

Mayor and Helena City Commissioners  
City of Helena  
316 N. Park Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
*Sent via email*



Re: HCC Representation on City Advisory Boards

August 23, 2023

Dear Mayor Collins and Commissioners Dean, Logan, Reed, and Shirliff,

The Helena Citizens' Council (HCC) received your correspondence dated July 25, 2023, regarding the immediate withdrawal of HCC appointments from City Advisory Boards. The HCC reviewed and discussed the letter and the accompanying memo from the MSU Local Government Center (LGC) at our July 26, 2023, meeting. Building upon the consensus at that meeting, several members of the HCC drafted this response to the Commission's letter which was approved at the August 23<sup>rd</sup> HCC meeting.

The HCC is deeply disappointed with the Commission's decision - and the process by which the decision was made - to remove HCC appointees as voting members from City Advisory Boards. HCC's engagement on City Advisory Boards has served as a crucial link to Helena citizens and greatly helped HCC to remain an engaged and productive body. HCC representatives who serve as voting members on various City Advisory Boards provide the HCC with valuable insight into the issues affecting our community and this better enables the HCC to meet its City Charter purpose of making 'recommendations related to the future development of the City.' (See Section 4.01.) Simply put, eliminating the HCC's participation as voting members on the various Advisory Boards erodes citizen participation in the local government decision-making process. The HCC strongly contends, on the contrary, that the Commission would be wise to work to enhance citizen engagement and participation to form a stronger, more resilient governing structure.

While the Commission's decision appears to have been based, in part, on the memo provided by the LGC, the HCC wishes to clarify and rebut one statement made by the LGC. Specifically:

*"The HCC's purpose as defined in the charter is to review and recommend actions to the commission related to budget and growth. Its stated purpose is not to act as an intermediary among citizens and other advisory boards on behalf of the commission. The HCC should work with and in support of the commission, but not act as a 'check' or adversarial middle-step between the commission and the citizens."*

This statement fails to recognize the intent of Helena's City Charter, which establishes the HCC as 'independent' from the City Commission for the purpose of providing the Commission with informed advice. In no circumstance does HCC act "on behalf of the Commission." HCC's informed input is not a 'check' or an 'adversarial middle step' between the Commission and the community. Indeed, a core guiding principle of the HCC is to work with the Helena public, and HCC members "are expected to be

fully informed of community issues and should actively solicit public opinion.” (See Principle 2.6.) To declare that the HCC is somehow an intermediary or adversarial step between the Commission and the citizens of Helena is misinformed and contrary to Article IV of the City Charter.

The HCC’s participation as voting members on Advisory Boards serves to enhance Helenans’ fundamental constitutional right of participation. Mont. Const., Art. 11, Sec. 8. HCC advises City Commission decision-making and helps to increase citizen awareness of and engagement in Commission decisions. Eliminating HCC participation as voting members shuts down an important avenue for information exchange and grappling with the important issues affecting our community. While the Montana Constitution promises enhanced access to government decision-making by an engaged and informed citizenry, the removal of HCC members from advisory boards does the opposite.

In closing, the HCC requests that the Commission reconsider its recent decision.

The LGC suggested a facilitated discussion involving the Commission, the HCC, and representatives from Advisory Boards. The HCC requests such a discussion with the intention of forging a path forward that best serves our community.

A response is requested from you in a timely manner.

On behalf of the Helena Citizens’ Council,

Benjamin Kuiper, Chair  
Helena Citizens Council

Cc: HCC Coordinator  
Dannai Clayborn, Clerk of Commission  
Tim Burton, City Manager  
HCC Representatives