

CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS

LAND USE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PLAN

Introduction

The Montana Land Use Planning Act (MLUPA), codified in Title 76, Chapter 25, M.C.A., creates a comprehensive update to Montana's land use regulations. Under Section 76-25-106, M.C.A., the City of Columbia Falls is to provide a Public Participation Plan that creates a framework for communication and engagement to ensure access to public information, and continuous and ongoing public involvement for adoption of a future Land Use Plan and associated regulations as well as any amendments or updates. As public involvement in the administrative decision-making process for site-specific development will be more limited after the adoption of the Land Use Plan and potential subsequent five-year updates, public involvement during this process is vital. This document serves as a starting point for MLUPA compliance and will be revised as needed to ensure communication objectives are achieved.

Background

Currently, the City of Columbia Falls' commitment to public involvement is defined in the 2019 Growth Policy. The Growth Policy defines goals and objectives identifying the importance of encouraging and supporting the continuous improvement of public communication, outreach, and involvement in the planning process. The City of Columbia Falls zoning and subdivision regulations also include the right to legal notice and public hearings regarding the City's zoning and subdivision decisions.

The current process tends to drive public comment towards individual projects around the city. This can create tension as different visions for an area collide. The intent of the MLUPA is to drive public comment towards the land use planning phase to ensure that potential incoming projects and the application of land use planning rules, goals, objectives, and standards to them have already been well-considered in the land use planning process.

MLUPA Requirements

The Public Participation Plan is the beginning of a process to replace the City's current Growth Policy, zoning regulations, and subdivision regulations to comply with the MLUPA. It will also guide public participation for future amendments and updates to those documents. MLUPA requires that the Public Participation Plan provide for the (1) dissemination of draft documents; (2) opportunities for written and verbal comments; (3) public meetings after effective notice; (4) electronic communication including online access; and (5) an analysis of and response to public comments.

Public Participation Opportunity

The purpose of this plan is to define a set of strategies that can be employed to ensure that the public is not only informed but also provided ample opportunity to participate in the process of crafting the City's MLUPA compliant Land Use Plan. The strategies outlined in this document will provide a framework for continuous and extensive public engagement. Public engagement is critical because the final adopted plan, including any amendments or updates, comprises the basis for implementing zoning and subdivision regulations that must be in substantial compliance with the plan. Additionally, the scope of and opportunity for public participation and comment on site-specific development that is in substantial compliance with the Land Use Plan is limited only to impacts or significantly increased impacts not considered in the Land Use Plan, zoning regulations, or subdivision regulations. The opportunity to be engaged comes with the process establishing the plan and regulations, not with review of a site-specific project.

Public Participation Opportunity



Land Use Plan and Future Land Use Map

The intent of the Land Use Plan is to identify opportunities for the development of land within the City of Columbia Falls and its greater jurisdictional area for housing, businesses, agriculture, public lands, institutions, and the allocation of natural resources. The plan will acknowledge and address impacts of development on adjacent properties, the community, the natural environment, public services, facilities, and address potential natural hazards that may limit development in certain areas of the city. Accompanying the Land Use Plan will be the Future Land Use Map that establishes the City's expected jurisdictional area and future land use boundaries required to meet projected housing requirements over the next 20 years, as defined in the Land Use Plan.

Zoning and Subdivision Regulations

The City will review its zoning and subdivision regulations to ensure their alignment with the Land Use Plan upon its adoption. The MLUPA requires that city zoning and subdivision regulations meet its specific statutory requirements; including adopting a zoning map that aligns with the Future Land Use Map and implementing best practices to encourage development of new housing to meet the projected housing demand for the next 20 years. The zoning, zoning map and subdivision regulations adopted by the City Council through recommendation of the Planning Commission will set forth the administrative and decision-making processes of the City of Columbia Falls Planning & Zoning Department.

What Should You Expect From Us?

At a minimum, the City and any agent of the City must allow the community access to:

- Draft planning documents and regulations.
- An opportunity to provide written and verbal comments.

- The chance to be heard at public meetings.
- A pathway for electronic communication to address any questions or concerns involving the planning and implementation processes, documents, comments, or any updates to the process; and
- Analysis of and response to public comment.

The Public Participation Plan establishes the framework detailing our commitment to public involvement throughout the process of adoption, amendment, modification, or rejection of any future land use plans, zoning, or subdivision regulations.

Public Participation Principles

City staff and any agent of the City will be guided by the following principles:

1. Thought and Purpose

Public participation helps to bring thought and meaning to our planning and decision-making process. The values imparted into planning and regulation documents through public participation will help preserve the City of Columbia Falls's culture, identity, and prosperity.

2. Respect and Inclusion

Every member of our community has intrinsic value and adds to its ever enriching and endearing character. It is our goal to ensure that all members of the community feel welcome to participate in the planning process and have their voice heard.

3. Transparency and Trust

Clear communication will be provided at each step of the planning process and the City will retain all material from public participation events as part of the public record in accordance with the retention schedule published by the Secretary of State.

4. Open, Adaptable, and Evolving

It is important to maintain a continuous dialogue between community members and the City and agents of the City. Likewise, it is imperative that we continue to seek out new means and methods for improving communication and engagement activities through evaluation of participant feedback and public comment.

Goals and Objectives

City staff and any agent of the City will strive to achieve the following goals and objectives when engaging the public:

Goal 1: Create Consistency

Create a consistent approach to communication including clear expectations for where information can be found. Aim to improve current technology, create better processes, and continue to explore new methods of communication.

Objective A: Create Communication Expectations

Standardize how, when, and where information will be communicated to the public.

Objective B: Improve Customer Communication

Standardize publication of Planning projects to the City of Columbia Falls website. Periodically review communication processes and tools to evaluate their effectiveness.

Goal 2: Engage the Public

Receiving public involvement in planning and decision making is critical. We are committed to improving and increasing access to public participation opportunities and periodically refining engagement expectations.

Objective A: Create Public Engagement Expectations

We will identify ways to engage the public through multiple platforms.

Objective B: Improve Public Written Comment and Feedback

We will identify and provide an easily accessible pathway to receive and retain written public comments and will provide analysis and feedback when necessary.

Participation Framework and Tools

There is a wide range of public engagement strategies that may be employed by the City. The strategies are provided to set consistent expectations for public communications and involvement opportunities. This is an adaptable framework. The following tools are not all-encompassing but are instead intended to provide examples of types of public engagement which can be utilized to elicit robust public participation. Depending upon the specific platform, opportunities for written and verbal comments should typically be provided along with an analysis of and response to those comments.

Information Tools

The following methods may be used for sharing information, including dissemination of draft documents, about the adoption of or updates to the Land Use Plan, zoning regulations, and subdivision regulations.

- Legal Notice in a Public Newspaper or other means (see Sec. 7-1-4127, MCA)
- Notification of adjacent properties when required.
- In some situations, seeking input from individual impacted properties.
- City of Columbia Falls Website (including access to information regarding the adoption process, documents, updates, and comments)
- Social Media
- News/Media/Advisory

Engagement Tools

The following methods may be used for gathering public input about the adoption of or updates to the Land Use Plan, zoning regulations, and subdivision regulations.

- Meetings with Community Groups
- Meetings with City Boards
- Surveys and Comment Forms
- Planning Commission work sessions (typically would occur after regular meetings, which are held at 6:00PM on the second Thursday each month, or at other times with the appropriate notice)
- Charrettes
- Storefront and “Pop-up” Studios
- Open Houses
- Presence at Public Events

Continuous Information and Involvement

The drafting and adoption of the Land Use Plan and subsequent land use regulations will be an extensive process, providing opportunities for continuous community engagement and feedback. Those who wish to remain involved throughout the planning process can stay up to date on current events by following activity on the City of Columbia Falls's website (www.cityofcolumbiafalls.org), or by contacting the Planning and Zoning Clerk (130 6th Street West, Columbia Falls, MT 59912; (406-892-4432). All public engagement material will be retained as public record and be available upon request.

Participation Feedback

Feedback from community members on the adequacy of public involvement opportunities and feedback on lessons learned from participation events is essential to ensuring a healthy communication stream. Using this combination of feedback, staff and

working partners will determine next steps to ensure continuous public engagement. Staff and agents of the City will also provide an analysis and response to public comments and engagement activities as appropriate.

Subsequent Site-Specific Development

The MLUPA establishes a different process for land use decisions than what has previously been used in Montana. The changes will front-load public input, with limited public involvement during land use permit and application reviews, including subdivisions. Any public notice or input will be governed by the applicable MLUPA section or local zoning and subdivision regulations.

The scope of and opportunity for public participation and comment on site-specific development that is in substantial compliance with the Land Use Plan is limited only to impacts or significantly increased impacts not considered in the Land Use Plan, zoning regulations, or subdivision regulations. The opportunity for the public to be engaged will arise with and occur during the process establishing the plan and regulations, not with subsequent review of a site-specific project.

However, any final administrative land use decision, including, including but not limited to approval or denial of a zoning permit, variance, preliminary plat, or final plat, condition of a zoning permit of plat or interpretation of land use regulations may be appealed by the applicant or any aggrieved person to the planning commission.

Next Steps

The MLUPA established a different process for land use decisions. The changes will front-load public input, with limited public involvement during permit and application review.

Upon adoption of the Land Use Plan, the Planning Commission will hear appeals on land use decisions. Unless an amendment to adopted

regulations is required, land use applications and permits will be reviewed, and approved or denied, by City staff. At this phase of the process, public input will be limited unless the permit or application in question differs significantly from the adopted Land Use Plan, zoning, or subdivision regulations. This section is subject to revision upon adoption of future regulations defining the public hearing and appeals process for the Planning Commission.