

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 5/6/2026

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 1 hr 52 min

Members Present: Brian Davies (Chair), Dave Gibney (vice Chair Pullman), Bill Myers (Colfax), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Chris Melhus (Malden), David McKeirnan (Pullman)

Members Absent: Tammy Southern (Garfield), Weston Kane (LaCrosse) are absent. Julian Mathews (Pullman) has resigned.

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Staff: Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner-on Zoom), Brandon Johnson (Public Works), David Werner, clerk . Rachel Granrath, consultant from Kimley Horn on the solar and battery energy siting storage (BESS) ordinance. Public: Ken Duft, Nicole Frazier, John Wright, Rick, Jamie Anderson, Julie, Also several people in the auditorium. Carol Black, Tom Thompson, Julie Clarkson Gullick.

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.*

This report is based on the minutes and recording of the meeting on May 6, 2026. The meeting started at 7:06, was adjourned after announcements and approval of minutes. Grace DiBiasi announced that Whitman County Planning Commission will have a Public meeting on the Critical Areas Ordinance on May 20, 2026. After the public meeting, commissioners will resume discussion of the Solar and BESS ordinances. The Commissioners then restarted in workshop mode at 7:09 to continue their discussion of the solar and battery energy storage (BESS) ordinance. Rachel Granrath facilitated a discussion of the visual impacts and zoning of solar and battery facilities. The Commission would like to allow Community Scale Solar Facilities in the agricultural, north and south Pullman-Moscow Corridor. Commercial solar systems may be permitted in the agricultural district, north and south Pullman-Moscow corridor and the industrial districts, either light or heavy. Dave Gibney asks if the community scale facilities could be in the rural community residential and rural community commercial district zones in the county (RCR, RCC-1, RCC-2). The other commissioners agree. Grace notes that they should change their setbacks if they would like to do this. The Conditional Use Process should allow for community input on these facilities.

The Commissioners discussed whether to limit the maximum number of acres for commercial solar energy projects to 5,000 acres and no individual site shall exceed 2,500 acres as had been proposed by the county commissioners. Planning commissioners had previously considered whether they could exclude certain quality soils or other criteria that could be chosen to protect high quality agricultural land. Dave Gibney suggests including the county scabland in potential sites for solar facilities. Bill Myers argues that using whether the land has been in production in the last 5 years would be a possible criteria for identifying valuable agricultural land for protection. Dave Gibney points out that this would need to be backed up by the best available science. Rachel Granrath advises that they can select land for protection but they just

have to be clear. A map of which properties are eligible and which would not be eligible would be clear. Dave Gibney wants to avoid telling property owners what they can and can't do with their land. Brian Davies notes that in west Texas they do allow sheep grazing under the solar panels necessitating building them slightly taller than here.

Setbacks for commercial solar energy facilities shall be a minimum of 100 feet from all property lines, 300 feet from any non-participating occupied building and 50 feet from public right of way.

Commissioners decline to restrict the facilities from a particular municipal radius.

Maximum structure height for the solar array shall be 20 feet at full tilt as measured from the highest existing native grade below each panel. Any associated buildings shall be limited in accordance with the standards established for the zoning district.

Brian asks whether they should be concerned about hail-damaged solar panels leaching toxic chemicals into the soil. Grace notes that solar panels manufactured today should not be leaching chemicals into the soil.

Commissioners discuss whether to use the same setbacks for parks that were used in the wind energy turbine ordinance. For Kamiak Butte County Park, Steptoe State Park, and Palouse Fall State Park they used 6:30 PM 7 miles. Dave Gibney notes that wind towers are particularly noticeable and obtrusive but solar and battery are not so noticeable such that 7 miles would be excessive for siting the latter. Bill Myers argues that they should stick to the 7-mile setback so that they do not pick winners or losers in the energy sector. Commissioners think that this setback should only apply to the Commercial scale projects.

BESS systems: Tier 1 are residential and permitted in all zoning districts. Tier 2 are Community scale projects allowed in the agricultural district and the north and south Pullman-Moscow corridor district in conjunction with a Conditional Use Permit. Tier 2 systems shall be set back a minimum of 50 feet from adjacent property lines, provide secure fencing and be screened from view from adjacent property and public right of way. Tier 3 are Commercial scale projects allowed in the agricultural district and the north and south Pullman-Moscow corridor district in conjunction with a Conditional Use Permit. Tier 3 systems should be set back a minimum of 500 feet from any residentially zoned property, 500 ft from public right of way, provide secure fencing and be screened from view from adjacent property and public rights-of-way. That larger setback is due to fire risk. Dave Gibney would like to see the Tier 3 facilities in a special zone (industrial for battery facilities) that could be rezoned to be adjacent to the solar facility. Rachel Granrath does not recommend a rezone process to prevent siting in agricultural areas. She thinks that the Conditional Use Permits will take care of cases of inappropriate siting. Dean Kinzer suggests that the ordinance reference WAC 51-54A-1207 from the general administrative code on energy storage systems in the design section for conformity. Other commissioners agree. BESS height would be specific to the underlying zone maximum height.

Rachel Granrath then walked through potential revisions for visual impact of solar and battery storage facilities starting with the requirements for solar facilities. This essentially was a discussion about screening, fencing and landscaping for facilities. Fencing in Whitman County is 8 ft fencing. Screening reduces the visibility of facilities either through fencing or vegetation. The applicant must consult with the Washington Dept of Fish and Wildlife prior to construction and have the project site evaluated by a qualified biologist to characterize vegetation and wildlife existing on the site and a qualified soil scientist to determine the soil conditions on the site prior to construction. Sensitive areas are flagged in the field to limit construction disturbance. The applicant will develop a reseeding/restoration and weed management plan with the assistance of a qualified biologist including a monitoring schedule. Glare produced by the facility should be managed to minimize the effect on adjacent properties and local aircraft activity. Fencing shall be security fencing or agricultural-style fencing. It should screen the facility from residential zones or public rights-of-way using a combination of fencing and vegetation. Projects should be landscaped.

Battery storage facilities must also have 8 ft fencing and should be screened from residences and public rights-of-way using security fencing, welded wire, chain link or similar that will satisfy fire standards. A

locking gate is required. Screening is not required if the facility is not visible due to topography or existing vegetation. Vegetative screening should use native or regionally adapted species, including a mix of trees and shrubs.

Next section is co-located Solar and Battery storage systems. They should be sited to minimize visual and land use impacts. These must be screened and landscaped. They may use the same setback and buffer areas, provided that all applicable safety, fire code and separation requirements are met. The co-located facilities should be designed to minimize their visual impact using fencing, screening and material selection. The power and communications section specifies that electrical collection and communication lines should be placed underground to the maximum extent practicable. If overhead lines are necessary, they will comply with the existing Avian Power Line Interaction recommendations. All electrical systems shall comply with National Electrical Code and applicable state and utility requirements.

BESS facilities shall include remote monitoring and emergency shutdown capability consistent with applicable safety standards. Dave Gibney would like this last requirement added to the solar section. The other commissioners agree.

Public Comment: Carol Black would like the commission to define dual use of solar and agriculture. True dual use is energy generation and agriculture occurring at the same time. She also would like to use Farm Land of State Significance to protect land for agricultural use. She would like a 1500 ft setback for residential homes. She supports the use of the 7 mile setback for the specified parks. Tom Thompson asks if Rachel Granrath has read the Whitman County Comprehensive plan which states that we protect farmland and rustic living. While there is not much incentive for green energy at the moment, that can change quickly. Julie Clarkson Gullick is concerned with the setbacks and the consequent safety issues that may occur if there is a fire. She would like a greater setback for residences than 100 ft. Solar and battery are quite noisy depending on the materials used; could they specify the higher quality, quieter materials.

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?*

Whitman County Planning Commission will have a Public meeting on the Critical Areas Ordinance on May 20, 2026.

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 draft ordinance materials were displayed on Zoom while being discussed.

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. rogerc63@outlook.com