

Council discussion included:

- Concerns regarding traffic speed, pedestrian safety
- Long-term corridor planning

AGENDA ITEM #3 – Proposed Building Permit Fees

Presenter: Jessica Fust, Building Official

Staff proposed a resolution to reduce building permit fees by approximately 23–31% to align revenues with departmental expenses and reduce reserves from approximately 22 months to a 10–12 month reserve.

Key points:

- Current fee structure was adopted in 2011.
- Revenues have exceeded expenses in recent years, increasing reserves.
- Examples show a 25% reduction for both residential and commercial projects.
- No residential plan review fee is proposed.
- Commercial plan review fees would decrease from 65% to 60%.
- Fee reductions are intended to promote affordability and reflect responsible fiscal management.

Council discussion included:

- Comparison to other Montana cities.
- Public messaging and communication of the fee reduction.
- Long-term sustainability of fee levels.
- Clarification on certain minor permit requirements.

The proposed resolution is scheduled for consideration at a future regular meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #4 – Babcock Theater Discussion

Presenter: Trishia Mae, Facilities Manager and Kevin Iffland, Assistant City Administrator

Staff reviewed the status of the Babcock Theater following the May 2025 ceiling collapse.

Key points:

- Estimated ceiling repair cost ranges from approximately \$938,000 to \$1.17 million.
- Full high-priority code and safety repairs range from \$1.4 to \$1.7 million.
- Insurance coverage may provide approximately \$469,000 after the \$100,000 deductible.
- The City did not previously carry property insurance on the facility.
- Art House proposed purchasing the property for \$1, contingent upon \$1.5 million in repairs (non-binding Letter of Intent).

Council discussion included:

- Paying the insurance deductible to restore occupancy.
- Lease amendment to address utilities and insurance during interim period.
- Transferring ownership to Art House.
- Avoiding long-term City financial obligations.
- Use of TIF funds and/or reserves.

Matt Blakeslee, Arthouse Executive Director, expressed interest in taking over the Babcock Theater. He spoke of the current partnership with the City and hopes going forward.

General Council consensus supported:

- Funding the insurance deductible to repair the ceiling and restore occupancy.
- Pursuing a negotiated sale and transfer of the property to Art House.
- Bringing back necessary lease amendments, resolutions for property disposal, and purchase agreements for Council approval.

Recess at 7:35 PM. Reconvene at 7:44 PM.

AGENDA ITEM #5 – Montana Land Use Planning Act Update (Billings 2045)
Presenter: Wyeth Friday, Planning and Community Services Director and Anna Vickers, Planning Manager

Staff provided an update on implementation of the Montana Land Use Planning Act and progress on the Billings 2045 Land Use Plan.

Key points:

- The new state law requires adoption of a land use plan and future land use map.
- Certain development approvals will shift to administrative review if consistent with the adopted plan.
- Extensive outreach has been conducted, including stakeholder meetings, community workshops, surveys (1,169 responses), business outreach, and public events.
- Major themes from outreach include housing affordability, public safety, infrastructure coordination, and growth management.
- Population is projected to grow by approximately 30,000 by 2045, requiring roughly 16,000 additional housing units.
- The Interim Planning Commission reviewed required housing incentive options and provided preliminary recommendations.

Council discussion included:

- Concerns regarding reduced Council involvement in certain land use decisions.
- State legislative authority and local control.
- Balancing property rights and predictability in development.
- Importance of thorough review of annexation areas and future land use map designations.
- Continued work sessions and incremental review prior to final adoption.

Staff indicated additional work sessions will be scheduled prior to plan adoption.

HIGHLIGHT UPCOMING AGENDA ITEMS OF COUNCIL INTEREST

COUNCIL DISCUSSION

CM Kennedy - Department of Commerce needs letter of support for South Park Pool grant.

CM Pitman – day Council meetings held and formatting changes discussion. USS Billings presentation coming forward.

PUBLIC COMMENT – “NON-AGENDA ITEMS”

Jeff Kettleon encouraged Council to retain power and not transfer to administration.

ADJOURN: 7:44 P.M.