

Lincoln County Study Commission

Tentative Report – DRAFT

2026

Adopted: February 18, 2026

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Introduction

To the Citizens of Lincoln County:

The Lincoln County Local Government Study Commission, elected by the voters of Lincoln County, respectfully submits this tentative final report for your review and consideration.

The purpose of the study commission, as defined in Montana law, is to study the existing form, powers, and structure of county government, compare it with other forms of county government authorized by state law. Upon completion of this review, the study commission is charged with recommending whether Lincoln County should retain its current form of government, amend it, or adopt an alternative form of government for submission to the voters.

Over the course of this review, the study commission sought broad and inclusive public participation through:

- Interviews with department heads and county employees
- Interviews with elected officials
- Consultation with key community informants
- A county-wide community survey
- Public hearings and community engagement events

All meetings of the study commission were open to the public, and public comment was actively encouraged at every stage of the process.

The study commission's recommendation reflects the themes and concerns consistently raised throughout this study process, including the need for greater accountability and transparency, improved efficiency and coordination, enhanced access and responsiveness to the public and stronger financial management.

After careful consideration of all information gathered, the Lincoln County Local Government Review Study Commission recommends that Lincoln County adopt the Commission Form of Government **with county elections conducted on a nonpartisan basis**, to be presented to the voters at the November 2026 General Election.

Respectfully submitted,

Lincoln County Local Government Study Commissioners

Report Summary

The Lincoln County Government Study Commission, having thoroughly studied our present form of county government and the alternative forms of government available to counties under state law, recommends the following:

1. Lincoln County should adopt, effective January 2, 2027, the Commission Form of Government. The Commission Form of Government consists of an elected commission and other elected officers. This form of government will retain three county commissioners serving six-year overlapping terms of office. The current (Elected County Officials Form) and Commission Form of Government are structurally identical. The latter, however, carves an easier path forward should a majority of Lincoln County voters wish to make changes to government form and plan in the future.
2. The question of whether an administrative assistant shall or may be appointed to assist the county commissioners in supervision and operation of the local government as authorized in 7-3-416, MCA. This will only apply if adoption of the alternative form is approved.
3. The question of whether or not elections shall be conducted on a partisan or nonpartisan basis shall be submitted to the voters of the county as a sub-option as authorized in 7-4-413, MCA. This will only apply if adoption of the alternative form is approved.
4. The questions on the form of government and the sub options shall be submitted to the voters of Lincoln County on November 3, 2026.

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a. Findings of the Study

After an extensive and deliberate study, the Lincoln County Local Government Review Study Commission concludes that while the current Elected County Officials form of government has served the county for many years, it no longer provides the level of coordination, administrative capacity and transparency necessary to meet the county's present and future needs.

Input from interviews, public comments, and survey responses revealed several consistent themes:

- A desire for clearer lines of accountability and responsibility in county operations;
- Concerns about inefficiencies in county operations;
- The need for improved public access, responsiveness, and communication of elected County Commissioners;

- Concerns about long-term financial planning, budgeting, and fiscal oversight.

Across engagement methods, residents expressed a shared vision for a county government that is open, impartial, financially responsible, professionally managed, regionally fair and actively engaged with the public.

b. Key Provisions of the Proposed Form

The proposed Commission Form of Government for Lincoln County includes the following key elements:

Commission Form of Government

An elected board of county commissioners serving as the legislative and policymaking governing body of the county.

County Operations

It is strongly recommended that the Lincoln County Commissioners hire a qualified, professional county administrator, based on professional training and experience, to serve as the county administrator responsible for day-to-day operations, coordination of departments, and implementation of county policy.

Commented [JM2]: add sub option about SHALL appoint an admin assistant then here promote that it is a county administrator and not a secretary?

Separation of Policy and Administration

The County Commissioners should then focus on legislative, policy, and strategic direction, while administrative and operational responsibilities should be centralized under the county administrator.

Public Accountability and Transparency

Clear lines of authority would enhance accountability, improve transparency, and provide residents with a better understanding of who is responsible for county decisions and outcomes.

Nonpartisan Elections

County elections would be conducted on a nonpartisan basis to encourage broader participation, reduce partisan influence in administrative governance, and emphasize qualifications and community service.

The proposed form maintains democratic accountability while allowing greater structural clarity and improved coordination of county operations.

Comparison of Existing and Proposed Forms of Government

A. Existing Form – Elected County Official (ECOF)

Under the existing ECOF form, Lincoln County government consists of a board of county commissioners and multiple independently elected officials, each with statutory authority over their respective offices. While this structure provides direct electoral accountability, it also results in fragmented administration, limited coordination across departments, and challenges in establishing countywide priorities.

Administrative authority is dispersed among elected officials, with the county commission exercising limited oversight primarily through budgetary approval. No single official is responsible for coordinating operations across departments or for implementing a unified administrative vision.

The ECOF Form of Government is the statutory basis (7-3-111, MCA) for the Commission Form of Government. This means that all sub options are predetermined in the ECOF form and cannot be changed. ECOF requires that County Commissioners be elected by qualified electors voting at large for candidates who reside in each district, which are apportioned by population (7-3-412, MCA), terms of commission members are overlapping (7-3-416, MCA) and that elections are conducted on a partisan basis (7-3-413, MCA).

B. Proposed Form – Commission Form of Government

The Commission Form of Government consists of an elected commission and other elected officers as provided in 7-3-432, MCA through 7-3-442. All legislative, executive and administrative powers and duties of the local government not specifically reserved by law or ordinance to other elected officers shall reside in the commission. The commission shall appoint the heads of departments and other employees, except for those appointed by other elected officials.

Local governments that adopt this form shall retain general governing powers. However, adopting the Commission Form of Government allows the county to be more responsive to community needs, allowing for deviation from the statutory basis.

Additionally, to address the operational shortcomings explained above, the study commission highly recommends the hiring of a professional, qualified County Administrator with the change of form. The elected county commission would retain legislative and policy-making authority.

The county administrator would be responsible for:

- Implementing county policies and ordinances;
- Coordinating county departments and operations;
- Preparing and administering the county budget;
- Providing professional management and long-term planning support; and
- Enhancing communication and service delivery across the county.

Elections under the proposed form would be conducted on a nonpartisan basis.

C. Comparison of Key Characteristics

Characteristic	Existing ECOF Form	Proposed Commission Form
Policy Authority	Shared among county commissioners and elected officials	Centralized in elected county commission
Administration	Fragmented	Centralized under county administrator
Accountability	Spread out	Clear lines of responsibility
Efficiency	Limited coordination	Improved coordination and management
Elections	Partisan	Nonpartisan

Recommendations and Reasons

The Lincoln County Local Government Review Study Commission recommends that Lincoln County adopt a Commission Form of Government with a strong recommendation for hiring a qualified, professional county administrator.

The study commission finds that this form of government will:

- Improve accountability and transparency;
- Enhance efficiency and coordination;
- Strengthen financial management;
- Increase responsiveness to residents; and
- Support fair and professional governance across all regions of the county.

The proposed change shall be submitted to the voters of Lincoln County at the November 2026 general election.

STRONG RECOMMENDATION REGARDING PROFESSIONAL ADMINISTRATION

While not part of the formal ballot resolution, the study commission strongly recommends that, under the Commission Form of Government, the Lincoln County Commissioners hire a qualified, professional County Administrator.

The study commission's review clearly demonstrates that professional management improves fiscal oversight, coordination, and long-term planning.

A qualified professional County Administrator would:

- Provide centralized administrative leadership.
- Enhance financial management and strategic budgeting.
- Improve coordination across departments.
- Increase transparency and reporting.
- Strengthen responsiveness to citizens.

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The study commission firmly believes that professional administration is critical to achieving the goals identified by Lincoln County residents.

Although the hiring of a county administrator is not part of the ballot proposal, it is a key recommendation that should be seriously considered by the Lincoln County Commissioners regardless of if the Commission Form is adopted.

Appendices