

CITY OF BILLINGS
CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION SUMMARY

September 8, 2026 - 5:30 PM

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

Council Present

Mayor Nelson
Councilmember Shaw
Councilmember Nicholson
Councilmember Neese
Councilmember Pitman
Councilmember Aguirre
Councilmember Lindley
Councilmember Boyett
Councilmember O'Donnell
Councilmember Kennedy
Councilmember Aspenlieder

Staff Present

Kevin Iffland, Interim City Administrator
Wyeth Friday, Planning and Community Services Director
Gavin Woltjer, Parks and Recreation Director
Karla Stanton, Human Resources Director

Mayor Nelson called the meeting to order then recessed to a Closed Executive Session at 4:30 P.M. He reconvened at 5:30 P.M.

PROCLAMATION: Healthy Tribes Run on the Rims Challenge Day - September 5

Mayor Nelson presented a proclamation recognizing the Healthy Tribes Run on the Rims Challenge Day and the partnership of the Indian Health Service and Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council in promoting health, wellness, physical activity, nutrition, and chronic-disease prevention in the Billings community. Representatives thanked the Mayor and Council for the recognition and noted participation in the annual event.

PROCLAMATION: Day of Service and Remembrance - September 11

Mayor Nelson presented a proclamation designating September 11, 2026, the 25th anniversary of the attacks on the United States, as a Day of Service and Remembrance in Billings. The proclamation honored those who lost their lives, recognized first responders and members of the Armed Forces, and encouraged acts of service, kindness, and community outreach. Senator Yakawich thanked Council and described local remembrance events honoring first responders and those affected by September 11, 2001.

PUBLIC COMMENT (Agenda and Non-Agenda Items)

- Jeff Ketelsen said he had filed an ethics complaint approximately one month earlier concerning actions taken by a Planning Commission member and had not yet received a response. He asked the City to follow up regarding the status of the complaint.

1. Housing Program.

Wyeth Friday, Planning and Community Services Director, reviewed a housing-program exploration initiated by Council and developed with a stakeholder working group. He said Billings continues to face a significant shortage of housing units and that the group focused on ways the City could support and facilitate work already being done by private, nonprofit, and community partners rather than duplicate those efforts. He connected the work to Billings 2045, prior Council goals, housing studies, urban-renewal projects, and the City's infill-development policy.

Friday said the working group identified implementation capacity as a central challenge. The report found that the community has ideas, organizations, and willing partners, but lacks a dedicated point of coordination to connect efforts, advance City-owned property opportunities, evaluate incentives, develop preapproved plans, and maintain a sustained housing strategy. He said some short-term steps, including possible grant-funded preapproved plans and development-industry outreach, could move forward with existing staff, but a broader program would likely require additional staff capacity and a combination of funding sources, including some General Fund support.

Former Councilmember Tom Rupsis described the report as a consensus product of the stakeholder group and said the proposed dedicated position was intended to implement adopted plans and help coordinate the private and nonprofit sectors, not create a large new government program. The following representatives spoke of the need for coordination, implementation, access to data and outside funding, and housing options across the full spectrum from infill and workforce housing to rentals, rehabilitation, and neighborhood revitalization. Patti Webster, HomeFront; Amber Parish, CEO Billings Association of Realtors; Terri Todd, Continuum of Care, and Eric Owen, Riverstone Health CEO. RiverStone Health also shared community-health data indicating increasing concern about housing affordability and unsafe housing conditions.

Public Comment:

- Kris Glenn, Yellowstone Valley Citizen's Council, emphasized the shortage of attainable housing for middle-income households and encouraged Council to pursue the low-cost policy and program options identified in the report.
- Lisa Buckman, Yellowstone Valley Citizen's Council, spoke in support of more affordable housing.
- Walter Gulick, Yellowstone Valley Citizen's Council, spoke of the need of additional affordable housing.
- Edward Barta, spoke of the importance of hiring a staff member to look for grants and ways to solve the shortage.
- Barbara Gulick, Yellowstone Valley Citizen's Council, spoke of the need of additional affordable housing.
- Jack Hanson, spoke of the need for the City to create a policy to create more affordable housing.
- Jeff Ketelsen, opposed using City funds for a new position and criticized potential use of tax-increment financing or other public incentives for housing development.

Council discussion focused on the scope, funding, and expected results of a dedicated housing position. Some Councilmembers supported the City serving as a facilitator and asked staff to further define the position, potential quick wins, measurable outcomes, and funding options. Others questioned whether the work should be led and funded by the industries and organizations that would benefit, expressed concern about using General Fund dollars, and questioned whether one City position would materially increase housing production. Council also discussed the role of the Planning Department, the recently created urban-renewal position, private lending and trade-

union participation, development barriers, permit activity as a possible performance measure, and whether the stakeholder group could continue its work independently.

Following discussion, Council considered whether to direct staff to begin implementation of the housing program. The direction to begin implementation did not receive sufficient support, and Council directed staff not to begin implementation at this time. Councilmembers nevertheless expressed interest in continuing work on infill policy, development barriers, and other housing-related policy tools.

2. Majestic Landing Housing Development for Veterans.

A representative of CR Builders, LLC, presented Majestic Landing, a proposed 24-unit affordable multifamily housing development on Majestic Lane near the Billings VA facility. The project is intended to serve households at or below 60 percent of area median income, with a preference for veterans. The development would include common space and partnerships with service providers, including Volunteers of America and Veterans Navigation Network, to provide supportive services and case-management resources.

The presenter said the project cost is approximately \$9 million and would be financed primarily through low-income housing tax credits, HOME funds, Housing Trust Fund dollars, a permanent loan, and a developer contribution. He said the location was selected in part because of its proximity to the VA facility and transit service and noted that additional residential development is occurring in the surrounding area. Rents would vary by income level, with lower rents reserved for households at 30 and 50 percent of area median income.

Councilmembers asked about the funding mix, the location and surrounding land uses, the number of units relative to the need among low-income veterans, project cost per square foot, and the rent structure. Several members expressed strong support for the veteran-focused project while also noting that the letter of support should be provided to Council with adequate time for review.

Public Comment: None.

Council supported authorizing the Mayor to sign a letter of support for the project's funding application.

3. Reservoir Recreation Amenities Update.

Gavin Woltjer, Parks and Recreation Director, returned with the itemized recreation-amenities menu requested by Council at the August 17 work session. He said the previously presented approximately \$13.7 million concept had been reduced to approximately \$5.7 million, with roughly \$3.6 million of improvements proposed for the North Reservoir and approximately \$2.16 million for the South Reservoir. The North Reservoir concept emphasizes active recreation, including a beach, shelters, restrooms, parking, sand volleyball, trees, benches, picnic tables, trash receptacles, and an observation jetty. The South Reservoir concept includes more passive recreation, with parking, shelters, a restroom, boardwalk-related improvements, trees, picnic tables, trash receptacles, and an observation jetty.

Woltjer explained that Public Works can cover several infrastructure components, including water-testing piers, the inlet bridge, maintenance-access paths around both reservoirs, turnarounds, shoreline treatment, beach grading, ramp surfacing, and engineered wetlands. Parks would need approximately \$82,000 for its portion of a proposed boardwalk improvement if Council elects to include it before the reservoirs are filled. He said other amenities can be phased over time.

Potential funding sources discussed included a capital campaign, grants, local/state/federal funding, interest-group contributions, and possible legislative support. Woltjer said discussions

with potential partners were continuing and confirmed that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks would stock fish at no cost to the City. He also announced that Councilmembers Shaw, Boyett, Kennedy, and Neese had been selected for the Council naming-review committee, with its first meeting scheduled for September 16.

Councilmembers discussed reservoir depth and beach safety, the timing of improvements that must occur before filling, long-term maintenance responsibility if the site becomes a park, and whether user fees would be practical. Woltjer said a general admission fee would not fit the City's normal public-park model, though third-party rentals or other activity-specific charges could be considered.

Public Comment:

- Jeff Ketelsen, representing a local pike fishing club, encouraged the City to place any fishing pier on the reservoir that will be stocked and distinguished between a true fishing pier and a boating dock.

4. Performance Evaluation for Interim City Administrator - Kevin Iffland.

Mayor Nelson reported that Council had met in closed executive session earlier in the day to conduct the most recent 60-day performance evaluation of Interim City Administrator Kevin Iffland. Without discussing confidential personnel matters, the Mayor characterized the evaluation as very positive and thanked Iffland for his work.

Public Comment: None.

5. City Administrator Hiring Process.

Karla Stanton, Human Resources Director, reviewed options for recruiting a permanent City Administrator. Council was advised that an internal recruitment could be posted immediately and, under City policy, remain open for five days, potentially allowing a successful candidate to begin by late September. An external recruitment would require a substantially longer schedule for advertising, screening, finalist interviews, public engagement, background and reference checks, contract negotiations, and relocation or notice periods. She estimated that use of an outside recruiter could cost approximately \$30,000 to \$48,000, with total external-process costs potentially approaching \$60,000 when advertising, staff time, and candidate travel are included.

Councilmembers discussed whether the City should move quickly with an internal process or conduct a broader external search. Supporters of an internal process emphasized cost, speed, organizational stability, upcoming Police and Fire Chief recruitments, improved communication and collaboration during Iffland's interim service, and confidence that the City already has a strong candidate. Members favoring an external process said the City owed the public a broader search to ensure that the best available candidate was considered and to bring in outside ideas.

Public Comment: None.

Council approved a motion to proceed with an internal recruitment process. Human Resources indicated the posting could be opened the following day.

Highlight Upcoming Items of Council Interest.

Council Discussion.

No additional Council discussion was held.

Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items.

No public comment was received.

Adjourn: 7:55 P.M.