

Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force

Mid-January 2024 Update



**As we enter a new year, it is our hope that we come together as neighbors to learn, participate and advocate for a better Billings
A healthy community is an informed and involved community!**

ALL CITY TASK FORCE MEETING: Jan 23, 2024 - we will meet with other City task forces (all are welcome)

- Billings Public Library, 1st Floor, Community Room. 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm
- This city-wide task force meeting will focus on community concerns around violent crime, a potential new or expanded jail, and exploring community-based solutions.

Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force - 2024 Meetings

Based on membership feedback - we are trialing a new meeting cadence in 2024

2024 Regular meetings - Wednesdays, 7pm, Mayflower Church (Rehberg & Poly)

February 21* ~ March 20 ~ May 15 ~ July 17 ~ September 18 ~ November 20

**January meeting moves to February due to the All City Task Force Meeting on Jan 23.*

Due to limited budget, we won't be sending postcards as we've done in the past. Put these dates on your calendar! We will email reminders, post on Facebook and on Next Door. Meetings are also shown on the City of Billings website. Many thanks to our friends at Mayflower Church for generously sharing their meeting room for us.

Announcement:

Our Chair, Richard King, has resigned from his post due to family health issues which require his presence to administer care and provide for the patient's safety.

Richard has guided the Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force for the last 15 months with a steady hand and has encouraged Board Members to support and engage in numerous community projects.

Richard is a man of faith which will help him get through this crisis, but additional prayers and thoughts would be appreciated. We will miss his leadership but, hopefully, he will be able to attend our meetings in the future.

From the desk of Howard Evans - Vice-Chair and Acting Chair - RNTF

Neighbors,

Your Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force Board is enthusiastically embarking on a fresh course for the new year and invite you, the members, to join in.

We, at your suggestion, are holding bi-monthly meetings to bring you more relevant and current information on civic matters of interest and importance.

Leslie Cooke, our secretary, has been active in establishing and publishing this newsletter as well as utilizing social media to make public announcements. It has been rewarding to see her efforts bear fruit in participation levels and RNTF recognition.

Tom Yampradit, Board member at large, will be our contact for issues involving the neighborhoods north of Rimrock Road and south of the Rims.

Kevin Moser, Board member at large, is spearheading a new commitment to the membership, "**Help a Neighbor**," to assist neighbors in need on a limited basis. **Volunteers needed.** Tina Hoeger of Code Enforcement and Kyle Foreman, Solid Waste Superintendent have agreed to participate in a one-time free trash pickup. The details are still being formulated.

I am monitoring the Rim Top issues such as the Limited Army Air Support Facility (LAASF) which will be built by 2026. The proposed Readiness Center is also an issue to monitor. A land usage study will be made this year to determine usage along the Inner Belt Loop and the western portion of Highway 3 which affects the RNTF area.

There are many more issues and community concerns we want to cover but need some help from our membership to do so.

The City, County and School District all have important projects to be funded. The City has the Storm Water Project which is estimated to cost in the neighborhood of \$178 million. The County just announced plans for a detention center for non-violent offenders awaiting arraignment or trial, at a cost of \$3.3 million. School District 2 has not yet publicly announced a need for funds, but we know that they have needs.

We have the issue of Safety. Adult and juvenile gangs have earned our attention and increasing domestic violence is a "silent" issue. We feel it necessary to monitor the crime situation and actions taken to address the problem as well as other safety issues.

Parks and Trails are also worthy of following. Design and construction of the Stagecoach Trail will impact our area and Park funding will certainly be brought forward again.

Now the ask.

If you have an area of interest in any subject of community interest and would like to contribute to our newsletter or member meetings please contact us at: rimrocktaskforce@gmail.com

Help a Neighbor



Kevin Moser - RNTF Board Member At Large is spearheading a new initiative, and we want everyone's eyes and ears to make this happen. And for some of you, your strong hands and willing hearts too!

Kevin will be organizing a group of people willing to help neighbors in need with occasional help to avoid falling into Code Enforcement's attention. This could be someone who had surgery recently, and can't cut down their weeds or shovel their walk. This could be someone who is not physically able to clean up their yard, and just needs a hand to get things under control. Or maybe a resident who is dealing with graffiti on their property.

Please contact Kevin Moser with any ideas, or if you'd like to sign up to help. Just text or call Kevin @ 406-690-1718, or email moser.construction@yahoo.com

Also - if you read Howard's letter at the beginning of this newsletter, you'll see we're looking at holding a neighborhood clean-up day this spring! City Sanitation and Code Enforcement have offered their help. More details to follow when we get closer.



SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL!

Our 2023 RNTF survey helped pinpoint the top concerns of task force members. Coming in as the #1 concern: TRAFFIC & PEDESTRIAN SAFETY. So we are pleased that Billings has received a \$3.56 million grant to make safety improvements around several local schools.



Here is a summary of the highlights:

The \$3.56 million **Safe Streets for All** grant funds 17 Safe Routes to Schools projects in Billings.

Projects include 6 bike facilities, 8 hi-visibility crosswalks, 2 walkways, ADA-compliant ramps, lighting, signing, curb extensions, signal improvements & general traffic-calming elements.

Projects have direct impacts on students traveling to Bench, Boulder, Burlington, Central Heights, Highland, McKinley, Miles Ave, Orchard, Ponderosa, Sandstone, & Washington schools, & indirect impacts on routes to Lewis-Clark, Poly Dr, Meadowlark & Big Sky schools.

About These Projects

Safe Streets for All & Safe Routes to Schools projects move Billings forward in important ways:

Students attending Highland, Washington, Lewis-Clark, Poly Dr, Miles Ave, Meadowlark, Big Sky, Central Heights & McKinley schools will access new bikeways & lanes in their neighborhoods.

Students at Bench will gain important sidewalk connections at Rex Lane & Lola Lane.

Students at Boulder & Burlington will utilize extended curbs that help reduce the amount of time needed to be in the crosswalk, & slowing traffic.

Burlington students will have access to a shared-use path from Arnold Drain to 24th St W

Students at Burlington, Central Heights, Highland, McKinley, Miles Ave, Orchard, Sandstone, & Washington will utilize high-visibility crosswalks.

Ponderosa students who use the path from Ponderosa to Kings Green Drive will benefit from new pedestrian lighting.

New signal timing & signage will also be made along pathways/intersections near Highland, Miles Ave, Sandstone & Washington schools.

**To learn more about this grant-funded project, contact: Ted Wilson City of Billings Grants Administrator
406-869-3997 wilsont@billingsmt.gov**



City Council Corner -

Our Task Force area includes parts of both Ward 4 & Ward 1.

From time to time we will be including updates from our council members.



**Outgoing Council Member
Pam Purinton
(Pam served Ward 4)**

We asked Pam her thoughts on priorities last month as her term was ending

"As the new council begins, Public Safety will continue to stay a priority as the city works with its partners in managing crime across our city.

Also addressing traffic issues, whether speeding or the movement of traffic.

Another issue which I hope all of the task forces stay engaged in is updating the individual neighborhood plans & the Westend Plan. These are critical in how Billings is built out along with the necessary infrastructure.

My personal belief is to encourage homeownership as that is the personal investment in the community. Affordable work-force housing is the goal."

General City Council Contact Information:

Council@billingsmt.gov

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Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force does not politically endorse any current office holder or candidate.

We extend an open invitation for attendance and participation in our task force meetings to all elected officials and candidates such as City Council, County Commission, and State Legislators.

We appreciate all those who attend and help escalate neighborhood issues.



We asked each council member to provide their top 3 council priorities for 2024. Thus far we have received "Top 3" from Ed Gulick & Scott Aspenlieder which appear below. If provided, top priorities from our other council members will appear in future newsletters.

Council Member Gulick's top 3 City Council priorities for 2024:

1. **Thriving Downtown** - downtown is not only the cultural heart of the city but also the economic engine that attracts the workforce of the future & generates a tax revenue surplus that benefits the whole community. However, downtown has been the golden goose on a starvation diet for decades. To get the substantial private sector investment & tax revenue surpluses that fund public safety, parks & trails, we need to make strategic downtown infrastructure investments.
 - The most immediate priority is seeing through the conversion of downtown streets from 1-way to 2-way traffic with bike lanes to attract vibrant mixed-use development.
 - I will continue to leverage private sector investments in downtown housing with matching tax increment finance grants, looking for ways for taxpayers to get the greatest return on investment for public funds. I would like to reexamine & potentially improve the TIF policy once we have results from the city's Cost of Services Study available.
2. **Safe Neighborhoods** - costs of crime are greater than costs of funding good police & fire protection. I supported the public safety levy to address immediate challenges. However, the long-term solution for public safety funding is having development patterns that generate more in tax revenue than they use in public services, such as a vital downtown & walkable higher-density mixed-use districts along our aging arterials. We also need to design our community so it is more crime-resistant. Example, we need more traffic calming in our neighborhoods to reduce speeding so children can safely walk & bike to school & property owners feel more secure reinvesting in their properties. More walkable districts also increase the number of "eyes on the street" which is a powerful crime deterrent. But we also need more jail capacity.
 - Ensure our public works funding for transportation infrastructure is balanced; rather than focussed exclusively on moving the most traffic as fast as possible, we need to enhance the safety of our streets & have good placemaking that contributes to wealth generation on adjacent properties. This is a fairly complex subject.
 - Support the city council & staff working with the county to identify what is an appropriately-sized jail for Billings, what best practices are that prevent backlogs in the justice system that keep the jail filled beyond capacity, & how we're going to pay for an appropriately-sized expansion. Progress is finally being made on this front.
3. **Excellent Parks & Trails** - a city that works hard deserves places to recreate that connect to our city's greatest assets, the Rims & the River. Speaking as a small business owner trying to grow my staff, this is essential for attracting workforce.
 - The parks bond didn't pass; fortunately, federal support for active transportation has returned, so there is a "path" forward for expanding our trail system. We need to leverage the limited parks funding we have to bring in additional resources, such as using them as the local match for federal active transportation funding & the 1:1 match for private & foundation funding of projects.

Council Member Aspenlieder's top 3 City Council priorities for 2024:

1. **Jail/Holding Facility Strategy & Investment**: Voters spoke loud & clear about priorities for our community in November - to return focus to Public Safety. To break that down a little further you've seen articles about the County's proposal on a 72-hold facility expansion at County Jail which stemmed from Councilwoman Owen's Council Initiative, which set aside \$500K for a temporary holding facility. However the County's permanent solution comes in at \$3.3 million.
 - a. The City needs to step up & meaningfully participate in expansion of the Jail for the betterment of our community with the Commissioners. Those conversations need to happen quickly to get that facility for misdemeanor violators in place.

Adjusting the CIP to find funding for that partnership should be top priority.

- b. The City needs to build a tighter relationship with the County on expansion of our existing jail. With the County's study ongoing, City participation needs to be supportive of the effort with an end to pointing fingers & pitting City vs. County for crime problems. A bond measure is likely coming in 2024 for major jail expansion & the City needs to be mindful of that as we set tax assessments & spending in the City to assure we're not overloading an already taxed constituency in Billings/ Yellowstone County. Spending on parks & rec needs to take a back seat for the coming years to assure we're keeping major public safety measures, jail expansion the biggest of them, on track to implementation.
- c. We need to coordinate with the County on review & expansion of our juvenile detention facility. The juvenile facility oftentimes is forgotten but is in just as much need of expansion as the jail. With the juvenile facility we need to look at inter- vention program incorporation which means getting SD2 to the table along with others in that space. Juveniles are key to generationaly turning the corner with crime issues & we need to be very intentional & thoughtful about that facility expansion with incorporation of those types of programs.

2. **Family Justice Center (FJC) Startup:** Council has committed to moving forward with a **FJC** which is a huge step but will take investment to secure space & services. With over 50% of violent crime coming from family related violence we have a domestic/family violence problem in Billings that needs to be taken seriously. Addressing family violence is critical in breaking generational cycles of domestic abuse & family violence that have grown in Bllings. This investment will not return immediate results but the City needs to stay the course to see long-term returns. This too must be a partnership with the County so rebuilding that cooperative relationship is imperative for the **FJC** to be successful. In 2024 we need to get the following things in place to assure **FJC** startup is a success.

- a. Family Violence Unit (FVU) within BPD needs to be formed & staffed. This also was put forward by Councilwoman Owen at the end of last year as a Council Initiative with results being presented in the coming month from CA Kukulski & Chief St John. Once Council understands the resource needs & cost associated with creating a **FVU** inside BPD we need to develop a funding strategy to assure that we take the first steps in getting this off the ground.
- b. Memorialize partnership with YWCA & open doors for a limited services **FJC** to start in 2024 must be a priority to build momentum. Groundwork & planning started in 2023 & advanced to the point of taking basic steps forward to get **FJC** off the ground. This means the City needs to find space in its buildings for **FJC** to reside & locate a portion of the DV unit staff from the BPD & City Attorney's ofc in the **FJC**.
- c. I'm chairing the financial subcommittee of the FJC to help develop a long-term funding strategy for operation of the facility that doesn't rely solely on tax dollars. This means we need to build partnerships with private sector & with non-profits to assure **FJC** has a reliable funding structure to operate & grow. City & County will likely have to provide the bulk of funding to start **FJC** & get it operational but through public/private partnerships. The goal should be to have taxpayer funding well under 50% of the operational budget for the long-term of **FJC** with an aspirational goal being that it requires zero public taxpayer funding one day.

3. **Encourage Economic Development:** This can be done through a myriad of methods which cost taxpayers nothing by setting up tax incentives for infill development & redevelopment of brownfield or blighted areas. The use of tax abatement programs to encourage development & redevelopment of areas of Billings is something that should be put in place tomorrow to keep fueling the growth Billings is seeing. We have an opportunity to target industries still seeking to leave Blue States on the coasts & we need to be able to draw them in with economic investment incentives. Tax abatements are key tools to encourage development without subsidizing or allocating existing budget dollars to drive the development.

Billings Storm Sewer Update



The current storm sewer issue has been in the making for a long period of time.

Culverts, ditches, pipe and other components of the storm sewer system are in need of repair and upgrading.

The first public action is to change storm sewer fee billing from the Tax Statement to the Utility Bill, which will allow creation of a Storm Sewer Utility.

City Council has granted approval to the Public Works Department to include the move in their planning. The move has NOT been approved as of this writing, but is almost certain.

The main fiscal change with moving the fees would be to reduce the required surplus by \$3.1 million because income would be received throughout the year instead of twice a year when property taxes are paid. The surplus would be used to maintain and improve the Storm Sewer System.

With the change, fees could be raised throughout the year with approval of the City Council instead of once a year.

There have been issues raised about the income tax effects of moving the fee. Experts have said that if it was deductible before the change, it is deductible with the change, it's just on a different bill.

Qualifying for homeowners and renters assistance programs may be affected. It's still an open question.

Jennifer Duray, Deputy Public Works Director, will be presenting the entire program at our March meeting.

**In addition to Task Force meetings, you can connect with
Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force through email and social media:**

- Rimrock Neighborhoods Task Force on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/BillingsRNTF>
- Follow Rimrock Taskforce on Next Door app
- EMAIL to the task force board: RimrockTaskforce@gmail.com
- City website: <https://www.billingsmt.gov/1730/Rimrock-Neighborhoods-Task-Force>

Links should be click-able, but if your browser doesn't support a direct link, just highlight, copy and paste into your search bar.