

Regular Meeting

The Town of Chester Council held the Regular Scheduled Council meeting on March 11, 2026, at 6:00 pm.

Members Present: Mayor James Dahlen, Council Persons, Sonja Dahlen, Rachel Ghekiere, Garrett Graff, Tina Neer, and Jim Sivils

Members Absent: Scott Decker

Staff Present: Dave Ghekiere (PWD)
Ashley Wickum (Clerk/Treasurer)

Guests: Britani Laughery and Chris Beskid, MMIA Via Teams Meeting

1. Mayor James Dahlen called the regular meeting to order at 6:00 pm
2. Pledge of Allegiance
3. Reminder that the Meeting is Audio Recorded
4. Mayor Dahlen moved the MMIA Employee Benefits Program and MMIA WC Presentation via Teams by Britani Laughery and Chris Beskid. Ms. Laughery gave the council a brief background on MMIA and the Workers Compensation Program. MMIA will no longer be providing Workers Compensation. Mx Laughery reviewed the steps to withdraw from MMIA WC Program, as well as payouts to the town. She also reviewed the steps and procedures for the town to secure WC coverage and resources on their website for assistance. Mr. Beskid reviewed the employee benefits program and the rate increase. The final rates should be set at the end of March. Ms. Laughery and Mr. Beskid exited the meeting.
5. Rachel Ghekiere made the motion to approve the minutes of the Regular Council Meeting, February 12, 2026. Sonja Dahlen seconded the motion. Motion to approve the minutes passed with all voting ayes.
6. Claims were presented to the council for approval. Ashley Wickum discussed the audit claim and she requested RPA notify her if there are additional funds available from the sewer project to help cover the federal audit cost. Rachel Ghekiere made the motion to approve the March claims submitted for payment. Ck # 21426-21448 electronic payment -99923-99922, March payroll advances, Ck # 21449-21450. February payroll Ck# 21413-21425 and electronic payroll liability payments -88919-88924 were processed. Sonja Dahlen seconded the motion. Question about vet bill, it was for animal control. Motion to approve claims passed with all voting ayes.
7. The council reviewed the adjustments and journal entries made in February. Ashley Wickum brought an adjustment to the council for March. There was a water leak at the Asper Funeral Home and their sewer is metered. She asked if the council wanted to look at adjusting the sewer rate from the metered amount of \$1,267 as the water didn't go down the sewer. Council discussed this. Jim Sivils made the motion to approve the February JV & Adjustments and to adjust the sewer rate for the Asper Funeral Home to the base rate. Garrett Graff seconded the motion. Motion passed with all voting ayes.
8. Public Comments: None

9. Sheriff's Office Report: Copy was provided by the Sheriff's office.

10. New Business:

- Appointing Rachel Ghekiere to Bear Paw Development Corporation Board of Directors: Sonja Dahlen made the motion to appoint Rachel Ghekiere to Bear Paw Development Corporation Board of Directors. Garrett Graff seconded the motion. Motion passed with all voting ayes.
- Approval of Logan Health Chester Professional Service Agreement: Sonja Dahlen made the motion to approve the professional service agreement with Logan Health Chester. Rachel Ghekiere seconded the motion. Motion passed with all voting ayes.
- Hiring and Setting Wages: Summer Help, Pool Manager, Lifeguards and Landfill Attendant: There have been no applications received. The landfill hours will switch to summer hours April 1st. Garrett Graff suggested looking at a higher wage for the summer help as this may recruit workers who would be interested in returning and possibly look at staying with the Town for the future. Sonja Dahlen made the motion to table this item until applications are received. Rachel seconded the motion. Motion to table this agenda item passed with all voting ayes.

11. Old Business:

- Approval: 2nd reading of Resolution #09-2026 to adopt New Wage Matrix and revise Employee Handbook to Reflect Matrix: Ashley Wickum updated the council that this has not been completed. Jim Sivils made a motion to table this agenda item. Rachel Ghekiere seconded the motion. Motion passed with all voting ayes.
- North Central Montana Regional Water Authority update was provided by email from Bill Hunt and placed on the website and Facebook. See below.

I did also visit with Jody Hellegard, the NCMRWA Exec Director, today (March 9) for a quick update. She said that 5 town / city councils / governing bodies have voted positive. The members meet monthly or quarterly, so it takes time to have a meeting, vote, and get the minutes done. Guessing by the end of April we should know.

1. *During yesterday's meeting, Jody reported that Brady and one other community have voted to approve Chester's membership. A few others will vote in the next month. Some are willing to have special meetings to move the vote sooner. Overall, feedback is positive.*

2. *The chances of NCMRWA building a pipeline between Chester and Shelby are increasingly less likely. Without the Chester to Shelby line, the build from the Water Treatment Plant to Chester becomes much less expensive (\$30 M to probably around \$10 M or less) and complex. Good news for moving the project up to Chester as well as the buy-in cost to Chester and other members. (The line from Chester to Shelby is estimated at \$100 million).*

3. *The bad news is that NCMRWA got taken for a \$70,000 theft by fraud. A thief was able to send NCMRWA a fraudulent invoice via email (?) which appeared to be from one of the engineering firms. A person at NCMRWA paid it. By the time it was discovered, the thief or thieves were long gone. Insurance may cover up to \$25,000. But any loss- I'm speculating- will have to be made up by members via increased water rates or a capital contribution. The actual engineering invoice is getting paid out of the reserve fund for replacement pumps.*

It just comes down to paying attention. My best guess is that the thief managed to burrow into NCMRWA's computer by either malware attached to a phishing email or getting through the firewalls to imbed malware. The malware gave the thief access to watch the user's

patterns and email traffic. The thief was then able to put together a convincing-enough email invoice which included a similar (but not exact) sender's email address. And the employee paid it via ACH.

NCMRWA now has a policy in place that any payment online needs to be verified. I'm also a lot more confident of just general operations since Jody Hellegard returned as Exec Director. I believe that this would not have happened under her watch.

Yesterday's meetings included meetings with the Tribe (OM&R and Coordinating Committee). OM&R is Operation, Maintenance, & Repair (I think). Its function is the day-to-day coordination between the Core and Non-Core Systems. The Coordinating Committee is geared more towards the buildout of both Systems.

The Tribe, BOR, and NCMRWA had some lengthy discussions regarding how the Water Purchase Agreement will work. As well as revisions to the Tripartite Agreement. Finally, audits- who, what, how on the annual financial audits that will be required. I think the best solution is someone else's suggestion- the Tribe sets up the Water Treatment Plant as its own enterprise fund. WPT operators would be that fund's employees. That fund sells the water to the Tribe's own water infrastructure and to the Non-Core System. This way- future audits are cleaner and much easier. And I'm just thinking on my own here- if NCMRWA and the Tribe can combine owners of that enterprise fund. There's some issues such as how we combine a federal enterprise fund with a state enterprise fund or even if that's a concern.

BOR also has around \$160 million for the rest of this fiscal year to spend on these regional water associations around the country. Next year's funding is anticipated to be flat or inline with this year's funding.

12. Mayor Report/ Additional Agenda Items: Mayor Dahlen updated the council that the audit was completed with no findings. He has talked to Chris Hayes with RPA about the water line coming to town and where the town might connect to the North Central Montana Regional Water Authority line. Chris does not think it is necessary to spend the money to replace the fiber glass line as NCMRWA will be able to connect to another spot in town. Dave Ghekiere wants to make sure that wherever the connection is made, the towers are able to stay at a consistent level. If the connection is made somewhere other than where it is currently, there are two connections south of town that will need to be addressed.
13. PWD update: Dave Ghekiere, PWD, updated the council that the generator is at the WTP but not hooked up yet. Garbage cans have been ordered, and he is working with Havre Public Works so that the freight can be split. The DEQ report on the WTP came back and everything looks good. They are picking up trash at the landfill and continuing to work on garbage racks. He is trying to get ahold of Peter Underdahl about the boiler at the pool as he was supposed to be here today but wasn't. Kelvin Jones had accepted the position as an operator but has since retracted his acceptance. The street by Jim Browns house needs to be addressed. They tried to pressure test the line, but there is one valve that won't shut off. The valve will need to be replaced. Ashley has been in touch with Chris Hayes about funding options for waterline replacement and repairs as well as street repairs and projects.
14. Clerk update: Ashley Wickum provided the council with information regarding a rate increase for the current water project. Ashley will send out the spreadsheet from RPA that discusses the different options and work with RPA to determine what the increase would need to be to put a specific amount into reserves. Currently Trish with RPA estimated a \$5.00 increase to a ¾ inch line base rate would be about \$44,000/year. The town can also look at including a 2% increase for the next two years when doing the current increase. Garrett Graff provided information on North Joplin rats, including a base rate of \$51 and \$4.00/1000. They are also charged O&M and

water loss. The town has not raised rates since 2019. The council will need to start looking at planning grants and grant deadlines for replacing water mains in town. It's too late to apply for this year, but planning grants can be applied for in 2027, PERS done and grants applied for in 2028, awarded in 2029 and a project started in 2030. For street improvements the town can look at doing an SID for the streets as well as continuing to look at the curb and gutter ordinance and include this in the projects. Ashley will work on getting some planning meetings set up and will schedule the special meetings to discuss rate increases in the next weeks. The Chester Motors Project will be starting again. She has contacted Bill Hunt about two properties. 1. The town is currently using an alley to the west of Mitch Wanken's house at 35 Casey Street NW and she is trying to determine if it is in fact an alley or not. 2. The sewer between The Well at 22 First Street East and the One-Way Café (formerly Spuds Café) at 26 First Street East are having issues as one sewer/water passes through the others building, Ashley is working with Bill to determine if this is something the town needs to address or if it is on the property owners. Ashley also stated there were no audit findings and that it went very well.

15. Council: Rachel Ghekiere asked if the water in front of her house had to do with the pressure testing being done, and it was.

16. Rachel Ghekiere made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Sonja Dahlen seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 7:24 pm.

Submitted by _____ Approved by _____
Clerk Mayor