

2004-2006

FINAL REPORT

**GREAT FALLS
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
STUDY COMMISSION**



Study Commissioners	Bob Deming	Chairman
	Sharon Gerhart	Study Commissioner
	Marie Mares	Study Commissioner
	Jane Meyer *	Study Commissioner
	Bill Wiseman	Study Commissioner
	Bill Beecher	City Commission Liaison
	Carolyn Horst	City Staff
	Peggy Bourne	City Staff Liaison

*Jane Meyer was appointed by the Study Commission to fill the seat vacated upon the resignation of Dick Michelotti.

Great Falls Local Government Study Commission **Final Report**

We, the 2004-2006 Great Falls Local Government Study Commission, since being elected in November 2004, strongly believe that the current form government with an elected city commission and an appointed city manager is the best option for Great Falls.

In our capacity as Local Government Study Commissioners, we met with neighborhood council representatives, community groups, community members, the Great Falls City Commission and city staff. We are pleased to report that while the majority of the citizenry are satisfied with our FORM of government, several individual citizens and members of at least three neighborhood councils expressed interest

Final Report continued....

in enlarging the size of the city commission—from four commissioners to six commissioners in addition to the mayor—to afford citizens an opportunity for broader representation on the City Commission. We believe this change will give citizens more voices on the commission to decide an issue, provide a greater opportunity to be elected from more varied areas of the city, provide an opportunity for expanded lines of communication between citizens of Great Falls and their elected commission, and bring a new perspective to the commission.

It is our hope that the additional commissioners will give the citizens of Great Falls a greater voice in the business of the city which affects all its citizens. Our calculations indicate the approximate cost to taxpayers of the enhanced benefit of two additional commissioners will be approximately .33 cents a year per person. THEREFORE, we submitted one change to the City Charter for voter consideration, which is to increase the size of the city commission to seven members: six commissioners and one mayor.

During our tenure, we considered the services expected by the people today and in the future, the impact the neighborhood council program has had on our community; the current emotional climate of our community and our country during the war on terrorism, and the impact static population growth has on the City's ability to fund the services expected. Our responsibility is to provide a form of government that will respond to local citizens, provide opportunities for citizen involvement, ensure that our government has the ability to respond to current emotional and economic climates, and meet the needs of its citizens. Therefore, in addition to the one ballot question, supplementary recommendations for the City Commission and City Manager to pursue are submitted in a Supplementary Report.

BALLOT QUESTION:

Increase the size of the City Commission to seven members to include six city commissioners and the mayor.

Rationale:

While the Great Falls population growth has been stagnate, citizen demand for services is increasing. A commission of seven members could:

- provide a legislative body large enough to better enable adequate representation,
- be more responsive to citizens, and
- meet the growing needs of the city.

The City Commission shall remain the legislative and policymaking body of the City of Great Falls.

Minority Report:

Two Study Commissioners agree with everything in the Final Report except the proposal to increase the size of the City Commission to seven members. The proposal for this ballot question was passed by the Study Commission with a 3-2 vote and is identical to an Initiative by the 1996 Study Commission which failed 16,000 votes "against" vs. 7,000 votes "for." Additionally, at least 3 of the 5 Study Commissioners had not heard nor been aware of any dissatisfaction from the community regarding the size of the City Commission. Taxpayers are being forced to pay as much as \$5,000 to ask the same question that was resoundingly defeated ten years ago to pacify a few Great Falls residents. Finally, the annual cost to taxpayers to increase the size of the Commission will be approximately \$19,950 - money that could otherwise be spent on police officers, firefighters and parks.

SUPPLEMENTARY

Recommendation:

Actively pursue consolidating services and entering into inter-local agreements not only with Cascade County, but with other local government agencies such as the School District and State agencies. Consider creating a joint advisory committee to research and recommend areas of collaboration between the City, County and School District.

Rationale:

A strategy of "functional consolidation" seeks to achieve local government economies through locally negotiated, cooperative agreements among the existing units of government. Functional consolidation permits the following:

- ✓ Economies of scale in purchasing of supplies.
- ✓ Cost reductions in areas such as vehicle and equipment maintenance.
- ✓ Cost reductions due to more efficient use of employee time.

The Study Commission believes that a joint advisory committee charged with the responsibility of researching and recommending areas of collaboration would keep this effort going resulting in cost savings to taxpayers.

Recommendation:

Support efforts by federal, state and health care organizations in the prevention and management of any public health emergency.

Rationale:

In the past months, the world has seen another outbreak of the Avian influenza - commonly called "bird flu" - which is an infection caused by influenza viruses that occur in birds. Some domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks, and turkeys, can become infected, often fatally. Avian Bird Flu has been detected three times in the United States: in 1924, 1983 and in 2004. The 2004 outbreak was quickly confined to one flock and eradicated. The Study Commission understands the level of devastation a pandemic of any type would have in the world and in the Great Falls community and therefore strongly urges the City Commission to support all efforts by the federal, state and local health care agencies in the prevention of any public health emergency.

REPORT

Recommendation:

Pursue additional methods of communicating to the public on disaster emergency plans and ways for community members to be prepared for emergencies.

Rationale:

During the past several years, Americans have witnessed our homeland being attacked, devastating hurricanes destroying entire communities, horrific floods, tornados and fires. As a result, the federal government has taken steps to ensure our emergency responders are prepared for emergencies. The general public needs to prepare as well. We believe that our local emergency responders should do an extensive public relations campaign on disaster preparedness in order to improve disaster preparedness by families, businesses and individuals.

Recommendation:

Neighborhood Council members take office the same day as the Mayor and City Commissioners.

Rationale:

The City Charter states that "within thirty (30) days after each election, each neighborhood council shall meet to organize as provided in the section." This statement has led to confusion because it has been interpreted to mean that Council members must be sworn in and take office within 30 days from the election date. The end result has been conducting two orientations and two swearing-in ceremonies – one for the Neighborhood Council members and one for the City Commissioners. According to "Mcquillin's," "A governing body is generally considered to be a continuous body, regardless of changes in its personnel"; and also states, "Municipal officers hold over until their successors are installed." Therefore, members of an existing Neighborhood Council may continue to act as members of such a council through November after an election, hold meetings inclusive of the November meeting required by Charter, and otherwise conduct business of the Council until the newly elected members are sworn in January.

*“All local governments in the
State of Montana should model their form of
government after Great Falls.”*

These were the first words we heard as Study Commissioners when attending a training institute hosted by the Montana State University Local Government Center, December 2004. While we were very proud to hear this endorsement of our form of government, we also understood the seriousness of the task we were elected to do. Since November 2004, the scope of our work included:

- Attending a two-day local government review workshop hosted by Montana State University;
- Attending a two-day orientation session which is offered to all city employees;
- Attending budget work sessions for the 2005/2006 budget;
- Attending neighborhood council meetings for all nine councils;
- Hearing presentations from all city departments;
- Requesting and receiving additional research on various issues including: disaster preparedness, inter-local cooperation, and the neighborhood council structure; and
- Meeting with many community members, community groups and other organizations in order to get a sense as to how the community sees the effectiveness of the City's government.

After conducting our thorough research of the City of Great Falls' form of government, we determined that an elected commission and an appointed city manager is the best form of government for Great Falls.