

League of Women Voters of Pullman Observer Report

Name of Agency: Whitman County Planning Commission

Date: 6/4/2025

Observer Reporting: Chambers-Fox Shelley

Length of Meeting: 2 hours 30 minutes

Members Present: Dave Gibney (Chair Pullman), Tammy Southern (Garfield), Bill Myers (Colfax), David McKeirnan (Pullman), Dean Kinzer (Pullman), Weston Kane (LaCrosse). Julian Mathews (Pullman), Chris Melhus (Rosalia). On Zoom: Brian Davies (vice chair).

Members Absent: none

Others Present (e.g., media, public): Others Present (i.e., media, public): Staff: Alan Thomson, Whitman County Planner, Grace DiBiasi (Assistant Planner), Brandon Johnson, Public Works, Denis Tracy (District Attorney) on Zoom, David Werner (Clerk)

Public: Ken Duft, Eric Slusher, Nicole Frazier, Shane Roche, Steelhead America, Ashley Hartman, Luke Sorenson, Michael Echanove, Jack Lein, Emily Pearce, Alan Black, Carol Black, Mike Dymkoski, Tom Thompson, Rick McNanny, others

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 first hour and 15 minutes of the meeting was used for presentations by Bob Morris, Lance Energy Chair for Montana Technical University and retired SEL employee, and Wraylee Flodin, County Assessor. Mr. Morris stated that he doesn't have a position on ordinances, on wind or solar but intended to provide a background on electric power. He notes that electric power consumption in the US has been flat for the last 20 years. We have transitioned from coal generation to mostly natural gas general, which has reduced our carbon emissions from electric power by 40%. Renewables are a growing but small part of electric power production. Projections indicate that electric power consumption will increase significantly by as much as 15% in the next 10 years. This is mostly driven by data centers and manufacturing, but in the PNW it is electric vehicle charging and space heating. The increase in generation is projected to be from wind and solar with batteries providing storage but so far have only built about 7% of the projected need. An important distinction to note is that these renewable sources are intermittent. They will also occupy large amounts of land unlike nuclear, natural gas and coal plants. If we were to build the wind and solar in eastern WA and Oregon to meet their estimate, it would take up 30% of the land east of the Cascades. If we consider solar energy, the desert southwest is a better place to build utility scale solar than the Pacific Northwest. Wind energy may be better placed in the central part of the country, Hurricane alley. We will need additional transmission lines to move the energy from the source to the need. The US has 3 power grids, the West, the East and Texas. Electrical energy can be moved easily within the grids but you can't move solar from the desert southwest to the northeast for example.

If intermittent sources of electricity represent a low percentage of electricity production, the system will be

stable when demand gets high. But if the intermittent sources represent 5+% of the production, the effective load carrying capability drops significantly. You have to overbuild to compensate. We cannot rely on wind and solar alone without being at risk of power outages.

Presently in Oregon and Washington electricity is 11 cents a kilowatt hour for residential customers. If we use wind and solar with battery storage to comply with the Washington and Oregon Clean Energy Acts, electricity will cost 28 cents a kilowatt hour. If we continue to use nuclear and natural gas, the price of electricity would be about 13 cents a kilowatt hour.

Bill Myers asks where the best places in the PNW for wind are. Mr. Morris responds that eastern and central Montana are the best sites. In Washington state, the Columbia Gorge has the most constant wind. Next Wraylee Flodin talked about tax revenues from renewable energy projects. The assessment of projects is laid out by Bill 5910 passed in 2022. Because the depreciation schedule is steep, the taxes paid by an energy project decline steeply over the first 15 years, such that when the project is 25 years old, which is its life span, it is not generating much tax income for the County. For example in 2014 the Palouse Wind project was assessed at \$74,928,00 and in 2024, it was assessed at \$55,163,192. Senate House Bill 1756 provides a large tax reduction to wind farms constructed after 2023. In addition wind farms are built on land that is categorized as 'open space' taxation areas, which means that we don't remove the acreage that the windmill is sitting on and it is taxed at a lower rate. Open space taxation applies to what the predominant use of the land is so if it is mostly farmed, the landowner will choose to leave it in the 'open space' taxation program.

Ms. Flodin looked at house values in the area of the current wind project. She was able to find homes in that district that have sold more than once over the course of the life span of the wind farm. House prices in the districts of the wind farms have increased since the project was built including 2 houses that were in the viewshed of the wind turbines. Case A sold in 2013 for \$220,000 and in 2023 for \$585,000. Case B, sold for \$190,000 in 2007, in 2018 for \$314,000 and in 2021 for \$365,000.

The Commissioners continued their review of the County wind ordinance starting tonight with section 19.61.060 Development Standards and Criteria including setback distances. Occupied buildings of the participating landowner will be a minimum of 1 times the height of the wind turbine generator. Occupied buildings for non-consenting addresses will be setback 4 x the height of the wind turbine. Visual, shadow flicker and aesthetic setbacks for non-participating adjacent landowners 4 x the height of the wind turbine. For nonparticipating property lines (empty fields) 1 x turbine height plus 100 feet. Alan points out that these setbacks were established by the court case that allowed the wind farm in Kittitas County. A member of the audience would like the setback to be 8x the height of the wind turbine. Commissioner Kinzer agrees. Carol Black suggests that all the setbacks for buildings or communities or property lines be the same: 1.25 miles. She would like a physical visualization of turbines from each residence around the proposed farm. Ken Duft would like a specific setback in the ordinance for Steptoe, Kamiak Buttes and Palouse Falls. Tom Thompson would like Commissioners to look at the health effects of wind farms that have been documented by other sources than those posted on the County website. Setbacks should be chosen to protect the health of the community; he recommends a mile or more. Carl points out that the court case mentioned earlier found that the setback should be at least 4 x the height of the turbine but this means it could be 8x if Commissioners choose. Mike Dymkoski believes that specifying the setback at 4 x ruins the

property owners' chance of developing their own property. Crop duster pilot: Crop dusters have to charge more for spraying fields that contain wind turbines. Mark Weber would like the measurement of setback to use line of sight rather than linear feet running along the contour of the land. Resident of Oakesdale reports that she sees 32 windmills, and it is inconvenient to farm around them. The wind turbines are their landlord's retirement. The company that built them has gone bankrupt and the money made from them has gone down because the contract has been renegotiated. Theresa Bannister suggests that the Whitman County Planning Commission represents the developers. She suggests that the Tribes be consulted since they have the cultural viewshed of the reservation cannot be disturbed. Julian Matthews points out that he is a Commissioner and will ensure that the Nez Perce are notified because they have been left out of the conversation in the past. Shane Roche points out that we need more energy.

Dave Gibney asks Denis Tracy if the regulations change the setback to the extent that a particular landowner's property cannot be used for wind turbines, what would be the remedy and increase cost to develop and require more land. Mr. Tracy says that building a windfarm on adjacent property does not constitute taking someone's property simply because the property value goes down. The Kittitas County case found that a 4 x height setback is well chosen to allow the landowner to do what he/she wants with the land and still protects the health, safety and welfare of the community. If the Commission increases the setback standard, the increase should be based on some new objective information about why it should be increased. The comments from the Commission indicate that they favor increasing the setbacks but they acknowledge that they need a justification for doing so. Dave Gibney suggests that the Commissioners do some homework to see if they can find an objective standard for increasing the setback if that is what they want to do.

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. Presentations were posted on the Planning website after the meeting. The ordinance is displayed on Zoom while it is being discussed.