

WHITEFISH CITY COUNCIL
January 5, 2026
SPECIAL SESSION AT 5:00 PM

1) **Call to Order**

Deputy Mayor Sweeney called the meeting to order. Councilors present were Feury, Davis, Qunell, Caltabiano and Norton. Mayor Muhlfeld was absent. Staff members present were City Manager Meeker, City Clerk Howke, Housing Coordinator Zamoyski, and Planner Macdonald.

2) Interviews

City Council interviewed Ryan Walther and incumbent Keegan Siebenaler for the Climate Action Plan Committee; and Kurt Herzon (via phone), Nina Heller and John Flink for the Whitefish Lake and Lakeshore Protection Committee.

3) Public Comment

None

4) Appointment

Deputy Mayor Sweeney re-appointed, with Council confirmation, Keegan Siebenaler to the Climate Action Plan committee for a two-year term.

Deputy Mayor Sweeney appointed, with Council confirmation, Kurt Herzog to the Whitefish Lake and Lakeshore Protection Committee.

5) Adjourn

Deputy Mayor adjourned the meeting at 6:19 pm and opened the work session.

/s/Francis Sweeney

Deputy Mayor Sweeney

Attest:

/s/Michelle Howke

Michelle Howke, Whitefish City Clerk

WHITEFISH CITY COUNCIL

January 5, 2026

7:10 P.M.

1) CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Muhlfeld called the meeting to order. Councilors present were Qunell, Feury, Caltabiano, Davis, Sweeney, and Norton. City Staff present were, City Clerk Howke, City Manager Meeker, City Attorney Jacobs, Finance Director Gospodarek, Planning and Building Director Taylor, Public Works Director Workman, Parks and Recreation Director Butts, Deputy Police Chief Conway, Fire Chief Hadley, Planner Macdonald and Long-Range Planner Tiefenbach. Approximately 29 people were in the audience and 3 attended virtually.

2) PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mayor Muhlfeld asked Terri Feury to lead the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance.

3) OATH OF OFFICE AND SEATING OF COUNCIL ([YouTube Video 4:33](#))

a) Administration of ceremonial oath of office to three (3) City Councilors – Mayor Muhlfeld

Mayor Muhlfeld administered the oath of office for Councilors Caltabiano, Davis and Feury who were re-elected during the 2025 General Election.

b) Election of Deputy Mayor

Councilor Feury, seconded by Councilor Caltabiano, made a motion to elect Councilor Sweeney to serve as Deputy Mayor. The motion carried.

4) PRESENTATION ([YouTube Video 12:05](#))

a) [Glacier Nordic Club](#): Winter Operations Storage Building at Big Mountain Trailhead (p.101)

Jennie Bender, Glacier Nordic Club Executive Director, provided an update on the storage building at the Big Mountain Trailhead. A copy is provided in the packet on the website.

5) COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE PUBLIC– (This time is set aside for the public to comment on items that are either on the agenda, but not a public hearing or on items not on the agenda. City officials do not respond during these comments but may respond or follow-up later on the agenda or at another time. The mayor has the option of limiting such communications to three minutes depending on the number of citizens who want to comment and the length of the meeting agenda)

([YouTube Video 20:14](#))

Jan Metzmaker reminded the Council that she previously presented data showing a serious and growing deer problem in the city and asked for an update on the long-promised deer management plan. She said the situation has worsened, raises safety and disease concerns, and offered to gather information from other cities.

She also expressed concern about increasingly bright LED string lights around town, calling them intrusive and inconsistent with the lighting ordinance. She asked the Council to review enforcement and better educate the community about light-trespass rules.

Toby Scott repeated earlier suggestions: painting signal boxes, adding a traffic light at Baker and 13th, and installing more EV chargers. He also questioned why EV charging spots require a leased permit during business hours after receiving a warning for parking his hybrid there. He suggested allowing limited public use instead.

Manager Meeker explained that the leased-parking rule applies only on weekdays from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the City currently has no way to bill users by the hour for charging. Outside those hours, charging is free.

Mary Beth Moran of Habitat for Humanity said Habitat has more building capacity than available land and wants to construct 22 townhomes on the snow lot using a Community Land Trust model. After reviewing the Depot Park Townhomes plans, Habitat believes it can build the units mostly as designed for under \$350,000 each, or \$250,000–\$300,000 with small changes.

Habitat would build the 30–80% AMI units using staff, volunteers, and homeowner sweat equity, making them eligible for low-interest state mortgages. Units above 80% AMI would be built by their partner, Iron Star Construction. Iron Star could start in spring 2026 and finish by January 2027; Habitat would finish by December 2027.

Moran highlighted the strong community benefits, volunteer involvement, and local partnerships that support Habitat's mixed-income, co-building model.

Garrett Roberson of Habitat Flathead highlighted the group's long, successful history building affordable homes and said their construction capacity is stronger than ever. He emphasized their large volunteer base and ability to design cost-effective, volunteer-friendly homes. He encouraged the Council to review Habitat's proposed designs, noting that small adjustments could lower costs while keeping the homes attractive and well built.

Cameron Blake said the Glacier Nordic Club serves about 3,000 skiers a year and then voiced support for Habitat Flathead's mixed-income housing model. He explained that Habitat can build lower-income units affordably through volunteer labor, discounts, and special mortgage programs, while private builders would handle the 80–150% AMI units. He stressed the value of down-payment assistance and praised Habitat's strong education and mentorship programs that help homeowners succeed long-term.

Kisa Davison of Iron Star Construction said her team has reviewed the approved plans and is confident they can build the homes at reasonable costs. She sees many opportunities for cost-saving adjustments and is eager to discuss them with the City. Iron Star builds 20–30 homes a year and has efficient systems and strong subcontractor relationships that would benefit the project.

Her team is ready to start, and a late-spring launch fits their schedule due to delays on other jobs. She stressed the need for timely Council decisions to lock in pricing. Davison highlighted the rare partnership between the City, Habitat, the Land Trust, and a private builder, calling it a strong community effort to create affordable, attainable homeownership.

Rhonda Fitzgerald voiced strong support for the Glacier Nordic Club's storage building and praised the program's long-term community impact. On the Depot Park Townhomes, she reminded the Council that the original design was created with extensive neighborhood input and urged caution with any changes—value engineering is fine, but the community's work should be respected. She emphasized the need to move forward quickly, noting that creating homeownership opportunities is challenging but urgently needed after ten years of effort.

Mayre Flowers of Citizens for Better Flathead urged stronger City–County cooperation on lakeshore protection as the County begins updating its regulations. She said CBF will recommend improvements such as requiring a surveyor to mark the lakeshore protection zone before work begins, something Whitefish already does.

She also raised concerns about an after-the-fact lakeshore permit for a Whitefish Lake property where blasting occurred without a required survey. The permit includes artificial structures not allowed under County rules and has had no public hearing. Flowers said the permit appears inconsistent with current regulations and asked the Council to urge the County to delay action until proper information and review occur.

Richard Hildner urged the Council to act quickly on the proposed updates to Title 6 for non-motorized vehicles, e-bikes, and golf carts. He pointed to new high-speed electric bikes as a growing safety concern and suggested looking at how Columbia Falls regulates them. He encouraged proactive rules for motorized electronic vehicles while making sure any changes still support mobility-impaired residents.

Keegan Siebenaler of Shelter Whitefish urged the Council to revise the 2025 Housing Needs Assessment, saying the current numbers underestimate Whitefish’s true housing shortage. He said both market-rate and subsidized housing are lacking and relying on pre-2020 data gives a false picture of demand. He supported the consultants’ recommendation for higher housing targets and asked the Council to formally adopt updated figures, noting they are essential for accurate housing policy, land-use planning, and zoning reforms. He stressed that planning for only 100–150 units per year is not realistic if the real need is closer to 300–400.

Scott Wurster, 222 Montana Avenue, stated he would appreciate hearing some discussion tonight at the appropriate time about what the current status of the O’Shaughnessy property is at the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Edgewood Place.

Mack supported the revised Shelter Whitefish housing needs assessment, saying it raises valid points that counter the current narrative. He stressed the importance of creating the capacity to build more housing—even if not all units are ultimately built—and encouraged expanding opportunities for additional housing development.

“Z” criticized the City and police during public comment regarding an ongoing lawsuit over an alleged racial-profiling traffic stop. She attempted to show a poster and play body-cam audio despite the Mayor’s request not to, citing active litigation and rules of civil dialogue. She argued the stop was racially motivated, questioned the delay in issuing the citation, urged the public to watch the released footage, and said the incident was wrong and should concern the community.

- 6) **COMMUNICATIONS FROM VOLUNTEER BOARDS** ([YouTube Video 1:09:57](#))
- a) **Consideration of approval of the Whitefish Lake and Lakeshore Protection Committee Letter to the County Commissioners regarding Shoreline Development Concerns (p.104)**

The Council showed support for the letter to be forwarded to the County Commissioners.

- b) **Consideration of a request from the Whitefish Community Library Board of Trustees to appoint Trustee-in-Training (p.108)**

Kelly Peppmeier, Whitefish Community Library Board of Trustees Chair presented the letter that is provided in the packet.

Councilor Qunell made a motion, seconded by Councilor Caltabiano, to appoint Dr. Moira McKinnon Linam to the Library Board of Trustees as Trustee-in-Training. The motion carried.

Toby Scott said the Council's letter to the County Commissioners has been updated to include two overlooked lakeshore violations. He plans to attend the January 14 County Planning Board meeting to push for an interlocal agreement and is also working on changes to state law so the City can manage the county side of Whitefish Lake. He assured the Council that efforts are underway to protect the full lakeshore.

Councilor Caltabiano reported the Bike/Ped Committee met, and discussed and supported the drafted ordinance by the police department regarding motorized vehicles on paths.

- 7) **CONSENT AGENDA** (The consent agenda is a means of expediting routine matters that require the Council's action. Debate does not typically occur on consent agenda items. Any member of the Council may remove any item for debate. Such items will typically be debated and acted upon prior to proceeding to the rest of the agenda.) ([YouTube Video 1:15:24](#))
- a) [Minutes](#) from December 1, 2025, Special Session (p.112)
 - b) [Minutes](#) from December 1, 2025, Regular Meeting (p.113)
 - c) [Minutes](#) from December 15, 2025, Closed Executive Session
 - d) [Minutes](#) from December 15, 2025, Special Session (p.116)

Councilor Caltabiano made a motion, seconded by Councilor Sweeney to approve the Consent Agenda. Councilor Norton had corrections to the December 1, 2025, Special Session minutes; the minutes reflect that she was absent, but she was in attendance. (City Clerk Howke went back and realized she had stated that Councilor Caltabiano and Feury were also absent but were in attendance). The motion to approve the Consent Agenda as corrected carried.

- 8) **PUBLIC HEARINGS** (Items will be considered for action after public hearings) (Resolution No. 07-33 establishes a 30-minute time limit for applicant's land use presentations.)
- a) [Consideration](#) of a request from Whitefish School District for a Conditional Use Permit to develop an expansion of academic and athletic facilities located at 1143 E. 4th Street, zoned as WR-1 (One-Family Residential District) (WCUP 25-13) (p.119) ([YouTube Video 1:15:34](#))

Planner Lauren Macdonald presented her staff report that is provided in the packet on the website.

Mayor Muhlfeld opened the Public Hearing.

Brandon Theis explained that the school project involves two separate bond-funded components: an athletics facility and an academic building addition. The athletics project includes a new track and field, 1,500-seat bleachers, concessions, restrooms, a practice field, a stormwater pond, and a new sidewalk on 4th Street. The academic project adds a two-story building on Pine Avenue and reworks parking, creating about 388 total stalls—roughly 20 more than today. Overall goals include improving pedestrian safety and traffic flow.

There being no public comment, Mayor Muhlfeld closed the Public Hearing and turned matters over the Council for consideration.

Councilor Norton made a motion, seconded by Councilor Sweeney to approve WCUP 25-13, the Findings of Fact in the staff report, and recommended 11 conditions of approval as recommended by the Whitefish Planning Commission. The motion carried.

- b) **Consideration of a request from Little Bear Developments No 4, LLC for a Conditional Use Permit to add a Beer and Wine liquor license to expand sales at Bonsai Brewery, located at 549 Wisconsin Avenue, zoned WB-1 (Limited Commercial District) (WCUP 25-12) (p.182) ([YouTube Video 1:23:46](#))**

Planning and Building Director Dave Taylor presented his staff report that is provided in the packet.

Mayor Muhlfeld opened the Public Hearing.

David Wright, 25 Fairway View, applicant stated they took over the operations of Bonsai Brewery at the end of June. Food and beverage industry is challenging. They intend to keep Bonsai running in the same vein as the previous owners as a community focal point. From a business point of view, the ability to be open for an extra three hours in the summer (11:00 am to 10:00 pm) would make a huge difference to their business. They are stacking their license on top of that current brewery license. They are going to remain brewery, predominantly selling beer that they brew onsite. This license will allow them to have a full kitchen in the main building.

There being no further public comment, Mayor Muhlfeld closed the Public Hearing and turned matters over to the Council for consideration.

Councilor Qunell made a motion, seconded by Councilor Norton to approve WCUP 25-12, with the eight conditions of approval. The motion carried.

- c) **Resolution No. 26-01; A Resolution approving an increase in ambulance fees and establishing new fees for certain fire rescue services provided by the Whitefish Fire Department (p.213) ([YouTube Video 1:34:23](#))**

City Manager Meeker reviewed her staff report and clarified how ambulance billing works for uninsured patients: they are billed directly, with occasional write-offs approved by the Fire Chief. Rates cannot differ for uninsured patients due to Medicare/Medicaid rules, and the City's roughly 50% collection rate is largely the result of required write-offs.

She said the City cannot offer free service to uninsured residents without another funding source, but the \$59-per-year Rescue Care program provides full ambulance coverage for residents and property owners. Those with high-deductible insurance may still face large bills unless enrolled in Rescue Care.

Council discussed fairness, billing for residents versus visitors, and how higher rates lower collection rates. Norton stressed promoting Rescue Care, while Meeker cautioned that enrollment cannot grow too large without affecting revenue needed to operate the service.

Mayor Muhlfeld opened the Public Hearing. There being no public comment, Mayor Muhlfeld closed the Public Hearing and turned matters over to the Council for consideration.

Councilor Sweeney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Qunell to adopt Resolution No. 26-01; A Resolution approving an increase in ambulance fees and establishing new fees for certain fire rescue services provided by the Whitefish Fire Department. Councilor Davis said the ambulance

billing system is unfair and hurts uninsured and under-insured people, and he cannot support raising rates. He believes no one should fear calling EMS and that the broader medical billing system is broken. Councilor Norton agreed and suggested exploring a fund to help those who cannot pay. She noted ambulance services often lose money but are essential. Councilor Qunell asked about collections, and staff explained that accounts only go to collections if someone stops following a payment plan, and the City controls when that happens. **The motion carried 5-1, Councilor Davis voting in opposition.**

Mayor Muhlfeld called for a recess at 9:17pm and reconvened at 9:27pm.

9) COMMUNICATIONS FROM FIRE CHIEF

- a) **Consideration to award the consulting contract for the Community Wildfire Protection Plan and authorize the City Manager to finalize the professional services agreement (p.242) ([YouTube Video 2:17:14](#))**

Fire Chief Hadley presented his staff report that is provided in the packet. **Councilor Norton made a motion, seconded by Councilor Sweeney to award the consulting contract for the Community Wildfire Protection Plan to SWCA Environmental Consultants in the amount of \$87,364.73 and authorize the City Manager to finalize the professional services agreement.** Mayor Muhlfeld disclosed that SWCA Environmental Consultants took control of his company River Design Group, 18 months ago. He had no role in the selection process. He will have no affiliation with the project. He will not be voting at any point on the adoption of this plan, and he has no financial gain. **The motion carried.**

10) COMMUNICATION FROM PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR

- a) **Resolution No. 26-02; A Resolution authorizing the submittal of an MCEP Infrastructure Planning Grant Application (p.245) ([YouTube Video 2:22:39](#))**

Public Works Director Craig Workman presented his staff report. **Councilor Norton made a motion, seconded by Councilor Sweeney to adopt Resolution No. 26-02; A Resolution authorizing the submittal of an MCEP Infrastructure Planning Grant Application. The motion carried.**

11) COMMUNICATION FROM FINANCE DIRECTOR

- a) **Review and consideration of the annual 2025 Impact Fee Report (p.249) ([YouTube Video 2:24:32](#))**

Finance Director Lanie Gospodarek presented the 2025 Impact Fee Report. Councilor Davis questioned why the proposed fees are dropping so much, saying it shifts costs from developers to taxpayers and creates confusion. Manager Meeker explained that updated peak-demand data from 2022–2024 requires the fees to be lowered. Impact fees are recalculated every five years, and another update may occur in three to five years. **Councilor Norton made a motion, seconded by Councilor Feury to accept the 2025 Impact Fee Report. The motion carried.**

12) COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY MANAGER ([YouTube Video 2:36:28](#))

- a) **Written report enclosed with the packet. Questions from Mayor and Council? (p.258)**

None

- b) **Other items arising between December 31st through January 5th**

Manager Meeker said two Fire Marshal orders were issued to the O'Piccolos property owners, but with no response, the case now needs to move to court. Director Workman added that an asbestos remediation

company has been hired but has not provided a timeline. Councilor Sweeney urged the City to pursue court action to ensure debris removal, and the Council agreed.

- c) **Consideration of a request from Northwest Montana Community Land Trust to release the deed restriction on 714 and 610 Trailview Way and request funds from the City (p.259)**

Kim Morisaki, Executive Director of the Northwest Montana Community Land Trust, reported that they have an opportunity to purchase 610 Trailview Way and are requesting \$20,000 from the Community Housing Fund to support that purchase. She noted a setback with 714 Trailview Way and will know by Wednesday whether that sale can proceed. She also learned that the owner of 506 Trailview Way may be interested in selling as well.

Councilor Davis made a motion, seconded by Councilor Qunell to approve the land trust request pertaining to 610 and 714 Trailview Way along with the request for \$40K. The motion carried.

13) COMMUNICATIONS FROM MAYOR AND CITY COUNCILORS ([YouTube Video 2:44:21](#))

- a) **Letter from Shelter WF requesting the City Council adopt the community housing needs projections in the Shelter WF Revised Community Housing Needs Assessment (p.269)**
- b) **Letter from Shelter WF response to the Agnew Beck memo regarding Whitefish Community Housing Needs Assessment Talking Points (p.280)**

Mayor Muhlfeld recommended delaying the discussion until the next meeting so Council can fully review the materials. Planner Alan Tiefenbach said housing will be addressed in a February 2 work session after the Planning Commission reviews it. Council will receive the full Vision Whitefish 2045 draft this week and start work sessions on January 20. Tiefenbach explained that the Planning Commission will determine whether the updated housing numbers would actually change policy. Councilor Davis confirmed that the Commission will review those impacts first.

Councilor Sweeney stated he thinks the appropriate time to discuss this is during the February 2nd work session. Council agreed.

- c) **Letter from Terry Marasco regarding teachers and affordable housing (p.282)**

None

- d) Appointments of City Council to Various Board, Commissions, and Committees**
- i) **Bike/Ped Path Committee – Councilor Caltabiano current designee**
Councilor Caltabiano to continue serving on Bike/Ped Path Committee.
- ii) **Climate Action Plan Committee – Councilor Davis current designee**
Councilor Norton to serve on the Climate Action Plan Committee.
- iii) **Community Housing Committee – Councilor Davis current designee**
Councilor Davis continue serving on the Community Housing Committee.
- iv) **Impact Fee Advisory Committee – Councilor Caltabiano current designee**
Councilor Caltabiano continue serving on the Impact Fee Advisory Committee.
- v) **Insurance (Medical) Committee - (2) City Councilors (Ex-Officio members)**
Councilors Feury and Norton current designee
Councilors Norton and Feury continue serving on the Insurance Committee.
- vi) **Legacy Land Advisory Committee, Recreation/Conservation Committee (LLAC)**
– (2) City Councilors, Councilors Feury and Qunell current designee
Councilors Feury and Qunell continue serving on the LLAC.

- vii) Whitefish Trail Operations Committee – (1) City Councilor – Councilor Feury current designee**
Councilor Feury continue serving on the Whitefish Trail Ops.
- viii) Montana West Economic Development Board of Directors – Councilor Caltabiano current designee**
Councilor Caltabiano continue to serve on the MWEB Board of Directors.
- ix) Park Board – Councilor Sweeney current, Councilor Caltabiano alternate**
Councilor Sweeney and Councilor Caltabiano (alternate) continue serving on the Park Board.
- x) Planning Commission – Councilor Sweeney, and Councilors Davis and Feury alternates**
Councilors Sweeney and Davis, Feury and Norton serve on the Planning Commission (All Council member can serve as alternates) It is the responsibility of the primary members to communicate with other Council members to serve as alternate.
- xi) Real Estate Advisory Committee – Mayor and Councilor Feury current designee**
Mayor Muhlfeld and Councilor Feury continue serving on Real Estate Advisory Committee.
- xii) Resort Tax Advisory Committee – Councilor Feury current designee**
Councilor Feury continue serving on the Resort Tax Advisory Committee.
- xiii) Tree Advisory Committee – Councilor Norton current designee**
Councilor Norton continue with Caltabiano as alternate on the Tree Advisory Committee.
- xiv) Whitefish Lake Institute – Mayor and Councilor Feury current designee**
Mayor Muhlfeld and Councilor Feury continue serving on the WLI.

Council Comments.

Councilor Feury said he is grateful to continue serving and praised the teamwork of the Council and staff.

Councilor Norton raised several items: appreciation for “Z’s” passion for civil rights; questions about progress on the deer management plan (a spring work session is planned); concerns about LED string lights, which would require amending the Dark Skies ordinance; interest in a traffic signal at 13th and Baker (a costly project needing MDT involvement); possible artwork on signal boxes (requires MDT approval and an artist proposal); EV charging comments; and Habitat for Humanity’s interest in the Depot Park Townhomes. Staff suggested issuing an RFP since multiple parties are now interested, but the Mayor postponed that discussion.

Councilor Davis thanked voters, apologized for earlier frustration, and asked for a future discussion on ambulance billing practices. He also supported taking time to evaluate the Habitat proposal with partners.

Councilor Sweeney said the Habitat/Iron Star opportunity is significant and should be prioritized soon. He asked about attendance at an upcoming County Planning Board meeting on lakeshore issues. Councilor Qunell welcomed returning councilors and emphasized maintaining respectful dialogue in Council chambers. He also praised the Glacier Nordic Club.

Councilor Caltabiano criticized “Z’s” use of imagery equating police with hate groups, calling it harmful and unacceptable.

Mayor Muhlfeld congratulated retiring Fire Department employee Scott Alexander on his long service.

14) ADJOURNMENT (Resolution 08-10 establishes 11:00 p.m. as end of meeting unless extended to 11:30 by majority)

Mayor Muhlfeld adjourned the meeting at 10:22 p.m.

/s/John Muhlfeld

Mayor Muhlfeld

Attest:

/s/Michelle Howke

Michelle Howke, Whitefish City Clerk