

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 4/1/2026

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 2 hrs

Members Present: Brian Davies (Chair), Dave Gibney (vice Chair Pullman), Bill Myers (Colfax), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse), Chris Melhus (Malden), Tammy Southern (Garfield), Julian Matthews (Pullman).

Members Absent: David McKeirnan (Pullman)

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Staff: Alan Thomson (Whitman County Planner), Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner-on Zoom), Brandon Johnson (Public Works). Public: Carol Black. Consultants: Dan Nickel and Douglas Yormick both with Facet, presenting on CAO update. Rachel Granrath, Talon Smith (Kimley Horn) will be presenting on the solar and battery energy siting storage (BESS) ordinance.

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.*

Wind and Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) Update

The wind ordinance has officially passed the appeal deadline. Following this update, Dan Nickel and Douglas Yormick from Facet presented an overview of the Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) update. The county aims to align the CAO with state law and the "best available science" updated in 2019. The presentation covered a gap analysis, proposed amendments, and a roadmap for protecting wetlands, aquifer recharge areas, frequently flooded areas, geologically hazardous areas, and fish and wildlife conservation areas. The overarching goal is to ensure "no net loss" of ecological functions and values.

Proposed CAO Changes and Timeline

The consultants identified several minor and major updates, including new definitions for habitat management plans and site potential tree height. Notable proposals include a 250-foot review distance for public and private trails and a requirement for conservation easements on mitigation sites. Wetland provisions will be updated to include vernal pools and ground-verified mapping. Regarding fish and wildlife, the consultants suggested using the WDFW Priority Habitats database and updating stream typing to match DNR systems. A point of discussion arose regarding the Palouse Prairie; while it may fall under the "shrub-

steppe" category, consultants suggested Whitman County explicitly list it to ensure protection.

Administrative Review and Flooding Standards

The timeline for the CAO update includes a 60-day notice and SEPA review this month, followed by a public meeting in May. Planning Commissioner Dave Gibney questioned whether the Commission would have time to review the specific language of the ordinance, to which the consultants responded that an additional meeting in April would be required. In other sections, the consultants recommended adding Channel Migration Zones as erosion hazards—common along the South Fork of the Palouse River—and modernizing floodplain standards to align local code with updated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maps.

Solar and Battery Energy Siting

The discussion then shifted to Solar and Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) with Rachel Granrath of Kimley Horn. The presentation defined "Community Scale" solar (less than 20 acres) versus "Utility Scale" (more than 20 acres). Key discussion topics for the upcoming ordinance development include agricultural land protection, decommissioning agreements, visual setbacks, and glare. The consultants noted that Whitman County may qualify for low-income community credits via the Inflation Reduction Act. The Commission identified agricultural protection and emergency response as high-priority topics for further deliberation.

Battery Storage Tiers and Infrastructure

Talon Smith, also with Kimley Horn, detailed the three tiers of BESS: Residential (backup power), Commercial (business/school use), and Utility Scale (grid stabilization). Utility-scale systems require intensive review, including conditional use permits and compliance with NFPA 855 fire safety standards. Proposed regulations would formalize a three-tier regulatory approach, include hazard mitigation, and ensure road use agreements are in place for infrastructure protection.

Commission Concerns and Siting Logic

The session concluded with a debate over the scope of the Commission's oversight. Dean Kinzer questioned the return on investment for solar at their specific latitude, while Dave Gibney expressed a preference for confining battery storage to industrial zones. Commissioner Weston Kane countered that it is not the Commission's role to determine commercial viability, but rather to focus on safety and visual siting. Additionally, Carol Black requested that the final ordinances specifically address soil compaction and erosion.

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?

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.

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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