

# Colstrip Local Government Review Commission

## Meeting Minutes

April 14, 2025

1. **Call the meeting to order.**
  - a. Meeting called to order at 6:35 pm
2. **Roll Call**
  - a. Present-Study Commissioners Dan Batie and Joe Novasio
  - b. Present-Ex-officio Member Michelle Richards
  - c. Absent-Study Commissioner Todd Olmstead
3. **Approval of Minutes of the Previous Meetings**
  - a. No action taken
4. **Correspondence or Study Commission Update**
  - a. None
5. **Unfinished Business**
  - a. None
6. **New Business**
  - a. Training Session w/MSU Local Government Center – Microsoft Teams meeting with Dan Clark & Ashley Kent
    - i. Dan Batie asked about who and how many interviews should the study commission conduct in regards to city officials and employees and asked for some suggested questions to ask. He asked if the commission as a whole should interview or have only one study commissioner present at each interview. He also asked about what the study commissioners are allowed to say to the public since they are not supposed to advocate for or against anything.
    - ii. Joe commented on a lack of communication with the public due to no television station, radio station and newspaper in Colstrip. The commission is looking at signs, banners and other ideas to try and get public engaged and participate in meetings.
    - iii. Ashley explained the study commission's job is to understand Colstrip's current form of government, educate the public about the scope of the study and the options available and ask them what they want. Some people will have a specific issue they are focused on that may not be within the scope of the study commission. Since Colstrip already has a charter with self-governing powers, the study commission doesn't have to worry about that part of the study. Questions to the public and interview questions should be things like: Is the balance between the legislative (City Council) and executive (Mayor) branch working well for our community? Does the Mayor and City Council have enough input from the community or do we want to look at something like community councils? Does the Mayor have the necessary authority to execute the city's policies without the City Council and Mayor getting too muddled in shared

responsibilities? Is the balance of power out of balance? Other items to consider are: at-large elections or wards; four-year terms or something different; and increasing the number of council members.

- iv. Ashley also explained state law in regards to debate versus advocacy. Elected officials are bound by state statute not to advocate for or against any ballot measure or person that is campaigning for office. So study commissioners cannot tell people to vote for a change to the charter or other recommendation they may make. The study commissioners can fully vet and debate the alternatives they are studying. Ashley suggested looking at the charters of other communities, especially those that have a manager form of government like Belgrade, Great Falls and Columbia Falls.
  - v. Dan Clark advised not to make the process too hard and don't overthink it. There will always be other things going on in the community but continue on with the study, noticing the meetings and studying the forms of government, etc. He suggested each month pick a theme, such as commission-manager or town meeting form of government and discuss it and compare to our current form of government. If any public shows up, that is great but if no public shows up, that is okay and move forward. There is no right or wrong answer as to which or how many city officials/employees the commission interviews. The existing form of government is also not based on who the current elected officials are. Utilize the elected officials and employees to gather input, ideas or suggestions.
  - vi. Joe asked if they could add another member to the study commission as it is difficult to accomplish anything with three members since anytime two of them want to meet or conduct interviews, it must be noticed and open to the public. He doesn't think people will be open and honest in a public setting versus a private setting. He would like to utilize other community members to assist the study commissioners, such as conducting the interviews.
  - vii. Other than the public hearing to gather input from the public, the study commissioners should be using their monthly meeting time as their active work time. Should be working as a group, not individually.
  - viii. Joe stated one of his objectives and goals is to conduct a third-party look at the city's transactions and business conducted, and "follow the money". That is the feedback he is getting and a concern. Ashley explained a forensic accounting review is something outside of the official scope of the government review. Those types of things that are under the authority of the City Council can be put in a supplemental report and encourage the City Council to review those but the City Council doesn't have to.
- b. At this point in the meeting (7:40 pm), Joe Novasio stood up and stated he is resigning right now from the study commission as there are huge issues that are not going to be done. There are issues here and he believes he has worked harder than anybody. He will submit his reasons for resigning to the Billings Gazette but is not going to do it now. He also stated he is not the right guy to do this. He feels the community has gone backwards, that he knows too much and more than likely will be moving. Joe then exited the meeting.
  - c. Ashley doesn't want the study commission to do a lot of work, put something together and propose to the voters but not have the power to do so. That would be a disenfranchising waste of time. All the study commission can do is related to powers, form and plan of government.

- d. Dan B., Michelle, Ashley and Dan C. continued the meeting. Dan C. suggested the commission look at the city's charter and ask themselves if there is something in the charter holding the city back. Interviews of city officials/employees was discussed again. Typically, the study commission interviews as a whole, either in a work session during the day or during their regular monthly meeting. Ashley suggested conducting a written survey if the commission feels people would be more comfortable answering the questions that way. The questions should also not be about the people serving in the positions, but the positions themselves regardless of who currently holds the position. It is about the issues, not the personalities.
- e. The study commission can continue with only two members until the City Council appoints someone to fill the vacancy. Ashley would focus the meetings on looking at other city's charters and discussing things we like and don't like. The study commissioners can voice their own opinions without violating the advocacy rules. If the study commission decides to research the manager form of government more, she can suggest people to talk to that have already gone through the process. The study of charters, forms of government, etc is not dependent on input from the public. Ashley also explained the study is not a critique of the services provided by the city, but about the structure of government and how it relates to the delivery of those services.
- f. Dan C. commented that in every form of government, the City Council is pretty much the same. The real difference in the forms of government is the executive branch and who performs those duties, i.e., Mayor or Manager. Not everyone who is elected as Mayor has the time to spend 40 hours per week and what happens in that situation. The Mayor is not required to spend a minimum amount of time each week; however, an appointed manager is.
- g. The Local Government Center can assist the study commission in conducting a community engagement session. This could be done separately or in conjunction with a study commission meeting. Dan also shared that even with a newspaper, television station, radio station, etc, doesn't mean there will be public participation. He just conducted a public meeting in Gallatin County, population 115,000, and only 15 people attended.
- h. Ashley and Dan also commented the point of a study commission is not to root out the bad things, although that sometimes is a byproduct, the point is to have a deliberate time to pause and review. There also is nothing wrong if the outcome of the study is to propose no changes.

**7. Other Scheduled Matters**

- a. No other scheduled matters

**8. Public Comment**

- a. No public comments received

**9. Announcements**

**10. Adjournment**

- a. Meeting adjourned at 8:15 pm.