

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 4/2/2025

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 2 hours 50 minutes

Members Present: Brian Davies (vice chair), Dave Gibney (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse), Tammy Southern (Garfield), Bill Myers (Colfax), Chris Melhus (Malden), David McKeirnan (Pullman)

Members Absent: there are 2 openings on the commission

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Alan Thomson, Whitman County Planner, Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner), Brandon Johnson, Public Works, Elinor Huber (Clerk), Tom Handy, BOCC, Denis Tracy (Prosecuting Attorney). Public: Ken Duft, Carol Black, Denise McCardle, Dennis Raugust, Tom Thompson, Kevin Akesson, Tresa Bannister, Tom Lamar (PCEI), Mary Jean Inman, Travis Frei, Vanessa McCarron, Kaitlynn Ward, Nicole Frazier, Sherry Johnson, Ryan Barber, Ashley Barber, Roy Senter, Amy Soncarty, Rick McNanny, Mike Dymkoski.

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.*

Chad Whetzel was appointed to the open County Commissioner position. Because he is no longer on the WCPC, Dave Gibney was appointed chair and Brian Davies will continue as vice-chair. They have the most planning experience of the current board members. Tammy Southern was appointed 2 months ago, and Bill Myers, Chris Melhus and David McKeirnan are attending their first meeting tonight. Alan notes that the WCPC is a 9 member board and presently has 7 members and has had trouble getting a quorum. Denis Tracy and BOCC Tom Handy suggested that they change the Bylaws on the issue of quorum such that if there are 5 commissioners appointed, 3 would be considered a quorum, if there are 6 commissioners appointed, 4 would be considered a quorum. The board discussed whether this could be an issue if the public was unhappy with one of their decisions. Tom Handy stated that the advice given by the State Attorney General's office when similar problems were encountered was that vacancies do not count toward the number needed for a quorum. The amendment was passed to allow a quorum to be a simple majority of the current members of the Commission.

The board then moved on to discussions of the decommissioning requirements for solar and wind projects. Tom Handy is concerned about whether a project involves a foreign company would require extra language to make decommissioning enforceable. Section 9 of the draft regulations requires that decommissioning shall be completed at the expense of the facility owner within 12 months after the end of the useful life of the facility. In rules written to address investor-owned facilities financial assurance requirements may be waived and the restoration obligations are considered a general obligation of the investor-owned utility. The regulation specifies that the company operating the project (or the parent company) provides a guaranty either with a surety bond or an irrevocable line of credit to handle the decommissioning of the

project. The viability of these two financial assurances is monitored by the planning department. Bill Myers, new commissioner from Colfax, would like to add a lien on the land as a third method of funding the decommissioning. Denis Tracy stated that he will be at the Planning Commission meetings until they complete the development of the solar, wind and battery storage ordinances so that legal questions can be addressed quickly. If he needs to research an issue, he will bring the answer to the next meeting. He also recommends that all Commissioners review the primer for local government and how to create regulations that do not violate the constitution and do not cause taking of private property without just compensation. The County can only make regulations restricting people's ability to do what they want with their land if it is acting to protect the public's health, safety and welfare.

David Gibney invited public comment not to exceed 3 to 5 minutes each. Carol Black would like wind energy projects only in heavy industrial zones and not in agricultural zones. Alan Thomson responded that 95-96% of the County is agricultural which can coexist with wind farms which need wide open spaces. Electrical substations and transmission lines are allowed throughout the agricultural district. If agricultural land used for wind farms were rezoned heavy industrial then the farmer would have to get a condition use permit to farm. Denise McCardle notes that wind farms on agricultural land change the real estate value of it and can come as a surprise to buyers if they don't know in advance that the neighbors plan a wind farm. She advocates that people considering rural property be advised in advance of plans to place wind projects on adjacent property. Dennis Raugust, a farmer has 3 wind turbines on his property near the Rosalia rest stop, and he has made more money on those 3 wind turbines than the whole two hundred acres before building the turbines, about \$50,000 per year. The income is better than his social security now that he has retired. He gets better yields (5-10 bushels more) per acre because the movement of the turbine reduces the impact of frost. He has yet to find a dead bird in the 10 years the turbines have been in place, and the deer and geese like to lay under the turbines, perhaps because it is warmer there. The road that they built to install the wind turbines makes it much easier to get his combines and grain trucks onto the land during harvest. Tom Thompson states that decision making will take time and notes that Harvest Hills wanted to build near Kamiak Butte because it is close to the grid. People have benefited in the County from wind farms but others are concerned about the viewshed because the turbines change the topography forever. He advocates putting the turbines on flat land that people don't want to photograph, like Ritzville. He is concerned about the health and fire concerns of turbines. Kevin Akesson states that while substations and transmission lines are not zoned industrial, energy generating facilities such as gas, wood fiber or coal with smaller footprints than wind are zoned heavy industrial. Tresa Bannister states that there are people from all over the world who stop at her property to take pictures. She has a view of Steptoe and Kamiak Buttes. She wants these areas to be protected from this kind of development because it will affect the economical value of coming to the Palouse to take pictures of its unique landscape. Mary Jean Inman lives on route 272 and found out that her neighbors have leased their land for wind farms. She is very concerned about the health concerns associated with wind farms and has not heard anyone discuss this issue as part of the deliberations about wind farms. Travis Frei lives near Tresa Bannister and his family wants to move away from the proposed wind farm. Carol Black states that she has 4 more points: she wants the ordinance to state that it will protect the aesthetic value of the land, the real estate values, and to make sure that the roads are adequately addressed so that they remain usable at all times. Vanessa McCarron is a practicing archeologist who is concerned that the community remember the importance of balancing climate mitigation with aesthetic concerns, relying on one source of energy runs the risk of fires such as occur in California where they rely on electricity and gas. Kaitlynn Ward, 14 from Colfax, does not want to see wind turbines take over the beautiful landscape of Whitman County. Tom Lamar, director of the Palouse Clearwater Environmental Institute states that PCEI is very supportive of the development of wind power for increasing the sources of renewable energy sources. PCEI staff and board members have attended

multiple public informational meetings about the proposed wind farm and feel confident that the environmental review process outlined will be suitable for identifying and mitigating local environmental wind impacts that might affect the PCEI's land at Rose Creek Preserve. Nicole Frazier works in crop risk management and is concerned about the potential for wind turbine fires in fields of standing grain. She states that the 3 top insurance carriers that insure farms in Whitman County will not insure farms that choose to put wind turbines on them. It matters to insurers whether there is a non-rural fire department available. Currently a fire is 100% the farmers' responsibility. Tom Thompson notes that PCEI received a donation from Harvest Hills. Sherry Johnson is concerned about the windmills becoming covered with black oil as they are in the Columbia River Gorge. Ken Duft advises that the Planning Commission use restrictions to wind project development that can be measured to ensure that they are enforceable. He also urges Commissioners to reconsider allowing placement in the viewshed of landscape treasures. Roy Senter notes that people are concerned about being hurt financially, with health issues and there may be better technologies with a smaller footprint that will overtake wind which currently has a poor rate of return. Ryan Barber is a commercial industrial electrician who states that we currently produce more electricity than we use in Washington. Wind turbines create more pollution during their manufacture than they reduce in producing power. Ashley Barber does not want to see wind turbines built within the viewshed of Kamiak Butte. Amy Soncarty does not want wind turbines in any of the Palouse County where it would affect the beauty and health of the land we inherit. Rick McNanny urges Commissioners to look at whether new laws or rulings might override the ordinance that Whitman County wants to establish. Mike Dymkoski farms the Marler property near Smoot Hill, and is concerned that the proposed wind farm on that property will ruin the beauty of that area of Whitman County.

The Commissioners discussed the need to make progress and agreed to meet again on April 16 to consider increased setbacks but they thought it unlikely that they could forbid wind turbines visible from the tops of any of the County peaks. Alan is concerned that if any of their codes are too restrictive they will be overturned by the State of Washington.

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?*

Of the seven commissioners attending, one had been appointed two months ago and three were attending their first meeting. One of the new commissioners is Bill Myers who is with Save the Palouse, a group opposing wind farms. This should be helpful to both the Commission and Save the Palouse to understand the complexity of the issues involved. There was some incivility arising from the public audience but the commissioners were reasonably restrained. Chair Dave Gibney was irritated by the audience incivility and the tendency of commenters to ignore the 5 minute allotment for each speaker. There were some references to documents that were not available to the audience.