

# West End Neighborhood Task Force Minutes

<i>Date / time</i> 10/19/2021 7:00 PM <i>Location</i> Connections Church & Virtual		
Chair	Howard C Holz	Website <a href="https://ci.billings.mt.us/676/Wet-End-Task-Force">https://ci.billings.mt.us/676/Wet-End-Task-Force</a>
Vice Chair	Gordon Olson	Facebook Group <a href="#">West End Neighborhood Task Force</a>
Secretary/Treasurer	Tina Volek	Email <a href="mailto:billingswetf@gmail.com">billingswetf@gmail.com</a>

The meeting was called to order at 7 pm by Chair Howard C. Holz

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## AGENDA TOPICS

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**Minutes of 9/21/21: Tina Volek, Presenter.**

The West End Neighborhood Task Force (WENTF) minutes previously had been distributed by e-mail. Ms. Volek asked to confirm the names of those who had won the door prize drawing, who were Jean Jarvis and Marcia Hurlburt. The corrected minutes were accepted by consensus.

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**Police Report: Sgt. Ryan Kramer, Presenter.**

Sgt. Kramer said there were 7,382 calls for service Citywide in September, which had 30 days; that was down from 7,828 calls in August, which had 31 days. WENTF had 942 calls in September, resulting in 203 police reports.

Citywide, there were 377 arrests on 440 charges. Of those, WENTF had 40 arrests for 42 charges. The WENTF had 75 disturbance complaints, 7 noise complaints, 13 complaints each of sick/injured persons and suicide attempts or threats, 125 reports of suspicious activities, 17 threats or harassments, 15 reports of vandalism and 48 welfare checks.

Traffic cases for September in the WENTF included 9 hit and runs, 35 property damage incidents, 9 injury accidents. Also, there were 59 traffic complaint investigations and 109 traffic stops were initiated by officers.

Tickets and citations issued in the WENTF in September were 1 for a City ordinance violation, 2 for criminal violations, 32 for municipal infractions and 22 for traffic offenses.

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**Public Safety Mill Levy 2021: City Administrator Chris Kukulski, Police Chief Rich St. John and Fire Department Executive Assistant Chief Matt Hoppel, Presenters**

Mr. Kukulski said that the 2021 Public Safety Levy, for which ballots are due Nov. 2, is needed to secure a safer city. It is needed because of population growth; increased crime, both violent and drug-related; an increased number of residents with substance abuse disorders, mental illness and homelessness; capacity needs in the City Legal Department and Municipal Court; and increased code violations affecting neighborhood safety.

The Center for Public Safety Management, LLC, was hired by the City to conduct operational studies and data analysis of the Police and Fire Departments, to recommend ways to increase effectiveness and efficiency in operations, and to identify needed resources. The 2020 Study made 102 Police Department recommendations and 34 Fire Department recommendations. Based in part on the study results, the City decided that additional resources would be needed for public safety.

He distributed a flyer that showed the levy, if approved, would cost \$7.1 million the first year, which would add \$8.33 a month to the property taxes of a house with the city median value of \$217,000. The levy would add 14 sworn officers and 14 civilian staff members in Police; add two Medical Response Teams of five members each to the Fire Department to go to medical emergencies with specialized equipment instead of fire trucks; add a full-time Municipal Court judge, 3 City Legal Department attorneys, 2 paralegals and support staff; add three code enforcement officers; to continue to support additional staff and resources added in a 2020 levy, based on critical need; and support community partners providing mental health and substance use disorder services.

Chief St. John said a steady increase in violent crime was the impetus to bring an additional levy after the 2020 levy was approved to retain the status of police operations. Crimes affect the quality of life through stolen vehicles, vandalism and similar problems. The Police Department patrols are going from crime to crime, and detectives are carrying a heavy load. A street crimes unit in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016-17 had reduced crime, until the pandemic.

The levy would allow increased capacity of specialized units targeting violent and habitual offenders, felons in possession of firearms, illegal drug activities, street crimes and hot spots where there was geographic concentrations of crime.

The presence of officers deters crimes. the Chief said. The department has 155 sworn officers. The levy would add to their ranks. Civilians working in areas such as animal control , and other issues like report taking, would be freeing up the time of officers to handle criminal activities. The strategic goal is to control violent crimes.

Behavioral work has been focused downtown but needs to be spread citywide. There had been 3 to 4 traffic fatalities in the past weeks due to driving while intoxicated (DUI). Special units could target violent and habitual offenders, felons in possession of firearms, illegal drug activity, street crimes and geographic concentration of crimes in hot spots. The levy also would support professional mental health efforts rather than taking Police and Fire Department time on them. Adequate staffing means problematic individuals can be identified and addressed so the issues go away, rather than just being moved around. An officer presence on foot, on bikes and in cars prevents downtown crime. The

department would work with Crime Stoppers, and organizations preventing crime through environmental design to prevent problems. High-visibility traffic patrols would be visible and prevent issues in places such as Shiloh Road, school zones and other hot spots.

Chief Hoppel said the Fire Department had been providing emergency medical service (EMS) since the 1980s and addressed all hazards such as those on the Rims and in the river, hazmat incidents and railroad issues. Forty six percent of the department calls are EMS, and there have been questions about why a fire truck should be sent to all those incidents? The levy would pay to set up two mobile response teams and to support private partners in high volume times by getting there in smaller trucks. The department would focus on prioritizing dispatching to get correct information and contract with the emergency response provider to firm up their respective rolls.

In addition, a Deputy Fire Marshal/Logistics Officer/Fire Protection Engineer could complete in a timely manner inspections and business licenses that now are sent out. The unit could conduct risk assessments on target hazards, manage all equipment and perform public safety education.

Mr. Kukulski said the loop of increased policing is finished by additions to the City prosecutors and courts. In 2016, there were 3,897 criminal cases opened in Billings. In 2021 there were more than 6,000, and as of June 30, 2021, another 3,000 cases. American Bar Association best practices show an attorney should have a 400-person case load. In 2020, five City prosecutors opened 5,430 cases. Domestic violence is a significant part of the case load. In 2015, prosecutors were able to file 90 percent of the cases brought by police; now, it is less than 50 percent, because attorneys are handling a much larger case load. The funds would add attorneys, paralegals and support staff, as well as a full-time judge and staff. This could improve recidivism rates and encourage alternative sentences including treatment options.

In Code Enforcement, the City would go from 7 to 10 officers. About 40 percent of the “dirty dozen,” the properties that are so derelict they shouldn’t be occupied, belong to two owners. They are havens for crime. Additional Code Enforcement officers could coordinate with neighborhood task forces and other groups, as well as connecting residents to assistance programs. They could identify issues for early intervention and respond to specific issues such as graffiti tagging and safe transportation routes.

Mr. Kukulski said there had been 1,078 violent crimes in Billings in 2021. That might become a new norm and the City needs to adopt the levy to get those numbers down to at or below the national average.

The expected outcomes, if the levy is approved, are improved neighborhood safety; increased efficiency in responding to emergency calls; better collaboration with Federal, State and County officials; investment in mental health and substance abuse services; holding criminals accountable; improving traffic safety; and feeling safe in any part of the community at any time of day.

Council Member Mike Boyett said the City Council had been talking about regularizing marijuana in response to a state initiative, and asked how it would affect the Police department? Chief St. John said it would adversely affect the community; other states with similar laws saw a 25 percent increases in DUIs. There would be more hospital visits. This is a cash business, so there would be home invasions

and burglaries. Over-saturated markets produce back-door sales that may be influenced by cartels. Marijuana is a gateway drug.

Dennis Ulvested said he had observed a traffic stop and asked what the standard procedure was? Chief St. John said if a person was suspected of a DUI, that individual would be cited for holding a beer.

Another question was whether Billings had considered a police reserve unit similar to the one in Laurel? The Chief said the department would add community service officers who will handle vandalism and minor calls now handled by officers. They have no arrest powers but have the same effect as reserves.

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**“It’s No Longer Marijuana...the THC Discussion”: Stacy Zinn, DEA Agent, Presenter.**

Ms. Zinn asked, what is the big deal in marijuana legalization? THC is the main ingredient in marijuana that gets people high. A joint today in Montana is 32 percent THC; in Denver, which has had legalized marijuana since 2012, it is 66 percent. She is not sure how producers of edibles are going to respond. But there have been psychotic outbreaks and mental health issues in Europe, where people had smoked marijuana with high THC levels for six years.

Montana is not prepared for the fallout, she said. Legalization will not drive out the black market; there will be selling out the back door. In Denver, the Columbians came in, followed by Cubans. The Chinese made big money by buying \$350-500,000 homes they gutted and used for growing marijuana. The money goes through their companies to Mainland China. They also have dab honey solutions for vape pens used by kids.

A risk behavior study in Montana asked what high school students were using? More than 50 percent said they had used drugs. Children as young as 13 are using marijuana. Forty-eight to 50 percent of drug users said their first drug was marijuana.

People are not taking high THC levels into account. She does not care what people are doing behind closed doors, but she is worried when it can affect kids, teenagers and taxes.

Every \$1 raised in Colorado tax revenue from marijuana costs \$4 to deal with the outcome. Is an additional 3 percent in revenue worth the extra costs? She suggested people research marijuana further before they make a decision on the November ballot.

**Other topics:**

On Zone Change 1001, Text Amendment to Marijuana Business Regulations, Ms. Volek reported that the Zoning Commission had made two major changes to the recommendations from a Council subcommittee and the staff.

One was to reduce a recommended 1,000-foot separation from adult dispensaries to a separation of 350 feet from a neighborhood and 600 feet from churches, schools and parks with playgrounds. the second was to add Corridor Mixed Use Districts to the Heavy Commercial and Heavy and light Industrial Zones already allowed as locations for adult dispensaries.

Mr. Holz showed two maps exhibiting the difference in the proposed changes, which would allow adult dispensaries in the West End Neighborhood Task Force district. He asked members to indicate by a show of hands whether the WENTF wished to ask the City Council to support the original proposals of 1,000-foot setbacks and limiting the stores to heavy commercial, and heavy and light industrial zones? The motion passed.

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#### Door Prize Drawing

Target gift cards of \$25 each were won by Pam Purinton and Robin Olson through a drawing. They were intended as a welcome-back incentive for those attending the meeting in person and provided by Gordon and Robin Olson.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

The next meeting will be at 7 PM November 16 as both a face-to-face meeting and a Zoom connection. More information about it will be distributed soon.