

GOVERNMENT REVIEW STUDY COMMISSION
MAY 7, 2025
5:30 PM
MINUTES

1) Call to Order

Study Commissioner Chair, Kevin McDowell called the meeting to order. Members present were Commissioners Alessi, Wurster, and Dugan. Commissioner Whitman was absent. Ex-officio Howke and City Manager Smith. Dick Zoellner was in the audience.

2) 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 presiding officer 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)

None

3) Approval of April 17, 2025, Minutes

Commissioner Wurster made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Alessi to approve the minutes. The motion carried.

4) Old Business

The Commissioners discussed the April 24th Open House at the Montana Tap House, with concerns raised about hosting it in a private venue instead of the originally planned O'Shaughnessy Center.

Survey results were reviewed, revealing a broad range of opinions and a lack of public understanding of the process. Commissioner Wurster emphasized that the Commission is not yet prepared to draft a report due to unresolved concerns and inadequate public input. He warned that rushing the process could reinforce existing distrust in local government. Commissioner McDowell acknowledged his concerns and highlighted the difficulty of engaging the public, echoing similar struggles with the Growth Policy.

Commissioners debated strategies to improve turnout, including extending the process and hosting additional meetings. Commissioner Alessi suggested delaying discussions until survey completion and a meeting with Dan Clark from the Local Government Center on May 14th. Public engagement challenges were highlighted, with some individuals actively participating, while others expressed dissatisfaction without attending City Council meetings.

Manager Smith noted valuable feedback in survey responses but acknowledged that some individuals resist engagement despite outreach efforts. The Commission recognized the importance of educating the public on the form of government and ensuring meaningful opportunities for input. While a draft report is expected by the end of May, further time may be required to refine recommendations and address public concerns.

Commissioner Alessi made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Wurster to table this discussion pertaining to the timetable and reevaluate it after the meeting with Dan Clark. The motion carried.

Chair McDowell moved agenda item 8) in the agenda.

5) Communication to or from Study Commissioners

a) Commissioners report from individual group meetings

Commissioner Wurster reported ongoing discussions with Roger Hopkins from the Columbia Falls Study Commission, noting shared concerns. The Columbia Falls group consists of two former city managers and a city council member, with pressure to expedite the process. Roger Hopkins will be meeting with Dan Clark to evaluate their form of government, considering a shift to a charter form or self-governance without a charter. Concerns were raised about internal influences on the decision-making process, particularly from a former city manager opposed to any changes.

Commissioner Wurster also emphasized efforts to promote the online survey, though scheduling meetings with key stakeholders has been unsuccessful. He distributed physical copies widely but is concerned about the low response rate.

Commissioner Alessi engaged with residents at the Senior Center and Whitefish Manor, prioritizing times with high attendance. The Whitefish Theatre Company has made survey postcards available during events. Commissioner Dugan met with high school students, and Commissioner McDowell distributed surveys downtown. However, McDowell expressed disappointment over apparent lack of engagement.

b) Letter from Rebecca Norton – comments on amendments to charter

Commissioner McDowell stated the comments provided by Rebecca Norton was along the same thoughts as the Commissioners.

5)6) New Business

None

6)7) Review City Charter (Standing Agenda Item)

- a) Included in the packet is the redlined version provided by Commissioner Alessi, which also includes comments provided by Commissioners Dugan and Whitman

Commissioner Alessi presented her redline version of the Charter, primarily removing gendered language, capitalizing specific terms, and restructuring legal references for readability. Commissioner Whitman supported these adjustments.

Section 1.04: Alessi added language clarifying governmental units; Whitman suggested streamlining for conciseness.

Commissioner Wurster inquired about previous legal challenges; City Manager Smith recalled possibly one instance. Discussion arose on whether formatting changes require voter approval—Dan Clark may provide guidance.

Section 2.01: Restructured numbering and incorporated language approved by voters in 2024. Councilor Dugan raised concerns about term limits and deletion of certain provisions.

Section 2.01 (5)(A)(i) Discussion on how renting impacts council member residency; City Attorney Jacobs to research.

Section 2.01 (5)(A)(iii) Dugan questioned applicability to reinstated individuals.

Section 2.01 (5)(A)(iv) Dugan raised concerns about enforcement.

Section 2.02 Legal references were redlined, discussion on anonymous voting. Clarity needed regarding vacancy appointments and potential impact on mayoral authority—City Attorney Jacobs to provide interpretation.

Mayor's Veto Power: Unclear language flagged by Commissioners Dugan and Alessi.

Standing Committee: Uncertainty about their existence and removal processes—legal clarification requested.

Park Board: Dugan questioned its inclusion in the Charter.

Section 2.03 (3) Council and Staff Interaction: Concern raised about council members directing staff – potential provisions discussed.

Section 2.04 Adjustments were made. Updates needed for municipal record fees following 2025 legislative changes.

Due to the length of the meeting, the Commissioner chose to complete reviewing Articles III – VI on May 13th at 5:30pm.

Commissioner McDowell asked the Commissioners to provide questions for Dan Clark by Sunday, May 11th at noon.

~~7)8)~~ Public Comment

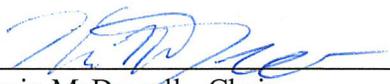
None

~~8) Communication to or from Study Commissioners
a) Commissioners report from individual group meetings
b) Letter from Rebecca Norton—comments on amendments to charter~~

9) Next meeting: May 13, 2025 @ 5:20pm
May 14, 2025, 9am-Noon meet w/Dan Clark
May 29, 2025, 6pm Public Hearing present/adopt tentative report

10) Adjournment

Commissioner McDowell adjourned the meeting at 8:10pm.



Kevin McDowell - Chair

Attest:


Michelle Howke, Whitefish City Clerk