



State of the City Address

Mayor Wilmot Collins - January 13, 2025

Distinguished guests, Commissioners, Members of the Executive Branch;

Good evening and welcome to the annual State of the City Address.

The City Charter States:

“The mayor shall communicate to the city commission and to the general public, a statement of the affairs and management of the city, each January, and may make recommendations regarding these matters.”

Established in 1976, the City Charter underscores Helena, Montana, as the proud seat of our state government— “It is a community with a colorful past and a vibrant future, there is an openness and basic decency that beckons each of our citizens to contribute to its unique identity.”

To our diverse and industrious City Commission, I wish to say thank you. Your thoughtful and poised discourse – even in the face of diverging opinion, proves democratic process conducted with respect can accomplish great things.

To our amazing City Employees, I extend a special acknowledgment. The City's many successes would not be possible without your hard work. On behalf of the Commission, I extend our sincere thanks, and look forward to all that you achieve in the new year.

The City would not be successful without the efforts of the community members who step up to serve. I commend the members of these boards for generously volunteering their time to ensure the seamless functioning of our City.

A special recognition goes out to the diligent members of the Helena Citizens' Council; your efforts are truly appreciated and the City's budget process is strengthened by your contributions.

In addition to the committed individuals within the City organization, we must recognize those working to foster our community's growth. Helena boasts a thriving business community, and it is imperative that we support policies and initiatives conducive to a robust and diverse economy. We can work to pave the way for thoughtful growth throughout the next century. The City will continue to bring all stakeholders to the table and ask how we may help one another to accomplish great things during a time of historic change for Helena and for Montana. Non-profit organizations, business community members, and residents – we all need each other to see the Helena we want to be in 2050, not just today.

Tonight, I aim to share the noteworthy accomplishments of 2024 and shed light on the ongoing projects propelling us toward the realization of the Commission's Strategic Outcomes in 2025.

City Manager's Office

2024 Accomplishments

- The City Manager's Office coordinated efforts to improve critical processes, like Development Review and Special Event Permitting.
- The City Manager's Office also guided the process to adopt the City's 2024 Strategic Plan and Implementation Strategies for the plan.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the City Manager's Office will continue leading the effort to upgrade the City's public meeting agenda system.
- The City Manager's Office will focus on improving operational efficiencies to promote a better customer experience for the public.
- The City Manager's Office will continue to seek alternative funding for city capital projects and operational needs through coordinated grant-seeking and grant management.
- The City Manager will lead the creation of a balanced budget for Fiscal Year 2026, focusing on employee retention and the City's Capital Improvement Plan.

Clerk of the Commission Office

2024 Accomplishments

- In 2024, the Clerk of the Commission's Office introduced a digital system for administration, execution, and archiving agreements, resolutions, ordinances, public comments, special events, and public meeting materials.
- The Clerk's Office also continued the City's Boards and Committee project, including a revised training and education plan for Staff and board members.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the Clerk's Office will coordinate with the City Manager's office to launch the new online public meeting platform and electronic meeting agenda system.
- The Clerk's Office will also adopt and implement a new records retention and management policy, including implementation of the automated records retention and management software.
- Finally, the Clerk's Office will launch a public records exchange portal for safe, secure access between the public and the City's archive system.

City Attorney's Office

2024 Accomplishments

- The City Attorney's Office fully transferred to an e-filing system with Municipal Court.
- The Attorney's Office also fully transferred to a paperless system, reducing waste in the office's operation.
- The Victim Services Program helped create, set up, and train staff for the APRAIS program, a new lethality model, to assess victims at the highest risk of lethality who need additional support.
- The office Secured a Violence Against Women Grant to continue supporting our Victim's Services Program for the 4th cycle.
- The Victim Services Program supported over 100 victims of violent crimes as their case went through the criminal justice system.
- Finally, the Attorney's Office supported a law school intern through a DUI Task Force grant to help prosecute DUI's in Municipal Court.

2025 Goals

- The City Attorney's Office will continue collaboration with the High-Risk Offender Team and Sexual Assault Response Team to implement the new APRAIS lethality model so victims of violent crimes are able to receive the support they deserve.
- The office will also continue to implement a plan for systems review for racial equity.
- The Attorney's Office will focus on creating a more streamlined process with other jurisdictions for release of public criminal justice information.
- The office will also create a more comprehensive and consistent process for enforcement of Helena city codes.

Community Development

2024 Accomplishments

- The Community Development Department closed on the City's 1st Affordable Housing Trust Fund Loan and issued permits for the Twin Creek's Project – creating 72 affordable housing units in the City.
- The City continued to see a lot of construction activity, with more than 670 Commercial Permits, which was a 32% increase from 2023.
- The City also issued over 1600 Residential permits, which was a 1.5% increase from 2023.
- In total, the Building Division issued 3,242 permits throughout the year, along with completing 5,100 inspections.

- Some notable development projects completed in 2024 include:
 - Benefis Specialty Medical Building
 - Helena Foodshare
 - Summerville Flats Apartments
- The Community Development team completed and went live with a new permitting system; allowing the public to apply for and submit projects electronically.
- The team also kicked off the City's Land Use Plan process.
- Last year, the Community Development department expanded the Interactive Development Explorer to include all commercial and residential permits, land use cases, and subdivision approvals.
- The Community Development team administered the funding of approximately 12 projects through the Residential Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Loan Program.
- Last, the City completed the 1st major update to the City's Sign Code in over 27 years.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the Community Development team will revamp of the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund guidelines and funding of additional projects through the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.
- The department will also lead completion of the Land Use plans process and start reviewing and drafting updated Zoning and Subdivision regulations.

Community Facilities

2024 Accomplishments

- The Community Facilities Department had 25 active projects in 2024. Some notable projects include:
 - Upgraded the boilers at the Law & Justice Center with energy efficient models.
 - Completed engineering design for boiler replacements at the fleet maintenance shop and fire station 1.
 - Replaced the south roof of the Law & Justice Center.
 - Upgraded to LED lighting on the 4th floor of the City-County Building.
 - Completed design and awarded the contract for the fleet maintenance shop roof replacement.
 - Completed the painting of the Mann Gulch mural on the Lyndale pedestrian tunnel.
 - Upgraded to LED lighting and installed new flooring at Fire Station 2.
 - Completed phase II of the xeriscape landscaping project at the Law & Justice Center.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the Community Facilities team will be focused on approximately 30 projects including several sustainability projects, like:
 - Beginning design of Fire Station #3.
 - Installation of a new mural on the bandshell at memorial park.
 - City-County Building north parking lot ADA improvements
 - Installation of new energy efficient boilers at the fleet maintenance shop and the main fire station.
 - Installation of air conditioning system in the Civic Center ballroom and auditorium.
 - Replacing the Civic Center ballroom tile flooring.
 - Upgrading heating and air conditioning controls in the Police and Sheriff's offices at the Law & Justice Center.
 - Wrapping up the xeriscape landscaping project at the Law & Justice Center.

Finance & Utility Services

2024 Accomplishments

- In 2024, the City received our 36th consecutive GFOA Certificate of Achievement Award for our Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Comprehensive Financial Report.
- The City received a clean audit of our financial statements and federal single audits for the FY23 reporting year.
- The Finance team led the implementation of several important software conversions. Within the City's new ERP system, the City launched financial reporting, budgeting, cashiering, accounts payable and general ledger, business licensing, payroll, and time and attendance.

2025 Goals

- Finance is currently working on the implementation of the new utility billing system. Go-live is scheduled for August 2025. This software module will allow customers to access and pay their utility bills online.
- The Finance team will continue to fine-tune our new software to achieve the most productivity we can garner with our new tools while serving our residents more efficiently.

Fire Department

2024 Accomplishments

- In 2024, the Helena Fire Department responded to the most calls in the department's history. By mid-December, the Fire Department already exceeded 5,000 calls for service.

- The Fire Department's Fire Prevention and Investigation Bureau continues to experience high levels of new construction plan examination and ongoing commercial occupancy inspections.
- The Fire Department's Master Plan is being utilized to drive strategic and capital plans for the organization. In 2024 the Fire Department replaced a Type 6 wildland fire engine with a Type 3. This new unit enhances the Fire Department's capabilities in the wildland urban interface.
- Helena Fire deployed to California for an emergency wildland fire deployment as members of a Montana Task Force.
- The City also began planning for construction of a third fire station after residents voted to approve the project.

2025 Goals

- Station 3 requests for proposals for architecture and construction are in the works. In 2025, the Fire Department will prioritize moving this project forward.
- Helena Fire Department will continue to seek out grant funding and other revenue opportunities to meet the ever-increasing costs and needs.

Human Resources

2024 Accomplishments

- The Human Resources Department was busy in 2024, supporting and assisting in the set up and configuration of the City's new Payroll system.
- The HR Department was involved in several important contract negotiation processes for the Police and Fire Departments.
- HR also Implemented protocols for Workers' Compensation Light Duty/Return to Work.
- Thanks to the HR Department's efforts, the City was able to renew health insurance plans with budget savings.
- In 2024, the City updated several employee-related policies thanks to leadership from the HR Department.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the HR team will continue to develop strategies for the City of Helena being an Employer of Choice, including:
 - Implement an updated Pay Plan for regular, non-Union employees
 - Implement Human Resource functionality in new software system(s)
 - Offer professional development opportunities
 - Explore enhanced benefit options and opportunities

- HR will also continue to review and update policies to address:
 - New HR systems
 - Compliance
 - Industry best practices
 - And Operational efficiencies

Municipal Court

2024 Accomplishments

- In 2024, Municipal Court completed implementation and training of e-filing, allowing electronic filing of court documents, bringing the Court closer to the goal of becoming a digitized court.
- The Court also implemented Meaningful First Appearances
- In total, the Helena Municipal Court processed 4,635 citations last year.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, Municipal Court will focus on continuing to provide efficient, effective and impartial services.

Parks, Recreation, & Open Lands

2024 Accomplishments

- Last year, the Parks, Recreation and Open Lands office processed 186 applications for park space, field use and special event requests.
- In total, the City booked over 4500 park and field space rentals.
- The team improved office efficiency by expanding use of the departments software for permitting and invoicing.

Park Maintenance

- The Parks Maintenance team cared for over 175 acres of turf, while improving and maintaining over 20 miles of trails and sidewalks.
- Major Parks projects included:
 - Rebuilding the Civic Center tennis courts.
 - Renovating Constitution Park and adding a full-service restroom for our downtown.
 - And moving forward the Fire Tower restoration project.

Civic Center

- The Civic Center enjoyed 206 dates with bookings.
- The Civic Center's Box office revenue increased over 80% from the previous year.

- Meanwhile, tickets sold increased by 33%.

Aquatics and Recreation

- Last Chance Splash and Pool welcomed over 34,000 visitors in 2024.
- The aquatics team also taught more than 1,200 swim lessons.
- In the winter, over 5,000 people skated at the outdoor ice rink.
- The Kays Kids program was successful in providing programs and activities for 90 children per day throughout the summer.
- The City also offered 1 new recreation event, the Jack O' Lantern Jaunt, along with continuing the Christmas tree decorating on Mt. Helena and Postcards from Santa.
- Finally, the Aquatics and Recreation staff analyzed the pool to create operation efficiencies to increase revenues while decreasing expenses.

Open Lands

- The Open Lands team was busy in 2024:
 - Treating weeds on more than 325 acres.
 - Completing 95 acres of forest fuel reduction and burning over 5,000 slash piles.
 - And Servicing 28 miles of trailhead
- Open Lands also secured cooperative grant funding agreements totaling \$420,000.

Urban Forestry

- The City's Urban Forestry division completed a tree planting project in the 6th Ward, planting over 40 trees utilizing funds from a DNRC grant for \$12,000.
- Urban Forestry continued to distribute wood waste to gardeners and firewood to low-income residents.
- Over the summer, members of the Urban Forestry team assisted the City of Missoula in the aftermath of their catastrophic storm event.

Golf Course

- Bill Roberts Golf Course experienced a busy 2024 season with over 54,000 rounds of golf played. This is the highest number of golf rounds played in one season in the history of Bill Roberts Golf Course.
- Additionally, Bill Roberts is proud to support several important community programs, like:
 - Special Olympics Training for athletes.
 - Hosting the Disabled American Veterans Golf tournament which raised over \$100,000 to support our local DAV Foundation.

- Bill Roberts also continued its partnership with the Last Chance Nordic Ski Club to provide high quality cross-country skiing for the public.

2025 Goals

- In 2025, the Parks, Recreation and Open Lands team will continue focusing on needed improvements to the City's parks, trails and facilities while providing high quality customer service and recreation opportunities.

Police Department

2024 Accomplishments

- The Police Department added two new K9's in 2024. One was donated to the department through an agency in Arizona and the second was purchased through a private donation. K9 Billy has already hit the streets and the second K9 will be here in February of 2025.
- The Police Department was able to add an Internet Crimes Against Children detective.
- The department replaced older generation body cameras with new updated versions.
- HPD implemented a new risk assessment screening protocol that will provide more protection for victims of domestic violence and provide more information to prosecutors to assist them in determining bonds on offenders.
- Last, the department carried on the tradition of the annual Curt Stinson Memorial Blood Drive and had the highest number of attendees to date.

Dispatch Center

- For a second time, the 9-1-1 Dispatch Center's training program was awarded the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials International Agency Training Program Certification. Our dispatch center is one of three agencies the state to hold this certification.
- For the first time since July 2017, the 911 Communication Center became fully staffed in 2024.
- Numerous physical security updates have been completed at the 911 center closing out the award of the State Homeland Security Program Grant.

2025 Goals

- This year, HPD will continue to work on recruitment and retention with the goal of becoming fully staffed.
- The department will also work to implement more community-oriented policing.

- The department continues working on implementation of a complete overhaul of the CAD/RMS system with a tentative go live date early 2025.
- The 911 Center will begin the process to identify a permanent location to establish a redundant 911 center to ensure a continuity of operations. The City will be searching for federal grants to assist with this process.
- Dispatch will also maintain full time employees and examine the necessity to increase staffing to meet the evolving demands of our public safety partners and the continued growth of the community.

Public Works

2024 Accomplishments

Water Treatment

- The City's Water Treatment team had a busy summer. Operations worked twenty-four hours per day for the month of June, running the Missouri River Treatment Plant to allow completion of the West Side Connector to meet summer water demands.
- The City made significant improvements to the Eureka well, adding sustainability to this water source.
- The Water Treatment division also started a filter replacement project at the Tenmile Treatment Plant. The project will increase efficiency and quality of the water provided for the city.

Wastewater Treatment

- The Wastewater Treatment division started the process to update 18 mixers at the wastewater plant, which will greatly reduce power consumption.
- The City also passed its 20th consecutive quarterly Whole Effluent Toxicity test.

Solid Waste

- The City's Solid Waste division continued serving the greater Helena community, with the Transfer Station seeing visits from 175,000 vehicles in 2024.
- The City and Lewis & Clark County launched a lithium battery collection campaign to help mitigate lithium battery fires.
- In 2024, the City and County also completed the Integrated Solid Waste Master Plan.

Sustainability

- This past year, the City completed the Sustainability Plan/Audit and incorporated the information to allow for planning, budgeting, pursuit of grant funding, and coordination between Departments.

- The Public Works team also applied for multiple grant funding opportunities for sustainability projects.
- The City's Solid Waste division, through recycling and sustainability efforts, secured a USDA Food Waste grant which funds local business food waste collection. The pilot project is scheduled to run for two years. In the first six months, 5.39 tons have been diverted from the waste stream.

Utility Maintenance

- Utility Maintenance responded to 8 water main breaks in 2024, which is 10 less than 2023.
- The Utility Maintenance team developed a program to train CLD drivers in-house.
- Finally, Utility Maintenance collaborated to design repair and replacement for the crosstown connector.

Industrial Facilities

- The City's Industrial Facilities division continued with several big projects in 2024, including:
 - LED light upgrades
 - Completing the first phase of the Transfer Station Entrance.
 - And installing new gates at Scott Reservoir.

2025 Goals

- In 2024, the Solid Waste Department will work to complete the Solid Waste Rate Study.
- Water Treatment will complete ARPA projects that include reconstruction of diversion structures and Red Mountain Flume.
- Public Works will lead installation of the City's 2nd 50-kilowatt solar project, which will be located at Bill Robert's Golf Course.
- The City will implement the second phase of the USDA Composting and Food Waste Reduction Grant.
- Utility Maintenance is also implementing new meter reading software.
- Finally, the Public Works team will continue to develop the City's Groundwater supply.

Transportation Systems

2024 Accomplishments

- The City's Transportation Systems Department led several important initiatives in 2024, including:
 - Implementing the Metropolitan Planning Organization.
 - Helping 14 different households bring their sidewalks up to ADA/PROWAG standards through the sidewalk loan program.
 - Implementing the new Citian software into daily operations.
 - Constructing 71 ADA Curb Ramps, as well as reconstructing the Broadway walking mall crossing to ADA/PROWAG standards.

Streets/Traffic Division

- The Streets Division was busy in 2024, completing over 2 1/4 lane miles of Mill and Overlay work, completing over 10 1/2 lane miles of Chip and Seal, while also repairing an estimated 1,950 potholes.
- Streets also graded approximately 60 alley blocks and 36 street blocks in 2024.
- The Streets division also put into service the City's new paver and roller along with two new plow trucks.

Rodeway Code Enforcement Division

- The Roadway Code Enforcement Division investigated numerous complaints including the following sidewalk related complaints:
 - 32 trip hazards
 - 88 sidewalk obstructions
 - 17 sight distance evaluations
 - And 136 snow code complaints
- The Roadway Code Enforcement division brought 88% of complaints into compliance, with the remaining complaints left to be handled through additional enforcement actions.

Capital Transit

- Capital Transit has seen consistent service in the Demand Response model amidst staffing struggles.
- Capital Transit has a 12-month overall rider experience rating of 98%. This includes a 12-month overall On Time Percentage of 91%.
- Transit has seen a 12-month average of 43% of rides booked via the app.
- Demand for the Transit system is at an all-time high, often leaving City buses fully booked 24 hours in advance and reducing the No-show rating to a new low.

Helena Parking

- Last year, the Parking Division worked toward implementing a new parking software.
- The division also added a license plate reader vehicle to improve parking enforcement efficiency.
- The Parking team continued improving Parking facilities per the ADA audit. This includes approximately \$40,000 worth of improvements that were completed in Lot 3 and adjacent sidewalk.
- The Parking office helped direct 62 Special Event Applications, which were submitted via the on-line process.

Fleet Services

- The Fleet Services team completed 1,392 work orders in 2024.
- The team also added 27 new pieces of equipment and vehicles.
- The Fleet Services team added new software that will allow departments to request service and maintenance appointments online.

2025 Goals

- The Transportation Systems team will continue to be busy in 2025 with projects and studies, including:
 - The Metropolitan Planning Organization working on a Long Range Transportation Plan.
 - Implementation of new Traffic Demand Model software to assist with development.
 - The Streets team plans to complete up to 3 1/3 lane miles of Mill and Overlay work, and over 12 1/2 lane miles of Chip and Seal
 - Capital Transit is currently aiming to become fully staffed to increase availability, increase the percentage of rides booked via the app, and increase on-time performance.
 - Transportation will continue to resolve outstanding active service requests for sidewalk trip hazards and sending a final reminder letter to property owners detailing next action steps to bring properties into compliance.
 - Finally, the Parking team will prioritize parking facility and lot improvements to assure they are accessible and safe, while also training Parking staff on new parking software and license plate reader vehicle.

Before I conclude, I want us to take a moment of silence for the State and people of California for the devastating wildfires. All over the news this past week, we have watched the devastation and loss of life and property occurring from the raging California wildfires. Let us take note and be reminded that Helena is also a community at risk from wildfire. You don't have to live in the forest to be in a wildfire; I encourage

city residents to learn more about the Firesafe Helena program and sign up for a free home wildfire risk review. It is easy, just go to firesafehelena.org.

In the ongoing pursuit of progress, Helena remains steadfast in collaboration with essential partners like Lewis & Clark County, the State of Montana, East Helena, YWCA, Helena Food Share, National Forest Service, Helena Housing Authority, Rocky Mountain Development Council, United Way, Helena Regional Airport, and various others. The road ahead demands our commitment to addressing challenges, particularly in ensuring affordable housing and enhancing public safety for our vulnerable populations, all while embodying the principles and charitable spirit ingrained in our community.

Hand in hand with our dedicated partners, we are poised not only to meet these challenges but to surpass them, all while upholding our fiscal responsibilities and serving those who have entrusted us with these crucial decisions.

Guided by the City Charter, Helena, as the esteemed seat of our state government, aspires to be a beacon for the future of our great state.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the state of affairs of the City of Helena remains strong.

I thank you all and I am looking forward to serving you in the years to come. God Bless this City, the State of Montana and these United States of America.

Wilmot Collins, Mayor

ATTEST:

Dannai Clayborn, Clerk of the Commission