Questionnaire for Billings 2025 Mayoral election.

**Mike Nelson, Mayoral Candidate**

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.

I was born and raised in Billings: I went to Meadowlark Elementary, Will James Junior High and West High School. I graduated from Eastern Montana College with a degree in Economics.

In our last year of college, my wife was hired by the Las Vegas School District, and in 1981 we moved. My wife moved up through the ranks in the school district, and I spent nearly 30 years helping to run large hotels on the Las Vegas Strip. My father died suddenly in 2008, and I returned then to Billings to be my mother’s caretaker until her death a few months later. With no job to return to, my brother and I decided to buy the Northern Hotel out of receivership. It took four years of work, but we reopened it as Billings’ finest hotel. We used Billings architects, designers, engineers and construction companies for the work.

2. What made you want to run for mayor?

I’ve spent the last eighteen years working to improve the City of Billings for my employees, customers and neighbors. I employ 125 team members, and I’ve reinvested a large portion of my earnings back into that workforce to enable them to improve their lives through responsibility and hard work. I am vested in our community and our people.

I’ve worked to improve the city through my service as board chair for the Big Sky Economic Development Corporation, the Billings Chamber and the Moss Mansion, among other efforts to improve the Billings economy and our citizens’ way of life. I began hosting safety seminars for my neighbors downtown in 2018, and finally, served as Treasurer of Citizens for a Safer Billings during the successful mill levy election to add to the Fire Department, Police and Mental Health budgets.

I’ve been recognized by the Billings Police Department for efforts in crime prevention, the Small Business Administration for work championing small businesses, and by MSU Billings for my work with the community. I have worked with the Billings Public Schools on their Career and Technical Education programs by turning the Northern into a satellite classroom.

These projects convinced me that I’m ready to put that experience to work for the City of Billings. I believe we live in a great community, but we have tough decisions ahead and we need a strategic focus. I am a businessman, passionate about our community’s success, and determined to make a positive difference in our future.

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

I have learned that effective leaders guide large groups of people through vision, team building and consensus. I managed workforces from 1,000 to 11,000 people. I learned to run every aspect of a large enterprise – from accounting to revenue generation, to security and safety. Several places had security forces larger than the Billings Police force at the time.

Running an enterprise depends on making and meeting a budget, which I am prepared to do.

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

To provide the foundational services that keep a municipality running smoothly. They can provide public safety, public infrastructure, public works and quality of life services. They are responsible for helping maintain economic vitality of the community so the city can have the funds to pay for these services.

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

Finances: the recent changes to the property tax laws, along with Billings levy cap will put us in a squeeze that will be an incredible challenge. We must increase money coming into the city through means such as tax-dense new development of our urban core. Mixed-use and multi-story development provide more revenue per square foot than suburban development. Another long-term strategy I would employ would include uniting our Helena delegation to work on Billings centric solutions in our legislature.

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

We could find ourselves in a unique moment in time. Over half the council could be new members in January. Regardless, identifying a long-term vision for the city will lead to long term goals. Once they are identified, the council will make decision as a means to accomplish those goals.

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

In the past, I have been on planning sessions between the City, County and the School District. These have proven to be effective, especially in the timing of the last Safety Levy. I would like to see more of these, to include other stakeholders, such as the Firefighters.

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

Your union serves to strengthen the collective bargaining power of your 144 members. You are responsible for stepping in for your members in matters of grievance and dispute resolution, and to advocate for your member’s rights. I am told by your members that you are effective listeners, and as a result are effective at representing their wishes to the city. It is important that you continue in that role.

As the next mayor, I look forward to an effective partnership with your local – to hear your concerns in a regular, ongoing process.

9. 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 am a fan of adaptive reuse, BUT only if the reuse can be effective, efficient and safe. I can imagine that some stations could be used after a refit, and some not. These types of decisions must be made after a thorough analysis of the options. If new is called for to create a safe environment or a long-term savings, then I’m for it. This is just another reason why having and open relationship with my office and your local is so critical.

Billings will continue to grow relatively rapidly in the future, and I can see a need arising for new stations. We will have to face those expenses with courage, and effective communication to the citizenry to cover those expenses.

10. 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?

More money. The big question is where that should come from. I believe that the long-term solution comes from tax-dense development (that I referenced above), and concerted efforts to unify the aims of our delegation to Helena.

The Center for Public Safety Management’s 2021 study also provided several recommendations for our department, and I would welcome an in-depth discussion with your leadership on the veracity and possible effectiveness of these recommendations. In other words, I would value your expertise.

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

Community awareness of the challenges we are asking our firefighters to face will bring support for these initiatives as they come up.

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

I have negotiated a lot of contracts in my past jobs. I’ve always faced them out of respect for the workforce, understanding of their positions at work and in life, and with transparency.

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

With as much energy and enthusiasm as I could muster. I would like to see delegates of the Fire Department be a part of the neighborhood task forces and other community meetings, and activities.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. Your answers will be shared with our
membership as we consider our endorsement.