

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION
June 17, 2025 – City Commission Work Session
Civic Center, Gibson Room 212 -- Mayor Reeves Presiding

CALL TO ORDER: 5:30 PM

ROLL CALL/STAFF INTRODUCTIONS:

City Commission members present: Cory Reeves, Joe McKenney, Rick Tryon, and Shannon Wilson. Commissioner Susan Wolff was excused.

Also present were City Manager Greg Doyon, City Attorney David Dennis, Finance Director Melissa Kinzler, Planning and Community Development Director Brock Cherry and Building Official Bruce Haman, Library Director Susie McIntyre and Library Board Chair Anne Bulger, Police Captain Doug Mahlum, and City Clerk Lisa Kunz.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Ben Forsyth, City resident, referenced a letter he received bearing the mayor's signature. In response to that letter, he stated he would limit his remarks to the allotted speaking time. He urged the mayor to engage the broader community in a discussion about the negative impacts of marijuana on the local population. Mr. Forsyth emphasized that this marked the 14th time he had spoken before the Commission, yet the mayor had not scheduled a dedicated discussion on the issue or invited others to participate in such a conversation.

Ron Paulick, City resident, spoke in support of Mr. Forsyth's suggestion in his response letter to the Commission to form a committee to address the marijuana problems that Mr. Forsyth has addressed.

Lola Sheldon-Galloway, County resident and City business owner, addressed the Commission in her capacity as Chair of the Fourth of July Parade Committee. She expressed concerns regarding the increasing scale of the parade and the associated events, including a Hootenanny, baseball game, stock car racing, and fireworks, which have contributed to growing crowds each year. She emphasized her commitment to safety by ensuring volunteers receive proper training and submitting a safety plan to the City.

She noted the need for additional volunteers and more stringent safety precautions due to the event's expansion. She also reported that three businesses received violation notices last year for throwing candy from their parade entries, actions that disqualify them from participating in the 2025 Great Falls Fourth of July Parade.

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

She urged the City's support of that issue to continue staying proactive and safe so it continues to be an enjoyable celebration for the community.

She requested that the City consider doing something big in Great Falls next year for the 250th birthday of the United States of America. She volunteered to be on a committee to plan activities.

WORK SESSION ITEMS

1. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO TITLE 15 REGARDING RESIDENTIAL GEOLOGICAL HAZARDS

Planning and Community Development Director Brock Cherry and Building Official Bruce Haman reviewed and discussed PowerPoint slides (available in the City Clerk's Office) to introduce a more flexible, risk-informed approach for soil evaluation in development projects, particularly for smaller infill lots, to reduce unnecessary barriers while maintaining safety and compliance. Highlights included:

- The history of geotechnical issues in Great Falls.
- The 2008 policy requiring site-specific geotechnical analysis.
- Ongoing litigation despite policy.
- Decline in local engineering support due to liability concerns.
- Single-family home building permits issued from 2011 to 2024: City of Great Falls – 660, Cascade County – 986. County permits rose steadily after 2015.
- In 2020, City staff explored a uniform geotechnical review framework for all new residential dwellings. Engineering firms agreed to resume services if City required upfront testing and on-site inspections. Key features of a proposed 2020 ordinance (not adopted) included:
 - Disclosure of Great Falls' soil risks and owner responsibility.
 - Geologic Hazards Plans and mitigation by qualified experts.
 - Mandatory on-site inspections before foundation pours.
 - Estimated added cost: \$1,500 - \$7,500 per unit.
- The 2025 revised proposal key features include:
 - Initial site evaluation before a full site geotechnical study; the soils and building code will direct next steps.

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

- Exemptions for up to four dwellings on one acre or less, or ADUs on stable ground (IRC-compliant).
- Allows proven foundation types without a full site geotechnical study (with approval by the Building Official).
- City retains discretion to deny exemptions if risk is present.
- Requires a signed Hold Harmless Agreement from the developer.
- Legal implications and concerns include: does not eliminate all risks or potential litigation; provides a degree of protection for the City in certain circumstances; and, effectiveness depends on the specific facts of each case.

Key Components of the proposal include:

1. Stepwise Soil Evaluation Based on Building Code

- Instead of requiring a full geotechnical study upfront for every project, start with a soils analysis.
- The soils analysis will inform whether a full geotechnical study is needed, based on current building code requirements.
- This is a new additional step intended to reduce unnecessary full geotech studies where soils conditions are clearly adequate.
- Goal: Streamline the process and reduce cost/time for sites with known, suitable soils.

2. Exemptions for Certain Low-Risk Infill Projects

- Applies only if all the following criteria are met:
 - The site is an infill lot of 1 acre or less.
 - The project results in 4 or fewer dwellings.
 - The City has no data indicating the soils are unsuitable.
- If eligible:
 - The project can be exempt from requiring a full geotechnical study.
 - Instead, the property owner must submit an affidavit and hold harmless agreement (a waiver of liability).
 - This exemption also applies to Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), which currently require geotech studies due to their habitable status.

3. Role of City Building Official

- The building official retains final discretion.

JOURNAL OF COMMISSON WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

- Even if a project meets the exemption criteria, the official can require a geotech study if any risk is perceived.
- This allows for case-by-case judgment and ensures safety isn't compromised.

Director Cherry concluded that next steps for the Commission are to direct City staff to commence the formal hearing and approval process by bringing the Ordinance before the City Commission for consideration. If passed, City staff will utilize relationships with Great Falls Home Builders, Great Falls Association of Realtors, Great Falls Development Alliance, NeighborWorks, etc., to both spread the word and educate regarding the ordinance change.

Staff have spent significant time on this and believe that this is a step the City can take. If adopted, it may be available for a while and then it may need to be modified.

City Manager Greg Doyon asked the Commission members to review the draft policy and provide individual feedback to him and to let him know if additional information is needed.

He explained that, when the City faces lawsuits related to building or development issues, taxpayers ultimately bear the cost. Settlements or court losses lead to increased City insurance rates. People also need to keep in mind that when their homes lose value because of structural deficiencies and they need to lower the price that also degrades the City's baseline property tax base.

Mayor Reeves inquired if this policy was in place in other communities.

Building Official Bruce Haman responded that since 2020 staff have been researching what other cities are doing. The other big cities constructed their geotech reports based on their soils, and they have all seen growth. This is a way to promote growth, protect the City, protect the developers, and protect the owners, with the landscape and the soils that the City has. It is not a magic bullet. It is a living document that may need to be adjusted.

Commissioner Wilson inquired if the hold harmless agreement would be specified on the deed for the property.

Director Cherry responded that is something that staff and the legal department are fleshing out.

Commissioner McKenney inquired if there has been outreach to the folks that are experts in the field.

Director Cherry commented that, based upon the Commission's directions tonight, after this meeting there will be broader outreach.

JOURNAL OF COMMISSON WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

Commissioner McKenney commented that he sees the Building Official choosing which properties are required or not required to obtain a geotech report as a red flag.

Director Cherry commented that the way the policy is being drafted it to ensure that there are safeguards.

Commissioner McKenney expressed that he would like to see the ordinance come back before the Commission after the outreach.

Commissioner Tryon inquired if the new policy would expedite the process for residential development, and was informed it could be significant for infill, ADUs and will help with the overall costs.

Manager Doyon added that the typical turn around for residential review is 5-10 days; if an engineer is involved it could be up to eight months.

Commissioner Tryon inquired if this would increase the workload of Planning and Community Development staff.

Director Cherry responded that staff could accommodate the processing. The City received a pro-housing grant that will also help to continue to investigate this matter, but he thinks this is a good first step.

It was the consensus of the Commission to encourage staff to move forward and to talk with community partners.

2. FY2026 GREAT FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY BUDGET PRESENTATION

Great Falls Public Library Director Susie McIntyre and Great Falls Public Library Board of Trustees Vice-Chair Anne Bulger reviewed and discussed PowerPoint slides (available in the City Clerk's Office) regarding the Fiscal Year 2026 Great Falls Public Library Budes. Highlights included:

- Fiscal Year 2025 accomplishments.
- Fiscal Year 2026 goals.
- Library remodel planning.
- Operational budget and Foundation/Donation budget.
- Great Falls Public Library Foundation independent non-profit audit.
- Fiscal Year 2026 Library fund account 2220 revenue and expenses.
- Fiscal Year 2026 Library Organization Chart.
- Fiscal Year 2026 Library Foundation fund account 2221 revenue and expenses.
- Reserve account - \$585,000 – to help fund a \$1.7 million dollar air handler/chiller on the third floor of the Library.

Director McIntyre provided a handout about SB 542 that is a new law passed by the Montana Legislature that revised property tax laws including changes for voted mill

JOURNAL OF COMMISSON WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

levies. A taxing entity with a local mill levy limit on a specified number of mills that may be imposed that was authorized by the voters shall (a) elect to transition a voted mill levy to a dollar-based mill levy equal to the amount of property taxes assessed in fiscal year 2025 and thereafter subject to the provisions of Mont. Code Ann. § 15-10-420(1)(a); or (b) levy the number of mills in fiscal year 2026 that will generate the amount of property taxes assessed in fiscal year 2025. In fiscal years after 2026, the local government shall levy the number of mills levied in fiscal year 2026.

Director McIntyre reported that Finance Director Melissa Kinzler has reached out for guidance on how the Library and the City should switch the Library levy to a dollar levy. The information will be provided to the Library Board of Trustees and the City Commission to take any necessary actions. Her best guess is that, when the Commission adopts the annual tax levy in August, it will include the mills converted to a dollar amount.

Mayor Reeves asked if the Commissioners had any questions.

Commissioner Tryon inquired about the discrepancy in 2009 Library visits when the Library had less money to work with compared to considerably less visits the past 12-months.

Director McIntyre explained that over 30% of the checkouts are now digital. Twelve years ago people couldn't check out books with their phones. Additionally, the number of visits in 2020 and 2021 really decreased during Covid.

Commissioner Tryon commented that the amount of money that was levied was actually higher than what was originally thought because of the mill value. He inquired if the mill value or dollar amount calculated for this fiscal year doesn't match what the Library budgeting and is in excess, would that money automatically go into the reserve account. If the Library doesn't get as much as anticipated, does the Library anticipate reducing services or personnel.

Director McIntyre responded that her guess is that the Library will look at funding deferred maintenance and also look at developing another strategic plan.

After the 3.5 mills were allocated back to the general fund by agreement, Commissioner Tryon noted the difference between the number of staff the Library budgeted for and the actual number of staff the Library has.

Director McIntyre explained that positions were held open. Staff were not laid off, rather positions were not filled pending the negotiation period.

Commissioner McKenney inquired about the Library's goal for a remodel and capital campaign.

JOURNAL OF COMMISSON WORK SESSION

June 17, 2025

Director McIntyre responded that the Library Foundation is the lead on the capital campaign. They are also looking into significant grants for infrastructure.

Commissioner McKenney also inquired if the changes made pursuant to the new agreement affected the Library.

Director McIntyre noted the positive that the Library is stable and has an agreement in place, keeping half the funding instead of losing all of the funding, and supervision of the Library Director by the Library Board has been going well. Challenges include some difficulties in getting all the policies in place, and some people not seeing the Library as part of the City.

DISCUSSION OF POTENTIAL UPCOMING WORK SESSION TOPICS

City Manager Greg Doyon reported that the Fiscal Year 2026 proposed budget will be a topic for the June 26, 2025 special work session.

ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Reeves adjourned the informal work session of June 17, 2025 at 6:45 p.m.