



HCC BUDGET RECOMMENDATION FY2025

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TO: Helena City Commission
FROM: Helena Citizens' Council
RE: Helena Citizens' Council Review and Recommendations Regarding the Fiscal Year 2025 Preliminary City Budget

Summary of Review and Recommendations

Per our mandated responsibility outlined in Article IV of the Helena City Charter, the Helena Citizens' Council (HCC) is providing the Helena City Commission our review and recommendations regarding the fiscal year 2025 preliminary budget for the City of Helena. The Charter reads:

There shall be seven (7) Neighborhood Councils, collectively comprising a Helena Citizens' Council. Operating independently from the city commission or city officials, the Helena Citizens' Council shall review and recommend actions relating to the annual budget, and make recommendations relating to the future development of the city.

The review and recommendations that follow were approved by a vote of the HCC on May 30th, 2024.

The HCC's recommendations for funding specific department requests and capital fund projects reflect the philosophical priorities for the Council. One budget philosophy that the HCC would recommend the City Commission continue to consider is to ensure funding for emergency services and city infrastructure are prioritized in a budget limited by constraints. Overall, funding requests and capital improvement requests from City departments are supported by the Helena Citizens Council.

Acknowledged Presented Budgets

The HCC acknowledges the time and effort of the following departments and programs to present well-drafted budget requests to the City Commission, but does not have a position on the following budgets:

- Parks, Open Space and Recreation
- Tourism Business Improvement District
- Business Improvement District
- Facilities

General Fund

- **Recommendation: The HCC supports a 4% COLA funded from unallocated revenue and cash reserves.**

The HCC recognizes the need to recruit and retain quality city employees in order to best serve and support the citizens of Helena. As such, following fiscal year 2025, the HCC recommends finding ways to implement this COLA into department budgets in order to avoid a continuing burden upon cash reserves.

- **Recommendation: The HCC supports the funding of a Housing Navigator position from unallocated revenue.**
- **Recommendation: The HCC supports using unallocated revenue or cash reserves to address a parking solution/stripping on Cruse Avenue to aid downtown businesses**

The HCC supports:

- A \$1 million General Fund Capital contribution to support the city's capital projects.
- Funding the Solar Energy Program in the amount of \$83,200 and the Sidewalk Improvement Program in the amount of \$156,000 through General Fund cash reserves. These amounts reflect a 4% increase from last year's budget.
- An additional \$4200 allocation to the Lewis & Clark Humane Society.
- The HCC recognizes the positive impact local nonprofits and community support organizations have on our community. As such, the HCC recommends that the city contribute \$39,750 through a competitive process to community non-profits and community service support programs.

Helena Area Community Foundation

Recommendation: Increase the City's annual contribution to the Helena Area Community Foundation to \$25,000.

Background: In 2024, 61 local organizations applied for \$72,705 in available grant funding from the Helena Area Community Foundation (HACF). These grants are made possible through contributions from HACF (\$30,000), the County (\$23,750), and the City (\$19,000). As in previous years, the demand funding outpaced available funding (\$197,064 funding requested or

37% of available funds). This year, HACF was able to successfully fund 32 of the 61 applications. HACF funding provides valuable services to support our community and could meet even more community needs with additional funding.

Building Division

Recommendation: Building Division explore ways to create efficiencies in permitting building projects to speed up the development of new housing projects and reduce permitting costs associated with creating new housing

Fire/Police

Recommendation: Recognizing that emergency services are one of the primary functions of local government, the city should regularly budget additional fire and police resources so that not all is being asked to be funded through the safety levy. Additionally, should the safety levy fail to pass, the city will need to strategically fund some of the sought after levied positions.

Community Development Fund 100-1401

HCC Supports:

- Finalization of Neighborhood Plans under the guidelines of the 2019 Growth Policy
 - 6th Ward Railroad District Neighborhood Plan
 - Downtown Neighborhood Plan
- Implementation of the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA)

Transportation

Recommendations:

- **Local community support and expertise offered by the NMTAC should be maintained and NMTAC should not be dissolved.**
- **Suspend/withdraw the Benton Avenue Turn Lanes \$650,000 widening project (ST9911) and reallocate those funds towards either various Safe Routes to School projects previously recommended by HCC or NMTAC or towards shortening the crossing distances on Cruse Avenue as recommended by the Downtown Multi-Modal Plan.**
- **Prioritize and implement the Henderson Street Bridge Feasibility Study (ST3922).**
- **Use existing Safe Routes to School Funds (ST2917) to either install painted crosswalks on appropriate crossings near schools (i.e., at least every street corner of a school or logical safe routes to school crossings) or use**

funds to construct sidewalk extensions on Hoback Street to allow for improved access for city residents to get to and from Helena Middle School, Helena High School, Jefferson Elementary, and Central Elementary.

- **Use the \$100,000 (ST4910) for crosswalk RRFB's (rectangular rapid flashing beacons) to proceed with construction of an enhanced crosswalk on Benton Avenue on Stuart and/or Hauser as was recommended by HCC in the FY2024 budget cycle**

HCC supports:

- Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)
(With Partners: City of Helena, City of East Helena, Lewis and Clark County, Montana Department of Transportation)
- Implementation of the Downtown Multimodal and Infrastructure Plan
- Update and Prioritization of the 2014 Helena Long Range Transportation Plan
- An HCC member hold a voting seat on the newly created MPO as well as NMTAC member.

Helena Citizens Conservation Board

Recommendation: Adopt and implement the Helena Citizens Conservation Board recommendations

Background: The Helena Citizens Conservation Board was established by the City Commission to advise the Commission on sustainability and climate change. The City Commission established sustainability goals around clean electricity (100% clean electricity by 2030; 80% by 2025), waste reduction (50% reduction by 2040; 35% by 2030), and has recognized the need for water conservation (e.g., City implemented irrigation restrictions in 2022 and participation in the national Mayors' Water Challenge). Adoption and implementation of the CCB's recommendations will help the City achieve these goals.

- **Energy Conservation and Efficiency Recommendation:** Amend Resolution 20218, which established a Residential Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Loan Program, to specifically include air-sourced heat pumps and add language to prioritize applications from low-income and disadvantaged households.

“Section 2: Loans to residential property owners may only be used to purchase and install energy efficiency upgrades and renewable energy systems including, but not limited to, solar photovoltaic systems, wind turbines, geothermal, air source, and ground source heating systems, grey water systems, and solar water heating systems.”

Section 3..... “Availability of loans is subject to availability of funds dedicated to this program by the City Commission. Applications from households determined to be low-income or disadvantaged shall receive priority on the funding list.”

- **Green Electricity Recommendation:** Continue to support the Residential Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Loan Program, established by Resolution 20218, with additional funds in FY2025.
- **Transportation Recommendations:** 1) Support mode shifts towards walking and biking by denying variance requests to not put sidewalks and boulevards in and continue funding for ADA compliant ramps on sidewalks; and 2) Create a resolution to make City vehicle replacement with Electric Vehicles the default. Unless justified otherwise based on usage patterns and availability restrictions.
- **Water Conservation Recommendation:** Create a resolution adopting Lush and Lean Landscaping Practices for municipal properties to include drought resistant native and xeriscape planting strategies.

Public Works Department

Recommendation: Fund and Implement the Energy and Cost-savings Measures detailed in the Sustainability Audit (March 2024)

Background: with a projected annual savings of \$115,650 and 400 MTCO_{2e}, enough emissions savings to power 52 homes for a year or drive over 1,000,000 miles.

Recommendation: Implement the Solar Energy project for the Bill Roberts Golf Course.

Background: In 2023, the City contracted with Iconergy to conduct a Sustainability Audit of the City's operations. The Audit identified potential *annual* savings of \$337,560 and 1,323 MTCO_{2e} – which is nearly equal to avoiding driving 3.4 million miles or enough to power 261 homes for a year. In addition, the contractor, QstN, conducted a Solar Feasibility Study for ten buildings and developed a conceptual design for the Bill Roberts Golf Course and the Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Recommendation: PWD works with other City Departments to identify on-going sustainability issues and opportunities for efficiencies and to use the results of the Sustainability Audit to develop a Sustainability and Updated Climate Action Plan for the City (2009).

Public Works Department, Fund #521 (Water) and #531 (Wastewater)

HCC supports the ongoing efforts of the Water Division to optimize its operations through energy, chemical, and other efficiencies and the realization of significant cost and energy savings as well as the investigation into groundwater supply wells to build increased resilience into Helena's water systems.

Recommendation(s):

- The HCC recommends the continued promotion of water conservation at residential and commercial facilities.

- The HCC recommends the establishment of ‘water wise’ best practice policies for City-owned properties and operations.
- The HCC encourages collaboration with the Lewis & Clark County Water Quality Protection District on its plans to promote ‘water wise’ practices and water conservation.
- The HCC repeats its 2022 and 2023 recommendations to allocate funding for a Water Conservation Specialist.
- HCC supports the PWD’s efforts to optimize its operations and continue to look for energy efficiencies, especially when looking at equipment upgrades and replacement.

Fund #541 (Public Works Department - Solid Waste-Residential)

HCC supports the City’s efforts to divert waste and offer recycling services and applauds its efforts to expand its composting program.

Recommendations:

- HCC recommends that the City continue to implement its Strategic Plan for Waste Reduction and look for opportunities from the Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan to identify specific actions to achieve Helena’s waste reduction goals of 35% by 2030 and 50% by 2040.
- HCC recommends *against* increasing the residential solid waste rates and instead recommends that the City reduce the amount of waste residents can dispose of at the Transfer Station from 3000 pounds and use the revenue from those additional tipping fees to offset the increased operational costs.
- HCC recommends that the City recognize the operational benefits and cost savings of diverting waste from the Landfill (less handling, extended landfill life, etc.) and not only focus on the costs associated with recycling and diversion.

The HCC thanks the Helena City Commission for their time and taking our recommendations and suggestions into consideration for the FY25 budget.