



OBSERVER CORPS REPORTS

March 18 to March 25, 2025

Meetings observed by members of the League of Women Voters of the Helena Area

Helena City Commission Meeting - March 19, 2025

Observer Clare Kearns, all commissioners, Mayor, and City Manager were present. The agenda was available and accurate, and the meeting started on time. The meeting room was full and there was a spillover in the room next door. The amount of public involvement in the meeting, and the City Commission and Department heads including public comment at the meeting, was impressive.

Helena Downtown Parking: Discounted parking for employees of downtown businesses and residential parking permits were discussed. The City Transportation department is hoping for more public input.

Citizens Conservation Board member Leah Anderson provided a report on recommendations with an emphasis on supporting city growth, climate change, renewable energy, resiliency, and sustainability. The board suggested that the city purchases one electric vehicle for all departments to share to determine if electric vehicles are practical for use in Helena. The city determined that hybrid vehicles that were purchased several years ago were not practical during winter months. The vehicles were too low to the ground and the bumpers were plastic.

Changes to Helena's parade routes: City Manager Burton led a rousing discussion on changes to Helena's parade route down Last Chance Gulch. The primary concern is public safety. Many people from the community including event organizers, John Jackson from the Shriners, local businesses, and Alicia Ryan from the Business Improvement District (BID) expressed opinions that the planning to change the route did not include important stakeholders. The Vigilante Parade will be allowed to use Last Chance Gulch with some modifications including spacing between floats, size of floats and crowd management techniques. The route for other future parades remains undecided. It was requested that the city provide assistance with planning events such as education on safety measures, providing safety cones, and creating a to-do list for event organizers.

Payments made to the city from accounts with insufficient funds: City Finance Director Sheila Danielson reported that the city is struggling with the cost of managing payments made to the city from accounts with insufficient funds. This is primarily an issue when people pay their water bills. The director is asking for a uniform fee to be paid by people whose checks bounce. There is a cost to the city for stamps, envelopes, personnel time

etc. Commissioner Mellinda Reed suggested that there be an appeal process when a fee is charged. The Commission will pursue the Director's request at a future meeting.

The Anchor Park bell needs repair; there is a crack in the bell. The Navy will repair the bell and return it to the park once it is repaired. The city will pay for transporting the bell.

Increasing the cost of renting the City Civic Center: Doug Smith, City Parks and Recreation Director, reported that consideration is being given to increasing the cost of renting the center for events. The increase will be modest. Most renters are nonprofit, and the city does not want organizations to change their venue.

Changes being scheduled for Helena's trail system include new trails, additional parking at trail heads. Open Lands Division manager, Brad Langsather, reported that consideration is being given to limit the hours the trail parking areas are open. People and businesses near the trail head parking lots have reported disruptive behaviors after dark. The closures would only be for vehicles, not hikers. Brad noted that there was a lot of community input into the decision.

Residential parking district annual fee discussion: Transportation Systems Director David Knoepke provided information on residential parking districts. The districts are areas where residents pay an annual fee to the park in front of their houses. A sign is posted to non-residents to inform them they cannot park there. Some residents living on Billings Ave near Helena High School provided the commission with a petition for the city to end the designation. The residents do not want to pay the annual \$10.00 fee. Some residents want to keep the designation due to fear that without the signage about the parking restrictions, students from Helena High School will monopolize the parking. The Community is being encouraged to give their thoughts on the parking restriction at the website feature: "Be Heard Helena."

Helena City Commission Meeting - March 24, 2025

Observer Clare Kearns attended the meeting in person. The meeting started on time and the agenda was available and accurate. All the City Commissioners, Mayor and City Manager were present. There were no reports given by the Manager or City Attorney.

Two new Police officers, Toby Erickson and Brendan Colburn were confirmed by the Commission. The new Assistant Fire Chief, Jason Wendzel, was sworn in.

Helena Sand and Gravel was the lowest bidder and was unanimously awarded a contract in the amount of \$312,000 by the Commission. City Engineer Jamie Clark announced that the contract is for the repair of water main breaks on Centennial Drive.

A proclamation designating March 24 as Patricia Johnson Day was read and presented to her son. Ms. Johnson recently turned 100 years old. She has a long history of civic activity in Helena including working at the Florence Crittendon Home and leading a Helena student reading group.

The City Financial Audit for 2024 has been completed and the result was found to be “clean,” reported Finance Director Sheila Danielson. The results of the audit are filed online at the city website. Commissioners Shirliff and Logan assisted with the audit. The commission approved the audit and recommendations from the audit are being considered.

The resolution to increase Civic Center rental fees was presented by Doug Smith. The City Commission unanimously supported the resolution. A public hearing will be held on the increase on April 7, 2025.

Zoning changes requested for the Crossroads Mountain View Meadow Development: City Planner Michael Alvarez told the commission that the zoning change is in response to market demands and is intended to allow for building duplexes, condominiums, multiple dwelling units, and offices on a section of the development that is currently vacant. The parcel is currently zoned for urban/residential, which does not allow for multiple dwelling units and offices. Mr. Alvarez stated the change could result in increased traffic and this will be looked at. Outreach to the surrounding community resulted in no opposition.

The Community Development Department approved the request for zoning change and the City Commission unanimously approved the change.

***League Position:** Land Use Planning and Growth in the Helena Area. Public Participation in Planning; Infrastructure and Planning Process: The League encourages public participation in all planning processes for infrastructure review and zoning districts. Transportation, telecommunications, utilities, law enforcement, fire protection and emergency services should also be addressed in the planning process.*

Railroad District Neighborhood Plan: Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution to adopt the Railroad Neighborhood Plan. City Planner Michael Alvarez described the community outreach events which sought feedback from area stakeholders. Due to the complexity of the plan, there was a focus on public engagement. Alvarez said the plan will create a vibrant neighborhood. Commissioner Shirliff commented that he hopes the passenger train project comes to fruition and it would add to the importance of the railroad district.

Mayor *Pro Tem* Dean questioned the first steps in implementing the plan and was informed that the city is already seeking zoning changes and is approaching local businesses regarding improving streetscapes.

A detailed Railroad District Plan is available on the City Commission webpage under meeting agendas and packets at <https://helena.novusagenda.com/agendapublic>.

Lewis and Clark County Commissioners - March 18, 2025

Observer Stephanie Wallace attended the meeting in person. The meeting started on time and the agenda was posted 48 hours in advance of the meeting. All commissioners were present. No members of the public were present,

Bid opening for crack sealing of county roads and of ads that are part of the rural improvement district: Another bid was opened for paint striping in Lewis and Clark County, East Helena, and one road in Jefferson County. The bid envelopes were opened publicly by the County Engineer and reviewed verbally as to completeness and compliance with the requirements of the solicitation. Public comment was invited but no public was present. Both sets of bids will be reviewed by the Public Works Department and a recommendation on the company providing the best value for taxpayers will be made for each solicitation in two weeks at a Commission meeting. Public comment will be solicited on the selection at the meeting. **Observer Note:** *The public bid opening process used by the County is important. It allows the public to have confidence in the fairness of the review process.*

The updated County Noxious Weed Management Plan was unanimously approved by the Commissioners. Montana law requires a biannual update of the county plan to qualify for funding from the State. The updated plan did not identify any new noxious weeds but included several formatting and editorial changes. At the request of Commissioner Hunthausen, the County noxious weed supervisor reviewed some of the work that his team performs includes education of the public, mowing and spraying for weed control on county properties and rights of way, compliance work and assisting the public with the development of weed management plans among other things. The approval of the weed management plan allows the county to apply for State trust fund dollars for weed management work, reducing the cost to taxpayers.

Lewis and Clark County Commissioners - March 25, 2025

Observer Stephanie Wallace attended the meeting in person. Two commissioners were present, Commissioner Hunthausen was absent, no reason was given by the chair. The meeting started on time. The agenda described some items to be discussed but not on others: 1. Three agenda items were consent action items that were named in the agenda with no information other than the resolution titles. 2. Two of the resolutions were public declaring county property as surplus but no information was provided on what properties were being surplus. 3. The third item on the agenda was a DA Davidson non-corporate organization and association resolution. No information was provided on this item. The information is only available by going online to the Commission's meeting agenda and opening the file.

Was there an adequate opportunity for public input? For the consent items on the agenda described above there was no information provided by the staff and no discussion among

the commissioners that would have allowed the public to understand what was being decided. The public would need to go online to get information. The only members of the public present in person besides the League observer were two members of Senator Sheehy's staff. Thomas Manninen introduced himself as regional director for Central Montana. He indicated that he had met earlier with County staff to introduce himself and his role.

NOTE: *Federal Funding has been used by the County to address emergency services and water quality to reduce the financial impacts of the County Budget.*

County Emergency Management Program: Approval of a \$70,500 grant application to the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services Division for funding to assist with salaries and benefits was clearly described in the agenda. This is an annual grant for funding provided to the state by the Federal government and distributed to local governments. There has been no notice of funding yet from the government, but the state is accepting applications to be ready when and if funding is released. The Chief County Administrative Officer Roger Baltz noted that the County will be conservative about including the funding in the budget.

Amendment to the grant award from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for the Ten Mile Creek Estates/Pleasant Valley Water and Sewer District: The original grant was used to improve the subdivisions' wastewater treatment system through chemical pH adjustment. Some funds remain and the amendment would extend the grant period to December 31, 2025, and allow for the use of the remaining funds for concrete barriers and utility markers. The water and sewer district were a sub-recipient of this grant, which was provided directly to the County through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)