

CITY OF BILLINGS

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION SUMMARY

September 21, 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 Kennedy
Councilmember Aspenlieder

Absent/Excused

Councilmember O'Donnell

Staff Present

Kevin Iffland, Interim City Administrator
Gina Dahl, City Attorney
Daniela Pavuk, Assistant City Attorney
Gavin Woltjer, Parks and Recreation Director
Cameron McCamley, Assistant Chief of EMS
Lora Mattox, Transportation Planner
Rusty Logan, Transit Manager
Shawn Mayo, Interim Police Chief
Tom Stinchfield, Animal Control Supervisor

PUBLIC COMMENT (Agenda and Non-Agenda Items)

None

PROCLAMATION: Adult Education and Family Literacy Week - September 13-19

Mayor Nelson presented a proclamation recognizing adult education and family literacy programs and their contributions to workforce readiness, economic opportunity, and stronger families and communities. No representative of Billings Public Schools was present to receive the proclamation.

Gavin Woltjer, Parks and Recreation Director, congratulated the Billings Mustangs on winning the Pioneer League championship, the team's first championship since 2014.

1. Mountain America Credit Union check presentation.

Gavin Woltjer, Parks and Recreation Director, introduced representatives of Mountain America Credit Union and the Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines, who presented a grant contribution for amenities associated with the South Park pool project. Suzanne Oliver of Mountain America described the Member Impact Fund application and the bank's matching contribution. Mayor Nelson thanked both organizations and City staff for completing the application on a short deadline. A ceremonial check presentation and photographs followed.

2. Crisis Response Unit.

Assistant Chief of EMS Cameron McCamley, reviewed the Crisis Response Unit's work during the approximately 18 months since Rimrock Foundation ceased providing a clinician. He said the Fire Department continued operating the unit with its EMT staff while seeking a mental health partner. RiverStone Health recently received a four-year federal SAMHSA grant of approximately \$750,000 annually for mobile crisis services. RiverStone is the fiscal sponsor in a coalition with Rimrock Foundation, the hospitals, and the Community Crisis Center; the City will not receive the grant funds directly, but the partnership is expected to provide clinicians, case-management support, training, and improved dispatch protocols.

McCamley explained that the unit can respond in an SUV, spend more time connecting people with services, and transport them without tying up a fire engine, ambulance, or police officer. As one example, calls involving a frequent service user declined from 121 before the unit's involvement to 34 afterward as staff helped arrange appropriate care. He said 43 percent of people contacted by the unit in 2026 had been connected with appropriate services, and staff anticipated that crisis dispatch protocols and a proposed nurse navigator program could reduce some traditional emergency responses. Implementation details with the new clinicians remain under development.

Councilmembers welcomed the new partnership while asking how the service would be sustained after the grant, whether it reduces repeat emergency-department visits, and how clinicians, dispatchers, and responders will coordinate. Council requested future information from the hospitals and other partners showing the effect on patients and community resources.

Public Comment:

- Jeff Ketelsen supported the unit but noted that the grant does not directly pay the City's Fire Department or dispatch costs. He encouraged the City to consider other funding sources, including impact fees.

3. Billings MPO 2027-2031 Transportation Improvement Program.

Lora Mattox, Transportation Planner, presented the five-year Transportation Improvement Program for the Billings metropolitan planning area. She said the update aligns the state's five MPO schedules and lists transportation capital projects and transit funding. The document to be brought forward for approval will include corrected transit allocations. A Stagecoach Trail funding figure in the published draft was based on an outdated state estimate; staff said the correction will align with the project agreement and does not represent new funding.

Rusty Logan, Transit Manager, reported that Montana is changing its distribution of federal Section 5339 capital funds among five urbanized areas. The annual amount projected for Billings falls from approximately \$780,000 to \$193,000, affecting future capital and equipment replacement plans. He said the state did not expect to open a Section 5310 application round this year because of previously approved projects, although MET Transit's recent federal grant has placed its paratransit fleet in a sound position for the near term. Staff will pursue competitive funding as available.

Council asked for an update on Stagecoach Trail costs before federal funds are spent if the project cannot proceed within its budget. Interim City Administrator Iffland said the project was at approximately 30 percent design, staff was reviewing ways to reduce costs, and an update would return to Council. Council also asked about grant-writing capacity and the purpose of the transit funding programs.

Public Comment:

None

4. Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee.

Mike Hayes, Multi-Modal Transportation Planner introduced Stephanie Donovan, co-chair of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, for the annual report. Ms. Donovan described the committee's review of public concerns, crash data, bicycle and trail counts, and possible safety improvements. The available data show crash concentrations downtown and along higher-volume corridors, as well as concern about pedestrian and bicycle injuries and fatalities. She noted gaps in the Police Department data, including incomplete pedestrian information in the current dashboard, and said the committee is working to improve its data sources.

Ms. Donovan said the committee is examining e-bike and scooter use, including speed, trail etiquette, definitions, education, and possible policy or enforcement recommendations. The committee has distributed a trail-etiquette flyer, reviewed site-specific complaints, worked with other boards and Safe Routes to School representatives, and supported consideration of safety improvements on Rimrock Road.

Councilmembers asked how crashes are classified, whether reports distinguish scooters and e-bikes, and how to obtain information about county roads and crashes involving children near schools.

Councilmembers discussed the need for sidewalks and safer routes near Midland Road, Riverside Road, and other corridors, and questioned whether faster Class 3 devices belong on bicycle trails. Planning staff and the committee will continue examining data and potential recommendations.

Public Comment:

None

Recess at 6:50 P.M. Reconvene at 7:00 P.M.

5. Animal Sheltering Services.

Shawn Mayo, Interim Police Chief, reviewed the request for proposals for animal sheltering services following Council's July 6 direction. Yellowstone Valley Animal Shelter submitted three options: reduced services within the City's budget, the full requested services at a higher cost, or a combined animal control and shelter operation. K9 Hope Brokers offered the full requested services at a proposed monthly fee approximately \$1,500 above the City's budget; the comparable Yellowstone Valley Animal Shelter full-service option was approximately \$6,400 above budget.

Mayo also examined City-operated sheltering. A limited operation was estimated at approximately \$212,000 annually, but the Chief cautioned that it would serve only a small number of animals, depend on other shelters accepting transfers, and likely increase euthanasia. A more complete operation would require substantially more staff and expense. Daniela Pavuk, Assistant City Attorney, explained that the City's current ordinances create duties concerning animals at large, impoundment, and quarantine; the limited model would require code changes. Mayo indicated staff said local shelters have recently been reluctant to accept animals transferred by Animal Control.

Council discussed whether to negotiate the submitted proposals, continue the current City operation, expand City services, use a fee-for-service arrangement with shelters, pursue a City and County partnership, improve licensing and reunification, or revise the ordinances. Members expressed concern about cost, capacity if animal intake rises, the likely euthanasia rate under the limited option, and whether current practice satisfies City code. Several members also emphasized vaccination, spay and neuter programs, and the work of existing shelters. Staff clarified that the current animal control budget and the shelter contract appropriation must be considered together when comparing options.

Public Comment:

- Corbett Skinner spoke about Yellowstone Valley Animal Shelter's veterinary care, reunification and adoption work, and fundraising for a new facility. He urged the City to recognize the shelter's role and funding needs.
- Tina Gaspar of K9 Hope Brokers described the high cost of spay and neuter services and the staffing and funding needed to care for animals.
- Garth Howley supported prevention and efforts to keep animals out of shelters but cautioned that the limited City model and reliance on volunteers could be insufficient.
- Kaitlin Laddinsaw asked Council to account for small animals, including pets abandoned in apartments, when defining future shelter services.

Council reached consensus to form a committee led by the Interim City Administrator to develop options and return with a recommendation, with a target of about 30 days. Councilmembers Pitman, Lindley, Neese, and Shaw, along with the Mayor, volunteered to participate. The two proposals remained under consideration; Council did not select a provider or approve a contract at this work session.

Recess at 8:15 P.M. Reconvene at 8:25 P.M.

6. Email Access Policy.

Gina Dahl, City Attorney, reviewed the City's policy for posting emails sent to the Mayor and Council on the City website. She said the current process can publish private information about third parties or potentially defamatory allegations before the City has adequately reviewed them. Such emails remain public records subject to disclosure upon request, but the City Attorney distinguished that duty from voluntarily posting every message online. The Clerk's Office currently handles the posting and does not have legal training to evaluate all exceptions or allegations.

Council discussed preserving public access while protecting private information and reducing the City's exposure. Members asked about clearer notices wherever Council email addresses appear, review by trained staff, automated acknowledgment to senders, technology to flag sensitive content, and the effect of shifting to public records requests. Ms. Dahl noted that automated tools might flag certain content but could not reliably determine whether an allegation about a third party is false. She reported that other Montana cities use differing practices, including reviewed public-comment inboxes.

Public Comment:

None

Council reached consensus to have the Technology Department explore review and notice options and return in approximately 30 days. Members also asked staff to improve website notices and to ensure the existing required review occurs while options are evaluated. No policy change was approved at this meeting.

Highlight Upcoming Items of Council Interest.

No additional items were highlighted under this heading.

Council Discussion.

Councilmember Aspenlieder raised the length of work sessions and suggested a two-hour limit with unfinished business continued to another time. The Mayor challenged Council to complete the next meeting in two hours.

Councilmember Kennedy announced a Legislative Committee meeting for September 23, 2026, from 3:00 to 4:30 P.M.

Councilmember Boyett also reminded members of a City Hall meet-and-greet the following day.

Councilmember Aguirre noted that the posted Legislative Committee schedule should reflect the rescheduled meeting.

Councilmember Nicholson raised public concern about a person openly carrying firearms near Broadwater School and asked whether the City could consider ways to address the situation.

Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items.

No public comment was received.

Adjourn: 8:58 P.M.