

LWVHA OBSERVER CORPS REPORTS: FEBRUARY 26-MARCH 10, 2025

LEWIS AND CLARK COUNTY COMMISSION – February 27, 2025

Observer *Connie Griffith attended the meeting in person. The meeting started on time and all three commissioners were present. The agenda was accurate and posted before the meeting.*

County Bid Process: Commissioner Hunthausen explained that bids are opened at a regularly scheduled commission meeting to assure the public that there are “no shenanigans” in the bidding process. County staff open each bid during the meeting and review the paperwork to ensure that all the required paperwork and payments are there. Staff take all the bids for review and will bring the recommended bid back to the commissioners for their approval at a later meeting. The process gives staff time to look over the bids and make a recommendation, and gives stakeholders time to provide public input.

Letter of intent approval by the Historic Preservation Officer to submit a grant application to the Treacy Foundation for the Unionville Schoolhouse Rehabilitation. Unionville does not have the taxpayer funding to pay for it. The County is using private funding to take care of this important project.

Investigation into road abandonment petition for the Rumping Addition in Marysville. The commissioners will seek additional input from the court and the neighbors on the road abandonment petition. Final action will be taken at a later meeting.

Citizen Comment: An individual from the Canyon Creek Fire District provided response to a letter sent to the commissioners by another person in the Fire District complaining about some of the actions of the administrative person for the Fire District. Commission Chair Payne explained that this was not in the commission’s jurisdiction since they do not oversee the Fire District.

LEWIS AND CLARK COUNTY COMMISSION - March 04, 2025

Observer *Stephanie Wallace reviewed the recorded meeting. All commissioners were present except Commissioner Rolfe who was excused. The agenda mostly described what was to be discussed. Two items on the agenda had vague titles. More specific information was available in the attached online exhibits and attachments.*

Was there an adequate opportunity for public input? *Resolution 2025-16, “Declaring County Property Surplus Property” was covered quickly without any discussion of the*

specific surplus items. It would have been difficult for the public to comment on the resolution without going online and looking at the meeting attachments.

Sussex Construction requests an extension to the wastewater treatment system for the Heron Creek Subdivision. The subdivision is being built in six phases and is currently 70% built out. The modular septic system for the subdivision is currently 76% complete. The system is approaching the need to add another module. Sussex is working with the Department of Natural Resources and Department of Environmental Quality to determine the optimal use of the system when the subdivision is fully built out. **League Position - Septic:** *The League knows that it is difficult and expensive to return contaminated ground water supplies to pristine conditions. Best management practices must be utilized before contamination occurs. Resources and funding are needed to support the serious planning necessary to avert septic problems across arbitrary boundaries.*

HELENA CITY COMMISSION – March 5, 2025

Observer *Bob Jones attended the meeting in person. All commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Reed, who was excused. The agenda was available and accurate, and the meeting started on time.*

Helena Citizens Council reported that they were reviewing an inaccuracy noticed by the commissioners in their recent recommendation. An explanation will be provided to the commission soon.

Departmental Reports:

Community Development - Director Christopher Brink provided information on a \$35,000 payment for the Helena Symphony to complete a feasibility study for a major fundraising campaign to upgrade the Ming Opera House. Money for the project would come from Tax Increment Financing loan funds. Finance Director Sheila Danielson explained how the funds would be allocated, and that the city attorney approved the funds. Ron Baldwin, President of the Helena Symphony and head of the Masons who own the building, would be one of the many stakeholders who are involved. Mr. Baldwin explained the bidding process and the current state of negotiations. Commissioners asked some questions along the way. **League Position:** *The League supports accountable stable city government with sustainable practices and policies, fiscally responsible budgeting and formalized policies for communication and citizen engagement.*

Americans with Disability Act (ADA) compliance: Transportation Systems Director David Knoepke explained the proposed municipal infraction structure provided as part of a study

group based on ADA compliance. Educating the public on infractions, such as leaving a hose on a sidewalk impeding wheelchair access, will be important. The infraction structure will include a courtesy notice, followed by a written notice, followed by a citation. *Note: “Less than half of the city’s facilities, parks and transportation services meet disability and accessibility standards, according to a recently updated city checklist... formally known as the city transition plan, ...created in 2017... to help identify facilities that need to be brought up to ADA standards.” (excerpt from City making progress but still behind on accessibility projects - **Montana Free Press**, Helena This Week, 1/27/2025, by JoVonne Wagner.)*

Public Works Director Ryan Leland asked City Engineer Clarke to describe the eleven projects that are being worked on currently or in the near future. The projects mostly involved water supply funded by \$22M in AARPA funds. The most notable were repairs to water flumes, valves, diversion structures. The filters project has just been completed and has improved water taste and smell. The creation of three new water sources through well fields and replacing fire hydrants are being worked on.

HELENA CITY COMMISSION - March 10, 2025

Observers Clare Kearns and Bob Jones attended the same meeting. City Commissioners Shirliff, Logan and Dean (by zoom) were present. Mayor Collins and Commissioner Reed were excused. Commissioner Logan served as Mayor Pro Tem. The agenda was available and accurate, and the meeting started on time.

League Position: The LWVHA supports transparency and public engagement and influence in developing policy. The League supports a strong City Commission that is involved in strategic planning for the City of Helena. The League supports fiscal responsibility.

Helena Citizens Council member Diana Hammer reported that the Council is standing by their recommendation to the commission regarding the city vacating an easement of LeGrande Cannon trail which provides access to the west end of the Mount Helena City Park Trail System. There is concern that future development will change the road and open the trail system to vehicles. City Manager Burton explained that the subject of vacating the right-of-way is complex and depends on many things, including the plans of the West Woods development project. The city is planning to vacate the easement once everything has been properly dealt with.

Upcoming Vigilante Parade Route Change: City Manager Burton announced that due to health and safety concerns, consideration is being given to changing the route of the upcoming Vigilante Parade that has historically used the Last Chance Gulch area. Three

possible alternative routes are being considered. A final decision will be made after discussions with city staff, parade organizers, safety personnel and other stakeholders.

Discussion of Ming Opera House Tax Increment Financing (TIF): Commissioner Dean made a request on behalf of Commissioner Melinda Reed who was excused from the meeting, to postpone a vote on the request that Urban Renewal Authority funds be used for a feasibility study for a major fundraising campaign to determine the feasibility of advancing the historic Ming Opera House project. The request for \$35,000 in TIF funding is being made by the Helena Symphony. Symphony Conductor Scott spoke briefly in support of the project which would expand Helena's capacity for the arts. The commission voted to postpone the final discussion and vote until Commissioner Reed is present.

Two additional TIF funding requests were unanimously supported by the commission. The first one awarded \$31,925 in TIF funds to Stockman's bank for demolition at the Last Chance and Lyndale intersection. The second was to award Sturnella Square LLC \$20,323 for façade work on the Tracy Block building. TIF grants cover half the cost of the projects.

Downtown Urban Renewal Districts & Tax Increment Financing: For background purposes, Helena's Downtown Urban Renewal District was established with the following goals to guide redevelopment: (1) Build a cohesive downtown identity; (2) Add to downtown vibrancy with a mix of uses; (3) Upgrade underperforming properties; (4) Invest in the public infrastructure needed to attract development; (5) Connections; (6) Promote historic preservation to create a quality and unique experience.

American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and road resurfacing: Continuing work on installing/upgrading ramps to meet the requirements of the ADA and to resurface roads was approved in the amount of \$350,000.

HELENA CITIZENS COUNCIL - February 26, 2025

Observer Mary Beth Linder attended the meeting in person. The meeting started on time with 12 members present and four attended by zoom, representing a quorum. The 28-member Council currently consists of 22 filled positions.

Chair Ben Kuiper reminded members of the HCC Open House meeting on Tuesday March 25, from 5-7pm at the library. The HCC member meeting will follow. The open house will focus on transportation issues, railroad crossing, malfunction junction and the costs associated with the alternatives. A budget workshop is planned to gather public input.

City Commissioners have discussed all HCC recommendations according to Ben, and some of them were given to city staff for follow-up. The City Manager is looking into the implementation of the complete streets policy.

Secretary Diana Hammer reported that the outreach committee is looking into the insurance issue for block parties.

Treasurer Lori FitzGerald asked for a motion to approve \$150 for the Open House. The motion was approved.

New Business:

The Prickly Pear Land Trust (PPLT) and the Helena Trails Alliance right-of-way recommendation for LeGrande Cannon was presented and approved by unanimous vote. Joel Gerhardt provided background on the urgent need to request the city to abandon the right-of-way. Abandonment will provide permanent protection for the westside Helena trail system.

HCC members attend the City Commission and other city committee meetings. *The HCC city commission reports contain information that has been previously reported by City Commission League observers.*

HCC Council Advisory Boards and Committees:

City County Planning Board: John Andrews reported that the 6th Ward Railway Plan was added to the Land Use Plan.

Helena Public Arts Committee: Paige Myers - The Memorial Park bandshell is in poor shape and there is no money in the Parks budget to address it. Possible upcoming projects, dumpster/recycling bins, benches, baseball field murals, downtown walking mall mural and in the Henderson tunnel. Art grants are being awarded earlier due to federal grant issues. The time capsule in Constitution Park may be opened in 2025.

City/County Library Board: Anna Kratz provided an update on the East Helena proposed new branch library building.

City/County Consolidated Parks Board: Pat Bik - The City/County consolidated plan includes a redesign of Constitution Park.

Water Quality Protection District: Diana Hammer announced that a former mine in Grizzly Gulch area is being reclaimed.

Metropolitan Planning Organization: Anne Hausrath will take this assignment.