

**JENI DODD, PSAC**  
**RECOMMENDATIONS, FEEDBACK AND PUBLIC OPINION**

**Recommendations**

1. RETIRE TIF DISTRICTS — If a TIF district doesn't accomplish its task of reversing blight within the initial time period, it should not be renewed
  
2. RECONSIDER THE USE OF TAX ABATEMENTS
  
3. USE MORE CDBG MONEY ON CITY NEEDS INSTEAD OF FUNDING LOCAL NONPROFITS, WHICH COULD FREE UP MORE OF THE GENERAL FUND FOR PUBLIC SAFETY
  
4. ELIMINATE NON-ESSENTIAL CITY EXPENDITURES — Despite claims to the contrary, I'm quite confident there are some that exist. For one recent example, how much did it cost to do a commission retreat at The Ranches at Belt Creek a few months ago? That's an expensive place. What other non-essentials does the city spend money on? 4. LOBBY THE STATE FOR TAXATION OF NONPROFIT REAL ESTATE OR PAYMENT IN LIEU OF TAX FOR NONPROFITS
  
5. LOBBY THE STATE FOR CHANGES THAT SPREAD THE BURDEN OF TAXATION SO THAT IT IS MORE EQUITABLE.FOR RESIDENTIAL TAXPAYERS — According to the former head of the MT Department of Revenue, "residential is the only class of property taxpayer that 'feels the full wind of the marketplace.'" Commercial taxpayers are protected at roughly 60%, he said, and other classes are protected as well."

## **Feedback and Public Opinion**

As an appointed member of the Great Falls Public Safety Advisory Committee, I am dedicated to representing the voices that I am hearing in the community.

This, despite Ms McCamey's aversion to hearing any more from the public on the levies other than by survey.

For example, she stated "there has been plenty of venting." In my opinion that was an insult to the public and incredibly arrogant coming from an elected public official who should be listening to the public.

We spent plenty of time hearing from city public safety staff and discussing their concerns. But I don't feel that this committee has spent nearly enough time discussing the public opinions that we've heard.

We've done a woefully inadequate job considering public opinion. I definitely felt that I was actively suppressed each and every time I tried to initiate discussion related to public opinion and that's just wrong.

So instead I will put down some public opinion and perceptions from my experience in the community in writing as part of this process and as part of the public record of this committee. Here are some of the main points that I've heard from the public on the levies.

### **1. WE JUST CAN'T AFFORD LEVIES — PERIOD.**

Many folks were angry that the go-to plan for the city seemed once again to be asking for levies, with little discussion or consideration of city spending. With inflation at a 40+ year high, and wages and fixed incomes not keeping pace, the overwhelming consensus is not that we don't want to afford it. It is — WE SIMPLY CANNOT AFFORD IT.

Many in Great Falls cannot afford ANY additional taxes, even though they may seem like minor increases to city officials and the commission. So, no matter what

the city claims to “ need” the city needs to instead find a way to cut spending, as taxpayers in Great Falls have had to cut their household spending. Given that our current administration has devastated the US economy, our residents have no extra money to pay for tax increases.

Great Falls residents are financially challenged and have been for some time. The following is from a 2018 article entitled, *What city is hit hardest by extreme poverty in your state?* By Evan Comen and Samuel Stebbins, 24/7 Wall Street. The city chosen as hit hardest was Great Falls. The following is from the article.

*2010-2016 increase in concentrated poverty: +10.7 ppts (0.0% to 10.7%)*  
*2010-2016 increase in concentrated poverty: +1,254 people (0 to 1,254)*  
*2010-2016 avg. annual GDP growth: +0.9% (Montana: +1.8%) Unemployment: 5.1% (poor neighborhoods) 5.0% (all other)*

*The number of Great Falls residents living in poverty climbed from about 10,600 to nearly 11,700 between 2010 and 2016. The increase was not spread evenly across the city, however. There were no neighborhoods with a 40% or greater concentration of poverty in Great Falls in 2010. But as of 2016, 1,254 of poor metro area residents lived in a region with highly concentrated poverty. More poverty and higher concentrations of it are likely due in part to a sluggish economy. Great Falls' average annual GDP growth rate of 0.9% since 2010 is below both the state 1.8% rate and the national 2.0% average economic growth rate.*

If you think Great Falls economy had significant changes for the better and that our city is growing to a meaningful degree, show me actual proof, not so-called “proof” from the GFDA.

The government website, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov), states that the percent of Great Falls population living in poverty was 15% for 2023 using methodology explained on their website. Looking at historic records, the city’s percent in poverty has hovered around 14% or so for many decades.

The latest data from [www.datausa.io](http://www.datausa.io) (2022) showed a **decline in Great Falls employed population and a 3.59% increase in Great Falls poverty rate in one year.** ([www.dateausa.io](http://www.dateausa.io) was created by MIT professors to help folks visualize data from various government sources).

## 2. FAILURE OF THE CITY COMMISSION AND CITY OFFICIALS TO ADMIT THEIR ERROR IN PUTTING THE LIBRARY LEVY ON THE BALLOT BEFORE THE PUBLIC SAFETY LEVY.

This was a big one. One comment from citizens that I hear over and over — if the public safety levies were SO important, why didn't the city commission pass a resolution and put them on the ballot BEFORE the library levy. The actions of the commission effectively signaled to Great Falls voters that those public safety levies weren't as necessary as the library levy. City officials and the commission showed a total lack of promoting the right priority — they promoted the library which is merely a want, over public safety which is more of need.

Library Director Susie McIntyre even admitted at a 2023 city commission meeting that the library could wait until 2024 for a levy. But the city commission ignored that, and Commissioner McKenney even told her she shouldn't wait.

The Great Falls City Commission and city officials NEED TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS ERROR and the city public safety employees need to quit blaming the public for failure of the levy and focus their blame where it belongs.

## 3. HIRING WENDT AT \$150,000 WAS AN ISSUE FOR THE PUBLIC for many reasons.

Using taxpayers money to try to persuade taxpayers to vote to increase their taxes with levies was universally scorned by the public.

There were numerous unfavorable comparisons to the county sheriffs department, who did their own educational efforts on their levy. The question I heard was, "Why aren't the city police and fire doing what the sheriffs department did?"

The city levy propaganda created by Wendt was an issue. Much of it was deliberately misleading. For example, the statement — "The last time Great Falls passed a public safety levy was the same year Neil Armstrong walked on the moon," implies that city public safety spending has remained flat since 1969, when in fact, it has increased significantly.

Public safety spending has, for the most part, comes from the general fund. Since taxes have increased and city revenue has also increased, people have questioned why the city can't continue to fund public safety from the general fund? For many, this points not to a problem of revenue but a problem of spending; spending that likely should be reined in for other city departments.

3. THE CONTINUED FALSE CLAIMS (which I am still hearing from the city commission and city officials) THAT THE ISSUE WITH HIGH TAXES IS ALL THE STATE'S FAULT.

Although folks know that the state tax system needs some reform, putting all the blame on the state as the city commissioners, and in particular, Commissioner Tryon, has done, is disingenuous and taxpayers recognize that.

In a recent letter to taxpayers, Governor Gianforte states what we taxpayers know, even as city officials and the commission denies it — ***While property tax rebates provide temporary relief, we've seen property taxes rise too much as some local governments grow their spending at alarming rates.*** (Gianforte letter dated August 1, 2024)

City residents are not fooled by the false rhetoric pushed by city officials and the city commission that the lion's share of the taxation problem lies with the state.