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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

*Billings city staff and council collaborate and connect  
during weekend retreat*

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BILLINGS – “Engaging,” “new,” “open,” “positive” and “surprising.”

Those are some of the words Billings elected officials and leadership staff used to describe this weekend’s two-day retreat hosted at the Billings Depot.

“The ability for city council and city staff to work together is key to the success of where the city’s going. This weekend helped make sure we’re aligned in how we’re approaching things and how we are able to discuss issues and come to good resolutions that are helping our city,” said Public Works Director Debi Meling.

The purpose of the retreat was to establish and elevate a vision for the city. Hosted in an informal setting, attendees discovered it did much more than that.

“I think the last couple of days have broken down barriers to form connections and relationships that will only allow us to be a stronger body, whether it’s the elected officials, and/or leadership, to make sure that we are doing everything we possibly can to create that highest quality of life for everyone in Billings,” said Gavin Woltjer, director of the Billings Public Library.

Facilitated by Karen Baumgart-Miller with Baumgart Consulting, the group covered topics from the city’s vision, mission, core values, policies, expectations of each other and more.

The last council/leadership retreat was hosted in 2019.

This is the second retreat orchestrated by City Administrator Chris Kukulski.

“I’m really excited and pleased. Everybody at the table with their diverse opinions and ideas were open-minded to getting to know each other better and share with each other,” Kukulski said. *(continued...)*



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Although the council meets every Monday in business and work sessions, this gathering garnered a new level of results that can sometimes be hard to find during those weekly meetings.

“There’s an agenda we have to go through, and it’s harder to get to a vulnerable place where you can throw out ideas, what ifs, and bounce ideas off of folks,” said Council Member Ed Gulick of Ward 1.

“The toughest thing to do in a council meeting is to actually think outside of the box and plan for the future, and that is probably the most important thing we’re doing today, is we’re sitting down and figuring out what the future is going to be,” said Ward 3 council member Danny Choriki.

Among the accomplishments of the retreat, the group drafted priorities for the city. They ranged from public safety to the city charter, housing strategies, parks and trails, and preparing for the 2023 legislative session.

Up next, a draft of priorities will go back to the council in upcoming sessions for further adjustments and public input before anything is adopted.

“The public will have an opportunity to see what’s on the list, and the council will be able to adjust it and ultimately, hopefully adopt something here in the next four to six weeks,” Kukulski said.

As the retreat wrapped up, everyone present came to an agreement more time together outside of regular council meetings is needed to effectively communicate and collaborate.

“You get to know them, know where they come from, hearing their perspective on a lot of different issues. It has been enlightening and yes, I would say this has been and can be productive in the future if we did do a couple more of these a year,” said Billings Fire Chief Pepper Valdez.

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