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Date: March 28, 2018
To: Helena City Commission
From: Helena Citizens' Council (HCC)
Subject: 2019 Helena City Budget Review

The Helena Citizens' Council (HCC) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the 2019 budget for the City of Helena. The City Manager, the City staff, and the City Commission have been very helpful and supportive during the budget review.

The HCC does have some specific concerns/comments/questions related to the 2019 budget that can be summarized as follows:

1. The annual city budgeting process appears to be well organized and managed, allowing for each department to objectively evaluate needs, resources, and plans.
2. HCC supports the current pay and benefit policy which is aimed at attracting and retaining good people. Current pay and benefits are at the median for Class 1 cities in Montana.
3. The projected 8% increase in medical /dental insurance costs appears consistent with trends.
4. HCC is concerned about the continuing trend in the June 30th cash balance over the recent several years. The predicted June 30, 2018 cash balance is about \$18,000,000 less than the cash balance on June 30, 2016. What is forecast cash balance at June 30, 2018 and June 30, 2019?
5. HCC applauds efforts by City staff to think regionally as the City plans for the future. The future City roles and responsibilities both within and outside the City and planning in conjunction with other jurisdictions are important.
6. HCC endorses Helena's continued support of Historic Preservation, the Humane Society, the Community Services program, the Friends of Pets program, joint 911 system, and other joint City/County efforts.
7. The HCC supports the police department plans to add officers and equipment to provide capacity to deal with traffic concerns (such as violations and accidents), which is a continuing concern expressed to and discussed by HCC members;

departmental responses are limited by capacity and ability to respond to these citizen concerns.

8. The major budget issue with the Community Services Department is the Civic Center. The HCC recommends that the Civic Center Board develop a 5-year plan to make needed improvements and to establish specific deficit reduction goals.
9. HCC is concerned that the planned increases in downtown parking rates could discourage downtown development. Adequate and convenient parking for employees and customers will continue to affect development in the downtown area; the Parking Commission needs to focus on this issue. The HCC encourages the Parking Commission to do a broader review of parking issues, including parking for customers and employees. The HCC recommends that the Parking Commission address the following: special parking tax district, variable rate structure, and the supply of parking to meet both current and future needs
10. HCC supports an additional fire station on the north side of town (vicinity of Custer Avenue) to reduce response times for both emergencies and growth to the north. A joint operation with the airport fire station may be ideal.
11. HCC supports the proposal to add six trained personnel and the necessary equipment to the fire department to reduce response time and to safely respond to simultaneous incidents.
12. With proper training and additional support, the current 911/dispatch system should continue to be adequate for the fire department, the police department, and Lewis & Clark County Sheriff department.
13. HCC encourages increased City efforts to attract major businesses to replace Blue Cross/Blue Shield, New West, and Independent Record, and to support economic development in the downtown area.
14. HCC is concerned with the total costs projected for a variety of consultant services such as updating the City's growth policy plan, an area-wide traffic study in the areas around the malfunction junctions, long-term housing needs, and infrastructure projects. The HCC recommends that detailed scopes of work and objectives be developed for each specific study before competitive contracting. The City should have a well-defined need/purpose for the consultant and a path forward as to how the consultant work product would feed a decision making process that leads to action.
15. HCC supports a regional approach (city and county) to develop a long-term parks plan; and recommends that Helena and surrounding jurisdictions pass a joint resolution to establish a multi-jurisdictional regional parks and trail system.

16. HCC supports the development of an indoor aquatics center for county/community/school use.
17. The HCC recommends that the open lands budget include sufficient resources to continue the current open lands program and the fuels reduction program.
18. The total estimated cost for the 5-year capital infrastructure program (streets, potable water supply, water treatment, storm water) is about \$115 million. The city needs to objectively evaluate the scope and schedule for some of the high cost items; there is potential to spread some of the items out an additional 5 years or more.
19. The City should begin looking at the impact and costs of expanding city services north, even to Lincoln road; including potable water storage and treatment and wastewater treatment issues such as metal loading, nitrogen, and phosphate.
20. HCC applauds City efforts to coordinate street improvements and rebuilding with water and sewer replacements. HCC would like to review the master plan that is being developed to address the aging of the city services system.
21. HCC does not support the update of the Helena growth policy plan and the hiring of a housing coordinator professional until the community development department clearly states the purpose of these two efforts. For example, will the growth policy be inclusive of the regional parks plan and infrastructure plans? Will the growth policy plan consider how the City will grow and what kind of neighborhoods and community will result both inside and outside the City? What is the role, focus and expected results of adding a housing coordinator position? Will it address different types of housing in the City, as compared to expected housing growth in the Valley – e.g., housing for elderly, empty nesters, young families, low income and special needs residents as examples?
22. HCC questions the hiring of a contractor to help develop an Urban Renewal District for downtown until the planning department details how the proposed Urban Renewal Tax Increment Finance (TIF) district is expected to stimulate downtown economic and residential growth. Defining the needs to be met by a downtown TIF district should include community representatives as well as the Business Improvement District and other downtown interests, such as residents and agencies.
23. Any evaluation of Helena’s future growth needs to address the fact that most of the future housing growth will be in the county (the valley) and needs to realistically address the nature and extent of job creation in the City and region which will drive growth.

24. HCC supports the Public Works request for funding to cover on-call drivers in case of another major winter snow event when added resources are needed and for the purchase of smaller, dedicated snow removal equipment to provide more flexibility than exists with the current equipment.