

## WHITEFISH CITY COUNCIL

January 20, 2026

7:10 P.M.

### 1) CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Muhlfeld called the meeting to order. Councilors present were Qunell, Feury, Davis, Sweeney, and Norton. Councilor Caltabiano was absent. 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, Police Chief Kelch and Alan Tiefenbach. Approximately 35 people were in the audience and 9 attended virtually.

### 2) PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mayor Muhlfeld asked Chris Schustrom to lead the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance.

### 3) 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 1:22](#))

Daniel Sidder reported that Housing Whitefish has now helped 100 households, nearly 200 people, through the Workforce Rental Assistance program, distributing about \$320,000 in aid. The average \$277 per household goes back into the local economy. The program now involves 72 employers and 55 landlords.

He thanked the Council and noted they are close to meeting their matching goal for the year. Regarding the Depot Park Townhomes, he said the main barrier is the lien on the property. Housing Whitefish cannot move forward without a clear timeline for removing it and wants the Council to ensure that issue is resolved before issuing an RFP.

Julio Delgado, Karrow Avenue, raised concerns about how the Glacier Twins use Memorial Field and the money they receive from their long-term \$1-per-year lease and the cell tower revenue. He believes their financial reports show questionable expenses, misuse of funds meant for field improvements, and a lack of transparency. He argued the agreement gives the Twins too much control, limits public access, and harms local student athletes. He urged the Council to take back oversight, review the agreement, and require accountability, saying he can prove the Twins have not acted in good faith and that he will continue pursuing a remedy.

Ryan Keifer, Baker Avenue, urged the Council not to repeal the Architectural Review Committee (ARC). He said the ARC is essential for maintaining Whitefish's architectural quality and preventing poorly designed, corporate-style buildings. He explained that the committee regularly helps applicants improve designs to fit the community's character. Removing the ARC would eliminate enforcement, allow unchecked development, and harm the town's appearance. He asked the Council to protect Whitefish and reject the ordinance.

Eric Payne urged the Council not to repeal the ARC. He said his decades of experience working with the committee showed that it helps developers create projects that reflect Whitefish's character, not block

them. As a local contractor and architect, he values the ARC's collaborative approach and noted that similar committees exist in other mountain towns. He emphasized that the ARC's volunteer makeup keeps it connected to the community and its goals.

Mary Beth Moran, Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity, Geddes Avenue, supported Housing Whitefish's request to issue an RFP for the Depot Park Townhomes now, even with the lien still in place. Habitat for Humanity needs enough time for its homeowner selection and construction process, which takes several months. She is confident the lien will be resolved and urged the Council to circulate the RFP soon. She thanked them for their transparency and use of an RFP process.

Leanne Galaz urged the Council to stop cooperating with DHS, ICE, and CBP. She cited reports of civil and human rights violations in Minneapolis and said similar agencies operate locally. She shared her own negative encounter with CBP and argued that these federal agencies should not use city resources or be involved in local policing. She asked the Council to take a stance of non-cooperation to protect the community.

Reverend Jon Umdenstock, Somers Avenue, seconded the same proposal that Leanne said. He urges non-compliance.

Ray Queen shared how important Memorial Field was to him growing up and how deeply the community once supported local kids and baseball programs. He said it breaks his heart that Whitefish Bulldogs haven't been able to use the field for nearly three years and urged the Council to prioritize reopening it for the kids. He believes restoring city control of the field and putting children first—above politics or disputes—will rebuild community pride and give local youth the support they deserve.

Bella Brown raised two main points. First, she asked the Council to incorporate strong climate action into the growth policy—supporting mixed-use development, better transportation options, and fewer cars on the road. Second, she urged the Council to avoid cooperating with Border Patrol, saying the agency has shown incompetence and the city's resources should instead support priorities like climate action.

Avery, W. 7<sup>th</sup> Street, spoke on behalf of Whitefish students, supporting Leanne's call for the city to stop cooperating with ICE, CBP, and DHS. He said many Whitefish High School students share this view and believe non-compliance is the best way to protect the community.

Keegan Siebenaler praised city staff—especially Alan Tiefenbach—for their hard work on the growth policy. He then commented on the ARC repeal, noting it is required by state law. Shelter WF supports ending the ARC because its aesthetic rules increased housing costs, limited business flexibility, and prioritized building appearance over people. He urged the city not to move ARC standards into zoning and instead focus on creating a community based on broader values, not narrow aesthetic preferences.

Chris Schustrom, Chair of Heart of Whitefish, urged the Council to be cautious with the growth policy's economic section. He said proposals like expanding commercial uses in neighborhoods and adding paid parking are not ideas but direct policy changes. He asked the Council not to include mixed-use or new retail outside downtown unless supported by real market data, noting downtown already has 89,000 square feet of vacant retail space and significant public investment.

He emphasized protecting downtown, improving bike and pedestrian connections, and basing decisions on solid analysis. He also clarified that Heart of Whitefish's suggested edits came from community input and are part of the public record.

[\(YouTube Video 34:10\)](#)

Mayre Flowers, Citizens for Better Flathead (CBF), asked the Council to improve accessibility at work sessions by providing additional monitors or digital text for the audience. She reported on the county's lakeshore protection workshop, noting strong public support for updating regulations and requesting feedback on CBF's 19 recommendations—especially concerns about “equilibrium beaches” on Whitefish Lake.

She also informed the Council about an upcoming county hearing on septic regulations and urged support for requiring advanced septic systems, especially in floodplains, to protect water quality.

Finally, she asked the Council not to disband the ARC or at least delay the decision and consider alternatives such as keeping it in an advisory role.

Zee criticized the Council for what she believed was an attempt to censor her protected speech at the January 5 meeting. She argued that even offensive speech is protected under the First Amendment and reminded officials they cannot control the content of public comment. She also said the Council failed to acknowledge the racial profiling and wrongful detention of Beker Rengifo Del Castillo, stating that accountability is overdue. She closed by quoting Malcolm X, saying truth is on the side of the oppressed.

Paul McCann praised the visioning sessions, Planning Commission, staff, and consultants for their work on the growth policy. His main concern is the economic future of downtown. He noted several local businesses have left or closed, making downtown feel more tourist-oriented while everyday services are shifting south of 13th Street. He believes workforce needs and basic services are increasingly located in south Whitefish and thinks zoning and economic planning should reflect that trend.

Jill Davis said Whitefish needs more economic diversity and more places locals can afford to eat, as downtown feels geared only toward tourists. She wants mixed-use planning restored in the growth policy and wants local workers' voices valued as much as business owners. She also supports the call for the city to avoid cooperating with ICE, CBP, and DHS.

Richard Hildner announced two upcoming wildfire-related lectures at FVCC hosted by Firesafe Flathead. Dr. Erica Fischer will speak on January 21 about structural resilience to wildfire and other hazards, and Dr. Paul Hessburg will speak on February 3 about wildland fire. He encouraged Council and staff to attend.

Rhonda Fitzgerald urged the Council to use realistic population projections in the growth policy, noting that state data shows Whitefish growing much more slowly than the draft assumes. Inflated projections lead to inflated housing and short-term rental numbers and distort planning for a community that is mostly year-round, not tourist-driven.

She encouraged the Council to read the public visioning comments, which consistently value downtown, neighborhoods, and small-town character—and oppose sprawl, rapid growth, and short-term rentals. She warned that “mixed-use” is a technical term meaning large multi-story buildings, not small neighborhood shops.

She also noted that most shopping now happens at big-box stores or online, so downtown must be planned for locals who live here year-round. Finally, she said the market alone won't create needed housing; deed restrictions and partnerships will be necessary to ensure residents can afford to live in Whitefish.

Anna Aster-Pulsifer, North Valley Drive, said she wants to return to Whitefish as an adult and supports Miss Zee's comments. She believes the city should never censor residents who care about the community's future. After living here 18 years, she values Whitefish's inclusive and progressive spirit and urged the Council to support local activists and reject cooperation with ICE. She wants Whitefish to remain a community she can be proud to come home to.

Unity Loveless, Columbia Avenue, supports earlier comments opposing cooperation with ICE and DHS. She said Whitefish students understand what is happening nationally and locally, and they know who to hold accountable. She emphasized that these federal actions do not reflect Whitefish's values and urged the Council to ensure the city does not cooperate with ICE in any way.

Marti Brandt explained that she submitted her own mixed-use research because she wants the Council to have solid information and because she can only participate with the time and resources she has. She said not everyone can afford consultants, and public input shouldn't favor those who can. She urged the Council to ensure equal treatment for all voices in the growth policy process and avoid creating a system where some comments are privileged over others.

Nathan Dugan, Kalispell Avenue, attended virtually attempted to provide comment. Due to technical difficulties his comments were not heard in the meeting.

#### 4) COMMUNICATIONS FROM VOLUNTEER BOARDS

None

5) **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.)

- a) [Minutes](#) from January 5, 2026, Special Session (p.588)
- b) [Minutes](#) from January 5, 2026, Regular Meeting (p.589)
- c) [Consideration](#) of a request for Final Plat for Hope Corner Subdivision, a 2-lot subdivision located at 1150 Wisconsin Avenue, zoned WR-2 (Two-Family Residential District) (WFP 26-01) (p.598)

[\(YouTube Video 1:05:09\)](#)

Councilor Sweeney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Feury to approve the Consent Agenda as provided. The motion carried.

6) **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.)

None

#### 7) COMMUNICATION FROM CITY ATTORNEY

- a) [Ordinance No. 26-01](#); An Ordinance to repeal Title 2, Chapter 10, Architectural Review Committee of the Whitefish City Code (First Reading) (p.629)

[\(YouTube Video 1:05:30\)](#)

City Attorney Angela Jacobs explained that state law no longer allows Whitefish to require Architectural Review Committee (ARC) approval unless the standards directly relate to health or safety. Because of this, the city's current ARC process is not compliant and must be repealed or changed. Staff will need to rewrite architectural standards within zoning, so they meet the new legal limits.

Council members discussed keeping the ARC as an optional, advisory group—similar to a free design-consultation service—so developers can still get expert feedback without it being mandatory. They noted concerns about losing the committee's knowledge but agreed mandatory review is no longer legal. The Council may postpone the decision and consider creating a voluntary, one-year trial version of the ARC to see if it is used.

**Councilor Qunell made a motion, seconded by Councilor Davis to postpone until we have a more concrete idea of what we replace it with.** Davis said he wants to hear the ARC's opinion on making the committee optional and suggested trying it for a year while working to change the state law. He argued the state bill was poorly designed, doesn't lower housing costs, and mainly harms local oversight of commercial buildings.

Feury added that since the ARC can't be required anymore, the current system is unusable. He sees little reason to delay repealing it and believes the city should end it now and focus on creating a new approach that still gives the community some influence over development.

**Councilor Qunell withdrew his motion, Councilor Davis agreed. Sweeney made a motion, seconded by Feury to adopt Ordinance 26-01 on first reading. The motion carried 4-1, Qunell voted in opposition.**

**8) COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY MANAGER ([YouTube Video 1:29:29](#))**

a) **Written report enclosed with the packet. Questions from Mayor and Council? (p.632)**

None

b) **Other items arising between January 14th through January 20th**

None

**9) COMMUNICATIONS FROM MAYOR AND CITY COUNCILORS ([YouTube Video 1:30:10](#))**

a) **Consideration to appoint a member to the Climate Action Plan Committee to complete the term ending December 31, 2026 – Mayoral Appointment (p.634)**

**Mayor Muhlfeld appointed, with confirmation of the Council, Ryan Walther to serve on the Climate Action Plan Committee and to complete the term ending December 31, 2026.**

b) **Letter from Citizens for Better Flathead regarding population projection per MLUPA requirements (p.635)**

Mayor Muhlfeld suggested continuing the broader discussion at the February 17 work session. Qunell added that the population estimate is the foundation of the entire growth policy and changing it now would require professional review because every part of the plan was built on that number.

Council Comments ([YouTube Video 1:33:32](#))

January 20, 2026

Norton noted that sign content is protected speech and governments can't censor it, though meeting time limits are allowed if applied consistently. She raised questions about civil rights and whether the city can refuse cooperation with ICE. Attorney Jacobs explained that while local police cannot enforce immigration law, they *are* required to cooperate with federal agencies.

Chief Kelch added that Whitefish police treat everyone with dignity, have no history of excessive force, and have long worked with federal partners without problems. He emphasized that national incidents don't reflect local practices and that communication with federal agencies is part of effective community policing.

Norton also stated that the ARC not only looked at individual projects, but they actually looked at the skyline and how things blended together in our town. She doesn't know how we recreate that without someone that has that kind of eye. It will be sad if we lose that. After some discussion council directed staff to reach out to the ARC to see if they have ideas and if they would be willing to meet as a service-based group.

Davis thanked everyone who came to the meeting and said public participation is vital. He emphasized that free speech, even speech that feels unpleasant or offensive, is essential to democracy. While meetings must stay orderly, he believes people should be given broad freedom to criticize the government and express their views.

Sweeney agreed that public comment can be uncomfortable but said Whitefish has always allowed very broad public input, more than most communities. He emphasized that nothing has changed in how the city handles public comments and thanked everyone for showing up, saying more participation is always better.

Qunell said the high school baseball team should be playing on a field next to the school and urged the city to help make that happen. He then spoke about free speech, saying the First Amendment is essential but also comes with responsibilities. He strongly objected to signs comparing Whitefish police to the KKK, calling that inappropriate and inaccurate, and said such statements cross the line for civil dialogue in council chambers. People are free to criticize government, he said, but they should still follow meeting rules and respect context.

Attorney Jacobs said the city had productive talks with the Glacier Twins. They are working on updating the agreement tied to Verizon funds for more transparency. The city is hopeful the Twins will reopen the long-term Memorial Field lease so Whitefish High School can use the field for baseball and football. The Twins seem open to it, but nothing is guaranteed and depends on their cooperation.

**10) 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 9:09 p.m.

/s/John Muhlfeld

Mayor Muhlfeld

Attest:

/s/Michelle Howke

Michelle Howke, Whitefish City Clerk