

MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE
GREAT FALLS BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT/APPEALS
April 10, 2025

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Pete Fontana called the meeting of the Great Falls Board of Adjustment/Appeals to order at 3:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL & ATTENDANCE

Great Falls Board of Adjustment/Appeals members present:

Pete Fontana, Chair
Christian Stone, Vice Chair
Antoinette Collins
Joe McMillen
Aspen Northerner

Great Falls Board of Adjustment/Appeals members absent:

None

Planning Staff members present:

Lonnie Hill, Deputy Director of Planning & Community Development
Amber Johanneck, Residential Plans Examiner
Jamie Nygard, Sr. Administrative Assistant

Others present:

Rachel Taylor, Deputy City Attorney

Mr. Hill affirmed a quorum of the Board was present.

MINUTES

Chair Fontana asked if there was a motion to approve the meeting minutes as stated for January 23, 2025. Ms. Collins moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Mr. McMillen. All in favor, the minutes were approved 5-0.

CONFLICT DISCLOSURE/EX PARTE COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. McMillen indicated that he was familiar with the applicant's representative, Mr. and Mrs. Bilbrey, who were present but asserted that there would be no conflict of interest.

BOARD ACTIONS REQUIRING PUBLIC HEARING

Variance from Section 17.60.4.050 of the Official Code of the City of Great Falls (OCCGF) to allow an increase in height limit allowance for the relocation of a freestanding sign located at 3715 31st Street Southwest

Lonnie Hill, Deputy Director, presented to the Board. He stated that the applicant, Town Pump, Inc., located at 3715 31st Street Southwest, was on approximately 11.45 acres and zoned C-3, Highway Commercial.

Mr. Hill presented a location map, site photos, a proposed site plan, and a sign rendering.

Mr. Hill stated that the request was to relocate an existing 70-foot freestanding sign from the north corner of their property to the northwestern corner to enhance visibility for motorists on I-15. He noted that in OCCGF 17.60.4.050, the height limit is twenty-five feet above the finished grade of the lot. The applicant seeks approval to exceed the maximum freestanding sign height in commercial and industrial districts. Mr. Hill mentioned that a height variance was granted in 2004, but the City's water tower, constructed in 2019, obstructs the visibility of the sign from the north.

Mr. Hill presented the Basis of Decision:

1. Granting the variance would not be contrary to the public interest.
 - It supports safe, effective, and aesthetically appropriate signage. The sign's scale and character match the surrounding site and streetscape.
 - Clear and visible signage is required for the Interstate setting, high-speed traffic (65+mph), and proximity to an interchange.
 - Improves visibility for transient motorists, many of whom are first-time visitors.
 - Unique highway context distinguishes the request from typical city zoning areas.
2. A literal enforcement would result in unnecessary hardship owing to conditions unique to the property.
 - The City water tower was constructed post sign installation in 2019, blocking the existing sign when approaching from the north.
 - There is limited visibility, which reduces reaction time for motorists, especially truck drivers on I-15.
 - Strict sign code enforcement would disadvantage the applicant due to circumstances beyond their control.
3. The spirit of the Title would be observed, and substantial justice would be done by granting the variance.
 - The relocated sign is effective for the site and typical for interstate commercial businesses, promoting a positive business climate.
 - The signage aligns with the building and site. Similar signs that exceed city limits are nearby, ensuring consistency with the surrounding development.
 - Increased height improves visibility and reaction time for motorists, reducing the risk of distraction or last-minute maneuvers.

Mr. Hill stated that no public comments were received at the time of the meeting.

Mr. Hill stated that based on the basis of decision findings, Staff recommended approval of the variance request, and the applicant would be required to go through the permitting process if approved by the Board.

APPLICANT PRESENTATION

Mr. Hill stated that the applicant and consultants were present to answer any questions.

PROPOSERS

None.

OPPOSERS

None.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

BOARD DISCUSSION AND ACTION

Mr. Fontana inquired about submitting a variance request before applying for a permit, and Mr. Hill responded that that is what Staff normally recommends to an applicant.

MOTION: That the Board of Adjustment, based on the Findings for the Basis of Decision, approve the height limit variance request from OCCGF Title 17, Chapter 60, Article 4, Subsection 50.

MADE BY: Mr. McMillen
SECOND BY: Ms. Stone

VOTE: Motion Passed 5-0

COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Hill mentioned that lingering changes remain regarding the processing of variance requests under the 2023 Montana Land Use and Planning Act. He stated that the Board will be kept informed as City Staff adjusts to these changes. He also noted that part of the changes will involve processing variance requests, like the one presented at the meeting, which will be approved at an administrative level to enhance efficiency.

Mr. Fontana inquired about any applicants for new Board members. Mr. Hill replied that there were none and that Mr. McMillen and Ms. Northerner could serve until a decision was reached regarding the Board's direction.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, Chair Fontana adjourned the meeting at 3:13 p.m.