

**City of Helena,
Montana**
***Community
Development
Planning Division***
Public Participation Plan
2026

Community Development Department
Planning Division
316 North Park Avenue, Room 445
Helena, Montana 59623





City of
Helena

Contents

Introduction..... 3

Background..... 3

MLUPA Requirements..... 5

 Public Participation Opportunity..... 5

 Planning Commission..... 6

 Land Use Plan and Future Land Use Map..... 6

 Zoning and Subdivision Regulations..... 7

 Case-Specific Public Notice Requirements..... 8

What Should You Expect From Us? 9

Public Participation Principles 10

Goals and Objectives 11

Participation Framework and Tools..... 12

 Information Tools..... 12

 Engagement Tools..... 12

Participation Spectrum 13

When? 14

Where?..... 14

Continuous Information and Involvement..... 14

Participation Feedback 14



Introduction

In accordance with the Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA) in Title 76, Chapter 25 of Montana Code Annotated (MCA), the Planning Division of the City of Helena Community Development Department presents the second version of its Public Participation Plan (PPP). MLUPA creates a comprehensive update to Montana's land use regulations. The City of Helena's PPP provides a framework for communication and engagement to ensure access to public information and continuous public involvement throughout the process to adopt or amend the City's Land Use Plan (LUP) and any associated regulations that require adoption in conformance with the LUP.

MLUPA established a different process for land use decisionmaking. The changes front-load public input, with limited public involvement during permit and application review. Under MLUPA, public involvement in the ministerial decision-making process becomes more limited after the adoption of the LUP and subsequent five-year updates to the long-range comprehensive plan, making opportunities for public involvement during the LUP amendment and update process vital. Where proposed site-specific developments are found to be substantially compliant with the adopted LUP and local regulations, public participation and comment *"must be limited to those impacts or significantly increased impacts that were not previously identified and considered in the adoption, amendment, or update of the land use plan, zoning regulations, or subdivision regulations."* In short, public input will be limited unless the permit or application in question differs significantly from the adopted LUP, zoning, or subdivision regulations.

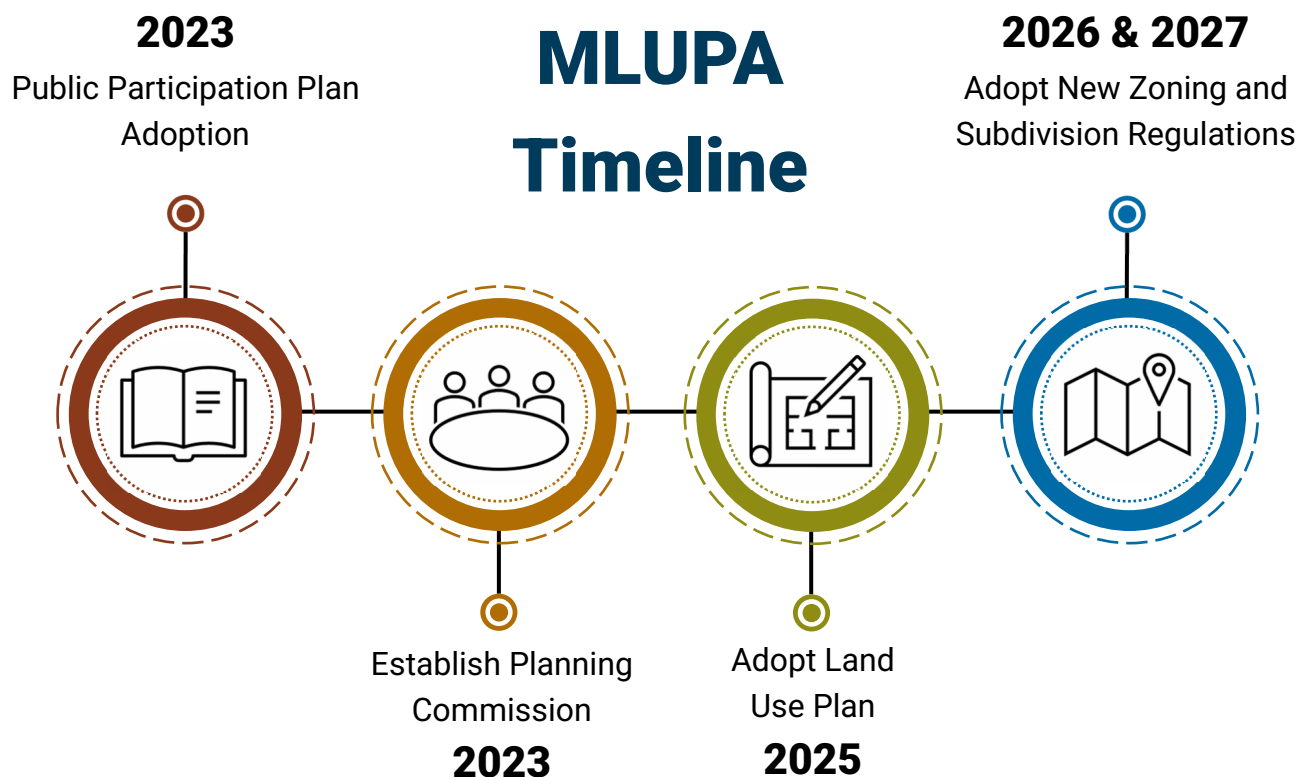
The LUP serves as a starting point for MLUPA compliance and will be revised as needed to align with policies and recommendations adopted by the State of Montana or the Helena City Commission. The City may review the Public Participation Plan periodically to ensure that communication objectives are being achieved and to reflect statutory changes affecting public outreach practices for land use considerations.

Background

The City of Helena's commitment to public involvement is defined in the 2025 Helena Forward Land Use Plan. The LUP defines goals and objectives identifying the importance of encouraging and supporting the continuous improvement of public communication, outreach, and involvement in the planning process. Following adoption of the LUP, the Community Development Director or their designee, as Planning Administrator (defined under the MLUPA), and will ministerially review land use applications that pertain to

zoning actions and subdivisions. These cases will be reviewed against the LUP and adopted regulations to ensure proposed activities conform with both the LUP and City Code. Notification will be sent to adjacent property owners of approved or denied actions as outlined in this PPP. Where a challenge arises to the Planning Administrator's ministerial determinations, appeals may be made, and further public notice will be issued on public hearings for appeals.

The Public Participation Plan establishes the framework detailing our commitment to public involvement throughout the process of adoption, amendment, modification, or rejection of any future land use plans, zoning, or subdivision regulations

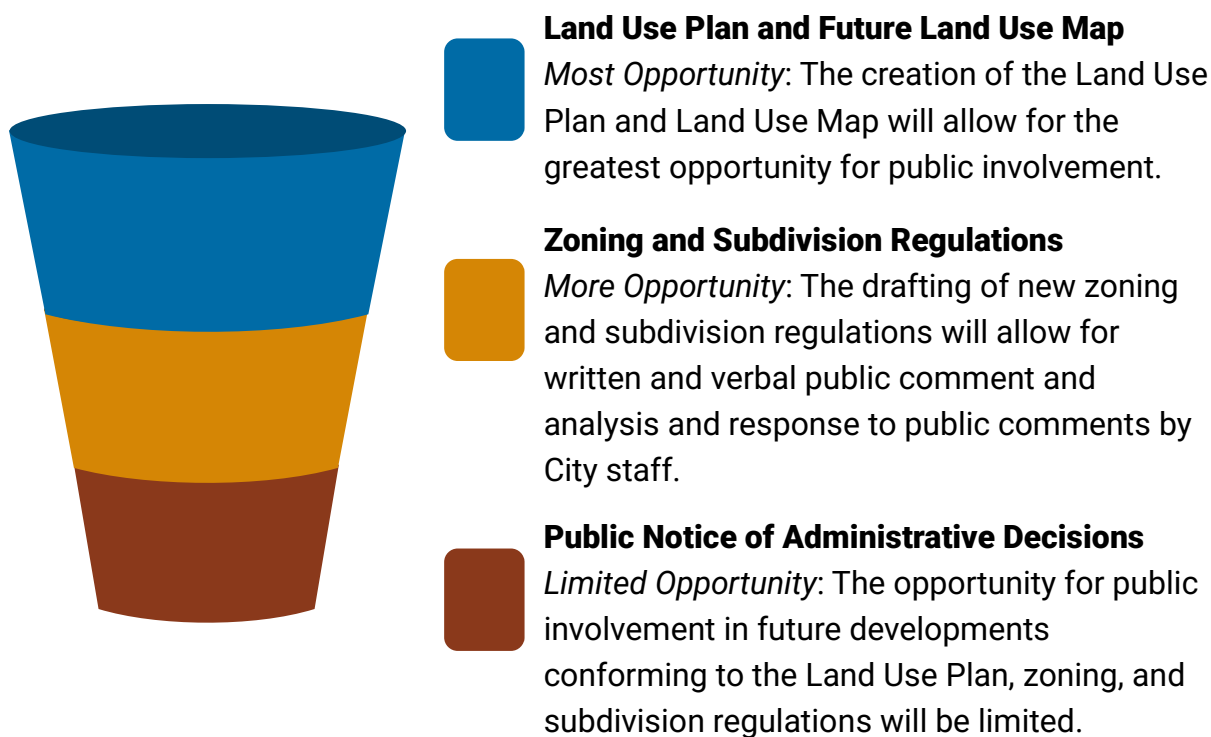


MLUPA Requirements

Public Participation Opportunity

The purpose of this plan is to define a set of strategies that can be employed to ensure that the public is not only informed but also provided ample opportunity to participate in the City's planning processes. The strategies outlined in this document will provide a framework for continuous and extensive public engagement. The public engagement process under MLUPA is broad during the land use planning process and progressively narrows as ministerial processes unfold for site-specific development and land use activities.

Public Participation Opportunity



Planning Commission

The Planning Commission is tasked with reviewing and making recommendations to the City Commission regarding the development, adoption, review, and the approval or denial of a Land Use Plan, Future Land Use Map, and updates to the City's Zoning Regulations, Zoning Map, and Subdivision Regulations. They are also the appeals board to the ministerial determinations of the Planning Administrator. The Planning Commission will hold standing meetings on the second Tuesday of each month in-person, virtually, or a hybrid of both. Additional meetings will be held as needed.

Meetings will typically be scheduled for 6:00pm but may be held at other times according to the needs of the meeting subject or to the needs of the community. In-person meetings may be held in the City-County Building or within the community in various locations as the work of the Planning Commission dictates and requires. Certain Planning Commission meetings may be of particular community importance and should be held throughout the community, particularly with respect to adopting amendments to the LUP, Future Land Use Map, or major zoning and subdivision regulation amendments.

Notices of each meeting will be provided as required of City policy and as required in §76-25-106, MCA. All meetings will be properly posted on the City website on the Public Meetings calendar. If any such meetings are held as official public hearings (policy recommendations, map amendments, ordinance change recommendations, appeals to ministerial decisions), these meetings will also be posted in the legal section of the Helena Independent Record. Additionally, notice may also be provided virtually using other platforms or publicly posted throughout the community to broaden reach, where applicable. Use of public notice to adjacent property owners and posting signs at the site of proposed site-specific developments, other land use activities, or appeals of ministerial decisions will be handled in accordance with this PPP.

Land Use Plan and Future Land Use Map

The intent of the LUP is to identify opportunities for the development of land within the City of Helena and its greater jurisdictional area for housing, businesses, agriculture, public lands, institutions, and the allocation of natural resources. The plan acknowledges and addresses impacts of development on adjacent properties, the community, the natural environment, public services, facilities, and addresses potential natural hazards that may limit development in certain areas of the city. The LUP includes the Future Land Use Map (FLUM), which establishes the City's anticipated jurisdictional area and the future land use boundaries required to meet projected housing requirements over the next 20 years, as defined in the LUP.

Zoning and Subdivision Regulations

The City is required to ensure that its zoning, zoning map, and subdivision regulations align with the LUP. The MLUPA requires that city zoning and subdivision regulations meet specific statutory requirements, including adopting a zoning map that aligns with the Future Land Use Map and implementing best practices to encourage the development of new housing to meet the projected housing demand for the next 20 years. The zoning, zoning map, and subdivision regulations adopted by the City Commission following the recommendation of the Planning Commission set forth the ministerial decision-making processes of the City's Planning Division.

Long-Range and Current Land Use Case Types

Under MLUPA, land use case types, whether a long-range planning policy amendment, regulatory amendment, or current land use cases, are as follows:

- **Text/Map Amendments**
 - LUP Text and FLUM Amendments, including adoption of Neighborhood Plans
 - Zoning Map Amendments (Zone Change and Pre-Zone)
 - Zoning and Subdivision Regulation Text Amendments
- **Site-Specific Development/Zoning Permits/Land Use Permits**
 - Multi-Family Residential and Commercial Site Review
 - Subdivision Preliminary Plats
- **Conditional Use Permits**
- **Variances**
 - Zoning
 - Subdivision
- **Ministerial Decision Appeals**
 - Zoning
 - Subdivision
- **Final Plats**
 - Administrative Minor Subdivision Final Plats
 - Final Plats Exempt from Subdivision Review
 - Subdivision Final Plats (following preliminary plat approval)

Case-Specific Public Notice Requirements

Public notice and requirements associated with the case types presented in the previous section will be made as shown in the table below. Public participation methods noted below will be conducted at a minimum, and any additional public outreach methods employed will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis depending on the nature and intensity of the case under consideration.

Case Type	New or Increased Impact Found?	Public Participation Type	Public Participation Duration (Business Days)	Public Participation Noticing Method
LUP Text, FLUM, Zoning Ordinance, or Subdivision Regulation Amendments (<i>Planning Comm. and City Comm.</i>)	N/A	Public Hearing	15 Days	Website, Newspaper, Interactive Public Engagement
Zoning Map Amendment (<i>Preliminary Determination Hearing</i>)	N/A	Public Hearing	15 Days	Website, Newspaper, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Zoning Map Amendment (<i>Planning Commission Impact Finding Hearing, if warranted based on preliminary determination</i>)	Yes	Public Hearing	15 Days	Website, Newspaper, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Zoning Map Amendment (<i>City Commisison Hearing</i>)	N/A	Public Hearing	15 Days	Website, Newspaper, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site

Case Type	New or Increased Impact Found?	Public Participation Type	Public Participation Duration (Business Days)	Public Participation Noticing Method
Site-Specific Development, Zoning Permits, or Land Use Permits	*No	*Public Notice	15 Days	Website
	Yes	Public Comment Period	15 Days	Website, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Conditional Use Permits	No	Public Notice	15 Days	Website, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
	Yes	Public Comment Period	15 Days	Website, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Zoning and Subdivision Variances	N/A	Public Notice	15 Days	Website, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Ministerial Decision Appeals (<i>Planning Comm. and City Comm.</i>)	N/A	Public Hearing	15 Days	Website, Newspaper, Letter to Adjacents, Sign at Site
Final Plats	N/A	N/A	N/A	Placed on City Commission Agenda

- Per SB121, until June 30, 2027, for site specific developments, zoning permits, and land use permits determined by the Planning Administrator to have no impact, public participation will be via a public comment process; after which time it will revert to a public notice only.

What Should You Expect From Us?

At a minimum, the City, consultants, and contractors must allow the community access to:

- Draft planning documents and regulations;
- An opportunity to provide written and verbal comments;
- The chance to be heard at public meetings;
- A pathway for electronic communication to address any questions or concerns

- involving the planning and implementation processes, documents, comments, or any updates to the process; and
- Access to the analysis and response to public comment.

Public Participation Principles

City staff, consultants, and contractors will be guided by the following principles:

1. Thought and Purpose

Public participation helps to bring thought and meaning to our planning and decision-making process. The values imparted into planning and regulation documents through public participation will help preserve the City of Helena's culture, identity, and prosperity.

2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity is the heart and soul of our community. The personal identity of every member of our community has intrinsic value and adds to its ever enriching and endearing character. It is our goal to ensure that all members of the community feel welcome to participate in the planning process and have their voice heard.

- We will continue to listen and evolve our participation tools and strategies;
- We will encourage all members of the public to stay informed and participate in public engagement events; and
- We will commit to making all communication and events accessible in the planning and regulation drafting process.

3. Transparency and Trust

Clear communication will be provided at each step of the planning process and the City will retain all material from public participation events as part of the public record.

4. Open, Adaptable, and Evolving

It is important to maintain a continuous dialogue between community members and the City, consultants, and contractors. Likewise, it is imperative that we continue to seek out new means and methods for improving communication and engagement activities through evaluation of participant feedback and public comment.

Goals and Objectives

City staff, consultants, and contractors will strive to achieve the following goals and objectives when engaging the public:

Goal 1: Create Consistency

Create a consistent approach to communication including clear expectations for where information can be found. Aim to improve current technology, create better processes, and continue to explore new methods of communication.

Objective A: Create Communication Expectations

Adopt policies for City staff, consultants, and contractors to follow, detailing how, when, and where information will be communicated to the public.

Objective B: Improve Customer Communication

Optimize and standardize publication of Planning Division projects to the City of Helena website. Periodically review communication processes and tools to evaluate their effectiveness.

Goal 2: Engage the Public

Receiving public involvement in planning and decision making is critical. We are committed to improving and increasing access to public participation opportunities and periodically refining engagement expectations.

Objective A: Create Public Engagement Expectations

The City will utilize an array of outreach methods to keep the community informed and to allow for robust engagement, including project process details, project updates, and ensuring access to relevant documents and information.

Objective B: Improve Public Written Comment and Feedback

We will identify and provide an easily accessible pathway to receive and retain written public comments and will provide analysis and feedback when necessary.

Participation Framework and Tools

The City will employ a range of public engagement strategies and varying levels of participation by the community. The strategies are implemented to set consistent expectations for public communications and involvement opportunities. This is an adaptable framework, and the following tools are not all-encompassing. Rather, the listings help illustrate the level of involvement the community can expect from the City at each step.

Information Tools

The following methods can be used for sharing information about planning processes and projects:

- Legal Notice in Public Newspaper or other means in compliance with MLUPA
- Neighbor Notification
- Public Notice
- Signs
- City of Helena Website
- Dedicated project websites
- Be Heard Helena
- Social Media
- News/Media/Advisory

Engagement Tools

The following methods can be used for gathering public input about planning processes and projects:

- Be Heard Helena
- Dedicated project websites
- ArcGIS digital participation tools
- Workshops
- Charrettes
- Storefront and “Pop-up” Studios
- Open Houses
- Presence at Public Events

Participation Spectrum

	Inform/Consult	Involve	Collaborate
Goal	Provide information in a timely manner, obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions.	Work with the public to make sure concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making process.
Promise	"We will keep you informed, listen, and acknowledge your concerns."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are reflected in the decisions made."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible."
What Part of the Planning Process?	Public notice and comments regarding ministerial land use decisions.	Opportunity for oral and written comment with analysis and feedback from City staff.	Interactive engagement opportunities.

When?

The updates to the LUP and the drafting of updated zoning and subdivision regulations will require public engagement at the *Involve* and *Collaborate* levels of the public engagement spectrum. It is important to take an active role in opportunities to be involved and provide feedback, being mindful that new land use plans and regulations will determine the outcome of future land use decisions that may allow for by-right development situations with limited opportunity for public hearings and comment.

Where?

Interactive and exciting engagement opportunities will be held at public events throughout the City. Our goal is to ensure that these events are both equitably distributed and accessible to allow for all of Helena's voices and concerns to be heard. Participants may also be asked to give feedback on how to improve future engagement tools, processes, and events.

Continuous Information and Involvement

The drafting and adoption of the LUP and subsequent land use regulations is an extensive process, providing opportunities for continuous community engagement and feedback. Those who wish to remain involved throughout planning processes can stay up to date on current events by following activity on the City of Helena's website, dedicated project websites, or by contacting the Planning Division office. Planning Commission meeting agendas, meeting materials, and minutes will be made available on the City website prior to each meeting. All public engagement material will be retained as public record and be available upon request.

Participation Feedback

Feedback from community members on the adequacy of public involvement opportunities and feedback on lessons learned from participation events is essential to ensuring a healthy communication stream. Using this combination of feedback, the Planning Division staff and working partners will determine next steps to ensure continuous public engagement. The Planning Division staff, consultants, and contractors will also provide an analysis and response to public comments and engagement activities at the *Consult*, *Involve*, and *Collaborate* levels of the participation framework.