

**PORT OF BENTON  
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES  
October 16, 2024**

**A. CALL TO ORDER:** The regular monthly meeting was called to order at 8:30 a.m. at the Port of Benton Commission room, 3250 Port of Benton Blvd., Richland, Washington.

**PRESENT:** Commissioner Scott D. Keller, Commissioner Lori Stevens, Commissioner Roy D. Keck  
**PORT STAFF PRESENT:** Diahann Howard, Jeff Lubeck, Quentin Wright, Summers Miya, Ron Branine, Cassie Hammond, Brandin Lopez, Wally Williams, Julia Mora  
**ALSO PRESENT:** John O’Leary, Gravis Law; Karl Dye, TRIDEC

**The following attendees attended via remote communications:** Jorge Celestino, Sheri Collins; Bryan Bell; Bryan Condon, Century West Engineering; Rachel Visick, Tri-Cities Area Journal of Business; Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Jeff (No Last Name Given)

The Commission meeting was noticed as required by RCW 42.30.070.

**B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Brandin Lopez led those present in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

**C. CONSENT AGENDA:**

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Roy Keck, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving the agenda for the October 16, 2024 Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the September 11, 2024 Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the October 7, 2024 budget workshop, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll, for the month of September totaling \$744,954.22.**

**D. PUBLIC COMMENT:**

There were no comments.

**F. ITEMS OF BUSINESS**

**1. Welcome and Update from Kevin Sliger, Ben Franklin Transit**

Executive director Diahann Howard introduced Kevin Sliger, transit planner at Ben Franklin Transit.

Kevin Sliger provided a state of the transit update, including current services provided, public transportation benefit area, taxing district service charge, and data metric impacts of initiative 2117 and an overview of the annual service plan process and long-range transit plan process.

## 2. Overview of 2025 Port of Benton Proposed Budget Before Being Placed on File for Public Review

Director of Finance Jeff Lubeck provided a high-level overview of the 2025 proposed budget that, if approved, will be placed on file for public review.

Lubeck explained that if approved, the proposed budget will be available for 28 days for public review and then will be brought back for final approval at the regular November meeting.

Lubeck stated that there were slight changes made since the proposed budget was presented at the budget workshop, including the second preliminary property valuation from the Benton County Treasurer. Lubeck stated that after review, there was no change to property tax numbers in the budget that's going out.

Lubeck added that a third valuation will be received around the end of October or early November, which may require final tweaks to the budget that is brought forward.

Lubeck reviewed the two slight changes in the proposed budget that was presented at last week's workshop.

Lubeck noted that property tax levy is decreasing for the sixth year.

Lubeck reviewed the major pending items and operating and non-operating revenues, as well as lease revenues.

Lubeck highlighted the port's 173 leases, noting that 55% of port leases are small businesses, which brings in 35% of the revenues. 10% of port leases are with large businesses, which bring in 58% of the revenue.

Lubeck overviewed the Benton County tax distribution, noting that the Port of Benton is receiving 1% of the total taxes a taxpayer pays.

Lubeck reviewed loan and bond payments, pointing out that operating revenues are able to cover the loans.

Lubeck highlighted the major operating expenses expected from the 2024 to the 2025 budget, which are rail and overall maintenance.

Lubeck reviewed several planned projects and planning for future projects that will incur costs in 2025.

Lubeck overviewed capital project plans, including multi-year projects.

## 3. Overview of 2025 Comprehensive Plan of Harbor Improvements Before Being Placed on File for Public Review

Executive Director Diahann Howard presented the proposed 2025 comprehensive plan of harbor improvements, stating that all port districts are required to adopt a comprehensive plan that aligns with the capital budget.

Howard noted that the proposed plan is consistent with other planning pieces of work, such as the Prosser and Richland Airports, North Horn Rapids, rail masterplans, Research District and the north Richland Communications and Marketing plan, as well as the 2020-2030 strategic plan.

Howard noted that the comprehensive plan highlights the Port of Benton's 11 sites across two-

thirds of Benton County.

Howard went through the plan, highlighting certain items she wanted to call to attention, including: Northwest Intermodal Facility, sale to Atlas Agro of 150 acres, barge facility improvements, projects at both airports, continued investment in 3110 Port of Benton Blvd., continued waterfront planning, Benton City building consideration of sale, RIC majority as part of the industrial land transfer with the city of Richland, Vintners Village, including the Wamba property.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Roy Keck, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the release of the proposed 2025 budget and proposed 2025 comprehensive plan of harbor improvements for public review.**

4. Resolution 24-35, Authorizing an Application to the Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) for \$2.4 Million Loan for 2579 Stevens Drive (RBP)

Executive Director Diahann Howard explained that Resolution 24-35 authorizes an application to the Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) for a \$2.4 million dollar loan, the application is due on November 17. Howard explained that the port would not go before the CERB board until application is selected the soonest being its January board meeting.

Howard explained that the funds would be directed at the 2579 Stevens Drive building, which is located in the Richland Business Park. Howard added that the 90,000-square-foot facility was built in the 1950s and needs significant upgrades. Howard added that if the building were gutted, it would easily be over a \$25 million project.

Howard explained that the port is taking an alternative approach to upgrading the building.

Howard reviewed the building specs and highlighted upgrades that have already been made by the port team and pointed out the focus area for the first phase of improvement. These dollars would be partnered with a federal US EDA grant request of \$3-5M with a total project that requires a port match estimated at \$1.5m.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Roy Keck, and unanimously passed by the Commission authorizing an application to the Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) for a \$2.4 Million Loan for 2579 Stevens Drive (RBP).**

5. 2345 Stevens Drive Proposed Lease with Avalanche (RBP)

Executive Director Diahann Howard explained that port tenant Veolia is moving out of 2345 Stevens Drive in the Richland Business Park. Howard said that Veolia built a room in the facility to aid in their business. Howard stated that a company is now interested in the space, including the area of Veolia's improvements.

Howard noted that the interested business is Avalanche, which has agreed to assume the responsibility of removing Veolia's clean room, which is estimated to cost \$320,000. Howard noted that TRIDEC has agreed to help offset the cost of removing the clean room, as TRIDEC fully supports the project.

Howard explained that Avalanche is a start-up company founded in 2018. Howard noted that Avalanche is capital-backed, with 50 employees, and is currently located near the Museum of Flight.

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Howard added that Avalanche is a fusion company focusing on a microreactor called an Orbitron.

Howard reviewed the plans for a lease with Avalanche in detail, and a conversation ensued related to the potential lease agreement.

Commission president Scott Keller invited Karl Dye of TRIDEC to say a few words. Dye expressed his support for the Avalanche project expanding to north Richland, highlighting that TRIDEC supports and stands behind the project and thanking the port for the opportunity.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Roy Keck, and unanimously passed by the Commission authorizing a proposed lease with Avalanche at 2345 Stevens Drive (RBP).**

#### **F. INFORMATION REPORTS:**

##### 1. Grants Update

Executive Director Diahann Howard pointed out that the grants report was included in the meeting packet and highlighted the following:

Item 2, National Highway Freight Program (WSDOT portion), SR 240 Rail Signal and Crossing – Only one bid was received, which was 60% over budget. The project will go out for a rebid with modifications.

Item 3, Railroad Improvements, Freight Rail Assistance Program Grant – Airport Way is completed. The Saint Street crossing will be completed from October 18-21. The Kingsgate signal will be completed when the materials arrive.

Item 4 – 2023-2025 State Capital Appropriation, White Bluffs Rail – Ties are ordered and the installation bid is due in early November.

Airport Manager Quentin Wright stated that both pavement maintenance projects at both airports are nearly complete. Contractors will return to add a second paint coating in a few weeks.

Wright added that WSDOT awarded the port a 5% matching grant, which is \$77,000.

##### 2. Legislative Report

Director of Governmental Affairs Cassie Hammond reviewed the 2025 legislative priorities that have been published.

Priorities include:

- Advocate for shortline rail modernization tax credit
- Support funding for MATCH Act 2.0
- Targeted Urban Area Tax Exemption
- Community Aviation Revitalization Board (CARB) Funding
- Site Certification/Readiness
- Port Electrification Grant Program

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- Supply Chain Competitiveness Funding

## **G. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS**

Commissioner Roy Keck noted that he has been out of town for the past month but highlighted the news release issued earlier that morning regarding Amazon's big plans with Energy Northwest on bringing small modular nuclear reactors to eastern Washington and beyond.

Executive Director Diahann Howard and TRIDEC's Karl Dye added their own comments on the Amazon and Energy Northwest announcement.

Commissioner Lori Stevens stated that Prosser just held their annual hot air balloon rally, which was a successful event that brought many tourists to the community.

Commissioner Stevens added that she attended the Port of Sunnyside's 60th-anniversary celebration in addition to her regular meetings with the Prosser Chamber and Prosser EDA. Stevens provided an overview of the Chamber's plans until a new director is hired.

Commissioner Scott Keller noted that he was sorry to miss the Balloon Rally for the first time since its inception but was on travel.

Commissioner Keller noted that he did attend the RiverFest event, which was a great educational experience and included a glimpse of the reactor core headed to the port's barge facility.

Commissioner Keller reviewed recent meetings he had attended, including the Department of Transportation and their new Aeronautics Director.

Commissioner Keller congratulated airport manager, Quentin Wright on securing the 5% match.

## **H. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS:**

### **1. FINANCE DIRECTOR:**

Director of Finance Jeff Lubeck reviewed current cash standings, noting that semiannual property tax payments will be arriving from the county in the coming weeks.

Lubeck noted that he is working on the reimbursement request for Benton .09 funds on the Richland Industrial Center (RIC) project.

Lubeck reviewed cash receipts from September, as well as accounts payable and receivable.

Lubeck updated that airport tenant, Chemchek's outstanding balance will be written out, as the eviction process is coming to a close and Quentin Wright is clearing out the property.

### **2. PORT ATTORNEY:**

Contract Port attorney John O'Leary provided an update on the recently evicted tenant, Chemchek, including the coordination effort with the sheriff's office.

O'Leary added that he has also been assisting staff with various contracts and lease reviews.

### 3. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Executive Director Diahann Howard announced that she has had further discussion with the Washington State Wine Commission and has been invited to present at their November board meeting. Howard noted that she will be presenting about coming together with other commodity groups and forming a collaborative plan that works for all at the Clore Center.

Howard provided an update on the discussions with the Class 1's regarding a rail car charge, the RFP/RFQ that went out for an intermodal operator, which will be brought back to the Commission.

Howard reviewed recent meetings she has attended, including speaking at the National Cleanup Workshop in DC, an Elevated networking group and speaking to the Association of Realtors next week.

Howard also noted that she attended the PNWA annual meeting, WSU INEF ribbon cutting event, hosted another VIP tour of port rail on the Abraham Lincoln, Port of Sunnyside event, Pasco Airport BBQ, VERTical convening with nearly 100 attendees. Howard added that she attended a meet and greet with Atlas Agro.

Howard added that the port participated in state marine cargo forecast and work continues on the intermodal facility.

Howard highlighted the recent Journal of Business story that captured rail and airport projects, waterfront planning and renovation projects.

Howard stated that the team will be bringing contract adjustments to the November meeting and overviewed recent lease changes. Howard stated that there has been interest in vacant building space.

Howard noted that she will be attending the AAPA annual meeting and noted that the team is working on the upcoming Entrepreneurial Awards event.

Howard added that the team hosted a great public tour, which was positively received by the attendees.

Howard added that the City of Richland has invited the Port to participate in their upcoming Winter Wonderland parade on December 6, which Ron Branine is taking the lead on. Howard alerted the Commission to stay tuned should they choose to participate in the parade as well.

#### I. FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER

Executive Director Diahann Howard reviewed a list of upcoming meetings and events.

**J. EXECUTIVE SESSION:** The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 10:52 a.m. and it was announced that an Executive Session would commence at 10:15 a.m. for 10 minutes to discuss real estate. It was noted that the regular meeting would be reconvened at 10:04 a.m.

At 10:25 a.m., it was announced that an additional 5 minutes was needed.

At 10:30 a.m., it was announced that an additional 5 minutes was needed.

At 10:35 a.m., it was announced that an additional 5 minutes was needed.

The regular Commission meeting was reconvened at 10:40 a.m.

No action was required after the Executive Session.

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**K. ADJOURNMENT:** The meeting was adjourned at 10:40 a.m. with an announcement that the next regular Port of Benton Commission meeting would be held at 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday, November 13, 2024 at the Port of Benton Commission meeting room located at 3250 Port of Benton Blvd., Richland, Washington.



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Roy Keck  
Commission Secretary