

Why Local Elections Matter

A Closer Look at Billings and Montana’s Fiscal Future — Tony O’Donnell for City Council

WRITTEN BY
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You might be wondering, *why should I care about local elections?* Don’t all the big issues get decided at the Montana legislature, in Congress, or the courts? And isn’t city government just about zoning, noise complaints, and stray animals?

Well, yes, local governments handle those things. But have you stopped to consider the incredible and sometimes outrageous policies passed by “insignificant” local boards—things like:

- Sanctuary city policies
- Defiance of ICE enforcement
- Red flag laws
- Special rights based on gender beliefs
- Mask mandates and quarantines
- Restrictions on gas-powered cars
- Confiscatory zoning regulations
- Firearms prohibitions
- Mandates for paper bags, paper straws, smaller soda servings
- Defunding police
- Public housing and taxpayer-funded benefits for undocumented immigrants
- Facial recognition technology
- “Smart city” initiatives tied to Agenda 21
- Traffic cameras
- Flying “gay pride” flags at city hall

If you’re okay with these policies, stop reading now. If not, keep reading—because these issues aren’t just abstract debates; they impact your wallet, your safety, and your community’s future.

Why Local Policies Matter More Than You Think

These policies don’t just appear overnight at the state or federal level—they often start right under our noses in city councils and county commissions. For conservatives concerned about these issues, waiting for “George” (state or federal officials) to fix things isn’t enough. We need to **be George** and take responsibility locally. Plus, city hall is a lot less of a commute than Helena!

The Property Tax Problem: Why It Affects Everyone

Property taxes are the backbone of local government funding in Billings and across Montana. Whether you own a home or rent, you pay property taxes—renters just pay through higher rents. Schools, ambulance districts, police, roads, and flood control all rely heavily on property tax revenue.

When property taxes rise, many families—especially low-income homeowners and seniors on fixed incomes—struggle to afford living here. And when communities reach their limit on property taxes, they **can’t** raise more money for other urgent local needs, like:

- Building or updating jails
- Repairing or replacing bridges and roads
- Flood relief and infrastructure improvements

This leaves critical services underfunded and your community at risk.

Sanctuary Policies and Overburdened Budgets

As economist Thomas Sowell warns:

“The welfare state... can be a form of economic slavery, in which those who have to work for a living become dependent on the political system and subject to its decisions.”

When local governments adopt sanctuary policies and expand services without sustainable funding, community resources are stretched thin. This can lead to rising property



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taxes, forcing families out and shrinking economic opportunity.

The Transportation and Upward Mobility Connection

Transportation is a key predictor of economic mobility. Economist Thomas Sowell has written extensively on how access to transportation opportunities correlates with upward economic movement. This is why policies restricting gas-powered cars or mandating unreliable renewable power sources can have a disproportionate effect on those trying to get ahead.

Montana’s reliance on reliable energy sources like coal and natural gas—not just solar or wind—is vital to sustaining economic growth and providing stable, affordable power to residents and businesses alike.

Montana’s Fiscal Future: The Sales Tax Debate

Montana’s constitution caps any potential state sales tax at 4%. Yet, analyses show that **if property taxes were completely eliminated by constitutional amendment and replaced solely by a sales tax, Montana would need a 10-12% sales tax to maintain current revenue levels**, assuming no increase in economic growth. Such a high rate would be uncompetitive and burden consumers.

Governor Gianforte’s plan, in Tony O’Donnell’s opinion, involves a two-part strategy:

1. Lower income taxes (which actually happened in 2025, despite Gianforte not being a typical “cut taxes” governor)
2. Push for a state sales tax at the constitutional maximum of 4%—without offering any property tax relief.

Tony believes this is a political ploy. The income tax cut was an easy sell to a Republican-majority legislature, setting the stage for a sales tax push disguised as “property tax relief.” But the truth is that property taxes would creep back up, while Montanans get stuck with a new sales tax and continued government growth.

The Role of Local Governments in Spending and Taxation

While city council members can’t vote on state income or sales taxes, they **can control local spending that affects property taxes**. In Billings, opportunities exist to reduce waste and improve efficiency:

- **Consolidate overlapping services and agencies** to reduce bureaucratic redundancy. For example, merging certain administrative departments that serve similar functions.
- **Prioritize frontline workers** like first responders by achieving pay and benefits parity with other Montana departments to fill critical shortages and give fair compensation to those who risk *their* lives for *our* safety.
- **Reduce** burdensome regulations that hurt

- businesses (thus increasing costs for us all).
- **Outsource non-essential services** such as groundskeeping or food services, to save costs.

Natural Resources and Economic Growth: A Key to Fiscal Stability

Montana’s economy benefits enormously from natural resource extraction. Coal royalties, for example, fund a wide range of state programs through the Coal Severance Fund. Yet, Montana has wasted **hundreds of millions of dollars** on moving coal ash piles around because it is treated as toxic waste rather than a resource.

Tony O’Donnell advocates repurposing coal ash in profitable ways—like using it to make superior concrete, turning a waste product into revenue. Instead of costly coal ash disposal that drives up taxes and energy prices, smarter management could help keep Montana’s energy affordable and support local jobs. For more, see Tony’s detailed article on this in *The Liberty Bell* at www.thelibertybell.press.

Comparing Local and State Tax Rates in the West

Montana needs to remain competitive with neighboring states like Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and South Dakota, where local and county sales taxes often combine with state taxes to fund services. Many of these states have a combination of income and sales taxes that balance growth with reasonable tax burdens.

Montana should consider a **constitutional amendment to eliminate property taxes permanently**—protecting taxpayers from future legislative increases—and **fund the government through a balanced mix of sales and income taxes**. Counties and cities can also levy local sales taxes as needed to maintain infrastructure and services without relying on property taxes.

The Political Reality of Tax Reform in Montana

Tony O’Donnell believes Governor Gianforte will have **legislators** push a 4% state sales tax bill in 2027. However, this sales tax will likely come with **no meaningful property tax relief**. The Governor supported the failed 4% sales tax legislation in 2025, and Tony views the Governor’s 2025 income tax cut not as a sign of fiscal conservatism, but a strategic move designed to pave the way for a sales tax increase.

The Governor and his legislative allies expected that the Freedom Caucus conservatives would be tricked into supporting a bundled bill, believing property taxes would go down and stay down. But property taxes would eventually creep back up, while the sales tax would add a permanent new revenue stream used to fund government growth and costly pet projects such as water- and energy-intensive data centers, risking power blackouts and water shortages for Montanans.

Why Vote for Tony O’Donnell?

Tony O’Donnell understands these complex issues from the ground up. With years of experience in Montana’s state government as an elected Public Service Commissioner and a deep commitment to fiscal responsibility, Tony pledges to:

- Protect Billings taxpayers from runaway property tax increases
- Fight wasteful government spending and bureaucratic inefficiencies
- Support economic growth through responsible natural resource development
- Advocate for practical energy policies that keep power reliable and affordable
- Prioritize essential services like public safety over unnecessary administrative bloat

Local government decisions affect your daily life and your family’s financial future. Tony O’Donnell gets it, and he’s ready to bring real accountability and common sense to the Billings City Council.

Vote Tony O’Donnell for Billings City Council. Because local government *does* matter. 🗳️

The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made know to all. *Luke 12:2*