

Special Meeting

The Town of Chester Council held Special Council meeting on January 14, 2026, at 6:00 pm at the Liberty County Senior Center.

Members Present: Mayor James Dahlen Council Persons, Sonja Dahlen, Scott Decker, Rachel Ghekiere, Garrett Graff, Tina Neer (arrived at 6:10), and Jim Sivils

Members Absent:

Staff Present: Dave Ghekiere (Public Works Director)
Ashley Wickum (Clerk/Treasurer)

Guests: Chris Hayes, RPA
Bill Hunt, Hunt Law
See attached list of Community Members

1. Mayor James Dahlen called the special meeting to order at 6:02 pm
2. Pledge of Allegiance
3. Reminder that the Meeting is Audio Recorded
4. Public Comments: Public comments are all under new business.
5. New Business:
 - Discussion: North Central Montana Regional Water Authority. Mayor James Dahlen led the discussion in a question-and-answer format. Bill Hunt also assisted with answering questions.
 - Ms. Morkrid, asked about current easements to town and how this would be affected. Mr. Hunt stated that North Central Montana Regional Water Authority would likely pay cash for easements and the ones with the Town would no longer exist.
 - Mayor Dahlen responded to a question from Mr. Anderson that it will be cheaper over the long term for the Town to join North Central Montana Regional Water Authority.
 - Mrs. DeVries thanked the council for the brochure. She asked about the timeline of when the plant will open as well as who will be operating it. Mr. Hunt stated that the tribe will be overseeing the plant and will be the primary operators of the plant. Mrs. DeVries also had questions about funds and the past mismanagement of funds. Mr. Hunt addressed this. Mayor Dahlen and Mr. Hunt reviewed the core and non-core portions of the water project with the group. Mr. Hunt has heard that it could be 3 to 5 years to get water to Chester, but this is a conservative number.
 - Mayor Dahlen read a written comment from the public sharing concerns about joining North Central Montana Regional Water Authority.
 - Mr. Fulbright wanted to know the life expectancy of the plant and the Towns' current system. Engineer Chris Hayes stated that the Town's current system is past its life expectancy and the current project is doing just enough to keep the plant running until the

Town decides about joining or not joining North Central Montana Regional Water Authority.

- Mr. Thompson asked what would happen if it takes 10 to 15 years before North Central Montana Regional Water Authority can get water to Chester. Mayor Dahlen and Mr. Hunt both addressed this, reiterating that the Town will do everything it can to keep the current system going until water is provided by North Central Montana Regional Water Authority. The hope is that by being a member of North Central Montana Regional Water Authority the Town will have more opportunities for loans and grants.
- Mr. Van Dessel asked about the ownership of the plant and the lines. Mr. Hunt reviewed the split between the core and non-core and the number of board members each member will have based on connection size.
- Mr. Nordstrom wanted to know if the Town had a current water loss amount. The last water loss figure was approximately 30% on the line coming to Town from Tiber and roughly 8% within Town.
- Mr. Cicon wanted clarification on the rate with North Central Montana Regional Water Authority and if the North Central Montana Regional Water Authority rate does in fact include the 3.5 million buy in cost. This question was also submitted in writing for public comment. Mr. Hunt clarified that it does include the buy in cost, although the 3.5 million is an estimate and is a moving target.
- Ms. Wicks and Mr. Buffington are members of the Tiber County Water District, which is a member of North Central Montana Regional Water Authority. They spoke in favor of the project and discussed how they have started to save money to pay their connection fee.
- Discussion about the buy in and how this is based on nominated capacity but also is a moving target.
- Ms. Wicks spoke about the federal money, and how the funding has a direct impact on how long it takes for the project. She took her class in 2007 to see the beginning of the project.
- Mrs. Vinson and Mr. Erickson had questions about the water treatment plant at the lake. Mr. Hunt stated that they water treatment plant could possibly be completed in 12 to 18 months and that the capacity is approximately 11 million per day.
- Mr. Streit stated concern about the cost to repair/replace the line coming to town and the intake at the lake, as well as the current water treatment plant, not to mention the distribution lines in Town. Mr. Streit asked about the expense and if grants for infrastructure are available? Joining North Central Montana Regional Water Authority will hopefully help and make it easier to get grants.
- Mr. Hembigner stated he is not for the connection.
- Questions and concerns about staffing with the Town. Not having the water treatment plant could decrease costs and possibly help with staffing as it would eliminate one test.
- Mr. Novak, thank the current operators for what they are doing. It will be the future generations paying for the cost.
- Mr. Kulpas stated he is also concerned about the management of funds.
- Mr. Graff asked when the buy in amount would be paid and Mr. Anderson asked how the 3.5 million is paid. Mr. Hunt believes 3-5 years before the town would be connected, he thinks 3 years is on the conservative side. However, no money would be paid until the

town is connected and receiving water. Typically, a combination of grants, loans and raised rates is used to pay the buy in cost.

- Mr. Nordstrom inquired if rates would go up right away. Mrs. Wickum updated the group that a rate analysis is being done for the current project and that rates will likely be raised for this project.
- Mrs. Kulpas wanted to know if there was a deadline for voting. The sooner the better. Mrs. Dolezal agreed that it would be harder to get in later.
- Mr. Heimbigner asked about current acre feet the town has. The contract with the BOR is for 100-acre feet with a 400-acre feet reserve.
- Mrs. Keith requested the council's opinions on the subject. Garrett Graff commented that he feels that more answers have been provided which helps. The cost burden to the town to do all of the repairs is very high, which makes North Central Montana Regional Water Authority the better option. Sonja Dahlen agreed. Scott Decker is worried about the pipe coming to town and stated that the plant needed upgrades 25 years ago when he worked here and it still does.
- Mr. Nordstrom had a question about water rights. The Town currently has a contract with the BOR.

6. Sonja Dahlen made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Tina Neer seconded the motion. The special meeting was adjourned at 7:38 pm.