

Questionnaire for Billings 2025 City Council 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 city council 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.

 I am Earnest (Earnie) Hammer and I am a retired gas serviceman from Montana Dakota Utilities. I grew up in Hamilton, MT. I worked at St. Vincent Hospital from 1982-1989 and then took on a management role at Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. I moved back to Billings Heights in 2000 where I have resided for the past 25 years.

1. What made you want to run for city council?

 I want to give back to my community and I’ve wanted to serve for several years but obligations of raising a family and being on call as a first responder prevented me from involving myself until now.

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

I tend to favor a democratic type leadership. I appreciate what others have to say when it comes to making decisions. I believe strongly in researching, studying and finding answers before I make a decision. On the city council, I will do what I feel is best while representing the heights residents.

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

I believe it is being a good steward of taxpayer money to benefit the city as a whole as well as keeping our city safe and functional. As the city of Billings is experiencing growing pains, with all the infrastructure issues such as new subdivisions, water and utility services along with the need to provide first responder services to a growing community.

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

 The biggest issue is going to be budget shortfalls with the new tax structure from the state. I would like to see city managers be more accountable for their budgets and it starts with our city administrator who is accountable to the city council. For example, last snowfall of last year we received less than an inch of snow but the streets were plowed. When the street department was contacted by the news media, I understand their answer was “we had the money so we did it”. Another issue I have seen firsthand is misuse of heavy equipment at the landfill which is city run which concerns me because that equipment is expensive and should be treated with a little more respect.

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

I understand from other city council members, that one of the big issues here is people do not read the agendas and come prepared for meetings. I believe this adds to unproductive meetings. I have a lot of available time to study and research the agendas to come more prepared. As far as conflicting demands of Billings, because I am not presently on the council, I am not aware of all of the demands at this point.

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

Because of the last two safety mill levies and our property values being reassessed, I believe that this caused a great concern to our community. At this time, I do not believe the public would support another safety levy. Issuing bonds might be the best solutions with major projects.

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

Through my career, I have belonged to two unions. As a member of IBEW, I received a lot of training as a shop steward and have been involved in several negotiating meetings. I am in favor of having work contracts in black and white so that both parties know what to expect from each other. As far as I am concerned, when contracts are negotiated and agreed upon, the city council should not stand in the way of getting it approved.

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?

I do not want to see what happened to the Miles City fire department having to use an unsafe building because the tax payers wouldn’t approve funds for its repair. One of my pet peeves is not maintaining what you already have. That’s my “keep things fixed” mentality of fixing and repairing in my career. I have publicly come out and stated my feelings about the Babcock building. I have been quoted as saying that that building is a “money pit” and I would be interested in knowing how much tax payer money has been spent thus far on that property. I believe public interest would have been better spent on high priority buildings such as the fire department.

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?

 As Billings expands with new subdivisions and the tax base continues to grow, I want to be proactive with that expansion, so that we can serve and protect the added growth. We have a responsibility to our public to make sure that we can staff our police and fire along with being able to provide the needed infrastructure.

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

 I believe that work places should provide the needed support for their employees. So, yes, I would be in favor of looking at initiatives to improve services for our first responders. At this point I don’t know exactly what services are available.

1. How will you approach contract negotiations with Local 521 if elected to city council?

 Favorable. Refer to question 8.

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

It’s very important to reduce our risks. Property owners need to maintain their own combustibles such as dead trees & overgrowth. I think a good example is the education provided by media has really helped the residents in Emerald Hills. After the property owners handled their responsibilities to maintain their own areas, the risks were greatly decreased.

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.