

Questionnaire for Billings 2025 Mayoral election.

The members of the Billings Firefighters Union, IAFF Local 521, are committed to protecting the lives, property, and well-being of our community. As we consider endorsements for the upcoming mayoral election, we are seeking your positions on issues that directly affect public safety, emergency response, firefighter health and wellness, and the future of Billings.

Please respond to the following questions as thoroughly as possible. Your answers will help our membership make informed decisions about who will best support the citizens of Billings and the men and women who serve them.

1. **Please provide a brief bio.**

My name is Jennifer Owen and I am running to be the next Mayor of Billings. I’m born and raised in Billings, and a mom of one son. I currently represent the Heights on City Council. I am a lawyer by training – I have worked in the child welfare system, served as a family mediator, and advised energy project development. I currently serve on the boards of Rocky Mountain College, New Day, and the Billings Child Abuse Prevention Foundation. Before I ran for office, I was chair of the Heights Task Force and sat on the Board of Big Sky Economic Development. I have led a few nonprofit organizations and also run my own small business.

While serving on Council, I have made public safety my focus – adding additional police and fire fighter FTE, championing the opening of Fire Station 8, and supporting innovations that give our first responders the tools they need.

1. **What made you want to run for mayor?**

I think that Billings is at a critical transition point from large town to small city, and I am excited about the opportunity to lead confidently into our future. We absolutely must make public safety our number one priority – that means appropriate staffing for police, fire, and 911; a justice system that works efficiently to hold people accountable; improved facilities, equipment, and training to help our first responders do their jobs well; and a community-wide effort to tackle behavioral health challenges that consume public resources.

But a safer Billings is not an end point – it is the first and most essential task ahead of us, so that we can build the kind of quality of life we want, a vibrant community where people can live, work, and play. I want to attract private development to bring the amenities we seek in a small city and to improve economic opportunities for families in Billings. I want us to make wise infrastructure investments so that our roads are safe and efficient, our water and wastewater systems are well-maintained and poised for growth, and we can increase housing availability to bring down cost of living.

Finally, I want to see our local government be more transparent, accountable, and responsive to residents. As mayor, I will engage the public, including key stakeholders like Local 521, meaningfully in critical decisions about our community, share more information on City Council actions, and elevate the good news and accomplishments of our City. Too often, residents of Billings feel excluded from City Hall and don’t have enough information about developments in the community. I believe we can change that and give our neighbors confidence in their City government.

1. **What is your leadership style and how do you intend to bring a consensus to the council?**

I am a problem-solver. I like to bring people to the table and work on solutions collectively. I am naturally curious and I ask tough questions to open the door to new concepts and discern the path forward on a given issue. I like big ideas and taking thoughtful risks to break out of habits that aren’t serving our community.

I believe consensus is best attainable when Council Members have the information they need to make decisions, the opportunity to engage with stakeholders who bring a variety perspectives, and a chance to be heard and voice the opinions of their constituents.

1. **What do you see as the role and/or function of city government?**

The most fundamental role of city government is to provide for the safety and well-being of its residents. Everything else – whether it’s economic growth, quality of life, or neighborhood development – depends on people feeling safe in their homes, at work, and in our community spaces.

That is why, during my four years on Council, I have consistently made public safety my top priority. I supported investments in new fire stations to meet the demands of our growing city, helped find budget resources to add an additional fire fighters last year and to make facility improvements this year, and have committed to supporting efficiency improvements like medical response teams and crisis response units, which help our fire fighters respond to a variety of calls without rolling a full engine.

As Mayor, I will continue to put public safety at the center of local government. That means ensuring our fire department has the staffing, training, facilities, and equipment necessary to meet the increasing call volume in Billings. It also means working in close partnership with the Local 521, recognizing that the men and women on the front lines are the experts in what our community needs.

City government has many responsibilities – from infrastructure to parks to planning – but its most essential role is safeguarding our community. I believe that starts with making sure our firefighters, police officers, and first responders have the resources and support they need to do their jobs effectively and return home safely to their families.

1. **What is the number one issue facing Billings for the next mayor, and how do you intend to address it?**

Truthfully, the number one issue facing Billings over the next four years is the city’s budget. Without a strong and sustainable financial foundation, we cannot provide the essential services our residents depend on – especially public safety.

The recent property tax legislation passed by the state has raised significant questions for Billings. While costs for equipment, staffing, and facilities are rising, the City’s primary revenue source has been challenged in ways that make it difficult to keep up. Figuring out how to adjust the City’s budget to the new tax structure, identifying statutory changes that could improve our financial outlook while still providing tax relief, and creating a robust economic development strategy to grow the tax base without increasing taxes must be the focus for the next Mayor. Without sufficient financial resources, we can’t make the necessary investments in police and fire that deliver on our commitment to prioritize public safety.

As mayor, I will tackle this issue in three ways:

1. **Protect Billings’ Interests at the State Level.** I will work closely with our legislative delegation to ensure that the true impact of 2025 property tax bills on Billings are understood, and look for ways to deliver real tax relief, rather than just shifting burdens around. Billings needs a comprehensive strategy to advance our interests in the 2026 interim and 2027 legislative sessions – we cannot be passive at the state level any longer. Montana’s firefighter unions are skilled advocates, and we can learn a lot by collaborating with the Local 521 to ensure the voices of Billings are clearly heard in Helena, especially on taxes.
2. **Accelerate wise development.** Growth is a responsible means to expand our tax base to increase local resources, without raising taxes on property owners. By encouraging development that aligns with our infrastructure and public safety capacity – infill where appropriate, and thoughtful expansion where needed – we can ensure new growth helps strengthen the city’s finances rather than strain them.
3. **Responsible Fiscal Leadership.** I have spent my four years on Council asking tough questions and working to ensure taxpayer dollars are used effectively. As Mayor, I will continue that approach while also making sure our budget priorities reflect our community’s top concern: public safety.

Candidly, if the next Mayor of Billings is not fully focused on addressing the budget impact of new property tax legislation, then any mention of public safety as a priority is just talk. We need to align the City’s budget with the demands of the community, ensure that dollars are going to the essential activities first, and be disciplined in spending. My commitment as Mayor will be to put Billings on a stronger fiscal footing so that we can continue to invest in the safety and strength of our community.

1. **How would you determine and align the agendas of council members to be the most productive and prioritize the conflicting demands of Billings?**

Council works best when members have the information, communication, and leadership they need to make clear decisions for the community. There are immense opportunities to strengthen communication among Council Members so that productivity is improved. For example, currently Council Members rarely meet one-on-one with the Mayor to discuss ideas and shared priorities. That lack of direct communication makes it harder to identify common ground, anticipate friction points, and move the city forward. Similarly, Council work sessions are largely just mini-business meetings, too often sacrificing opportunities to work through different perspectives and build collaboration.

As Mayor, I intend to tackle this challenge directly, from the way new Council Members are on-boarded to the structure of our meetings and the way I allocate my time as a leader. I am committed to engaging regularly with Council Members to hear their perspectives, understand their ward’s needs, and build the relationships that are essential to governing effectively. Open communication builds trust, and trust allows us to work together productively even when we don’t always agree.

I also believe the Council should vote more often. Too many issues linger because we delay decisions – and that leads to conflict and frustration. My approach will be to put items on the agenda according to our City ordinances, debate them openly, and then call for a vote. We may not always be unanimous, but by making a decision and moving forward, we can spend less time circling the same issues, eliminate ambiguity, and deliver results for Billings.

Strong leadership means guiding Council discussions toward action, while making sure every member feels heard and respected. With clear communication, regular collaboration, and a commitment to decision-making, I will help Council be more productive, align our agendas, and stay focused on what matters.

1. **How would you work with other entities to balance asks of the public for funding through levies and bonds?**

Billings has many important needs, and I believe the way to meet them is through strong coordination between the city, county, and school district. Each of these entities serves the same taxpayer, and we owe it to our residents to be cautious about when and how we ask for additional support. We also owe it to our residents to stop shifting blame and pointing fingers at other entities – the public wants to know its local governments are working together on a shared set of goals for the safety and prosperity of our community, not hiding behind jurisdictional boundaries.

Right now, Yellowstone County is preparing to bring forward a bond proposal to expand the jail. This is a critical public safety need, and I believe that in the immediate term, the City must support the County and let it make its case to the voters. But taking a thoughtful approach to timing does not mean setting aside our priorities.

I strongly support building Fire Station 9 on the West End, fully staffing Station 8, adding resources to address rising call volumes, and investing in long-overdue repairs to our existing fire stations. These are not “nice-to-haves” – they are essential to ensuring Billings’ residents receive timely emergency response and that our firefighters have safe, functional facilities. While the voters are contemplating the future of YCDF, I will be focused on growing the tax base in the City of Billings and advocating for a better approach to property taxes than the complicated tax-shifting bills from the 2025 session. I will be working with the administration and Council to prioritize funding and plan for future investments, looking at all options to ensure that the Fire Department has what it needs to do its job.

As Mayor, I will work closely with the county and school district to define shared priorities in a way that respects taxpayers while still delivering for public safety. I already have strong working relationships with county commissioners and school district, and I will use those relationships to keep our agendas aligned and our communication clear.

1. **What do you see as the role of the Union in representing the 144 members of Local 521?**

The union plays an essential role in representing the 144 members of Local 521. At its core, the union advocates for better wages, safe and healthy working conditions, and the resources needed to do an incredibly demanding job. That advocacy is valuable not only to current firefighters, but also for recruiting and retaining the next generation that will serve Billings in the years ahead.

But I also see the union’s role as extending beyond the bargaining table. Local 521 has deep knowledge of the day-to-day challenges facing our fire department — from rising call volumes, to facility needs, to the value of health and wellness initiatives. That expertise is crucial for Council members as we make budget and policy decisions. Right now, Council doesn’t hear directly from the union as often as we could, and I see that as a gap in our education. As Mayor, I would welcome and encourage more direct communication from Local 521 so that Council Members have the benefit of your perspective when setting priorities.

I also want to praise Local 521’s visibility in the community – sharing fire safety tips, engaging the public, and building an excellent reputation for our fire fighters. Local 521’s strong social media presence helps to educate people about our fire department, the amazing work that is done every day, and the quality of our men and women serving Billings. Kudos to you all for recognizing the importance of public awareness.

When firefighters are supported, the entire community is safer. The union’s role in representing its members and educating city leadership is important to making sure our decisions reflect both the realities of the job and the needs of the people of Billings. I view Local 521 as a partner in ensuring we have a strong, professional fire department now and in the future.

1. **Currently Fire Station 5 is undergoing a renovation that is long overdue. There are four other stations that need considerable renovations and a growing need for a new station to support growth. What is your stance on maintaining what is currently in use versus building new stations?**

There is not a choice between maintaining what we already have and building new stations – we must do both. Our existing stations are the backbone of the fire department, and many of them are long overdue for repairs. Renovations are not optional; they are essential to keeping firefighters safe and ensuring that equipment and facilities function the way the job demands. That’s why I supported the allocation of funding for fire station repairs in this year’s budget, and why I will continue to prioritize funding for maintenance and renovations in the years ahead.

At the same time, Billings is growing, and our fire service must grow with it. The addition of Fire Station 8 was a critical step for the Heights, but we know additional needs remain – particularly the construction of Fire Station 9 and fully staffing Station 8. These investments are not about “extras”; they are about ensuring residents across Billings receive timely emergency response when they need it most. As I am talking with voters, I continue to hear deep concerns about response time and ISO ratings on the West End. Failing to prioritize station expansion has a ripple effect across Billings. I have championed additional fire stations as a Council Member and will continue to do so as Mayor.

1. **The men and women of Local 521 currently respond to about 18,000 to 20,000 calls for service each year. Departments throughout the nation that respond to a similar number of calls have between 200 and 250 members taking those calls. Currently L521 has 144 members. What do you see as solutions to add staffing?**

Over the past four years on Council, I have consistently supported adding FTE when the Fire Department recommended new positions – including the addition of seven firefighters in FY25 – and I will continue that practice as Mayor until we reach more appropriate staffing levels.

At the same time, we can maximize the efficiency of existing resources. Expanded services like Medical Response Teams allow firefighters to respond to calls effectively without always deploying a full engine, which stretches dollars further while ensuring residents get the right care. Similarly, we also need to monitor mutual aid agreements carefully to ensure we are not over-burdening Billings firefighters and creating an unsustainable response radius. We can also do more, as elected officials, to advocate for system-level funding, so that our state and local partners have the resources they need for their jurisdictions, without overly relying on BFD support.

Finally, fire safety education and prevention measures remain a critical tool for reducing call volume and keeping our community safe. When residents understand risks and follow safety guidance, the department can focus on emergency response where it is most needed.

1. **Firefighters face significant risks from cancer, PTSD, and other occupational hazards. How would you support initiatives to improve firefighter health and wellness programs?**

As Mayor, I commit to supporting initiatives that improve firefighter health and wellness, ensuring that our brave men and women have the resources and support they need to serve our community safely and effectively.

As a first step, renovations and repairs to existing fire stations need to be addressed. With reports of MRSA and other contaminants in the carpets of stations, we must be urgent about providing safe and healthy conditions for our fire fighters to work in. Similarly, investing in appropriate staffing levels is critical to reduce overtime, allow for physical and mental health to be a priority, and reduce fatigue, error, and burnout.

Secondly, I would like to work with BFD leadership and the Local 521 on the various programs and recommendations of the IAFF and IAFC to develop health and wellness programs that make sense for our fire fighters. For example, the IAFF's Wellness-Fitness Initiative (WFI) provides program of individualized services for firefighter wellness that encompasses medical evaluations, physical fitness, rehabilitation, and behavioral health. To the extent that BFD could benefit from the addition of these types of programs, I would look forward to a joint planning effort to implement.

Finally, as we build new stations, we should do so with health and wellness in mind. We can build environments that contribute to the overall well-being of our first responders without significant cost increases, and we should do that at every opportunity.

The need for health and wellness initiatives is truly an area where Council needs to rely on guidance from the Local 521, helping to identify programs that fire fighters want, gaps in existing support systems, opportunities for education and awareness that meet real needs, and even places where equipment or training fall short of best practices. Local 521 can play a pivotal role in gathering data on health trends and conducting screenings to identify early signs of illness. This information will enable the City and the union to target resources effectively, addressing the areas of greatest need and ensuring that interventions are timely and impactful.

1. **How will you approach contract negotiations with Local 521 if elected mayor?**

As you know, the Mayor and Council do not directly participate in contract negotiations. As Mayor, my focus will be on ensuring the safety priorities of Council are clearly understood by the City’s negotiating team and ensuring we have appropriate budget resources available to invest in police and fire.

1. **How would you support community risk reduction initiatives such as fire prevention education, wildfire preparedness, and public health partnerships?**

Community risk reduction, like crime prevention, is a critical component of public safety and one that I strongly support. Preventing emergencies before they happen not only saves lives and property but also helps the Fire Department manage call volumes more effectively.

Education in schools, neighborhoods, and businesses empowers residents to reduce risks and respond appropriately during emergencies. I admire the incredible work that BFD does to educate the community already and would work with the Fire Department and union to expand those opportunities as appropriate. I believe there is an inherent link between public health and public safety, and have championed that interconnectedness on Council. Violence and injury prevention is a major public health issue for Billings – not just crime, but simple fall prevention work could have a measurable impact on call volume to the City.

Disaster preparedness, including wildfire, is especially important for Billings and our surrounding areas. I believe that City Council as a whole is underprepared for disaster response – both understanding our role directly and supporting our local emergency response teams overall. I have participated in FEMA table-top exercises alongside BFD and other public safety leaders, and have begun to identify the many ways the Mayor and Council need to improve our engagement in and support for readiness and response.

As Mayor, I will continue to work closely with Local 521 and other safety stakeholders to strengthen our community risk reduction efforts. This includes supporting robust public education programs, ensuring the city has the right policies and training in place for disaster response, and fostering partnerships that enhance public health and safety. By combining proactive prevention with strong planning and coordination, we can reduce risks for our residents and make sure our firefighters are positioned to respond safely and effectively when emergencies occur.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. Your answers will be shared with our membership as we consider our endorsement. Please return your completed questionnaire to Local 521 by September 1st, 2025 at 5p.m.