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FRIDAY, JULY 10, 2026

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Judge blocks new Montana GOP bylaws

By TOM LUTEY
Montana Free Press

A restraining order has been issued that blocks the Montana Republican Party from enacting new bylaws intended to drive nonconformists out of the party ranks.

Lewis and Clark County District Judge Michael F.

McMahon issued the restraining order Wednesday morning. The order had been requested by county precinct committees and officers suing the state party organization over the new bylaws. The plaintiffs are the Yellowstone County Republican Central Committee, the Choteau County Republican Central Committee, and indi-

vidual committee members Jeff Essmann, Ted Kronebusch, James Wilson and state Rep. Brad Barker, R-Red Lodge.

At issue are bylaws passed during MTGOP's June platform convention that the litigating party members say amount to "fraudulent and corrupt practices." The new bylaws require members to pay \$20 in annual

membership dues and pledge a loyalty oath, and subject members to removal from elected party positions for nonpayment of dues or for "conduct deemed inconsistent with party purposes," as determined by executive party officers. The new bylaws allow charges for removal to be brought by any 20 official Republican Party

members.

Montana Republican Party Chairman Art Wittich, the only official spokesperson for the state party, has not responded to voicemails and texts sent to his cell phone Wednesday. Wittich, elected party chairman in June 2025, has long been

See GOP, A6

SOUTH KALISPELL



COMMUNITY ACTION Partnership of Northwest Montana's Home Again RV Park in Kalispell on Monday, June 22. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

Nonprofit-owned RV park opens without required city permit

By JACK UNDERHILL
Daily Inter Lake

The Community Action Partnership of Northwest Montana recently unveiled its new RV Park in South Kalispell, but it still needs a conditional use permit to operate, say city planning staff.

The 10-space lot opened June 1 and lines the west side of the property that houses the nonprofit's building at 1820 U.S. 93 S. The sites are intended for seasonal workers, travelers or those looking to stay longer term, helping expand the supply of affordable housing options, according to the nonprofit.

But Community Action Partnership never obtained a conditional use permit needed to operate the facility, prompting some residents and a former city councilor to question how the RV park was allowed to

open without city approval and whether Mayor Ryan Hunter's ties to the organization created a conflict of interest.

Although Community Action Partnership already obtained a license through the state, it was unaware that a city conditional use permit was also required, according to Development Services Director PJ Sorensen.

Community Action Partnership did not respond to multiple requests for comment before press time.

Before Community Action Partnership moved into its new digs, the building was the home of the Kalispell Elks Lodge, which started operating an RV park on the property in 1989, according to the city's geographic information system hub.

Owing to the amount of time between when the

Elks-run RV park closed and Community Action Partnership relaunched it, its use as an RV Park could not be considered grandfathered in, Sorensen said.

City staff were unaware of the effort to relaunch the park until after the nonprofit announced its opening. That's when a resident submitted a complaint to City Hall, according to Hunter.

Planning staff notified the nonprofit over a week ago that it needed a permit, Sorensen said.

After Kalispell City Council adopted sweeping changes to the municipality's land use regulations to comply with the Montana Land Use Planning Act, conditional use permits are now reviewed and approved by staff rather than Kalispell City Council and the Planning Commission. Sorensen said he expects

a permit to be approved within six to eight weeks as staff iron out the new administrative review process.

FORMER CITY Councilor and Planning Commission President Chad Graham submitted a letter to City Hall on June 29 accusing Hunter of disregarding the Council's ethics policy and creating conflicts of interest in regard to the RV park, though he did not cite any specific actions by the mayor.

Local business owner Vaughn Penrod also lobbed a conflict of interest accusation at Hunter because of his involvement with Community Action Partnership.

Hunter, who has served on the organization's board for about a year, said he

See RV PARK, A8

CFAC will pay \$57.6M in cleanup costs

By CHRIS PETERSON
Hungry Horse News

Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. has agreed to pay \$57.6 million to clean up the former smelter site in Columbia Falls, according to a proposed agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency.

The cleanup plan includes placing a slurry wall of bentonite around the wet scrubber sludge pond and west landfill where leachate and spent pot liner from the plant was dumped for years.

Both areas have been found to be leaking high amounts of cyanide and fluoride into the nearby groundwater, though by the time the groundwater reaches the Flathead River, the concentrations have been shown to

See CLEANUP, A6

Airport rule tabled by Planning Board

By HANNAH SHIELDS
Daily Inter Lake/Report for America

The public will have another opportunity to comment on revised land use and development restrictions near Glacier Park International Airport.

County planning staff amended the restrictions outlined in the proposed ordinance in response to public comments from the Flathead County Planning Board's June 10 meeting. Planning board members agreed Wednesday that residents deserve a chance to comment on the updated version.

A second public hearing on the proposed ordinance will be held at the board's September meeting.

"I want to make sure if we do regulations, that property rights are still protected," said Board Chair Jeff Larsen.

The county Planning and Zoning Department has worked with the Flathead Municipal

See AIRPORT, A8

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2026

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