

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: September 1, 2021

Observer Reporting: Shelley Chambers Fox

Length of Meeting: 2 hrs

Members Present: Dave Gibney, Weston Kane, Erina Hammer, Chad Whetzel, Brian Davies, Russ Jamison, Fred Wexler, Staff: Alan Thomson, Whitman County Planner; Grace Di Biase, Whitman County Assistant Planner; Mark Storey, Whitman County Director/Engineer; Brandon Johnson, Public Works; Tina Layne, Public Works; Elinor Huber, Clerk.

Absent: Keith Paulson, Matt Webb

Others Present (i.e., media, public): Sheri Farr, Karen Hinnenkemp, Debbie Snell (Port of Whitman), Barney Buckley

Content (What is being discussed):

Reports:

- a. Update on previous conditional use permits and variances – Jeff Motley CUP for an industrial park on SR 270 and Airport Road. Hearing was held on August 12, 2021, and the permit was granted.
- b. Forthcoming Administrative Use Permits – Weis Towers new cell tower on Big Alkali Road. First they will need access to the building site. In addition, there has been a request by the Maders to move dirt from the building site on SR 27 to fill another area on Albion Rd.

Old business: Discuss progress on the **updating of the Whitman County Comprehensive Plan**. The current Whitman County Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1978. It is available at [Comprehensive-Plan-Working-Draft-Narrative---August-13th-2021-PDF \(whitmancounty.org\)](#) The proposal is to go through the Plan line by line, chapter by chapter. In the next 2 months the Commission will start reviewing, answering questions and discussing the plan at each meeting. This may require meeting the first and third Wednesday of the month. **This month the plan is to try to get through Chapter 2.** We got a little over half way last time. Chapter 1, the introduction, will be reviewed last since they will have a better picture of what the introduction should look like at the end of the process.

1. The discussion began with the Land Use, Natural Resources & Agricultural Conservation section on page 18. Dave Gibney read the section out loud and entered edits agreed upon by the rest of the board. Debbie Snell from the Port of Whitman corrected the section on the zoning of their 5 sites. There was considerable discussion about whether the **USDA descriptions of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance and Agricultural Land of Long-term Commercial Significance** were appropriate in Whitman County. There was some concern that if the state designations were used that would allow the state to come in to the county and tell farmers what land they could and couldn't farm. Alan points out that from the standpoint of planning, prime farmland must be mentioned because the county is obligated to protect prime farmland and rock for quarries. However, it isn't designated what land in the county is prime and what land is farmland of statewide importance. **Commissioners ultimately agree to use the definitions put forward by the U.S. Department of Agriculture** (page 19). Whitman county includes prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance; the latter being steeper (slopes greater than 6%) and therefore potentially erodible.
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcseprd1338623.html
2. There was a discussion about how to clarify the status of **cluster development zones** within the area impacted by the County/City of Pullman tax sharing agreement. Cluster zones were originally developed to permit an area where people could build on larger lots. 3 to 5 acres. So they were placed on the edge of town where people could get to work but still live in the county. It was supposed to be limited within a half mile within the city limits of Pullman. It was corrected to read "There is currently 384 acres of cluster development approved for or developed upon within the Pullman tax sharing area. No additional developments are allowed within the Pullman tax sharing area. There is an additional 141 acres outside the tax sharing area that is available for cluster development."

3. Alan proposed a more accurate description of the twelve **unincorporated communities** in Whitman County to include residential, commercial and agricultural zones. Entries on commercial grain elevators and mineral deposits were reworded to update and clarify them. In particular commissioners wanted to make a strong statement about the need for the county to continuously develop this resource to provide for local construction and road maintenance in light of how negatively rock quarries are viewed by the public.
4. There ensued a lengthy discussion of the **railbanking statement** that had been inserted earlier in plan development. Karen Hinnenkemp had requested that the plan include abandonment as the first consideration in this section because the railroad owner has to abandon the line before it can be used for railbanking or revert to the owners. The commissioners who spoke up did not want to abandon the easement because they would like to retain the land for transportation. Chad Whetzel notes that the current statement needs to recognize that whatever becomes of a line that is no longer used as a railroad, it cannot hinder current agriculture uses or practices around it. Barney Buckley noted that many people propose rail banking as a pretext for a trail, and there is never any thought or discussion of returning the corridor for future rail use. Art Swannack had sent Alan Thomson an email earlier suggesting the section be changed to read “Railroads. The Whitman County Comprehensive Plan supports abandonment of an unused rail line. The line may then be reverted to nearby property owners, or a public or private Trail Agency may negotiate to rail bank the line to establish a recreational trail. Rail banking preserves unused rail easements until such time as they are needed for rail transport.”

Public Meetings of interest to League

1. The Pullman Planning Commission will continue to discuss the draft of its Comprehensive Plan continuing discussion of **Chapter 2** during its meeting on September 15. The draft of the Comprehensive Plan can be found at [Comprehensive Plan | Whitman County, WA](#). The details on remote participation can be found at the Whitman County Planning Commission website.

Process & Protocol: (Observations about participants and procedures of the meeting) *e.g., Did the members appear to have done their “homework”?* Yes *Were members courteous to each other and the public?* Yes. *Was access to materials for certain agenda items available to you?* Yes, the most recent copy of the Comprehensive Plan, agenda and supporting materials were sent via email.

Next meeting: September 15, 2021