



LWVHA OBSERVER CORPS REPORT: May 13 -28, 2025

LWVHA Observers:

- **Helena Citizens Council:** Mary Beth Linder
- **City of Helena Commission:** Robert Jones, Clare Kearns
- **Lewis and Clark County Commission:** Stephanie Wallace, Connie Griffith
- **Helena School Board Trustees** Cherri Jones

Disclaimer: League observers are all volunteers. For further information and clarification of agenda items, please use the contact information provided for each local government entity.

Helena School Board Meeting - May 13, 2025

Recognition of High School Student Board of Trustee members: Adella Harris, Helena High School and Charlie Snellman, Capital High School. Chair Hathhorn recognized the students as outstanding ambassadors for their generation in the school district. They asked good questions and helped the board think through important issues. Charlie and Adella thanked the board for the opportunity to advocate for hundreds of voices in their home schools.

Superintendent Weltz Report

Bills waiting to be signed: A bill on the governor's desk waiting to be signed covers full compensation of school lunches for economically distressed students. The Legislature approved \$40 million statewide for major school renovation. The Helena School District needs \$100 million.

Fund forecast information coming out of the Federal government: Superintendent Weltz stated that the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) is cautioning decreases in Title 1 funding. The district is expecting a 20% decrease. There is no guidance from the Federal government, and OPI has fewer staff members than three years ago.

Kids in a school get to stay there: Taking a 7-10 year look at school boundaries makes it an easier transition for families. The longer you wait the harder it is for families to adjust. We have to take demographics as they are and fit kids into existing buildings. Walkability is a priority.

New Business

Energy Efficiency Audit approved: The board approved energy performance audit RFPs to three DEQ-approved groups to perform energy audits district-wide. This is the first comprehensive review of our facilities' energy use. NW Energy and DEQ offer low-interest loans with no upfront cost. Contractors guarantee your energy savings will be X amount, or they pay the difference. A deferred maintenance review showed that the district has a lot of energy deficiencies.

Helena Middle School - Witham Companies, LLC was awarded the exterior restoration project with a low bid of \$348,209 for painting, patching and repairing walls, metal, doors, etc. The project will restore the building's art deco charm and protect its exterior.

Reports

Budget and finance: The passed levy amount for the elementary school budget is a little over \$2 million. Liability insurance is going up again.

Teaching and learning: There is a focus on new writing projects across the district in high school social studies teaching and learning. There now is an inquiry focus rather than a content focus model. Focus has been on "what do you think and how does this relate"?

Elementary writing task force is piloting adding and sustaining writing practice across all content areas. Daily time for writing is now more than 30 minutes per day. This is a great way to learn content. This change aligns with the new Montana standards, which also includes math.

Courses and elective packages: Middle schools do not offer the same package of electives, and elective courses differ from school to school. The district would like to have a common course catalog at the high schools. The district is not losing AP (Advanced Placement) classes, but is consolidating some music offerings. Teachers do not want to teach six out of seven classes a day, and they are quitting.

9150 Policy and special needs children: The board is trying to understand the "why" behind the policy entitled "School Visitors at District School Building". The policy provides comprehensive direction on creating school access for parents, primary caregivers and other stakeholders to support students.

Boundary recommendation update: The district is working to balance needs across east and west side in order to balance middle and high school enrollment. The goal is to ensure educational opportunities for all schools across the district. The district is still taking recommendations. There will be a gradual transition starting in the 2026-2027 school year. The "sibling rule" states that families may follow their siblings in school attendance areas if they choose. Parents will need to transport or utilize a courtesy route. We should adjust boundaries every 7-10 years.

Public comment summary: A vote on the proposed Hawthorne Elementary School closure is expected in June. “Why aren’t we getting information? Why are we not following precedents set by closures of Lincoln and York where kids had a year of notice in time to visit the schools they would go to? What are the plans for crossing busy intersections? Today’s fourth graders are COVID kids, what is the mental health cost of changing their schools abruptly?” An online meeting attendee who is a Hawthorne alumni and grandparent noted that “we are all trying”. She also questioned the sustainability of walking safety.

Helena City Commission Meeting - May 14, 2025

The meeting started on time, and all City Commissioners, Mayor and City Manager were present. The agenda was available within 48 hours and was accurate. This was a long meeting.

Helena Citizens Council (HCC) Report: The Council is still working on a budget. A successful exhibit at last week’s Art Walk engaged the community in posting sticky notes describing their likes and dislikes of the City.

City Manager report: Staff provided a report on Congressional Directed Funds that are available for Helena. Guidance was sought from Representative Downing and Senator Daines on earmarks, a practice that had not been used in Montana before. A Commissioner asked about the criteria for project inclusion. City Manager Burton replied that these are shovel-ready projects that have been unfunded for five years and could be prepared for presentation to the delegation in the one-day timeframe staff were given. The projects include a design and build project for the Custer Avenue corridor (presented as two earmarks). *Federal grants information is currently in limbo.*

Budgets for 2026: The bulk of the meeting focused on budgets, accomplishments and goals (based on department strategic plans) for the departments of public works, engineering, administration, and the facilities division. Most departments provided status quo budgets with reductions due to the completion of ARPA funded projects. These projects included water treatment, wastewater treatment, storm water maintenance, solid waste master plan (the transfer station, residential or curbside trash pick-up, recycling), and sustainability. *For information on the 2026 budget contact Sheila Danielson, Finance Director - 406-447-8390, sdanielson@helenamt.gov*

Staff shortages are slowing the progress of some projects. A new Stormwater Engineer and Sustainability Coordinator have been hired.

Department of Public Works Summary: goals for 2026 and achievements in 2025.

1. A study will be done this coming year of ways to improve the taste of drinking water from the Missouri River treatment plant.

2. Ways to alleviate long lines at the Transfer Station are being studied.
3. More containers will be available at the Transfer Station to keep items disposed of out of sight.
4. Curbside pickup of bulk trash will be expanded.
5. Food composting for residential home and commercial enterprises is being studied.
6. The proposed projects serve to reduce costs and increase capacity.

Rate increases for solid waste tipping fees (a 2.5% increase over inflation), and an increase in residential water rates help deal with a large residential sewer line service program. Older neighborhoods have very old sewer conduits. All rate increases were consistent with inflation except for the tipping fee increase and sewer service project.

Sustainability: Commissioners expressed their support for all but one of the Citizen Conservation Board recommendations - refunding the energy efficiency loan program, joining the C-PACE program, purchasing a glass crusher (glass is currently being sent to Utah for crushing at a high price), and providing signage at the Law and Justice Center Xeriscape project.

Sewer service rate increase was suggested as funding source to pay for residential water lines. The cost to homeowners of repairing residential water main breaks was discussed. The Commissioners agreed the cost could be catastrophic. No solution will be decided until after the current rate study is completed. Public comment on the rate increase will be solicited.

Finance Director Danielson wrap-up of the budget sessions: The sessions included seeking commission approval to pay for a variety of projects that had been presented in the previous four meetings. Projects include:

- HVAC system in the Civic center
- funding for the animal shelter
- repairing sidewalks and making them ADA compliant

City employees cost-of-living increase was discussed. The commission suggested several possibilities pending the final budget. The majority argued for an increase of 2.5%, with a 2.0% increase suggested by one commissioner. The current arbitration over firefighters' compensation will set an unknown limit on the city's ability to provide increases based on projected revenue.

Upcoming Helena City Commission meetings on the budget:

- June 16th Adoption of the FY26 Preliminary Budget
- July/August City Assessment Resolutions, Mill Levy, and Adoption of the FY 26 Interim Budget

Helena City Commission Administrative Meeting - May 28, 2025

The meeting started on time; the agenda was available and accurate. All city Commissioners, Mayor and City Manager were present.

City Manager Report: Public Works Director Leland provided information on an incident at the Missouri River pump station. A pump valve malfunctioned resulting in significant flooding in the station. The break was handled swiftly with no break in service. The pump station is currently at 75% of capacity.

2025 Budget Amendments provided by Finance Director Sheila Danielson. The two primary amendments were for: an increase in salaries (\$150,000), and the sidewalk loan fund to bring Helena sidewalks in compliance with the ADA. The sidewalk loan fund currently has \$74,000. The money has not been spent due to no work during the winter months. The increase in salaries was due to overtime and an increase in the cost of health insurance. Another amendment was for \$20,000 to purchase an ADA golf cart for the municipal center. The purchase was approved by the commission at the April 2025 meeting.

Executive Director of Helena Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) provided information on the work being done to promote tourism in Helena. The annual draft budget proposes expenses of approximately \$677,270 which is recovered from assessing \$2.00 for overnight lodging facilities within the district. The district is currently short on funds as the state chose to focus on rural areas rather than towns. The district will focus on promoting the Montana History Museum, which is expected to open June 2026, the Archie Bray Foundation, Myrna Loy Theater, and Helena's unique architecture. TBID will also be promoting "Faces of Helena", which will seek local people with interesting stories.

Drop in tourism to Helena from Canada as well as from Europe has been noted by HTBI. However, there has been a noticeable increase of visitors to Helena from surrounding counties.

Business Improvement District (BID) FY 2026 budget proposal is for \$360,600. The FY 2025 budget was \$328,000. The method of assessing levies on the properties in the district is the same as last year. Grants are available for events for businesses to relocate downtown. New initiatives include landscaping and installing a restroom in the area park, and promoting safety in the downtown area. The BID recruits and trains volunteers to provide security at events and has trained 60 people so far.

Making the walking mall more attractive: A commissioner asked what is being done in this area. The City Manager noted that this is being discussed along with safety issues. There has been little interest from businesses in applying for a grant to improve facades. There is a great website that lists events for the downtown area: visitthegulch.com

Sustainability funding: funds for the sustainability plan (\$243,500) will come from general fund cash reserves. Some of the funding for the City-County Building should come from the County.

Purchase of one electric vehicle and improvements to the City-County Building. One Commissioner stated he did not agree with purchasing an EV.

Adding \$150,000 to the sidewalk loan fund was discussed. A proposal was made to limit the loan to sidewalks in large areas like surrounding a school rather than for individual homes. One commissioner supported using the funds for individual homes. No decisions were made on the subject. It was proposed that a decision be made by next Fall.

Lewis and Clark County Commission Meeting - May 27, 2025

The meeting started on time; all the Commissioners were present. The meeting agenda was posted 48 hours in advance of the meeting and clearly explained what was to be discussed.

Low bid awards for asphalt overlays of county roads: Lake Helena/Floweree (Montana Materials and Construction \$374,904), Jimtown/Herrin (Montana Materials and Construction \$261,920), and Canal Circle/Concord (Cap Paving Inc. of Helena \$105,655.) The projects were divided geographically into three contracts to help meet time constraints. Funding comes from a combination of County public works road and infrastructure funds and Rural Improvement District funds.

Approval of settlement agreement between the County v. Phil Wirth et al.: The lawsuit was filed almost ten years ago over conditions of approval of the Bridge Creek subdivision developed by Mr. Wirth. At issue was whether Mr. Wirth was allowed by the subdivision covenants to further subdivide the lots retained by him with the subdivision. The settlement lifts the prohibition on further subdivision, and specifies that lot size restrictions of the zone will not apply. *The County will pay the HOA \$48,600 for attorney fees. For more information on the Wirth case: juddocumentservice.mt.gov.*

FY 2026 presentation by eight county departments: The presentations will take place over three consecutive days, followed by a mid-June summary meeting that will go over any changes as a result of the initial presentations. A preliminary budget will be presented prior to mill levy approvals in September. There will be additional opportunities for public comment. County Administrative Officer Roger Baltz went over the priorities each department was asked to address. *For more information: rbaltz@llccounty.mt.gov*

- Maintaining the existing level of service
- Including fixed costs in the budget (such as insurance)
- Identifying any unfunded mandates, such as requirements enacted by the Legislature
- Identifying continuing items and revenue projections with an inflation estimate of about 3%
- Including a 2.1% cost of living increase for the County's 400 employees

- Including group health plan amounts and expenditures (Mr. Baltz noted that claims have escalated beyond rates)
- Exercising discipline in regard to new expenditures

Federal funding cuts, including cuts to pass-through funding to the state that would normally help fund county activities, were discussed to assess effects on various county departments. Communication with federal agencies has become more difficult in some cases. There seems to be a lack of good information on what the future holds.

Helena Citizens Council Meeting - May 28, 2025

The meeting started on time and the agenda was posted in advance. Eighteen members were in attendance. The 28 member council currently has three positions unfilled. District 5 HCC member Bob Hoffman resigned his position effective May 2025.

Former HCC Clerk Peggy Benkelman introduced Deputy City Clerk Alex Monteil who will have a new role with HCC. Peggy will be retiring at the end of the month.

New Business: Council member Katie Ryan expressed concerned that the Beattie and Broadway intersection needs a crosswalk.

Reduced paid staff hours: A motion was made and unanimously voted on to send a recommendation to the City Commission objecting to the Commission's proposed 2026 budget to reduce paid staff hours for the HCC from 20 hours per week to four hours.

HCC recommendations to the City Commission on the 2026 Budget:

- Identification of alternative sources of money when federal money is not guaranteed
- The HCC paid staff position be 20 hours per week
- Reduce permitting costs associated with new housing
- Initiate a "repair" program for sidewalks in addition to the current replacement program
- HCC hold a voting seat on the newly-created Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Reduce the 3,000 lb. waste limit so that more revenue for the "overage" is collected