

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 3/6/2024

Observer Reporting: Crawford Roger

Length of Meeting: 90 minutes

Members Present: 9 in person: Alan Thomson, County Planner; Grace Di Biase, Assistant County

Planner; Russell (Rusty) Jamison; Dave Gibney; Weston Kane; Chad Whetzel

Members Absent:

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Ken Duft; Jeff; Brandon Johnson; Carter

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 Commission is considering enacting legislation to prevent solar energy development. The Planner presented maps showing USDA soil capabilities. USDA classifies soils as class 1, 2, etc. with 1 being prime farmland. The County could restrict energy development on capability class 1 and 2 soils. This proposal aligns with the State's goal to protect farmland, usually codified in local comprehensive plans. Washington's goal of protecting farmland from development is in the Growth Management Act of 1990.

Dave Gibney stated the question as "do we want to take part of Whitman County off the table for solar energy and what is a scientific statement to define those areas?"

Dave Gibney stated that class 3 and above is productive arable land so maybe that class should be protected. Class 1 and 2 is actually a small number of acres.

If Commissioners want to enact legislation, they need a scientific basis for designation. The USDA also defines "agricultural land of statewide significance" and that classification could be a scientific basis for protection. However most of Whitman County is "agricultural land of statewide significance" whereas class 1 and 2 is small acreage. Some areas are class 3 and above because of slope, not soil.

County Commissioners' probable goal is to put solar on scrub land, not on good farmland. Avista wants to find land for renewable energy. Dave Gibney floated that a designation could be "no panels on land being cultivated or under CRP Jan 1 2025." Alan adds that panel farms need to be visually screened, fenced, and he wants to ensure that landowners do not clear forest areas to build panels.

No decision made. Alan will take this conversation to the County Commissioners and ask if the Commission wants an ordinance and what is their direction, based on the Planning Commission's conversation.

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?*

Alan corrected a member of the Commission who believed the goal of protecting farmland was recently sent down from Federal jurisdiction to the States by the Trump administration. Alan rebutted that the Commission was following Washington's Growth Management Act of 1990.

Alan clearly stated that the Planning Commission should talk openly so County Commissioners get feedback. As facilitator, the County Planner does not offer any opinions. He kept the Commissioners focused on answering "does Whitman County want to enforce the location of solar energy panels?"