

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission Date: Dec 6, 2023

Observer Reporting: Shelley Chambers Fox Length of Meeting: 66 minutes

Members Present: This was a hybrid meeting. Dave Gibney, Weston Kane (LaCrosse), Chad Whetzel, Brian Davies (on zoom).

Absent: Fred Wexler, David Tysz (Tekoa), Mark Tolman (Pullman), Russ Jamison (Garfield).

Others Present (i.e., media, public): Staff: Alan Thomson, Whitman County Planner, Grace Di Biase, WC Assistant Planner; Dave Werner, Clerk; Dean Cornelison, WC Engineer; Brandon Johnson, Public Works. (running Zoom).

Public: Cathy George; John Goyke; Ellis Devin, KG, Tom Thomson, Karen Hinnenkamp, Shannon Gfeller. Presenters: Alex Rohr and Clark Rein, Vesper Energy.

Notes taken from Minutes published online at

https://www.whitmancounty.org/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Minutes/_12062023-655

Content (What is being discussed):

Public Meetings (none)

Reports

1. Board of Adjustment forthcoming hearings - We have a conditional use permit application for Umont LLC, that is in the South-Pullman Corridor District to lease a parcel on the Palouse Producers' Subdivision to Disaster Response for the storage of emergency response materials and office space. The hearing is set for December 14, 2023.
2. Board of County Commissioner's action -The public hearing on Riddco Zone change was held on December 4th and the public hearing for the code amendments to Chapters 19.15 and 19.16 -North and South Pullman-Moscow Corridor District and the zone change was approved. However, one of the BOCC wanted some changes made to the corridor district code changes and so the BOCC will have to set their own public hearing tentatively set for December 20, 2023. That one has not been finalized yet for the code changes. But the zone change was approved.

Unfinished business

1. Alan Thomson continued on with the workshop to create a new ordinance for solar energy project. Vesper Energy is a company that is thinking about starting a solar energy plant here in WC. They are present tonight and they have a power point presentation for us to explain a little bit about who they are and what their objectives are. So, I'm just going to hand it over to Vesper and Brandon will put the power point up on the screen so everybody can see.
2. Clark Rein and Alex Rohr presented on a proposed project called Daystar Renewable Energy. It is a combined solar and battery storage project. As far as the company goes, they are based out of Irving, Texas. Clark is based out of Kansas, and Alex is based out of Minneapolis
3. They are proposing a 100 MW solar and 100 MW/400 MW battery storage system. It is located northwest of Thornton, along Thorn Creek Road, and will be looking to

interconnect to the Avista transmission system. What they are looking at currently is a battery system that could charge both from their development or from the grid and given what they are currently designing, will provide around one hundred megawatts right now, though this may change as they are early in the process. They are hoping to interconnect directly to the Thornton 230 KV substation that is located along Stoneham Road. They are presently conducting field studies to determine if there are any potential effects on wetlands, wildlife, or state historic sites. Their engineering studies indicate that they do not have enough land to generate 100 MW, more like 82-89 so they will need to lease more land. They currently have about 560 acres leased and are looking for up to 900 just to make it optimized and try to position it to where it is less visible. They are negotiating on right-of-way options to get electricity to the substation, and to use some hilltops of the neighboring landowner who says the hilltops are generally less productive than other land. One of the things that interests them about locating in the Palouse is that Avista is open to interconnections, this particular substation has some good interconnection points, and they have good grid resiliency.

4. Once they have identified a suitable substation, they contact the landowners in the area to see if they are interested. In some cases land owners want to keep the land in the family but do not have a family member who wants to farm so this is a way to keep the land in the family with the potential to go back and farm it when the solar lease is up. Some companies will put wildflowers to attract pollinators under the panels to create more diversity in the plant community in the area.
5. The project would create about 140 jobs during construction thus an opportunity for local contractors, laborers, and businesses. These are construction jobs but not permanent positions needed to maintain the facility. In terms of tax revenue for the County, they estimate over the life of the project for the County schools and roads, contributing about 14.9 million dollars, over forty years.
6. Safety issues: the county fire department would require special training relating to handling potential fires. This could be handled with a grant from the company to the Volunteer Fire Department. They are attentive to the new regulations on battery storage and determining glare as it relates to aviation safety. Water quality is a focus and they build sediment basins if need be.
7. Solar farms are fenced like substations, uncertain how high the proposed fence would be. Dave Gibney notes that a solar farm is larger than a substation. Shannon Gfeller, a local farmer notes that the Thornton area only has 175 days a year of sun whereas Boise, Idaho has 320 days. Why are you picking Thornton versus south central Washington? Clark Rein replies that would really go back to the market demands of Avista and the area. Chad Whetzel asks what kind of batteries. The batteries are lithium ion technology. For 100 MW farm, the batteries would take up 5 to 10 acres. John Goyke from Rosalia asks if any of the tax revenue will come back to the area or will the company be given tax breaks to incentivize renewable energy. He also asks about weed management under the solar project. Will the company manage the weeds that come up under their panels? Clark Rein notes that there are tax breaks for renewable projects but he doesn't know what percent tax revenue will be collected or what would come back to local entities. He states that vegetation such as native grasses and wildflowers could be planted under the panels to prevent establishment of weeds or that spraying could occur. He doesn't know the specific weed issues in this area. Mark Storey notes that the company will be held to pay

for wear and tear on the roads that are used in bring in equipment and supplies. He also notes that in the case of the wind farm project even though it was a 200-million-dollar project at the time, the assessed value was maybe a quarter of that, so we only realized a quarter of the increase in property taxes because of the way it is assessed. Alan Thomson notes that the planning commission should think about decommissioning of projects as they craft the solar regulation so that equipment is not abandoned on farmland. There needs to be language that you have to return it to a farmable state, including road removal.

Public Meetings of interest to League

1. None this month.

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?* es.

Was access to materials for certain agenda items available to you? Yes, the agenda and mting link were sent via email. I did not receive the materials that Alan had shared with the commissioner about utility scale solar farms. Next meeting is January 3, 2024.