

Bonner Milltown Community Council

Meeting Minutes

May 11, 2026 — 7:00 PM

Bonner School Cafeteria and Via Zoom

Call to Order

Chair Rick Hall called the meeting to order and reminded attendees to silence cell phones.

Roll Call

Members Present:

- Rick Hall, Chair
- Jane Kipp, Vice Chair
- Kaaren James, Treasurer
- Emily Herndon, Secretary
- Jessica Glebke, Alternate
- John Wilke, Member (online)

A quorum was present.

Approval of Agenda

Motion: Emily Herndon moved to approve the agenda for May 11, 2026. Seconded Kaaren James Motion carried unanimously by voice vote.

Approval of Minutes

Motion: Jane Kipp moved to approve the minutes from the April 13, 2026 meeting; Emily Herndon seconded. Motion carried unanimously by voice vote.

Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda

Railroad Noise — Jane Kipp

Jane referenced a May 8 article in the Missoulian, “The city of Missoula’s hands largely tied when it comes to railroad noise,” noting that even within city limits, efforts to reduce train noise from BNSF have had limited success. BNSF has stated it will look into the matter.

Bear-Resistant Containers — Jane Kipp

Jane reported receiving notice from the County indicating she lives in Phase 3 of the bear buffer zone. Effective April 30, all garbage must be stored in a bear-resistant container or enclosure; however, containers are currently unavailable. According to Republic Services pricing shared with her, a 95-gallon bear-resistant container would increase from \$65.91 to \$85.42 per quarter, with a \$61 delivery fee and an \$11 pickup fee for the old container. Smaller containers run about \$80 per quarter. Availability is estimated to be one to two years out.

Data Center Petition — Paul (community member)

Paul announced he started a petition opposing approval of permits for the proposed data center. The petition has approximately 4,000 signatures and is circulating online (Nextdoor, Facebook). He offered flyers and is available to community members with questions.

HD-92 Candidate Introduction

A candidate Reggie Spaulding for House District 92 introduced themselves and attended to observe. The Chair noted that ballots are out and reminded the public that resources such as the League of Women Voters provide information on candidate positions.

Bonner History Tidbit — Ken Bergman

Ken Bergman presented a nostalgic history of the Duck Bridge — the former Milwaukee Railroad bridge that crossed the upper end of the Milltown Reservoir for approximately 70 years, connecting the main line to Bonner Junction and the Blackfoot logging camps and cattle ranches. In preparation for the recent opening of the Bonner railroad exhibit, Ken determined the bridge was removed in 1983. He read excerpts from an April 1983 Missoulian letter to the editor by Sandra Wilcox (formerly of the Piltzville–Bonner area), who lamented the removal of the bridge without public notice and described the natural beauty it provided access to — waterfowl, beavers, turtles, river meadows, and seasonal scenery along the Clark Fork.

Announcements

None on the agenda.

Guest Speakers — Water and Energy Use with AI Data Centers

Procedural Motion: Emily Herndon moved to limit public comment following the guest speakers to three minutes per individual, with no questions. Seconded Jane Kipp. Motion carried unanimously.

Robert Morris — Lance Energy Chair, Montana Technical University

Professor Morris presented on water and electricity use in data centers. Key points:

- Montana is attractive to data centers due to reliable and economical electricity, a cool climate that reduces cooling loads, fiber optic infrastructure along transmission corridors, and a well-educated workforce.
- Industry metric — Power Use Effectiveness (PUE): ratio of total facility power to IT equipment power. Industry average ~1.6; best-in-class ~1.1.
- Cooling design is a trade-off between water and energy. Evaporative coolers use significant water and little energy; air-cooled chillers use no water but more energy. Adiabatic systems are a middle option and can operate with zero water use for ~10 months/year in Montana's climate.
- Industry metric — Water Use Effectiveness (WUE): liters of water per kWh of IT power. Industry average ~1.8; best-in-class ~0.15; dry/adiabatic systems much lower.
- Example: A 34 MW Sabey Data Center in Round Rock, TX (dry-cooled) uses approximately 2 million gallons per year — comparable to about 15 single-family homes.

- A proposed 250 MW adiabatic facility in Butte targets a PUE of 1.25 and uses approximately 44,000 gallons per day — roughly equivalent to a 100-room hotel with restaurant or a softball field.
- On electricity rates: U.S. electricity demand was flat from ~2005 until recently. Inflation-adjusted prices have generally trended downward over a century. There is no correlation between number of data centers and state electricity rates (e.g., Virginia hosts ~700 data centers with mid-range rates).
- In Montana, data centers have three power options: (1) buy from NorthWestern Energy through the rate base (subject to PSC large-load tariff review, which requires demonstrating no harm to existing customers); (2) buy on the open market, bypassing NorthWestern (likely path given Missoula County's new clean energy requirement); or (3) bring their own backup generation.
- NorthWestern's IRP modeling for replacing Colstrip shows no material cost increase even with up to 1,160 MW of data center growth, due to economies of scale.

County Representatives

The following county and state representatives addressed the project:

- **Jenny Dixon**, Case Planner — confirmed the application was certified as complete that day. Review will focus on impacts to adjacent residential properties (traffic, natural resources, utilities, noise/vibration, lighting, landscaping/screening, TIF district effects). Target board hearing: July 1. Public comment is encouraged via missoulacountyvoice.com.
- **Caroline Lauer (County Climate Action Program Manager)** — working on the clean energy requirement compliance mechanism. Krambu Data Center has not yet proposed a compliance mechanism.
- **Karen Hughes**, Director, Missoula County Planning, Development & Sustainability Department.
- **Benjamin Thomas**, DNRC Water Rights — reported that the property has existing water rights totaling roughly 6,000–7,000 acre-feet per year with consumed volume of ~1,200 acre-feet (~400 million gallons/year). Because existing rights cover the proposed use, a new application to DNRC likely would not be required.

Key Discussion Points and Q&A

- **Water use:** Krambu Data Center has indicated approximately 2,000 gallons/year of water use, consistent with a dry chiller system (no evaporative cooling). The cooling fluid is a 60% water / 40% propylene glycol closed-loop mixture.
- **Site capacity:** The site can supply up to 29 MW with existing electrical infrastructure. The current proposal is 7 MW, with potential expansion up to 29 MW (subject to re-review). Going beyond 29 MW would require additional transmission lines.
- **TIF district:** The site is in a TIF district. Mike Johnson and Karen Hughes clarified that TIF funds must benefit public infrastructure across the district, not a single tenant. Power lines specific to the data center building would not qualify.
- **Heat output:** Heat will be exhausted to the environment, comparable to the previous sawmill operation that also consumed ~29 MW at the site. Krambu Data Center has stated the heat is not sufficient for productive reuse (e.g., greenhouses).
- **Noise:** Krambu Data Center's comparable Washington site measures ~49 dBA at the property line (~470 ft). Missoula County zoning compliance requires noise not to exceed 50 dBA at a residential property line at night and 55 dBA during the day. Cooling towers have been relocated to the rear of the Planer Building. No backup generators are proposed.

- **Wastewater:** Cooling-tower discharge will go to an engineered on-site disposal system approved by the County Health Department (not a municipal sewer or standard drain field).
- **Hazardous materials:** Per the applicant, propylene glycol is classified as low toxicity and not a hazardous material; no other hazardous substances are proposed.
- **Monitoring & enforcement:** Final verification occurs at the Certificate of Zoning Compliance stage. Ongoing monitoring is complaint-driven; the County will investigate complaints (noise, lighting, megawatt use, etc.). Significant changes (e.g., new cooling technology or more toxic chemicals) would require additional review by DEQ and the Health Department.
- **Conditions of approval:** Jenny Dixon noted that performance-based conditions (e.g., metric thresholds) could be written into approval to address future technology changes.

Statewide Perspective — Ben (Montana Environmental Information Center, MEIC)

Ben offered a contrasting perspective on data center growth statewide. Highlights:

- NorthWestern Energy has signed letters of intent for approximately 1,400 MW of data center load and is reportedly in talks with ~11 more facilities; the proposed merger with Black Hills Energy is partially motivated by serving this growth.
- MEIC views the large-load tariff currently before the PSC as deficient — lacking adequate contract length safeguards and a separate data center customer class.
- NorthWestern Energy has financial incentives to build more generation; resource adequacy oversight is unclear in current statute.
- The E3 study showing downward pressure on rates was funded by Amazon, raising credibility concerns.
- Missoula County's new renewable energy requirement is the model MEIC would like to see statewide; Missoula's regulation alleviates some concerns about this specific proposal.

Related Event: A panel on data centers and Montana's energy and water resources will be held Tuesday, May 19, 5:30–7:30 PM at the UC Theater, featuring Anne Hedges (MEIC Executive Director), Barbara Chilcott (Western Environmental Law Center), Amy Cilimburg (Climate Smart Missoula), and Eva Rocke (Sustainability).

Three-Minute Public Comment Period (Following Guest Speakers)

- **Ben (MEIC):** Emphasized the importance of statewide context. Cited Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory data showing U.S. WUE has risen from ~0.36 to ~0.48 L/kWh in recent years due to AI workload demands. Encouraged a “trust but verify” posture and attention to when (seasonally) water is consumed, given summer river flow concerns.
- **Reggie:** Supported statewide legislation mirroring Missoula's requirements and proposed a tax on data centers to fund an independent monitoring task force.
- **James (online):** Urged independent, transparent monitoring and possible financial penalties when WUE or PUE targets are exceeded.
- **Rick Hall (Chair):** Offered an editorial comment that the Community Council's scope is limited to land-use and code compliance review, not broader policy questions about AI or the desirability of a business to the community.
- **Emily Herndon:** Expressed personal support for environmental stewardship while acknowledging property owners' rights to lease their property; thanked attendees for their engagement.

- **Paul:** Shared concerns based on his experience in Gallatin Gateway and the Yellowstone Club area, where some operators paid fines rather than comply with environmental regulations. He stated his petition (4,000+ signatures) reflects strong community opposition.
- **Jane Kipp:** Recalled community opposition ~25 years ago to a proposed pre-release center at what is now the Travel Plaza casino site, which was successfully relocated to Mullan Road.

Bouquet Period

- Emily Herndon thanked everyone who attended in person and asked questions.
- Gary recognized Mike for his ongoing efforts to mitigate potential adverse effects of the proposed data center.
- Ken Bergman recognized Mike and Steve for their decades of contributions to the community, including rehabilitating homes and selling them below market with first option to existing residents.

Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda (Second Period)

No additional comments.

Communications

- MDT and Riverside Contracting, Inc. anticipate pausing work on MT-83 near Swan Lake until early June. Project info: www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/mt83bridges/
- FAQs about the potential Bonner Mill data center are available on missoulacountyvoice.com. The project is a special exception request, subject to approval by the Missoula County Consolidated Land Use Board (MCCLUB), which meets the first Wednesday of each month at 6 PM in the Sophie Moiese Room.
- Commissioners will consider final adoption of the billboard amendment at a public hearing Tuesday, May 12 at 2 PM.
- Aging playground equipment at West Riverside Community Park has been removed; new playground installation is targeted for 2027.
- Floodplain mapping project (Clark Fork River, Bitterroot River, Rock Creek) FAQs are available on MissoulaCountyVoice.com. County contact: 406-258-4657 / floodplain@missoulacounty.us.

Treasurer's Report

Kaaren James reported a zero balance in the council account. The budget is due June 1, 2026. Anticipated budget items include the Zoom account, P.O. Box, and contribution toward the annual community picnic, Zoom, PO Box rental, and misc. items. Suggestions for additional budget items may be submitted to bcommunitycouncil@gmail.com.

Action Items

None.

Discussion Items

1. Blackfoot Crossing

Greg Morse (online) reported no major updates. Work continues to address issues that emerged following prior decisions; no significant developments to share at this time.

2. Bonner Mill AI Center

Covered in detail under Guest Speakers above.

3. Open Council Positions

The application period closes May 15. Three applicants have been received to date. New members begin officially in June.

4. City/Community Signage

John Wilke (online) reported that his application for a Rural Impact Grant was declined. Per County staff (Claire), he plans to apply for a Rural Micro Grant (up to \$500), which would cover approximately four signs. Estimated cost is ~\$125 per sign for six signs (~\$750 total). The shortfall could be addressed through County budget request and/or community donations from local businesses such as Trail West Bank and Dollar General. John will submit the micro-grant application this month.

5. Milltown State Park — Recreational River Closures

Jessica Glebke reported that she was unable to secure an FWP representative for this meeting. McKenna Flanagan (River Ambassador Program point person) indicated that hard dates are not yet known due to BNSF involvement. The most recent public information is the April 14 KPAX article. Additional information may be available in June.

6. Chair Resignation

Rick Hall announced he has submitted his letter of resignation as Chair. He will preside over one more meeting. Selection of a new Chair will be an action item at the next meeting once new council members have been seated. Jane Kipp, currently Vice Chair, also indicated her intent to step back from a chair role.

Final Public Comment

- Ken Bergman reiterated his appreciation for Mike and Steve's longstanding contributions to the community, urging the Council not to lose sight of their broader value to the area when reviewing the data center proposal.
- Rick Hall added an editorial appreciation for the property owners' record of rehabbing and selling homes below market value with first option to existing residents.

Next Meeting

Date: Monday, June 8, 2026

Anticipated Agenda Items:

- Blackfoot Crossing
- Bonner Mill AI Center (Special Exception Permit Process — speakers TBD)
- Filled Council Positions
- Chair Opening and Resignation
- City/Community Signage (action item — micro grant and County budget request)
- Milltown State Park — recreational river closures (invite park manager and/or Front Country Alliance representative)

Adjournment

Motion: Emily Herndon moved to adjourn; John Wilke seconded. Motion carried unanimously.
Meeting adjourned 8:54 PM