League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission Date: 11/4/2026

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley Length of Meeting: 1 hr 51 min

Members Present: Brian Davies (Chair), Bill Myers (Colfax), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Chris Melhus (Malden). David McKeirnan (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse).

Members Absent: Tammy Southern

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Staff: Grace DiBiasi (Whitman County Planner), Brandon Johnson (Public Works), David Werner, clerk, Mark Storey Online (Public Works Director). Public on zoom and in the auditorium: Kent Keller, Julie Clarkson Gullick, Carol Black, Tom Thompson, Michael Miller, Zac Picard, Mark Weber, Kevin Atkinson, Judy Meuth, Steve Flint, Jamie Anderson, Nicole Frazier.

Business pertaining to League Positions or Topics of Interest: *Include in this section 1) issues discussed that relate to League priorities or positions. Do you recommend local league action? If so, please refer to the League position that supports your suggestion. 2) links to further information available on an issue, if available.*

Avista has requested a permit to replace a substation east of Garfield.

The comment period on the Critical Areas and the Flood Damage Prevention Ordinances ended yesterday. There have been no additional comments.

Talon Smith presented updated criteria for mapping of BESS (Battery Energy Storage System) facilities. These included at least 130 ft from street centerlines, at least 7 miles away from key parks, within 2 miles of a transmission line, at least 1500 ft from existing structures. In addition, criteria were expanded to include existing parcels whose centers are within the agricultural designation. The Proposed Siting Feasibility Map is 173,482 acres total.

Rachel Granrath talked about the Solar Energy Facility Ordinance Section 19.65.070 Development and Standards: The Commission proposes a 5000-acre maximum total utility solar built in the County, does not apply to BESS. Utility Solar 1500 ft from nonparticipating landowners occupied building. Tier 3 BESS set back is 1500 ft from any non-participating property line. The 7-mile radius around parks applies to Utility Solar and Tier 3 BESS facilities.

Community Scale solar can be described as under 20 acres, more than 250 kw up to 5 MW, serves multiple users, distribution grid connection, ground mounted or large rooftop installation. Standards include minimum setback distance 50 ft from property lines, 500 ft

from all occupied buildings, 50 ft from any public right of way.

Utility Scale Solar can be described as 20 aces or more, more than 5 MW, bulk generation for regional grid, transmission grid connection, ground mounted, principal use of site. Standards include 5000-acre maximum total utility solar built in the County, 500-acre limit per single facility. Setbacks include minimum of 100 ft from all property lines, minimum setbacks may be waived by participating landowners, 1500 ft from any non-participating landowners occupied buildings (may be reduced to 200 ft if the non-participating landowner authorizing in writing, minimum of 100 ft from any public right of way. Commissioners discuss the 500-acre limit on single projects, should the market be allowed to determine what a single project should look like. It may be hard to find a 500-acre plot available for solar development. It could be useful to know the average size of a solar facility in Washington.

Height limits: maximum structure height is 20 ft at full tilt as measured from the highest existing native grade below each panel. Design shall be in accordance with the standards applicable to the zoning district. Project design should minimize grading on ridgelines. Removal of native trees is prohibited unless explicitly authorized. Agrivoltaics spacing and turning radius requirements were removed to allow developer preferences. Commissioners discuss whether solar panels should be allowed on top of a hill if the County does not allow houses on top of hills.

Solar relationship to BESS:

Current code addresses siting and layout, shared infrastructure, screening and landscaping, setbacks and buffers. Rachel recommends adding requirements to address noise and lighting. Grace suggests that they use state standards for noise, currently 45 dB.

BESS Tiers: Tier 1 home based, Tier 2 intermediate and Tier 3 large scale storage facility.

Public comment: Tom Thompson requests page numbers on the BESS Ordinance, he thinks that Whitman County is not ideal for solar panels because the topography is not flat. He thinks that 500 acres is a reasonable limit. There need to be multiple fire districts involved in fire protection. Carol Black suggests that code needs to describe what Agrivoltaics is. Mark Weber states that 500 acres is a reasonable size. Such a facility would produce about 100 MW and will require dedicated high voltage transmission lines and should probably be zoned industrial rather than on agricultural land. This size facility could generate about $7 million per year. Kent Keller appreciates that the County’s Comprehensive plan embraces renewables that are compatible with farming. He wonders where the 5000-acre total solar farms limit comes from. Judy Meuth urges the Commissioners to use the expanded criteria that were presented tonight to allow the County to select good quality projects. She saw many solar and wind projects in Texas that are helping the area to have power generation adjacent to crop land. Steve Flint is also pleased that they are considering expanding the

eligible parcels using the new criteria. Simon Smith would like to have coffee with people who are opposed to renewable energy to find out what motivates them. Kevin Atchinson points out that solar panels are an industrial use and conflict with what is allowed in the agricultural zone. He notes that solar energy is unreliable and inefficient. Julie Clarkson sent the Planning Commission a database of ordinances for solar facilities that have been passed in other counties. She also sent a database of all the solar farms in the United States that could be used to determine their characteristics.

Public Meetings of Interest to League: *Were there any public meetings announced that you think League members may be interested in attending and/or becoming involved with that relate to League positions?*

The BOCC will consider the adoption of the Critical Areas Ordinance and the Flood Damage Prevention Ordinance on November 16.

Process & Protocol: (Observations about participants and procedures of the meeting**)** *e.g., Did the members appear to have done their "homework"? Were members courteous to each other and the public? Was access to materials for certain agenda items available to you?*

Members are courteous to each other and the public. The presentation and draft ordinance materials were displayed on Zoom while being discussed and copies sent via email before the meeting.

Your additional comments/opinions:

Reminders ☺

A LWV Observer is impartial, silent, and respectful. It is, however, acceptable to ask questions for clarification following the meeting.
Remember to wear your awesome ID Badge!
Please attach any materials, or links to such, received at the meeting that you feel are important to your report. Please submit your report to the LWV Observer Chair within one week of the meeting.
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