



Helena Citizens' Council (HCC)

Minutes

September 27th, 2023, 7-9PM
Room 326 or via Zoom

3:28 Meeting was called to order by Chair Ben Kuiper at 7:05PM

Attendance: John E Andrew, John R. Andrew, Diana Hammer, Nancy Perry, Pat Bik, Joe Lehman, Ben Kuiper, Nolan Harris, Lowell Chandler, Paige Myers, Bob Schlack, Ryan Schwochert, Bob Habeck, Denise Roth Barber, Susan Steffens, Peggy Benkelman (coordinator)

Excused: Steve Allen, Emily Mowers, Erinn Donnell, Chelly Hasquet, Rick Boleware

Absent: Heidi Friedlander, Margaret Strachan

Guests – Greg Wirth, Brian Coplin (Helena Resource Advocates), Magda Kintzing (member of the public)

A Quorum was established – yes

19:56 Approval of August 2023 Minutes – Motion to approve the minutes from the August HCC full board meeting was made by Lowell Chandler, seconded by John R. Andrew. Chair Ben Kuiper asks if there are any changes or updates to the minutes. All HCC members were in favor of current minutes. Minutes were approved.

Public Comment

Magda Kintzing (member of the public) – Magda K. comments that on 7/26/23 she was walking her dogs near the dog park and someone drove by spraying chemicals while on a 4-wheeler. The spraying was also done near kids attending summer camps. Magda sent several emails to the city regarding this issue, and no one ever answered her. She did some research on chemicals used as herbicides and insecticides and discovered they are bad (toxic) for people, animals, and wildlife. She returned to the area in about a month and the area still had weeds, so the spraying did not do much good.

Lowell Chandler (HCC District #3) States it is unacceptable that Magda K. received no response from anyone in the city. Lowell says the citizens of Helena should be notified of where and when chemicals are sprayed in public areas. The Parks Department should have some sort of notification process in place.

John R. Andrew (HCC District #1) John wonders what sort of process the HCC has to inform the Parks Department and the citizens of Helena about the chemical spraying. He says companies like NitroGreen put out little flags after they have sprayed.

Diana Hammer (HCC District #1) would like to invite the Parks Department and/or the Health Department to give a short presentation to the HCC. Diana wonders if chemical spraying is even necessary.

Susan Steffens (HCC District #7) Asks what is the best way for the City to notify citizens of spraying of chemicals. Signage on site? Notices in parking lots?

Bob Habeck (HCC District #7) says the HCC should follow process and that now, inviting the Parks Department is fact-finding. The HCC should not be too accusatory.

Brian Coplin (Community Resources) Brian is here to give public opinion and to hand out his Community Resource list. His organization is trying to track barriers that our community members face and point them in the right direction to get help. He reminds the HCC of the Suicide Hotline number which is 988.

Guest Speakers – Greg Wirth, Chair of NMTAC (Non-Motorized Advisory Council)

Greg W. reminds HCC of the Walk to School Day. The City's Downtown Multi-Modal Plan was approved last Monday. In this plan, it mentions the reducing of the width of crossing lanes on Broadway, 6th Ave, and Lawrence streets. This reduction in crossing widths is a good opportunity to complete as the city is going to do an overlay on 6th Ave. Greg W. says that NMTAC disagrees with widening some streets and it is disappointed that the city did not include more public input on this decision. NMTAC is currently working on the completion of the Centennial Trail which includes feasibility study for the Henderson St. bridge, safe crossing on Montana Ave and Safe Routes to Schools. Greg W. mentions the Complete Street Policy (2010) that needs to be better followed. Diana Hammer asks what that policy means. See attached document.

Diana Hammer (HCC District #1) asks if temporary bikes lanes have ever been tried to see how well they work. Yes, says Greg W. and temporary round-a-bouts have been tried as well. Normally the comments received from the public is that they do not like traffic calming. Greg Wirth mentions there needs to be new School Speed Zones posted. It is quite chaotic for pick-up and drop-off at Helena Middle School.

Greg Wirth – reiterates that NMTAC would prefer that the City amend its budget from using funds to widen Benton Ave and use the funds for Cruze Ave pedestrian crossings.

Bob Schlack asks about Custer Ave expansion. Greg W states the project has had little traction, and probably won't move forward until the MPO is fully formed and functioning.

Officer Reports

Chair Ben Kuiper – Ben K. states the HCC has not yet received a response from the Commission regarding the letter that HCC sent to them on Advisory Boards. Ben Kuiper reached out to the media, but it seems they don't want to print or get involved with the letter.

Diana Hammer – says the HCC Executive Committee opted not to print the letter and reached out to the newspaper but they did not respond.

Vice-Chair – Lowell Chandler – Lowell reached out to the City's Grant Coordinator, Amanda Opitz, regarding grants the city could apply for. He received a good response from her. The email explained the process that the city uses as to whether approve to apply for grants. Lowell still feels it is important to encourage the city to apply. Lowell also reached out to an attorney at the MDOT (Montana Department of Transportation) to discuss specifically who gets a seat at the newly formed MPO. The voting members of the MPO will be determined by the City of Helena, Lewis & Clark County and East Helena.

Treasurer Report – Nolan Harris – The final budget for HCC is \$33,612.00. The HCC runs on a pretty lean budget. The only expense so far this year is \$60 for the District #1 Outreach Block party. The HCC Outreach Committee does want to spend money on updating the brochure and having a smaller table banner.

Secretary Report – Diana Hammer – Diana moves comments to the Outreach Committee reports. Coordinator Peggy Benkelman will read Emily Mowers email.

Denise Roth Barber wanted to have the HCC's letter to the Commission have more exposure. It is too bad it did not get printed as an Op-ed. Denise asks how did the HCC learn of the "checks and balance" wording in the letter?

Patricia Bik answers: Pat B. says she contacted Dan Clark from the LGC (Local Gov't Center) and Dan stated that the wording made it seem that the HCC feels it has some control over the City Commission. This is completely false, as the HCC knows it has no authority – it can only make recommendations.

It was asked that Peggy Benkelman send out both the January letter and the August letter to HCC members. The letter was in reference to the Commission removing HCC members from advisory boards.

Denise Roth Barber still prefers that the HCC letter be posted on the HCC Facebook page.

Lowell Chandler says that a City Chartered Elected Body (the HCC) receiving no response from the Commission is a compelling article for Nolan Lister. We (the HCC) don't want to create animosity between the Commission and the HCC.

Unfinished Business:

Diana Hammer follows up with **Strategic Planning Priority Discussion**. She states the top five priorities from the HCC Poll. 1. Safe routes to schools 2. Bike/Pedestrian safety & signage 3. Housing 4. Land Use 5. Fire Safety. Diana Hammer will categorize the priorities into these groups: Improve neighborhood livability, promote healthy & sustainable growth and promote safe community.

Bob Habeck says this is a great start for strategic planning. We are now in year 2024.

Lowell Chandler wants the HCC to work on an action plan to achieve these top goals.

John R. Andrew wonders if there are regular meetings between the School District and the City of Helena.

Policy Guidelines on how HCC will interact with non-profits. Moved to next month.

Block Party – Neighborhood Outreach – John R. Andrew says that both he and Pat Bik met with City Attorney Rebecca Dockter and she states that MMIA (city insurer) wants all events to have the extra insurance coverage. Rebecca D. says that the Helena City Manager will not overlook the extra insurance mandate as other city managers around Montana have done in the past. John R. Andrew says they are doing some research to see how many block parties were held last year vs this year and comparing the numbers to see the impact of the insurance mandate. Both Pat and John R. were thinking maybe the Commission could set aside money to help fund the added insurance premium for block parties.

Commission Attendees' Reports – two minutes

9/6 John E. Andrew – addresses that it is problematic to find speaking points at Commission meetings. HCC members need to write up a quick synopsis of what occurred at the meeting they attended, and then move it forward to the next person who will attend a meeting. John mentioned that the HCC still wanted to see support for the Sports Complex, and the Mayor corrected him, saying that it was approved at the Administrative Commission meeting the week before. Peggy B says she encourages members to download the agenda (red button) beforehand and review it before the meeting.

Pat Bik agrees with John E. Andrew. She says preparing a brief report of the meeting you attend, allows the next HCC member who is attending to feel more updated. The HCC needs a better way of communicating with the Commission. The HCC needs time to meet with the Commission regarding specific issues. These meetings should involve back and forth dialogue.

Lowell Chandler – says that at the Administrative meeting immediately following the full board HCC meeting, the member attending should tell the Commission about what was discussed.

Ben Kuiper thinks the HCC should ask the Commission how the HCC could better communicate with them.

Ben K. also mentions he will attend most of the Monday meetings to help establish better rapport. He wants to make it clear he is not taking the place of the HCC members who volunteer.

Lowell Chandler – thinks the HCC should establish a template along with the living document (formed by the Outreach Committee) and, after each meeting, move it forward.

Pat Bik – the HCC, in conjunction with the Commission needs to find time where there is more back and forth open discussion. There needs to be a good forum for that.

Commission Attendees Reports

9/6 John R. Andrew – Much discussion about the election. Being fiscally responsible was discussed as well as following democratic process. A full general election would cost \$70,000. The only contested race was in HCC District #1. SB 282 has created a bit of a nightmare for local planning departments. New Taxation was discussed – but there needs to be a better explanation for the public. The Multi-Modal plan was approved.

9/11 Emily Mowers – Peggy Benkelman reads from Emily's email as she is absent. The elections discussion was fast and confusing. The only election that will be held is for HCC District #1 (because it is the only one contested). More of an explanation on elections will be in the city water bill. Updated Fire Code was discussed in relation to street width.

9/20 Pat Bik - The city qualifies for a HUB entitlement grant. However, the staff of the city recommended that the city not apply. There may be a Parklet fee reduction, and the fee may now be monthly instead of seasonally. A new softball field was named for Mike Miller. The City did approve \$47,000 dollars of ARPA funds for the new Sports Complex study.

9/25 John E. Andrew – Approved the Multi-Modal Plan, Approved the City of Helena Golf Advisory board, election cancellation was approved. The only election will be for HCC District #1, water rates increase was discussed.

Coordinator Report – Peggy Benkelman – Peggy reports that volunteers are still needed to attend Commission Meetings in November and December. Peggy gives an update about the November 7th election and how appointments to HCC will work. A meeting date for November needs to be decided – either November 15 or November 29. Chair Ben K. asks that Peggy B. send out a poll asking HCC members which date they prefer.

Ben Kuiper addresses the HCC appointment process. The Commission would like the HCC to send them applicant preferences. The HCC is looking forward to a more distinct process.

Outreach Committee Report – Peggy Benkelman (coordinator) reads Emily Mowers report. HCC will have a booth at the Fall Artwalk, they will update the display in the City County building and have a new radio spot coming soon.

Boards, & Standing Committees

City-County Consolidated Planning Board – John E. Andrew – a large conservation easement was donated to the City from the Krause Family Ranch.

Helena Public Arts Committee – Paige Myers – The Art Committee plans for more dumpster murals, electric box wraps and re-painting of the band shell. Recruitment for all advisory boards has been difficult.

Non-Motorized Travel Advisory Council – Lowell Chandler – no new updates.

L&C County Water Quality Protection District Board - Diana Hammer - The board toured the Ten-Mile watershed. The EPA gave money to the State of Montana to address the heavy metals loading from years of mining. Completing this clean up will save the city millions of dollars.

Citizen Conservation Board – Diana Hammer – There are still two openings on the CCB. The CCB expressed interest in applying for the “Solar for All” grant. This \$25M grant could be transformational. Lowell Chandler asks if the grant money would be just for municipalities or

would it also be for private citizens. Another grant was for \$3m from DEQ for a Climate Action Plan.

Solid Waste Master Plan Meetings – Denise Roth Barber – they did not meet.

City- County Library Board – Paige Myers - no quorum, so no meeting.

Golf Advisory Board – Ryan Schwochert - Ryan has stepped down from this board. Bob Schlack would like to attend as a member of the public.

City-County Consolidated Parks Board – Ben Kuiper – recommended naming of baseball field.

Affordable Housing Trust Fund Advisory Board – open for an HCC member to attend. An HCC members will not have voting rights.

Chair Ben Kuiper – makes one more call for public comment, there was none.

Lowell Chandler motions for meeting to be adjourned, John R. Andrew seconds. All in favor.

Chair Ben Kuiper says meeting is adjourned.

2:10:30 9:09PM Meeting Adjourned

Next HCC Full Board Meeting is scheduled for October 25th, in Room 326 or via Zoom.

