

My dear Laurel residents,

I am writing to you all...ALL of you, to share and completely lay bare the facts and events relating to the state mental health facility that is proposed to be erected on the west side outside of Laurel. Yes, it IS outside of Laurel, and we have no plans in place to bring it in. All this is being shared to give you a peek inside my thought process and how I saw this, so you can understand why we did what we did, how we did it. Nobody is perfect, and I am far from it.

I have been badgered, called names, accused of wrong-doing, collusion, malfeasance, dishonesty, violation of my oath of office, have had negative, demeaning claims made on my competence, and have been ridiculed publicly in person and online by members of the community, and many times those who do not even live in the city of Laurel. All this has been done in the name of fairness, justice and transparency. And thus far, I have not directly responded or replied. Well, that ends today. I will do my best, with the purest of intentions, to explain this whole ordeal as follows:

You got it wrong, because (a) we could not tell you by law, (b) you did not understand what really happened and how it happened, and (c) some of you took an incomplete puzzle and filled in the gaps with pieces that were colored by opinion, conjecture and not based in facts. And then all that when presented to the general public, created a false narrative. Communication is key, but the essence of communication is in its meaning. The “meaning” of words is what shapes perceptions, not the words themselves. It is obvious that much of the communication that took place between the city officials and the state were dressed by the residents with meaning that was, and still is, to this day, faulty.

Things have been taken past the stage of civility and respect, possibly by all concerned, and I do not excuse myself from that either. I have had my fair share of falling short of the expected professionalism, and regret that, with a vow to be better and do better henceforth. We are at a stage from which there is no turning back and the only way out is through it. The recall petition has been filed, the signatures are being collected. It is your right to do. But it is my right and responsibility to share with you the truth of everything because a lot of what has been built as a campaign against me and my officials is NOT based in fact. It is based in opinion and biased meanings assigned to what was said or written. Let me set the record straight once and for all.

There is misinformation and falsehood floating around online and in people’s minds, which when combined with hidden agendas, creates a very one-sided picture. Facts need to be set straight. The time of expediency and political correctness has come and gone. I will list these facts down in this open letter:

There are three branches of a city government – Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. Laurel is NOT a weak-mayor form of government. Laurel is a strong-Mayor form of government. You may want to look into what that means. The ex-mayor of Red Lodge misspoke in his letter to the Outlook and gave a factually inaccurate statement, which people never bothered to check. The EXECUTIVE Branch of the city government is the Mayor. The City Council is the LEGISLATIVE branch of the government, whose role is to pass legislation, create policy and approve what is presented TO (budgets, resolutions). It does NOT have any executive authority, as that rests entirely with the Mayor. City employees do not report to the City Council directly. They report to

the Mayor. The JUDICIAL branch is the city court/judge. The City Council does not make decisions on day-to-day operations of the city. Managing operations and duties pertaining to job descriptions are the job of the Executive branch AND the city officials/department heads. City Council's role is also limited to issues WITHIN the city limits (not outside). The City Council do NOT dictate or rule on how people do their jobs, preliminary and exploratory talks, discussions, meetings, and who to talk to. As such, their role is one of overall policy-maker from on high. City employees report to their operational and/or functional heads. They are, however, bound by the policy and legislation approved by the City Council.

It is true that as CAO, Kurt did not take the City Council (even though they were invited by the state) with him to the tour that happened in July 2025 with the state officials. What is not true is the assumption made by the public that his intent was to go behind the City Council's back to "sell" Laurel to the state before they could object. It was actually improper for the City Council to attend that tour. This is why: ALL the sites the tour group visited were OUTSIDE of the city of Laurel's limits. The only reason Billings City Council members were there was because one of the sites visited was INSIDE Billings city limits, so they had the right to be there. The CAO's role, just as is mine, is to explore possibilities of growth, success, for the benefit of the city of Laurel, and in his capacity, it is his job responsibility to go out and explore these possibilities. This was the ONLY reason he was there....to understand what the whole deal was about and if it could benefit Laurel. Attending the tour that did not pertain to City limits would have put the members in a challenging quasi-judicial role through opinion formation (on the facility that we never applied for since it was not in the current city limits). The Council members would have to disclose this to the public, which would invariably have created a public opinion (again, a quasi-judicial role), and this could expose them to legal action.

When Kurt or I said that we did not know what this facility was, this statement of ours was erroneously assumed to mean that we denied knowing at all what the state was planning. When we said we did not know what it was, we simply meant that we did not know what it entailed, included, how the facility worked, what were the specifics of it, etc.. And this was with because there was very limited information available about this facility. We were first informed that the state wanted to create a new mental health facility and they were interested in eastern Montana because of reasons already known and documented. Being citizens of Laurel and of Montana, we have an obligation towards our city and our state. Remember that the city is a political subdivision of the state, and the state is the sovereign. They do not need our permission to purchase land outside of our city. The only statement about a piece of land for sale west of Laurel that Kurt had mentioned to them on the tour was the 10 acre plot owned by Woods, and in response to the state officials saying that the sites they visited were not feasible. Once the first 4 sites were deemed no-go, and after the negative reaction from Billings community (again, this was because one of the sites was INSIDE Billings city limits), the state put a stop to this whole process.

It was our thought process that with the way the city has struggled with forward progress, we needed some fresh impetus to bring life back to Laurel. We were only advised that this was a mental health facility (the word "forensic" was not mentioned to us for the first few months). We did not know whether this was going to be good for the city or not. We also did not know whether the community would be upset if it came here, or if they would be upset if we ignored it.

We could not ask the community, because then the residents and the city would have become a quasi-judicial body, passing an opinion/judgment on a “potential” facility that had not yet materialized. Such a stance without any indication from the state would have been seen as a pre-judgment against a potential future act of the state and could be grounds for legal exposure for both the city and its residents. I could not allow our residents to be exposed this way.

Our thinking was simple – we needed to explore options for the city to vote on, in order to grow. What if we had ignored the facility, and then the residents had gotten wind of this possibility, and gotten upset with us because we did not pursue the option...that we could have had more jobs, more people visiting Laurel, and its shops, restaurants, etc.? We had no way of knowing what the residents would want, and we could not even ask due to the risk of legal action in case of a negative vote. The prudent course of action was to explore the option, knowing full well that the community still had the final say when presented for a vote.

The efforts to obtain information from the state must be based in an air of cooperation. The city and the state are allies and not adversaries. Kurt’s initial letter was aimed at showing to the state that Laurel is a great citizen of the state, with the hope that more detailed information about the facility would be forthcoming in response. We were not applying for the facility. We wanted to know what it was (what it entailed – specific details about the size, structure, security, safety protocols, etc..). This was the first letter. Of course, when you want to know more about something, you have to show interest in it. One simply does not ask questions and run the risk of being shot down because one never showed one cared. That is why we had that first letter go out. Again, Kurt is not obligated to run this by the City Council, as the council does not have executive authority, and can only act on legislative/policy matters that are within its jurisdiction (city limits). There was no violation of policy or legislation in this.

Appointed officials are mandated with the day-to-day running of the city operations. The department heads are mandated with pursuing growth options for their respective departments. The CAO is mandated with managing all of this and also explore growth options for the city as a whole. At no time did Laurel apply for, or submit, an application to be considered for the facility. We are, to this day, unable to do so, because our interest is limited to the city limits. And since there was no site that would suit the state for this facility, we never applied. Stating that the letters sent by us were applications and circumvented the city council or any due process is a gross exaggeration.

BOI wanted in writing that there was no site available within the city, and while we did not apply, regardless of that, IF it were to pursue something around Laurel, that there were processes and possibilities in place for the facility to be annexed. We had clearly outlined that BOI must follow our process. They had, to my mind, already decided that the area around Laurel presented the best opportunity for the facility to succeed, and they wanted to know that the City officials did not outright object to it, so they could convince the state government to allow it to pursue this area (Laurel and surrounding area). Where they may have faltered is that they went ahead with the decision without first having a discussion with the public and respecting their wishes. The city annexation policy, guidelines and protocols are public information. These are NOT privileged info. If someone contacts us and wants to know all the details about how to get a property annexed, that information will be provided openly and freely.

Again, as the team that actually runs and manages the city, we wanted to have choices. We knew that the final say rests with the community and the council, so we merely pursued the obtainment of more information so that the public could make an informed decision. When we found out that it was a forensic mental health facility, we wanted more info as we did not know what a forensic mental health facility was – what it entailed. We saw the potential for jobs, for more people visiting the facility on tours, county officers coming in. We saw growth for hotels and restaurants, for retail stores, gas stations. We saw qualified people moving into Laurel, or residents finding jobs in that facility. That was our goal, and we trusted that the State would never jeopardize the safety, security, and well-being of its citizens by having this new facility be mismanaged and have poor security protocols in place. Do we really think that the state would run the risk of hurting its citizens?

I want to reiterate that the State is the sovereign, and what it does outside of city limits is entirely up to it. None of the city leadership is committed or married to the idea of having this facility near Laurel....not now, not before. The people will decide whether it gets annexed or not. However, we do not control, nor can we force the state against its will. In August, the governor put a pause on this whole process. Kurt's first letter was sent in August, so that while a reset had been applied to the whole thing, we continued our communication with the state to get more informed. It is true that despite that letter, all we received was a reply that the process had come to halt. When the process did resume in September, BOI was unclear on the details of the facility, so it did not provide us any info. Instead, they did say that they were still waiting on guidance from DPHHS about the specifics of the facility and that once they had that, they would share it with us. BOI and DPHHS seemed to have already decided on Yellowstone County as the preferred location, and with good reason – this area is central with the highest potential for the facility to be successful and viable. They are smart people and did not need a letter from us to know that there are many sites around this area that are/were for sale. For Sale properties are public information. Initially, they pursued the 10 acre plot (Woods Power Grip) west of Laurel as a possibility on their own. We did not broker the deal and were not a part of it. However, the realtor, who is also one of the people speaking up against this, seemed to have lost the deal. BOI found the 114-acre plot across from it that offered more potentially for less on a per-sq. ft. basis. Again, the city had NOTHING to do with this. We could not interfere as it is illegal and improper. Tortious interference is a crime. You cannot interfere in a buy-sell agreement.

I have heard countless times that people are in favor of a mental health facility, but not near their homes. If everyone in the state says the same thing, where would you put it? In the middle of nowhere is all that would be left. And then who would want to work there? How would utilities and services be provided to that facility in an economic and viable fashion? We need it to success, not fail. The idea that it should be put where people want it, merits a response as well. When you look to hire a person for a position, you don't give it to the one who wants it the most. You give it to the person who is best suited for it. Why should it be any different for choosing a site for a facility? The state did its homework on seeing all the options available to it. It considered the ones submitted to it, and it considered the ones it explored on its own. In the end, it made sense to have this facility in an area that to them provided the best opportunity to succeed. Remember the BOI is a board of "Investment" and that means that its mandate is to invest in profitable/successful ventures, not lost causes.

The cost of a recall election is around \$15,000, and then another \$15,000 for a mayoral election. This money will need to be paid by the city and therefore, the public. The campaign to recall me is your right and I have decided to let it proceed. Initially, I wanted to fight it, but then it would have resulted in further costs to the community. I would rather see truth come out outside of court in the open, so everyone has a say in the recall. I will accept whatever the outcome.

I'm happy and willing to hold in-person public meetings to answer any questions and explain things further, because these written words can only convey so much. We do not need to color these words with wrong meanings fueled by hidden agendas. Come talk to me. Let me know where and when and I will do my best to meet you. But please remain respectful and courteous. I am at your service and remain committed to you.