



White Salmon City Council MEETING MINUTES

December 3, 2025 – 6:00 PM
119 NE Church Ave and Zoom Teleconference

Attendance:

Council Members:

Jason Hartmann
David Lindley
Ben Giant
Morella Mora

Staff:

Marla Keethler, Mayor
Kelly Hickok, City Attorney
Erika Castro Guzman, City Clerk
Rowan Fairfield, City Planner
Jennifer Neil, Director of Finance and Operations
Chris True, Director of Public Works
Mike Hepner, Police Chief

- I. **Call to Order, Land Acknowledgement and Presentation of the Flag (6:00 p.m.)**
Mayor Marla Keethler called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. There were five members of the public in attendance in person and via teleconference.

- II. **Oath of Office (6:02 p.m.)**
 - A. **Administration of Oath to Councilor Morella Mora**
Councilor Morella Mora was appointed on May 21, 2025, to fill a vacant City Council seat. Following certification of the November 4, 2025, General Election results, she was sworn in as the elected City Councilor for Position #4.

- III. **Roll Call (6:03 p.m.)**
Roll call was taken and a quorum was present.

Moved by Ben Giant. Seconded by Morella Mora.
Move to excuse the absence of Council member Patty Fink from the December 3 City Council meeting.

There was no further discussion.

MOTION CARRIED, 4-0
Giant – Aye, Mora – Aye, Hartmann – Aye, Lindley – Aye.

- IV. **Changes to the Agenda (6:04 p.m.)**
Administration requested the removal of Consent Agenda Item B due to the absence of a complete list for consideration. No further changes to the agenda were requested by Council.

Moved by David Lindley. Seconded by Jason Hartmann.
Move to approve the City Council agenda with Consent Agenda Item B stricken.

There was no further discussion.

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MOTION CARRIED, 4-0

Giant – Aye, Mora – Aye, Hartmann – Aye, Lindley – Aye.

V. Public Comment (6:05 p.m.)

No members of the public provided comment.

VI. Presentations (6:06 p.m.)

A. City Highlights with the Mayor

Mayor Marla Keether provided an update on childcare policy following her participation in a regional Child Care Workshop held in Goldendale during the Klickitat County Board of Commissioners meeting on December 2, 2025.

Mayor Keethler reported on policy recommendations presented by the City in coordination with the Klickitat County Child Care Committee, emphasizing that childcare should be treated as essential infrastructure supporting economic stability, workforce retention, and child development. She outlined five key policy focus areas discussed at the workshop: revising age group definitions and caregiver-to-child ratios to better align with child development and provider sustainability; establishing stable, long-term funding for childcare access; ensuring reimbursement reflects the true cost of quality care; expanding physical capacity through facility construction or renovation funding; and improving the state licensing system rather than shifting licensing responsibilities to local governments.

Mayor Keethler noted ongoing local progress, including ordinance changes to streamline childcare siting, federal funding secured for facility renovation, and continued advocacy at the state level. She also shared opportunities for public engagement through the Klickitat County Child Care Committee and indicated future workshops would provide updates on legislative progress.

Additional announcements included upcoming community holiday events and reminders regarding required training for newly elected officials.

VII. Consent Agenda (6:17 p.m.)

A. Approval of 2026 Lodging Tax Grant Awards

~~**B. Approval of Mayor's Appointments to the Wildfire & Emergency Preparedness Committee**~~

C. Resolution No. 2025-12-634 - Planning Commission Bylaws

D. Resolution No. 2025-12-635 - Recognizing the Community Members Whose Spirit and Service Bring to Life the Annual Christmas Tree & Menorah Lighting Celebration

E. Approval of Meeting Minutes - October 15, 2025

F. Approval of Meeting Minutes - November 5, 2025

G. Approval of Meeting Minutes - November 19, 2025

H. Approval of Vouchers

Vouchers audited and certified as required by RCW 42.24.080 and expense reimbursement claims as required by RCW 42.24.090 as of this 3rd day of December 2025.

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Type	Date	Beginning Check	Ending Check	
Claims	12/03/2025	43005	43037	\$57,545.31
			Claim Total	\$57,545.31
Payroll	12/05/2025	EFT	EFT	\$126,473.24
	12/05/2025	43004	43004	\$789.25
			Payroll Total	\$127,262.49
			Toal Vouchers	\$184,807.80

Moved by Jason Hartmann. Seconded by David Lindley.

Motion to approve the amended Consent Agenda (Items A and C–H) and Vouchers for \$184,807.80.

There was no further discussion.

MOTION CARRIED, 4-0

Giant – Aye, Mora – Aye, Hartmann – Aye, Lindley – Aye.

VIII. Public Hearing (6:19 p.m.)

A. Ordinance 2025-11-1184 – Adopting the Annual Budget for Fiscal Year ending December 31, 2026 (Continued from November 19, 2025)

1. Presentation (6:19 p.m.)

Mayor Marla Keether opened the public hearing on Ordinance 2025-11-1184, adopting the annual budget for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2026, at 6:19 p.m.

She noted this was the second public hearing and that no action was planned for the evening in order to allow time to consider public comments received.

Finance and Operations Director Jennifer Niel provided a detailed overview of the proposed budget and reviewed Council’s adopted priorities, including housing, wildfire preparedness, and youth programming. She noted that, as a non-GMA city, the City’s planning and housing workload has increased significantly, with infrastructure (water, wastewater, and streets) being critical to enabling future housing development. Ongoing investments in wildfire mitigation, code compliance, and abatement were identified as increasing needs, as were youth recreation, engagement, and workforce development initiatives.

Director Niel reported that since 2022, Council has committed approximately \$47 million toward housing and related infrastructure, \$1.1 million toward wildfire preparedness, and nearly \$3 million toward youth-focused programs. Revenue forecasting continues to be challenged by rising operational costs that exceed the statutory 1% property tax increase limit. Insurance costs, including medical, dental, WA L&I, and liability coverage, continue to rise at rates significantly higher than revenue growth.

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Sales tax revenue was described as stable but modest, having leveled out following post-COVID recovery. New criminal justice sales tax revenue beginning January 1 is projected at approximately \$40,000 for the first year, with 75% budgeted to account for delayed collections; however, increases in public safety costs are expected to fully absorb this revenue. Investment earnings were projected using an estimated LGIP rate of 3.5%, generating approximately \$189,000 in interest income. Lodging tax revenue was also reviewed, with short-term rental permits declining by approximately 15 compared to 2024, partially due to conversions to long-term housing.

Expenditures were presented by service tiers. Tier 1 mandatory services, those required by state or federal law, comprise approximately 86% of the \$14.6 million preliminary budget and include executive and legislative services, finance and human resources, public safety, streets, and utilities. Tier 2 essential services include planning and building, as well as code compliance, while Tier 3 discretionary services include parks, facilities, and community services.

Director Niel noted that the general fund balance is stronger than previously projected, estimated at \$792,000 entering 2026. Staffing changes proposed in the budget include an increase from 21 to 22 full-time employees, one part-time employee, and the addition of three interns. The proposed youth internship program is intended to engage local students in public-sector work, support administrative and public works operations, and create a pipeline for future municipal employment.

Director Niel concluded with key takeaways, emphasizing that mandatory services drive baseline operational costs, interlocal agreements and insurance increases continue to outpace revenue growth, and infrastructure investment remains the largest budget driver for 2026. She outlined next steps, including potential Council-directed adjustments and formal budget adoption at the next Council meeting.

No questions were raised by Council.

2. Public Hearing (6:28 p.m.)

Mayor Marla Keethler opened the public testimony portion of the hearing to consider Ordinance 2025-11-1184 – Adopting the Annual Budget for Fiscal Year ending December 31, 2026, at 6:28 p.m.

Mayor Keethler entered into the record that one written public comment had been received from Chris Stifler, President of the White Salmon Business Association, and noted that all Council members had received a copy of the comment.

No in-person or remote public comments were offered. Mayor Keethler closed the public testimony portion of the hearing at 6:29 p.m.

3. Discussion (6:29 p.m.)

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Council Member Ben Giant commended staff for continued improvements to the budget structure and presentation. He requested future consideration of year-over-year expenditure growth by department to better support fiscal discussions with the public. Director of Finance and Operations Jennifer Niel explained that producing that comparison currently requires significant manual work due to the structure of the financial system but noted efforts are underway to improve reporting capabilities in future years. Mayor Marla Keether added that comparative data from 2022 forward is included in the budget packet and noted recent reclassification of positions, including the separation of the clerk and treasurer roles, which impacts departmental totals.

Council Member Morella Mora expressed appreciation for the new budget breakdown showing that approximately 86% of the budget is dedicated to mandatory services. She noted this level of transparency is helpful when discussing budget constraints and staffing needs with the public. Mayor Keethler explained that while similar breakdowns have been provided in the past, this is the first year the full budget has been presented in this format.

Council Member Jason Hartmann asked about a significant increase in the Water Reserve Fund. Director Niel explained this reflects the temporary placement of infrastructure project costs within that fund as part of ongoing financial system cleanup, with plans to reallocate costs to appropriate capital funds later.

Council Member Mora asked about the origin of the criminal justice sales tax. Director Niel clarified that the tax was enacted by the Klickitat County Board of Commissioners and is applied countywide.

Council discussion then turned to a written public comment from the White Salmon Business Association regarding City funding for professional street closures associated with community events. Mayor Keethler explained that while the City historically did not fund these costs, it did so in 2025 due to increased regulatory requirements, safety considerations, and volunteer limitations. She noted the City intends to explore shared-cost approaches for 2026, including potential use of lodging tax funds, to balance support for community events with long-term fiscal sustainability.

Public Works Director Chris True provided additional context, noting that the Halloween street closure alone cost approximately \$9,000 due to prevailing wage requirements and approved traffic control plans, and that costs would be lower if managed by non-city entities.

Several Council Members expressed support for continued City involvement in funding community event closures, emphasizing the importance of maintaining successful events and avoiding undue financial burden on community organizations. Council Members discussed exploring alternative funding sources, including lodging tax revenues, and expressed interest in further discussion at a future meeting.

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Council also acknowledged the Business Association’s request for renewed collaboration with City leadership. Mayor Keethler explained recent gaps in participation were due to staffing transitions and capacity but expressed openness to reestablishing regular communication and exploring Council involvement.

Mayor Keethler concluded the discussion by noting that staff will incorporate Council feedback and pending labor negotiation outcomes before presenting a final budget for consideration and adoption at the December 17 Council meeting.

4. Action (6:50 p.m.)

Mayor Marla Keethler tabled the discussion to the next Council meeting, December 17, 2025, at 6:50 PM.

IX. Business Items (6:50 p.m.)

1. Presentation (6:50 p.m.)

Mayor Marla Keether introduced Resolution 2025-12-636, regarding a Short-term Cash Flow Loan, and invited Director of Finance and Operations Jennifer Niel to present.

Director of Finance and Operations Jennifer Niel explained that in 2024, Council authorized the purchase of a new street sweeper through the Washington State Treasurer’s Local Program, a tax-exempt financing tool. At the time of purchase, the notification required to the Treasurer’s Office was inadvertently missed. As a result, the Streets Fund is experiencing a temporary cash flow shortfall while awaiting reimbursement for the equipment purchase. Reimbursement funds have been awarded and authorized and are expected to be available in late February or March 2026.

2. Discussion (6:51 p.m.)

Council Member Ben Giant asked about the certainty and timing of the reimbursement. Director Niel confirmed that the funds are fully awarded and allocated, though the exact reimbursement date may depend on the State’s processing timeline.

3. Action (6:53 p.m.)

Moved by Jason Hartmann. Seconded by Ben Giant.

Motion to approve Resolution 2025-12-636, authorizing a short-term interfund loan in the amount of \$326,000 from the General Fund to the Streets Fund, establishing loan terms and repayment conditions, and approving related budget modifications.

There was no further discussion.

MOTION CARRIED, 4-0

Giant – Aye, Mora – Aye, Hartmann – Aye, Lindley – Aye.

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X. Reports and Communications (6:53 p.m.)

A. Council Member Reports (6:53 p.m.)

Council Member David Lindley reported on a recent City Operations Committee meeting, noting discussion focused primarily on the wastewater interlocal agreement. He described the meeting as productive and indicated the committee plans to meet monthly to review ongoing projects and operational matters.

Council Member Jason Hartmann reported no updates.

Council Member Morella Mora shared her anticipation for upcoming community holiday events. She also provided a brief update following comments made at the previous Council meeting regarding ICE enforcement concerns in the region. She thanked Council for its support, noted continued conversations with community partners, and stated that efforts are underway to explore mutual aid systems and potential City involvement. She indicated that more detailed information would be provided at a future meeting.

Council Member Ben Giant reported on the work of the Lodging Tax Grant Committee, noting that the committee received more applications than available funding for the first time during his tenure on Council. He commended the committee, applicants, and City staff for collaborative efforts that allowed more events to be funded through shared concessions. He also noted upcoming Community Development Committee activity and expressed willingness to help reestablish City participation in Business Association meetings.

B. Staff Reports (6:54 p.m.)

Mayor Keethler noted that City Attorney Kelly Hickok had no updates at this time.

IX. Executive Session (None)

X. Adjournment to Closed Session

Mayor Keethler announced that the Council would convene a closed session pursuant to RCW 42.30.140 to discuss ongoing collective bargaining.

The public meeting and Zoom session were ended at 6:58 p.m.

The meeting adjourned at 7:39 p.m.

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Marla Keethler, Mayor

Signed by:



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Erika Castro Guzman, City Clerk