



State of the City Address

Mayor Wilmot Collins - January 8, 2024

Distinguished guests, Commissioners, Members of the Executive Branch;

Good evening and welcome to the annual State of the City Address.

The City Charter States:

“The mayor shall communicate to the city commission and to the general public, a statement of the affairs and management of the city, each January, and may make recommendations regarding these matters.”

Established in 1976, the City Charter underscores Helena, Montana, as the proud seat of our state government— “It is a community with a colorful past and a vibrant future, there is an openness and basic decency that beckons each of our citizens to contribute to its unique identity.”

To our diverse and industrious City Commission, I wish to say thank you. Your thoughtful and poised discourse – even in the face of diverging opinion, proves democratic process conducted with respect can accomplish great things.

To our amazing City Employees, I extend a special acknowledgment. The City's many successes would not be possible without your hard work. On behalf of the Commission, I extend our sincere thanks, and look forward to all that you achieve in the new year.

The City would not be successful without the efforts of the community members who step up to serve. I commend the members of these boards for generously volunteering their time to ensure the seamless functioning of our City.

A special recognition goes out to the diligent members of the Helena Citizens’ Council; your efforts are truly appreciated and the City’s budget process is strengthened by your contributions.

In addition to the committed individuals within the City organization, we must recognize those working to foster our community's growth. Helena boasts a thriving business community, and it is imperative that we support policies and

initiatives conducive to a robust and diverse economy. We can work to pave the way for thoughtful growth throughout the next century. The City will continue to bring all stakeholders to the table and ask how we may help one another to accomplish great things during a time of historic change for Helena and for Montana. Non-profit organizations, business community members, and residents – we all need each other to see the Helena we want to be in 2050, not just today.

Tonight, I aim to share the noteworthy accomplishments of 2023 and shed light on the ongoing projects propelling us toward the realization of the Commission's Strategic Outcomes in 2024.

City-Wide

The City was accepted into the National League of Cities Racial Equity and Leadership Institute. The Mayor, City Attorney and Human Resources Director represented Helena as one of ten cohort teams to participate in the inaugural REAL Institute. The experience was incredibly impactful, as participants learned:

- 1) How to focus on leading for racial equity,
- 2) communicating effectively about race,
- 3) visualizing a racially equitable future, and,
- 4) bringing about systems change by building racial equity infrastructure for organizational change.

City Manager's Office

2023 Accomplishments

- The City Manager's Office provided a structured and transparent process for allocating General Fund Savings created through ARPA funds.
- Staff from the City Manager's Office helped coordinate the Montana League of Cities and Towns Conference, which brought approximately 450 municipal leaders and elected officials from around the state to Helena.
- The City Manager's Office led the transition to a new website, which has greatly improved the community's ability to access important information from the City.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the City Manager's Office will lead the effort to upgrade the City's public meeting agenda system.

- The City Manager's Office will continue to focus on improving operational efficiencies to promote a better customer experience for the public.
- The City Manager will lead the creation of a balanced budget for Fiscal Year 2025, focusing on employee retention and the City's Capital Improvement Plan.

City Attorney's Office

2023 Accomplishments

- This past year, the City Attorney's Office implemented workflows to better coordinate with City Departments for reviews of contracts and resolutions.
- A great deal of effort was spent updating various sections of City Code to comply with legislative updates and modernize language to reflect current needs.
- Finally, the Attorney's Office implemented in-depth trainings for the Helena Police Department, as well as regular trainings for new officers.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the Attorney's Office will implement a plan for systems review for racial equity.
- They will continue to work toward fully reviewing the Helena City Code for updates and revisions.
- The Attorney's Office will also expand and broaden the Victim Services program to better serve City departments and City residents.

Clerk of the Commission's Office

2023 Accomplishments

- In 2023, the Clerk's Office successfully completed the Administrative and Governance Policy Boards Project, which redefines how the City and the City Commission interact with citizen advisory bodies. The project created consistency in administrative processes and standardization of the governance practices, allowing for a more fair and open citizen engagement through the City's boards and committees.
- The Clerk's Office team began implementing the archival of digital records and launched phase 1 of the online portal for accessing public records.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the Clerk's Office will begin the introduction to a revised and modernized Public Records Management and Retention policy, utilizing digital creation and exchange of City's work products resulting in more efficient internal processes and greater access to public records than ever before.

Community Development

2023 Accomplishments

- In 2023, the City approved the 1st project through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund – providing \$1 mill for approximately 70 affordable units.
- Through the Community Development department, the City also completed the 1st Home Renewal Program project – funding health and safety related home renovation needs for low-income households.
- The Community Development team facilitated discussions and worked with local non-profits to find solutions for emergency housing during the winter for our unhoused citizens.
- The City continued to see a lot of construction activity, with more than 500 Commercial Permits and over 1500 Residential permits issued.
- In total, the Building Division issued 3,155 permits throughout the year, along with completing 4,696 inspections.
- The City's Planning Division supported a \$750k CDBG grant to fund the construction of Helena Foodshare's new food resource center.
- The Planning team also coordinated the annexation of the remaining portion of Mt Helena City Park and continued work on the 6th Ward/Railroad District Neighborhood Plan
- Planning staff created an online Housing Development Map representing all new housing developments approved by the City Commission since 2019.
- The Community Development team administered the funding of approximately 10 projects through the Residential Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Loan Program.
- Finally, the City began a major update to the City's Sign Code.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, Community Development hopes to complete a second Home Renewal Program project.
- The Housing Coordinator will also lead the effort to support additional projects through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.
- The Community Development team will begin work on a new Land Use Plan for the City, along with implementation of the Montana Land Use Planning Act.
- Staff will also complete the 6th Ward/Railroad District Neighborhood Plan, and continue focusing on collaboration with the County in joint planning efforts.
- Last, the Community Development Department will launch a full suite of online mapping tools to support development in the City.

Community Facilities

2023 Accomplishments

- The Community Facilities Department had 59 active projects in 2023. Highlights from the Facilities team include:
 - o Upgraded all light fixtures on the first floor of City-County Building to LED.
 - o Remodeled the 2nd floor offices of the Law & Justice Center.
 - o Replaced the roof at the Grand Street Theatre.
 - o Upgraded the audio/visual technology in several conference rooms to allow for hybrid public meetings.
 - o Coordinated the painting of a mural inside of the centennial trail tunnel at Centennial Park, which was completed in August.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the Community Facilities team will be focused on approximately 25 projects, including:
 - o Upgrading several boilers to energy efficient models at the Law & Justice Center, Fleet Maintenance shop, and the Main Fire Station.
 - o Replacement of the Fleet Maintenance shop roof.
 - o Replacement of the south roof of the Law & Justice Center
 - o LED lighting upgrades at several facilities.
 - o Coordinate the painting of a mural in the Lyndale tunnel.

Finance

2023 Accomplishments

- The Finance Department added a new Budget Analyst position in 2023. This position provides a key support role as the City goes through the budget process in the future.
- In 2023, the City received our 34th consecutive GFOA Certificate of Achievement Award for our FY21 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report.
- The Finance team also secured a contract for a new auditing firm that brings a wealth of government accounting experience to the City's annual audit.
- Finally, Finance Department staff led the implementation of the City's new Enterprise Resource Planning system that will impact all aspects of City operations.

2024 Goals

- The Finance team is working to launch the new ERP system's core financial suite in January. Finance will continue to support launching additional modules of the ERP system, which will include HR/Payroll, Permitting and Licensing, and Utility Customer Services.

Fire Department

2023 Accomplishments

- In 2023, The Helena Fire Department exceeded the previous year's calls for service, which was more than 4800.
- The Fire Department's Master Plan was completed, which is being utilized to drive strategic and capital plans for the organization.
- Thanks to approval from the City Commission, an old type 6 wildland engine that was damaged during a fire has been replaced with a new engine.
- Last year, the Fire Department instituted new record management software which handles scheduling, fire inspections, incident pre-planning, and dispatch integration. This new system will improve data quality and will be integral in data driven decision making in years to come.
- The Fire Department's Fire Prevention and Investigation Bureau continues to experience high levels of new construction plan examination and ongoing commercial occupancy inspections.

2024 Goals

- In cooperation with City Leadership, the Fire Department is working to bring forward discussions about the level of public safety service and how the City can fund the Community's need for expanded service in the future.
- Helena Fire Department will continue to seek out grant funding and other revenue opportunities to meet our ever-increasing costs and needs.

Municipal Court

2023 Accomplishments

- In 2023, Helena's Municipal Court completed implementation and training for a new court software system.
- Municipal Court staff continued with implementation of status hearings as a system for checking in with defendants to follow up on their compliance.
- For fiscal year 2023, Municipal Court processed 4700 citations.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, Municipal Court will focus on continuing to provide efficient, effective and impartial services.

Human Resources

2023 Accomplishments

- The City's Human Resources team was busy in 2023, moving forward efforts to improve employee retention and recruitment.
- HR led a salary market analysis and implemented cost of living wage increases.
- The HR team also developed and implemented several new policies and updated multiple existing policies.
- HR was busy working on a new HR/Payroll platform through the ERP system, which will be a huge benefit to employees once it launches in 2024.
- The City successfully negotiated a contract for Police Records and Telecommunicators, while also moving forward contract negotiations with the Helena Police Protective Association.

2024 Goals

- The HR team will lead strategy and implementation of goals and principles learned through the REAL Institute.
- HR is also continuing development of a market-based pay plan.
- Finally, the HR Department will work on further policy updates to address ERP implementation, compliance, industry best practices, and operational efficiencies.

Parks, Recreation and Open Lands

2023 Accomplishments

- The Parks Maintenance team accomplished some big projects, including new art and playground equipment at Leo Pocha Park, resurfaced tennis courts at Lockey Park, as well as new picnic shelters and upgraded playground equipment at Memorial Park.
- The Civic Center saw a full calendar, with 206 dates booked throughout the year.
- The City's recreation facilities were in high demand once again, with over 20,000 visitors to Last Chance Splash and Pool along with 5,000 people skating at the Memorial Park Ice Rink.
- The recreation team led another successful year of Kay's Kids, providing affordable summer programming for 80 plus children each week over the summer.
- The community came together to support two new recreation events as well, as the City hosted an Arbor Day tree planting event and a Christmas tree decorating event on Mount Helena.
- The Open Lands team continued its critical maintenance work on the City's open lands, completing more than 400 acres of weed treatment, 300 acres of forest fuel reduction, and burning more than 15,000 slash piles.
- The Urban Forestry team provided over 40 cords of wood donated to low-income families through Helena's Low Income Energy Assistance Program.
- Bill Roberts Golf Course experienced a full 2023 season, between golf leagues and tournaments, cross-country running meets, cross-country skiing, and even a disc golf.
- The Junior Program at Bill Roberts had over 70 participants, which was an increase of 20 kids from 2022.

- Additionally, Bill Roberts is proud to support several important community programs, such as Special Olympics Training for athletes, hosting a Disabled American Veterans Golf tournament, and partnering with the Last Chance Nordic Ski Club to provide cross-country skiing for the public.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the Parks, Recreation and Open Lands team will continue focusing on needed improvements to the City's parks, trails and facilities while providing high quality recreation opportunities.
- The team will complete the project to repair our iconic Fire Tower.
- Finally, the City will continue monitoring for the Emerald Ash Borer and improve the structure of Helena's Urban Forest by increasing the planting of new trees.

Police

2023 Accomplishments

- The Police Department worked hard in 2023 to overcome staffing issues. The department is nearly at full staffing levels with only three shortages and expects to be fully staffed by the middle of 2024.
- The Police Department partnered with the Helena School District to donate 18 AED machines. HPD also worked with the school district to implement the Handle with Care program, which has been overwhelmingly successful so far.
- The Leave Behind Program for Narcan was implemented allowing officers to leave doses of Narcan at locations where opioid use is suspected.
- Animal Control started a Trap, Neuter, Return Program for feral cats, and it has been extremely successful so far.
- The Police Department carried on the tradition of the annual Curt Stinson Memorial Blood Drive and had the highest number of attendees so far.
- The Criminal Investigations Division did an incredible amount of work, successfully investigating many complex cases.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, the Police Department will work on reaching sufficient staffing to start more community-oriented policing projects like bike patrols, community resource Officers, and utilizing beats for routine patrols.

- The department will work on implementation of a complete overhaul of the CAD/RMS system with a tentative go live date late 2024 or early 2025.
- Finally, the Department is committed to increasing its public information sharing and community outreach.

Public Works

2023 Accomplishments

- The Public Works Department made substantial progress on facility improvements that impact all aspects of their services.
- The Water Treatment division made improvements to the Ten Mile Treatment facility that resulted in more efficiency and less chemical usage.
- The first round of groundwater wells was also drilled at the Missouri River Plant.
- Public Works received a \$147,000 grant to install a new piece of equipment at the Wastewater Treatment Plant that will save approximately \$38,000 worth of energy costs per year.
- The Transfer Station saw the installation of its new automated entrance gates.
- Sustainability continued to be a priority within Public Works, with several new projects coming online. The City installed 2 electric vehicle charging stations, completed an in-depth analysis of water use in the City, and started a monthly Sustainability newsletter.

2024 Goals

- In 2024, Public Works will implement new meter software and reading equipment.
- Public Works will also complete a Sustainability Plan and Audit, and focus on pursuing grant funding for sustainability projects.
- Public Works will finish the ground water exploration project in the Helena Valley to ensure the City is maximizing its groundwater rights.
- The City of Helena Transfer Station will complete Phase II of the Transfer Station entrance to include a recycling drop off location and intersection updates.
- Lastly, the City of Helena, in collaboration with Lewis & Clark County, has contracted to develop an Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan to be completed in FY24.

Transportation Systems

2023 Accomplishments

- In 2023, the Transportation team led the transition of Helena, Lewis and Clark County and the City of East Helena to a Metropolitan Planning Organization.
- The City helped 15 different households bring their sidewalks up to ADA/PROWAG standards through the sidewalk loan program. In total, 1,360 linear feet of sidewalk was placed.
- The City contracted with a company to complete a LIDAR scan of all City Streets' assets, which will provide the City with an interactive system to manage transportation assets.
- The Streets Division was busy in 2023, completing over 8 lane miles of Mill and Overlay work, over 11 lane miles of Chip and Seal, while grading approximately 140 alley blocks and repairing an estimated 2,300 potholes.
- The Streets division also put into service the City's first 100% electric sweeper.
- Capital Transit saw consistent growth in use through its Demand Response model.
- Transit also received a 12-month overall rider experience rating of 98%. This includes a 12-month overall On Time Percentage of 92.5%.
- The Parking Division continued to focus on improving Parking facilities per the ADA audit.
- 79 Special Event Applications were completed through the new online process.
- Finally, the Fleet Services team did tremendous work keeping the City operational, completing 1254 work orders for nearly 400 vehicles and equipment.

2024 Goals

- The Transportation Systems team will be busy in 2024 with projects and studies, including:
 - o Finishing the transition to a Metropolitan Planning Organization.
 - o Implementing the new Transportation Assets system into daily operations.
 - o Completing up to 5 lane miles of Mill and Overlay work, and over 13 lane miles of Chip and Seal.

- o Evaluating expansion of Capital Transit services to Helena’s North and West Valley, and possibly extending service days and hours of operation.
- o And lastly, implementing an online payment option for permits and parking tickets.

CONCLUSION

In the ongoing pursuit of progress, Helena remains steadfast in collaboration with essential partners like Lewis & Clark County, the State of Montana, East Helena, YWCA, Helena Food Share, National Forest Service, Helena Housing Authority, Rocky Mountain Development Council, United Way, Helena Regional Airport, and various others. The road ahead demands our commitment to addressing challenges, particularly in ensuring affordable housing and enhancing public safety for our vulnerable populations, all while embodying the principles and charitable spirit ingrained in our community.

Hand in hand with our dedicated partners, we are poised not only to meet these challenges but to surpass them, all while upholding our fiscal responsibilities and serving those who have entrusted us with these crucial decisions.

Guided by the City Charter, Helena, as the esteemed seat of our state government, aspires to be a beacon for the future of our great state.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the state of affairs of the City of Helena remains strong.

I thank you all and I am looking forward to serving you in the years to come. God Bless this City, the State of Montana and these United States of America.

Wilmot J. Collins, Mayor

ATTEST:

Clerk of the Commission