

Getting Involved in Local Government in the Flathead County Area

Updated 2022

This guide was designed to help you
get involved in State, County, City and Town
decisions that affect residents
in the Flathead County, Montana area.



Flathead County, Montana

Flathead County has a population of almost 104,000 as of the 2020 census and has an area of 13,613 km², making it the fourth-most populous county in Montana. The population has grown 14% in the past ten years. Flathead County borders Canada to the north and Lake County to the south, encompassing the upper portion of Flathead Lake. The county seat and commercial hub for the area is the City of Kalispell, with a population around 24,565. The popular resort towns of Whitefish, Bigfork, Somers and Lakeside as well as Columbia Falls, the gateway to Glacier National Park, are located in the County. It is also home to many other small town residents and boasts many lakes, National and State Parks, and wilderness areas.

Engagement in Local Government Decision Making

As a Flathead County resident, decisions are being made at every level of government that can affect your family and your community. As a democracy, the government has been set up to allow the citizenry to engage with decision makers whenever possible, so as to reflect the values and needs of the people that the government was set up to serve. Engagement at a basic level can take the form of voting for elected representatives that will best represent our views. While important, voting is not the only way to have an affect on the policies and laws that shape your civic life. This guide was designed to provide ideas and contacts from a governmental perspective on how you can become engaged in the issues that you care about on a State, County, and City or Town level. There are many other ways to become engaged that are not included in this guide, such as involvement in clubs, organizations, grassroots movements, and local non-profits.

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Determining Jurisdiction



Trying to determine who has jurisdiction over a particular matter or policy is not always simple and clear. For example, some roads in a city are the responsibility of the city, while other roads are in control of the state. Some towns have established their own governments and policies while others leave some or all of the decisions to the County. While the entire County is governed by Montana State policy,

sometimes local policy can be more restrictive than that of the state.

When trying to determine who has jurisdiction over a matter, you may find assistance within the specific sections of this guide. If not, start with whatever agency or level makes sense and simply ask. If you have patience and understand you may be directed elsewhere, you will likely soon learn who your questions and comments should be directed towards. You may feel like someone is ‘passing the buck’, but you will want to talk directly to the right person. The community members that work or volunteer for these agencies will appreciate your patience.

Engagement with the State Legislature

The State laws and policies are largely determined by the [Montana Legislature](#), which is made up of a 100-member [House of Representatives](#) and a 50-member [Senate](#). Legislators are elected from geographical locations within the state and only convenes on odd-numbered years, for a period of 90 days from January through April.

The laws created by the State legislature are available to the public online through a searchable database called the [Montana Code Annotated \(MCA\)](#). During the legislative session, legislators and legislative committees bring forward drafts of bills (laws) that they would like to sponsor through the legislative process. Once a law is passed and is signed by the Governor, it becomes part of the MCA.

Ideas to become engaged in the state legislative process:

Become involved in the election process. Become a candidate or learn about the candidates and vote!

The Secretary of State has information on candidates, registering to vote, ballot measures, and more at <https://sosmt.gov/elections/>.

Get to know your local state representatives and share your views and concerns with them.

You can find your representatives by address, name or district and contact information on the [Legislator page](#) at <https://leg.mt.gov/>.

Follow the draft bills that you care about as they go through the legislative process, and submit public comment to your local representatives and to committee members reviewing the bills.

[Find and track bills](#) by subject matter, keywords, bill #s, sponsors and status on the [bills page](#) at <https://leg.mt.gov/> You can also watch [live meetings online](#), view past meetings, and testify at hearings in Helena.



Engagement with State Agencies

The daily administration of the State's laws are carried out by the [executive](#) level of government. At the helm of the executive branch is the [Governor](#) and Lieutenant Governor. There are 14 executive branch [agencies](#) in the State of Montana. If you are not sure which agency to reach out to, you can browse by [service category](#). Within those agencies there are many commissions, councils, boards and offices. Every agency is tasked with providing ways to engage the public in meaningful ways. These days, state agencies tend to have robust websites with information pertaining to current matters under consideration. You may be surprised by how many of the State Agencies are now engaging through social media! Some also have ways for you to receive automatic email notifications when they are soliciting feedback from the public on a project. Learn more about State resources, including online forms, a large variety of public information, and ways that you can get involved in the administrative decisions of the State of Montana, at the [mt.gov](#) website.

Tip: Many agencies have local offices. Don't be afraid to reach out.



Just a few of the state agencies relevant to Flathead residents:

[Montana Department of Transportation](#) (MDT)

The MDT website is frequently updated with ways to attend [meetings and events](#) and [give feedback](#) into the projects it is planning. MDT is also open to hearing from you about specific roads and highways that you have concerns about.

[Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks](#)

This agency has oversight over some of the outdoor resources that Flathead Valley residents cherish.

[Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation](#)

Weigh in on issues dealing with forestry, water rights, and other conservation matters. [Get involved.](#)

Engagement with Flathead County

The Board of County Commissioners is the County's governing body, which consists of three commissioners elected at-large to six-year staggered terms. The [County Commission](#) is the executive as well as the legislative branch for [Flathead County](#). The board is charged with setting policy to guide County programs that serve residents and businesses in Flathead County. In addition to the Commissioners, the County has eight other elected officials representing various branches of government.

The Flathead County Commissioners hold public meetings in their chambers, located on the third floor of the County Courthouse at 800 South Main Street in Kalispell. Meeting dates and times change weekly, so check the [agenda](#) regularly. Commissioner of District 1, Brad Abell can be reached at babell@flathead.mt.gov. Commissioner of District 2, Pamela Holmquist, can be reached at pholmquist@flathead.mt.gov, and Commissioner of District 3, Randy Brodehl, can be reached at rbrodehl@flathead.mt.gov. They can be contacted by phone at (406) 758-5503. You can also contact County Administrator Pete Melnick at 758-5503 or pmelnick@flathead.mt.gov.

One of the ways to engage on a County level is to apply to be appointed to one of the many [County boards](#) that serve in a legislative or advisory capacity to the County Commission. Information on county board meetings and other events is available on the [Calendar of Events](#).

If you have a concern about a County issue, you can also contact the individual [department](#) that administers that function of government. For example, contact the Planning & Zoning Department with concerns or questions about the zoning in your area, the rules a county subdivision must follow, or floodplain information. Question about your County road? Contact the Road and Bridge Department.



[Flathead County Sheriff's Office on Facebook](#)



Engagement with the City of Kalispell

The [City of Kalispell](#) welcomes participation and strives to keep citizens informed. Kalispell residents can become members of volunteer [advisory boards](#), volunteer for City events, and provide feedback to the [Mayor, Council](#) and staff on current issues or concerns. Keep informed through the [Notify Me](#) portal on the [City website](#). The City also solicits feedback and provides information on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Linkedin](#), and has a [YouTube channel](#).

The Kalispell City Council holds a regular public meeting the first and third Monday of every month and a public work session the second and fourth Monday at 7 p.m. at City Hall, 201 First Avenue East. Upcoming [agendas](#) and materials are released the Thursday prior to the meeting. The public will have an opportunity to speak in person, online via zoom or can e-mail the full council at publiccomment@kalispell.com. Regular Council meetings are also streamed live on the city website, under Meeting Videos and aired live on Charter Cable Channel 190. Find dates and times for all board meetings on the [city calendar](#).

If you have a concern about a City issue, you can also contact the [department](#) that administers that function of government or the [City Manager](#), Doug Russell. Many city documents are public records and available on the website under [Archives](#). Contact Aimee Brunckhorst, in the [City Clerk's office](#) for more information at (406) 758-7756 or cityclerk@kalispell.com.

***Kalispell welcomes
your participation.***



Engagement with the City of Whitefish

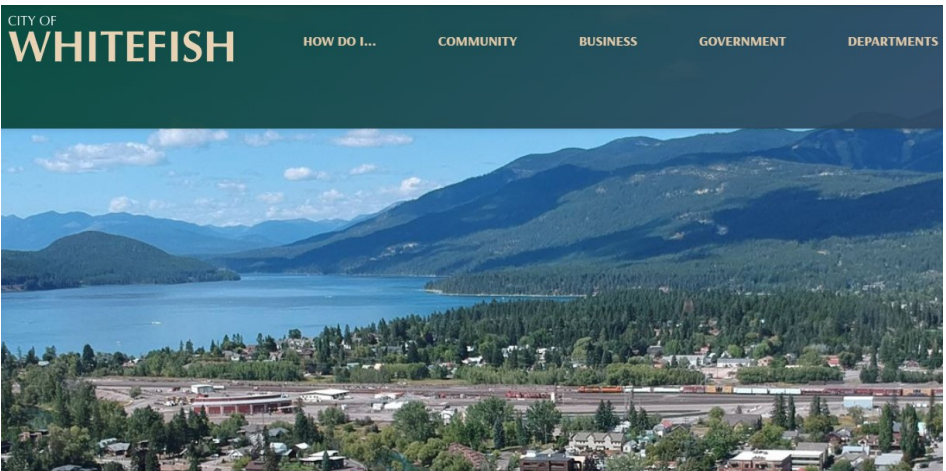
The [City of Whitefish](#), with a population of about 8,900 people, Whitefish has a six-person City Council, a Mayor and an appointed City Manager. Public City Council meetings are held the first and third Mondays of the month at 7:10 p.m. with work sessions generally beginning at 5:30 p.m. The meeting [agenda](#) is available on the City website the Wednesday prior to the meeting. You can contact individual



[Council Members](#) directly, or send public comment to the entire council via Michelle Howke, the [City Clerk](#). Regular meetings are broadcast live and later on [YouTube](#). Signing up for automatic [email notifications](#) helps to keep track of upcoming issues under discussion.

Volunteering for Committee Boards is a great way to become involved in government decision making. Most cities, counties and state agencies have citizen boards. [Whitefish Boards & Committees](#) help the Council with a variety of city decisions.

The City of Whitefish's [website](#) has a wide variety of information and resources including, current projects, news and notices, and detailed contact information for each City department and division.



Engagement with the City of Columbia Falls



The City of [Columbia Falls](#) lies just 17 miles from the west entrance to [Glacier National Park](#). Additionally, the City is the gateway to the scenic corridor, traveling north on Nucleus Avenue and continuing on the North Fork Road through the Flathead National Forest to the Camas entrance of Glacier National Park. The City of Columbia Falls has a population of about 5,300 people, has

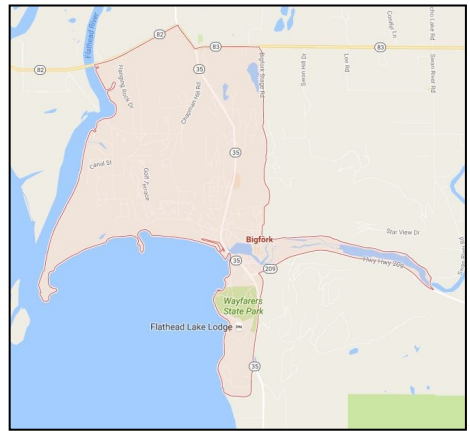
an elected six-person Council and Mayor and an appointed [City Manager](#). The City Manager, Susan Nicosia is responsible for the day-to-day business and activities of the City and is readily available to assist the public. The Council members can be contacted through the City Clerk, Barb Staaland at staalandb@cityofcolumbiafalls.com or (406) 892-4388. The City's [website](#) (www.cityofcolumbiafall.org) contains contact information as well as a [contact us page](#) with an email form to send complaints, suggestions and questions. The website contains the City Council and Planning Board [agendas and minutes](#). The Columbia Falls Municipal Code and adopted Ordinances and Resolutions are also available on the website. Check the [website](#) for a wealth of information by department and city service.

[City Council](#) meetings are held the first and third Mondays of each month at 7:00 p.m. in the Council Chambers at City Hall, 130 6th Street West.



Engagement with the town of Bigfork

The town of [Bigfork](#), located at the north end of Flathead Lake and bordered on the western edge by the Flathead River, is also an unincorporated community and, therefore, governed by [Flathead County](#). Bigfork has a population of about 4300 with an economy that relies heavily on tourism. Though Bigfork is governed by the County, there are several active grass-roots groups that work to address Bigfork's needs and they have a very active [Chamber of Commerce](#). The town also has a Bigfork Parks Advisory Committee with volunteers appointed by the County Commission.



Engagement with Somers and Lakeside

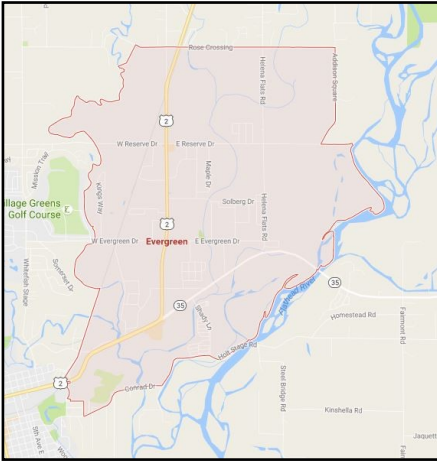


View above Somers (Photo by Aimee Brunckhorst)

lispell, and Lakeside eight miles farther south. The southern end of Lakeside borders Lake County. Somers has a population around 1,200 and Lakeside is around 2,700. They are both unincorporated so [Flathead County](#) is the governing body. There is a Lakeside Parks Advisory Committee through the County, and Lakeside and Somers have their own Special Water and Sewer Districts and Fire District. The [Lakeside-Somers Chamber of Commerce](#) website has information about the area and would be aware of local citizens groups that are involved in the community.

[Somers](#) and [Lakeside](#) act as sister communities sharing the same [Chamber of Commerce](#), [Fire Service](#) and [School District](#). They are both located on the western shore of the north end of [Flathead Lake](#) with Somers nine miles from Ka-

Engagement with Evergreen



Evergreen is an unincorporated community of nine square miles located on the northeast side of Kalispell and bordered to the east by the Flathead River. Evergreen has a population around 8,000 and is under the jurisdiction of Flathead County. Evergreen has its own Special Water and Sewer Districts and its own Fire District. Many addresses that list Kalispell as the city are actually located in Evergreen, confusing many people in the area who may not realize they are not Kalispell residents.

Evergreen residents should contact Flathead County with questions or concerns. The County also has jurisdiction over most of the roads and streets in Evergreen with the exception of State Highways, such as Hwy 2, which is under the jurisdiction of the Montana Department of Transportation.

The Evergreen Chamber of Commerce would be a good place to contact to learn more about involvement in The community of Evergreen.



[OUR CHAMBER >](#)

[EXPLORE >](#)

[COMMUNITY](#)

[EVENTS >](#)

[STORE](#)



Frequently Asked Questions

Who would I contact regarding a Public Safety Issue?

In an emergency, call 911. The Flathead County Justice Center, located in Kalispell, houses the [Flathead County Sheriff's Office](#), which has jurisdiction over 5,200 square miles. This is also the location of the County Jail and Justice Court. [Kalispell](#), [Whitefish](#), and [Columbia Falls](#) also have their own Police Departments.

Who would I contact regarding a Public Health Issue?

In an emergency call 911. The [Flathead City-County Health Department](#) administers community and environmental health programs, immunizations, home health, family planning and provides services such as health alerts.

Who is in charge of the schools in Flathead County?

There are 23 independent [school districts](#) in the county, with a [Superintendent of Schools](#) overseeing general supervision of all the public schools. Each district, and each school within the district has ways to get involved. Check with the individual school or district.

What about the libraries in Flathead County?

The Kalispell, Columbia Falls and Bigfork [imagineif](#) Libraries are governed by a volunteer [Board of Trustees](#) which meets monthly. The [Whitefish Community Library](#) also has a governing [Board of Trustees](#). The all volunteer, non-profit [West Shore Community Library](#) serves Somers, Lakeside, Rollins & Dayton.

What about citizens' groups, clubs, non-profits, and other grass-roots organizations that advocate for communities?

There are many such groups in the Flathead area. Some groups will follow local government issues and report back to their membership on issues they feel are important. An internet search on the particular topic area you are interested in should provide leads.

***“The government is us; we are the government,
you and I.” —Theodore Roosevelt***

To report a needed update, please contact [Aimee Brunckhorst](#), Leadership Flathead Class of 2016, through LinkedIn.