

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 10/7/2026

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 1 hr 36 min

Members Present: Brian Davies (Chair), Bill Myers (Colfax), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Tammy Southern (Garfield), David McKeirnan (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse).

Members Absent: Chris Melhus (Malden).

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Staff: Grace DiBiasi (Whitman County Planner), Brandon Johnson (Public Works), David Werner, clerk, Mark Storey (Public Works Director). Rachel Granrath, consultant from Kimley Horn. Public audience on zoom and in the auditorium: Kent Keller, Ken Duft, Julie Clarkson Gullick, Carol Black, Tom Thompson, Kathy, Nora Harren, Julian Mathews, Bill Engles, Judy Meuth, Steve Flint.

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.*

The September 16 Whitman County Planning Commission meeting was cancelled because the Periodic Update Grant that funds the consulting firms assisting with the Critical Areas Ordinance and the Solar and BESS (Battery Energy Storage Siting) Ordinance did not start until October 5, 2026. The current drafts of these documents are posted on the County Website and were circulated to the Commissioners and interested parties by email.

First order of business was to open a Public Hearing to amend the Whitman County Code Chapter 9.05 Critical Areas to remove the frequently flooded areas section, retitle and amend Chapter 17.12 into a separate ordinance. The title of the new ordinance was changed from Construction in Flood Hazard Areas to Flood Damage Prevention, establishing standalone flood damage prevention regulations including adoption of the updated FEMA flood insurance study and flood insurance rate maps effective December 23, 2026. This has been submitted to the Dept of Commerce for review and comments. Carol Black comments that she is pleased to note that the Planning staff may incorporate appropriate revisions into the proposed amendments prior to their presentation to Board of County Commissioners assuming that the revisions do not substantially change the scope or purpose of the amendments. Comments must be submitted by November 3, 2026. The amendment of the Critical Areas ordinance and the newly created Flood Damage Prevention ordinance were approved for submission to the Board of County Commissioners.

The next item addressed was a workshop to continue the discussion of the Whitman County Solar and BESS ordinance. Rachel Granrath, consultant from Kimley Horn presented the draft schedule for moving the Ordinance forward and the To Do list for discussion/decisions. Deadline is June 11 for approval. The grant for consultant services ends at the end of May 2027.

The Commission will meet on the first Wednesday of the month to work on the Solar and BESS Facilities Ordinance for the remainder of the 2026 year and then twice a month from January 2027 to June 2027. The second meeting each month in 2026 the Commission will work on the new Natural Lands Ordinance.

The BESS/Solar Siting Feasibility Map for utility scale solar projects found 11,623 acres eligible under the current criteria: at least 130 feet from street centerlines, at least 7 miles away from key parks, within 2 miles of transmission lines. The Board has not fully settled on the 1500 ft setback from any non-participating property line (for BESS) or any non-participating occupied building (utility scale solar). The To Do list for completing the Solar/BESS Ordinance includes defining visual criteria for BESS Tiers, defining community scale vs utility scale, determining how solar height will be measured, describing the balance of agrivoltaic systems and agriculture, determining fencing and screening requirements and the setback for noise mitigation, describing the relationship of BESS to Solar facilities and the Solar relationship to hills of the Palouse. Bill Myers would like to discuss what farming can occur around solar panels, in case prime farmland is used for solar farms. Grace points out that the ordinance applies to land in the unincorporated County only. Rachel proposes looking at a particular site where a solar farm might be developed to see what a facility might actually look like.

Comments from the public: Carol Black asks what kind of crops might be growable around solar farms, is concerned about use of residual herbicides in solar farm areas, and sees the need for fire mitigation in solar and, in particular BESS facilities. Tom Thompson notes that recently the Hatch fire around Walla Walla that was started by a wind turbine and consumed around 9000 acres. He would like the solar/BESS ordinance to require robust fire mitigation for battery facilities. Kent Keller notes that the Whitman County Comprehensive Plan supports the development of renewable energy facilities and therefore Commissioners should consider reducing the 1500 ft setback as it will restrict eligible areas significantly. Bill Engles is concerned about the 1500 ft setback making the development of renewables more likely to be reviewed by the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC) rather than reviewed locally. Judy Meuth asks that the Commission develop an ordinance that allows the County and its residents to decide on projects, rather than be so prohibitive that it will drive applicants to the state EFSEC. Another community member encouraged Commissioners to develop an ordinance that will increase the amount of affordable electricity available through renewable methods that can be used for water purification. Steve Flint from Pullman would like to learn about the mapping criteria that were used to define what type of parcel is eligible for solar energy facility development.

Next meeting will be October 21, 2026. Dan Nickel and Douglas Yormick, consultants with Facet will present on the Natural Resource Lands Ordinance. There may be some additional improvements made to the Critical Areas Ordinance after input from state agencies.

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?*

Oct 7, 2026 Public meeting to approve the amendments to the Critical Area Ordinance and to create a Flood Damage Prevention Ordinance.

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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