

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission **Date:** Apr 3, 2024

Observer Reporting: Shelley Chambers Fox **Length of Meeting:** 2 hours, 4 minutes

Members Present: This was a hybrid meeting with most participants in the Colfax meeting room: Dave Gibney, Mark Tolman (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse), Chad Whetzel, Russ Jamison (Garfield), Brian Davies (on zoom).

Absent: Matt Webb, David Tysz (Tekoa).

Others Present (i.e., media, public): Staff: Alan Thomson, Whitman County Planner, Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner), Brandon Johnson, Public Works (running Zoom), Mark Storey (County Engineer), David Werner (Clerk).

Public: on Zoom: Ken Duft, Jana Lien, Shane Riebold, Greg Harazin, Nick Lafrazia. At the auditorium: Rick McNannay

Content (What is being discussed):

Public Meetings

1. None.

Reports

1. Update on previous administrative use permits – 150-foot cell tower by Harmoni Towers and Verizon approximately 4 miles west of Ewan on SR 23 was approved on February 27, 2024. 160-foot cell tower by Weis Tower on the SE end of the County Fairgrounds was approved on March 21, 2024.

Unfinished business

1. Rick McNaney represents a group of people who are wanting to update the ordinance regulating wind energy. They are here tonight to learn about the process and to find out how they might get a moratorium on new permits for wind projects. Chad Whetzel notes that a moratorium would come from the Board of County Commissioners not the WCPC.
2. Jana Lien is also in the audience to learn about the process to revise the wind ordinance and to speak in favor of a moratorium on new permits. Alan notes that the ordinance is unlikely to be revised before there is a new permit request because the Commission is in the process of working on crafting a solar ordinance. Chad Whetzel invited both Rick McNannay and Jana Lien to stay for the discussions tonight as they will illustrate how an ordinance is developed. Jana points out that the solar ordinance draft has been based on the wind ordinance which people seem to agree needs to be revised specifically in the area of notices to neighboring properties of the plan.
3. Continue conversation about creating a solar energy ordinance for utility scale solar projects, Chapter 19.65. Tonight they are going to review the rough draft of the

ordinance. The County Commissioners would like to set a limit on the number of acres that could be devoted to utility scale solar projects, specifically 5000 acres. These projects would need to be placed around the substations. Chad remarks that if these limits are used, the earliest projects would get the permits. BOC did not like the idea of limiting projects to Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land since this land is not necessarily less productive than currently farmed land. In addition, the trend around the country is to increase the amount of land in CRP. Dave Gibney notes that Avista will likely have to add substations because natural gas is being phased out and will be replaced by electric energy projects. Brian Davies states that the only solar projects that will come to this county are those projects that can be sited within 5 to 10 miles from the existing substations. Alan notes that there is federal money coming to the states to expand the grid and that may alleviate the limitations created by substation placement.

4. Chad Whetzel read the intent of the proposed draft of the Utility Scale Solar Energy Facilities ordinance, Chapter 19.65. By definition, large scale (commercial) solar energy facilities will have a project size greater than 20 acres. There was some discussion about whether 20 acres represented a commercial scale project. Alan will check this out.
5. The ordinance specifies the process of applying for a conditional use permit to build a commercial scale solar facility. The application process must include a decommissioning plan and bond which is reviewed every 5 years to adjust for inflation. The review process by the County is also described. The ordinance will need to specify what kinds of land will be excluded from projects either due to value as farmland or public interest (parks). Neighbors will be notified of plans. Avista is able to put transmission lines on land if it is in the public interest but if the lines are for a private company they cannot force a right of way. There are some provisions that specify screening from view and glare limitations.
6. State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) requirements are specified that will evaluate effects on wildlife, cultural impacts and effects on stormwater management and water quality, and transportation effects.
7. Alan notes that the regulations for battery storage associated with solar facilities is included in this proposed ordinance. Chad Whetzel remarked that he would prefer that storage be addressed separately so that it could be applied to wind or other energy sources. He notes that the fire department has been told that battery fires tend to be small and the recommendation is to let them burn. Do not use water. The newer batteries are lithium iron batteries. The draft ordinance asks that the storage area be graveled and isolated from flammable elements.
8. Zoning locations permitted for these facilities are fluid but likely to exclude North and South Pullman-Moscow Corridor District. They will likely be permitted in agricultural zones but not allowed in higher quality soil areas (Capability class 1 and 2 in Taxsifter soils map). Industrial zones are too small to accommodate large scale projects.
9. Micrositing: within the area that is allowed for siting these facilities, there will be a specific corridor where the panels and storage facilities will be located.

10. The maximum number of acres available for large scale solar energy projects shall be 5000 acres in the eligible zoning districts as described in zoning districts. Setbacks a minimum of 100 feet from property lines. Maximum height will be 20 ft from the highest existing grade.
11. A member of the public asks what the plan is for protecting ground water from chemicals released by hail, lightning or other weather damage caused to the panels. There was general discussion about the importance of public input in the crafting of rules rather than complaints that occur after the rules are established.

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?* **Yes.** *Was access to materials for certain agenda items available to you?* **Yes, the agenda and meeting link were sent via email.**

Next meeting is May 1, 2024.