

# League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 6/17/2026

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 1 hr 55 min

Members Present: Brian Davies (Chair-on Zoom), Bill Myers (Colfax), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Chris Melhus (Malden), Weston Kane (LaCrosse)

Members Absent: David McKeirnan (Pullman), Tammy Southern (Garfield).

**Julian Mathews (Pullman) and Dave Gibney (vice Chair Pullman) have resigned.**

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Staff: Alan Thomson (Whitman County Planner), Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner), Brandon Johnson (Public Works), David Werner, clerk.

Public: Dave Gibney, Ken Duft, Julie Clarkson Gullick, Carol Black, Tom Thompson, Jim, others. Rachel Granrath, consultant from Kimley Horn.

**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.*

A Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) hearing and public meeting for the Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) update is scheduled for June 29th. The Planning Office is working on an Administrative Use Permit for a Cell tower for Smartlink Group on Barbee Road. Commissioners asked if there was public comment before the discussions but there was no public comment offered. This is the last meeting that will include the consultants from Kimley Horn.

Rachel Granrath, consultant with Kimley-Horn presented a Feasibility Map of Battery Energy Storage System (BESS)/Solar Siting as a visual exercise to determine the potential impacts of proposed draft setback specifications on renewable energy siting eligibility in the county. A visualization of areas at least 130 feet from street centerlines (100 ft setback from right of way) and at least 7 miles away from key parks leaves considerable area for siting. However, if 'within 2 miles of a transmission line' is added, the area available for siting is reduced to include mostly the eastern portion of the County. Using the following siting criteria leaves ~ 11,623 acres eligible.

- At least 130 feet from street centerlines
- At least 7 miles away from key parks

- Within 2 miles of a transmission line
- At least 1,500 feet from existing structures
- Existing parcels within these criteria
- Parcels within Agriculture designation
- Within ½-mile of existing road

Under the previous siting criteria-500 ft from nonagricultural designation, (before addition of new criteria) there were ~ 19,600 acres eligible.

Bill Myers notes that they had talked about a buffer around incorporated areas. Other commissioners note that 'within 2 miles of transmission lines' is the most limiting of the criteria and probably applies to wind facilities as well.

Commissioners then reviewed proposed draft language in the Commercial Solar and BESS ordinances as compiled from focused discussions pertaining to setbacks and siting, visual impacts, and community benefits and economic tools. Commissioners agree to use the criteria 'at least 1500 feet from nonparticipating occupied structures' rather than 'from existing property lines.' Grace notes that the Pullman Moscow Corridor and light industrial zones are excluded from siting commercial projects (either community scale or utility scale) because of the criteria listed. There is interest from the airport in a community scale solar facility for its use which may be in the Pullman Moscow Corridor. Grace points out that Commissioners will need to specify different setbacks if they want to allow siting of community scale solar in the Corridor or in light or heavy industrial zones. They agree they want to allow community scale facilities in the Pullman Moscow Corridor or in agricultural, light or heavy industrial zones. Rachel suggested that Grace and Alan prepare setback language for community projects that will allow them to be built in the above zones. Utility scale projects can be allowed in the agricultural district and the setbacks mapped above will apply to utility scale projects. Commissioners also specified that the acreage allotted for Utility scale projects shall not exceed 5000 acres.

Wraylee Flodin, Whitman County Assessor addressed the following questions on general taxation and renewable energy facilities by email.

1. Is it correct that property tax valuation is generally based on the property's assessed value and use, rather than its zoning designation? Yes, but zoning and use are tied together. The only zoning we are currently tracking in our system is the City of Pullman. We assess by use.
2. If agricultural land enrolled in the Open Space Taxation Program is developed with a solar energy facility or battery energy storage system, does the affected acreage lose its

enrollment in the program? Not necessarily. Solar could stay in use.

3. If enrollment is lost for some or all of the property, would compensating tax, additional tax, or any rollback tax provisions apply? Depends on the purchaser, there are some exemptions to the comp tax.
4. When a renewable energy facility is constructed on leased farmland, is the facility itself assessed and taxed separately from the underlying land? Yes, it can be, if we are considering from the parcel layer only. We create an ad min parcel to account for the improvements. Otherwise, the objects and slices within the parcel track each assessment type.
5. Is the renewable energy facility generally treated as personal property, real property improvements, or some combination of the two for assessment purposes? The current renewable taxation in Whitman County is a mix of personal property (windmills and transmission lines) and real property (land and buildings such as a shop)
6. Does the assessed value of the underlying land change as a result of siting a renewable energy facility on the property, or does the primary tax impact occur through assessment of the facility itself? Depends on the project and use.
7. Are there any notable differences in assessment or taxation between utility-scale solar facilities and battery energy storage systems? I don't have enough exposure or knowledge of battery energy storage assessment to answer this.

Public comment was invited. A man from Colfax asked about decommissioning. Grace notes that the decommissioning language is very much like the wind facility ordinance. He then asked about any limits on solar that would address erosion. Grace states that the steepness of land can be addressed in the Conditional Use Permit process. Another member of the public asks a question about whether the BOCC is considering a data center moratorium. Alan notes that the Planning staff are preparing a White Paper on whether the current County regulations would allow data centers. Brian Davies notes that the Board of County Commissioners extended the solar/BESS moratorium for another six months.

Next meeting will be July 1 without a second meeting in the month. There will be no meeting in August.

**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?*

A BOCC hearing and public meeting for the Critical Areas Ordinance update is scheduled for June 29th.

**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 and the Consultant’s were posted at the Agenda Center.

**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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