

Citizen participation is the foundation of housing and community development programs. The Citizen Participation Plan for the City of Billings is designed to ensure citizen involvement in the planning and reporting on the City's programs covered under the HUD Consolidated Plan requirements. The purpose of the Citizen Participation Plan is to ensure that citizens, nonprofit organizations, and other interested parties are afforded adequate opportunity to review and comment on plans, programs, activities and reports regarding the City's federally funded housing and community development programs. Citizen participation pertains to the following documents herein referred to as "plans and reports":

- Consolidated Plan
- Annual Action Plans
- Citizen Participation Plan
- Limited English Proficiency Plan
- Comprehensive Annual Performance and Evaluation Reports
- Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice

Citizen Participation Plan Objectives

The primary objectives of the City's participation plan are to:

- Encourage citizen participation in the development of the City's plans and reports with emphasis on participation from individuals and households identified as:
 - Low / moderate income
 - Residents of blighted areas
 - Minorities and all protected class members
 - Those with limited English proficiency
 - Elderly
 - Disabled
 - Those with HIV / AIDS diagnoses
 - Homeless
 - Families with children
 - Those residing in areas where funding will be utilized
- Provide citizens with reasonable and timely access to meetings, information and records relating to the City's plan for utilizing funding in addition to allowing reasonable opportunity to comment on the above-noted plans and reports. All records regarding these activities are maintained according to the City Record Retention Schedule and as required by federal regulations.
- Consult with the local Public Housing Authority (HomeFront, formerly known as the Housing Authority of Billings) on the development and implementation of the above noted plans and reports, which includes input from residents of public and assisted housing.
- The City's Planning and Community Services Department will also continue to support the activities for the Adjacent Neighborhood Committee, which is comprised of Task Force Officers who meet bi-monthly to collaborate and exchange information regarding the lower-income neighborhood task force areas. The Community Development Division staff attends meetings of lower-income task force neighborhoods when requested for specific presentations. The lower-

income neighborhoods are comprised of higher concentrations of ethnic and racial minority populations.

- Facilitate public hearings to obtain citizen views and to respond to proposals and questions at all stages in developing and implementing activities as outlined in the City's plans and reports. All hearings and meetings shall be provided in areas where accommodations for the disabled can be provided.
- Consult with public and private agencies and organizations during the development of the City's plans and reports:
 - Assisted housing
 - Health and social services
 - Regional and local government agencies
 - Public Housing Authority
 - Fair Housing education and enforcement agencies
 - Continuum of Care organizations
 - Businesses
 - Housing developers
 - Nonprofit organizations
 - Philanthropic agencies
 - Faith-based communities

HUD Data

The City of Billings will share any HUD-provided data and other supplemental information relative to the City's plans and reports. HUD-provided data is also currently provided on the City's website at www.BillingsMT.gov/HUDdata.

Public Decision-Making Processes

The *Community Development Board* is a citizen's advisory board consisting of nine members who are appointed by the Mayor of Billings with the consent of the City Council. Six members are appointed from, and represent, lower-income neighborhoods of the City as defined by federal regulations for the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program and three members represent the community at large. Staff is available to provide technical assistance to the Board in all aspects of planning and reporting processes.

This board serves in an advisory capacity to the City Council for the purpose of providing citizen input on policy decisions to the City Council. The primary responsibilities of the board are to review existing and proposed City policies and to review the Community Development Division's activities to ensure policies are being implemented and carried out. As six of the nine Board positions are held by low income area representatives, board composition meets basic federal requirements for low income citizen input and engagement.

The Community Development Board makes recommendations to the City Council relative to all plans and reports. In addition, the Community Development Board reviews applications submitted for CDBG and HOME funding in order to make funding recommendations to the City Council for approval.

The *Billings City Council* is the final citizen policy body that reviews and takes action on plans and reports. The Community Development Board presents recommendations to the City Council during a scheduled work session preceding the public hearing in April in order to deliver information on decisions made regarding recommendations. After receipt and consideration of public comments, the City Council approves reports / plans and proposed funding allocations.

Public notices announcing Community Development Board and City Council meetings are published in a widely-circulated newspaper prior to the meeting date. These notices are designed to provide reasonable and timely access to local meetings consistent with accessibility and reasonable accommodation requirements.

Plans and reports on the City's housing and community development activities are made available for review by citizens, public agencies, and other interested parties. These documents are available at the Community Development Division and posted on its website at www.BillingsMT.gov.

Public Access and Engagement

The City of Billings takes the following actions to ensure public access to drafted / proposed plans and reports are published and accessible to ensure the public has reasonable opportunities to examine content and to submit comments. City staff will strive to explore alternative public involvement techniques and quantitative ways to measure efforts that encourage citizen participation in a shared vision for change in communities and neighborhoods, where practical.

Public Comment Periods: The City will publish and accept public comment on drafted Consolidated Plans, Annual Action Plans, Citizen Participation Plans, Limited English Proficiency Plans, and the Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice for a period of at least 30 days. The same timeline applies to substantial amendments to the aforementioned documents.

The City will publish and accept public comment on drafted Comprehensive Annual Performance Evaluation Reports (CAPER) for a period of at least 15 days. The same timeline applies to amendments to the CAPER.

The City may request public comment for one or more activities, plans, and / or reports during the same public comment period for efficiency. Staff will consider citizen comments and views made prior to document finalization and comment summaries will also be included or attached to the document.

The City will strive to provide written responses to all written complaints and grievances related to the City's housing and community development programs within 15 working days of receipt of the complaint or grievance where practical. Grievances at the City Council level will require significantly more time.

In the event of a pandemic or other infectious disease, the City may alter public participation to include social distancing, virtual attendance, and other forms of virtual participation in lieu of or in addition to efforts described herein. The City may also implement shorter public comment periods as allowed by HUD. As per federal regulation, the City of Billings may publish its application for CDBG-CV funds for no less than five calendar days to solicit public comments.

Published Notices: City staff will issue notices via widely-circulated print press in advance of public comment periods. Notices will include the purpose of the document, a summary of the document contents, and instructions on how to access documents in their entirety. Statements are included in notices of public hearings and service brochures indicating that office, meeting, and public hearing locations are accessible to persons with disabilities and they include the Montana Relay phone number 711.

Plan Online Access: City staff will post drafted / proposed reports and plans online for free download at www.BillingsMT.gov/CDreports.

Plan Hard Copy Access: City staff will make available free hard copies of drafted / proposed documents to the public including residents, groups, and organizations upon request at the City's Community Development office. City staff will provide reasonable and timely access to information and records relating to all plans and reports, including the use of assistance under the programs managed by the Community Development Division. Those requesting records can complete a [Public Records Request](#) and submit it to the City's Legal Department.

Public Hearings: The City will hold at least two public hearings during City Council meetings each year to obtain residents' views and to respond to proposals and questions. Council meetings promote community access and participation and the meetings are aired live on social media and the local community television access station website and local free channels. Citizens may also access recordings of the meetings on social media and Channel 7's website.

The hearings will be held at two different stages of the program year and together they will address housing and community development needs, development of proposed activities, proposed strategies and actions for affirmatively furthering fair housing, and a review of program performance.

- **September:** One public hearing will be held each September, before publishing the proposed Consolidated and / or Annual Action Plan. The purpose of this hearing is to obtain public comment on:
 - CDBG and HOME Comprehensive Annual Performance Evaluation Report (CAPER) for the prior program year; and
 - Current community needs to assist the Community Development Board in designing the application process for the upcoming program year, before the publication of the drafted Consolidated and / or Annual Action Plan.
- **April:** One public hearing will be held during the development of the Consolidated and / or Annual Action Plan. This hearing is typically held on the last day of the public comment period and prior to staff's adjustments to Consolidated and / or Annual Action Plans and subsequent submission to HUD.
 - In the event HUD releases allocation amounts later than the public comment period, the Consolidated / Annual Action Plans will include descriptions of activities with specific recommended dollar amounts and one activity each for CDBG and HOME that will be allocated the remaining funding amounts. This will ensure only one activity for each program will be allocated variable funding amounts.
 - The City Council maintains authority to change the allocation amounts recommended by the Community Development Boards during the April public hearing meeting.

The City may facilitate one public hearing to accept public comment on one or more plans / reports for efficiency. Staff will consider public hearing comments made prior to document finalization and comment summaries will also be included or attached to the document.

All public hearings are accessible to disabled individuals, publicized as required by State law and allow for accommodation of individuals with hearing, visual, or mobility impairments.

City staff makes every effort to encourage public participation in the City Council public hearings and meetings:

- **Agenda Packet:** Available for viewing on the City's website www.BillingsMT.gov/councilagendas.
- **Viewing the Meeting:** The Public may view the meeting on the Community 7 TV - Channel 7 or Channel 507 – Spectrum Cable. The Public may also view online at www.comm7tv.com and click the *Watch Live* icon. Community 7 also has links to their Facebook page and YouTube channel in which to view the meeting. Meeting recordings are also available after the meeting for viewing online via the Community 7 TV website, Facebook page, or YouTube channel.
- **Public Participation:** Verbal comments are taken only during the Public Comment periods as indicated on the agenda and during the Public Hearings under the regular agenda. Written communication can be submitted any time prior to or during the public comment period.
 - **In-Person:** The public may attend City Council meetings in person in the Council's Chambers, City Hall, 210 North 27th Street, Billings, Montana.
 - **Email:** Emails can be sent to the City Council before 3:00 pm on the date of the Public Hearing at council@BillingsMT.gov.
 - **Viewing Council Emails:** All emails sent to the City Council can be viewed online at www.BillingsMT.gov/councilemails. Emails received after 3:00 pm and prior to 5:00 pm, may be read during the meeting.

Access for the Disabled and Limited English Proficiency: The City will provide accommodations for individuals with disabilities in public meetings, public hearings and in written documentation regarding programs and services available from the Division. Community Development offices and City Hall are accessible to those with disabilities. Statements are included in notices of public hearings and service brochures indicating that office and hearing locations are accessible to persons with disabilities. Accommodations can be made for other disabilities as well.

Special arrangements for participation by individuals with hearing, speech, or vision impairment may be made upon request with three business days advanced notice. Non-English speaking persons wishing to participate will also be accommodated through translation and / or interpretation in accordance with the City's Language Assistance Plan.

Criteria for amending the Consolidated Plan

24 CFR part 91.105(c) of the Final Rule requires grantees of CDBG and HOME programs make public the criteria the City will use for determining what changes in planned or actual activities constitute a substantial amendment to the five-year Consolidated Plan and the Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice.

Substantial changes to the Consolidated Plan are defined as *the creation of any new program, project, or activity to be funded or carried out under the City's CDBG and / or HOME programs*. All substantial changes to the Consolidated Plan must meet demonstrated need substantiated by HUD-approved data sources. Minor amendments include the *expansion of an existing program, project, or activity funded or carried out under the City's CDBG and / or HOME programs*. Minor changes must also meet demonstrated need by HUD-approved data sources.

Prior to the submission of any substantial change in the proposed use of federal housing and community development funds or to the Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice, the City will hold a public hearing to allow citizens reasonable notice of, and opportunity to comment on, proposed amendments. Public comment periods will not be less than thirty (30) days unless otherwise allowed by HUD.

Routine Revenues, Close- and Shovel-Ready Procedures: Routine revenues include program income, recaptured or repaid funds, reprogrammed federal dollars, and revised allocations to the City. HUD may alter current allocations due to calculation errors and release final CDBG and HOME annual allocation amounts after the City has used estimates to develop funding recommendations. These revenues are allocated on a readiness-to-proceed basis, prioritizing projects and programs that are close to implementation or shovel-ready, to support timely commitment and expenditure of funds. Such adjustments are standard practice and do not trigger a substantial or minor amendment to the Consolidated Plan. As routine revenues are received throughout the fiscal year, they will be directed toward existing, previously approved programs.

City staff are unable to predict annual HUD entitlement allocations or repayment revenues for CDBG and HOME programs. As a result, the numerical goals outlined in the five-year Consolidated Plan are based on estimates and may vary over the course of the plan period, depending on actual funding received and program demand. These fluctuations are typical and do not require a substantial or minor amendment to the Consolidated Plan.

Technical Assistance

The Community Development Division provides technical assistance, as requested and as staff time allows, to lower income groups to develop proposals for the Division's housing and community development activities in the City limits. Technical assistance is offered any time proposals for the use of funding are requested, and is offered routinely in December and January - prior to application deadlines for CDBG / HOME funding allocations.

Nondiscrimination, Accommodations & Grievances

The Community Development Division receives federal funding to support housing acquisition, repair, development and poverty impact programs and is required to adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Fair Housing Act, the Montana Human Rights Act, and other equal opportunity regulations. These regulations are designed to protect individuals with disabilities with equal access to employment opportunities and the services, programs and activities the City offers.

It is essential that all individuals have equal access to the Community Development Division's communication, open meetings, programs and services including: First Time Home Buyer; Home Repair; Housing Development; and the Billings Metro VISTA Project.

- **Federally Protected Classes:** Disability, including people with HIV / AIDS and people in recovery from alcohol / drugs; Race / Color; Religion; Sex, includes protection against sexual harassment; Familial Status, includes the presence of children under the age of 18 and / or pregnancy; and National Origin.
- **HUD Protected Classes:** Sexual Orientation; Gender Identity; and Marital Status.
- **Montana's Protected Classes:** Marital Status; Creed; and Age.

Accommodations: Auxiliary aids and services are available to facilitate effective communication to individuals with disabilities to ensure equal participation. Such aids and services are free to the public and may include sign-language interpreters, large print formats, and other aids to make information and communications accessible to individuals with speech, hearing or vision impairments.

Public Notices: The City of Billings - Community Development Division encourages all members of the community to participate. Special arrangements for participation by individuals with hearing, speech, vision impairment or physical disabilities can be made upon request. Non-English speaking persons wishing to participate will also be accommodated through translation and / or interpretation in accordance the City's Language Assistance Plan. Fair Housing Equal Opportunity.

Grievance Procedure: If a citizen feels they have been denied equal access to Community Development programs, services or activities, they may file a written complaint including their contact information and a description of the alleged act(s) of discrimination, including the date and place of the act(s). The written complaint may be submitted to any Community Development employee or specifically directed to the Community Development Manager by phone at 406.657.8286 (Montana Relay 711), email beckettb@billingsmt.gov, in person (appointment recommended) or U.S. Postal Service at 2825 3rd Avenue North, 6th Floor, Billings, MT 59101. City staff will provide a timely, substantive written response to written citizen complaints as soon as practicable. Complaints may also be filed in writing with the Denver HUD FHEO Office at 1670 Broadway, Denver, CO 80202 or by calling 303.672.5155.

Program Eligibility: If a citizen disagrees with a staff decision relative to program eligibility unrelated to discrimination, they may submit a written appeal to the Community Development Division. The letter must be received at least two weeks prior to the Community Development Board meeting when the appeal would be reviewed. If the Community Development Board upholds the staff decision, the citizen has the option to have the appeal reviewed during a future City Council meeting. Please note, it can take several months to prepare an appeal for City Council review and determination.

ADA / 504 Coordinator: The City of Billings ADA Coordinator is responsible for the City's overall Grievance Procedure and is also available to ensure compliance with the physical and general program accessibility requirements of the ADA for other City Departments and Divisions. Please call 406.237.6294 (Montana Relay 711) with any questions.

Fair Housing Complaints: Please see the City's [fair housing webpages](#) for information on how to file a fair housing compliant.