

**PORT OF BENTON  
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES  
January 14, 2026**

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

**PRESENT:** Commissioner Scott D. Keller, Commissioner Bill O'Neil, Commissioner Lori Stevens

**PORT STAFF PRESENT:** Ron Branine, Alicia Myers, Quentin Wright, Summers Miya, Bryan Bell, Audrey Burney, Cassie Losey

**ALSO PRESENT:** John O'Leary, Gravis Law; Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation/Tym2Fly, Helen den Hoed, Jon Ray, Richland Airport; Dennis Collins, Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Rick Heath, Heath Energy; RJ Blahut, Prosser Airport; Lynn Carlson, Roy Keck, Samantha Peterson, Century West; Kurt Addicott, Century West; Virginia Tomlinson, Joan Wright, Davis Raile, NBC Right Now; Rachel Visick, Tri-City Area Journal of Business

**The following attendees attended via remote communications:** Sheri Collins, Jorge Celestino, Angela Saraceno-Lyman, Julia Mora, Ashley Garza, Stephanie Bowman, Brian Young, Hans Wellenbrack, Brandon Morgan, Stuart Smith, Columbia Rail; Tina Rex, Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Nick Zamantakis, Columbia Rail; Bryan Condon, Century West; Jim Millbauer, Trent Hall, Columbia Rail; Brian Malley, Melinda Mazuer, Jen Cash, Lauren Granger, Jeff Losey, Joshua Lott, Anderson Perry; Rich Christensen, Playing tball's iPhone

The Commission meeting was noticed as required by RCW 42.30.070.

**B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Commissioner Lori Stevens led those present to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

**C. CONSENT AGENDA**

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving the agenda for the January 14, 2026, Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the December 10, 2025, Commission meeting, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll, for the month of December totaling \$947,801.04, and resolution 26-02, to cancel warrant Nos. 085562 - 085563, which were printed in error.**

#### **D. PUBLIC COMMENT**

RJ Blahut of Western Aviation Services congratulated Commissioner Bill O'Neil on the election, noting that he feels it is a plus to have an aviator on the Commission, adding that he is willing to work with the Commission to advance not only the Prosser Airport, but Richland Airport as well.

Roy Keck read a prepared statement.\*

Lynn Carlson read a prepared statement.\*\*

Brian Young stated that he has been working in the clean technology economic development for many years and has been working with Diahann Howard since 2005. Young stated that Howard's accolades have been detailed throughout today's hearing. Young stated that the Port of Benton deserves strong leadership, which is exactly what it has under Howard's leadership. Young stated that he is concerned with the process the Commission is currently undertaking and asked for transparency, basic transparency that a public body should undertake. Young asked the Port Commission to release the investigation findings, which were paid for with public money, and explain the suspension of executive director Howard. Young asked if Commissioner Keller should be voting on matters involving the person who disclosed his violations.

Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation, announced that he is a "regular Joe" and that, in his experience, Diahann Howard does not treat "Joes" very well and puts a lot of stress on tenants, including charging unfair rates. Dyer encouraged listeners to look at the leases, noting that no new-money leases have been added under Howard's tenure.

Dyer added that the private sector is no longer in lockstep with the Port and no longer trusts it. Dyer stated that people no longer want to do business with the Port of Benton.

Stephanie Bowman, former Port of Seattle Commissioner and former Washington State Maritime Industry Director, spoke in support of Director Diahann Howard. Bowman highlighted her 20+ year professional relationship with Howard and emphasized Howard's national reputation and contributions to elevating the Port of Benton and the Tri-Cities on a national stage. She referenced their recent collaboration on developing the Port's intermodal rail hub. Bowman underscored the Commission's responsibility for transparency and urged that any concerns regarding Director Howard be addressed publicly. She encouraged commissioners to consider Howard's long-standing dedication, leadership, and positive economic impact when evaluating her future with the Port.

Jen Cash read a prepared statement.\*\*\*

\*Attachment A

\*\*Attachment B

\*\*\*Attachment C

#### **E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil recessed the regular Commission meeting at 8:54 a.m. and opened the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) meeting at 8:34 a.m.

1. Economic Development Corporation (EDC): Approval of Minutes from January 15, 2025, EDC Meeting, Selection of Officers, Financial Overview

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the minutes from the January 15, 2025, EDC Meeting.**

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the selection of EDC officers for 2026, with Bill O'Neil serving as President, Scott Keller serving as Vice President and Lori Stevens serving as Secretary.**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the Economic Development Corporation meeting at 8:56 a.m. and reconvened the regular Commission meeting at 8:56 a.m.

2. Resolution 26-03, A Resolution of the Port of Benton Authorizing the Port Executive Director to Sell and Convey Surplus Property with Less Than \$23,340 Value

Director of Finance Alicia Myers explained that Resolution 26-03 authorizes the Port Executive Director to sell and convey surplus property with less than \$23,340 value.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-03, authorizing the Executive Director to sell and convey surplus property with less than \$23,340 value.**

3. Resolution 26-04, Adopting an Amended Port of Benton Personnel Policy and Procedures Handbook

Director of Finance Alicia Myers explained that Archbright's HR legal team was used to update and review the personnel policy, and most of the updates were to bring the Port up to state standards for FMLA and PFML.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-04, adopting an amended Port of Benton personnel policy and procedures handbook.**

4. Resolution 26-05, Lease Agreement with Hanford Mission Integration Solutions, Inc. – Richland Business Park

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney provided an overview of the Hanford Mission Integrations Solutions, Inc. (HMIS) lease, noting they have been a Port tenant since 1998 at the 2345 Stevens Drive building.

Burney reviewed the lease agreement, which starts January 1, 2026, going through December 31, 2030, with three successive five-year terms, with this lease continuing to 2045 potentially. Burney stated that lease revenues are expected to be approximately \$9.3 million over five years, with 8.7% rent increase to the market rate.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-05, a lease agreement with Hanford Mission Integration Solutions, Inc. – Richland Business Park.**

5. Resolution 26-06, Richland Airport Electrical Easement for City of Richland

Airport Manager Quentin Wright explained that the approval of Resolution 26-06 grants an electrical easement across Butler Loop at Richland Airport to the City of Richland to enable future hangar development.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-06, approving an electrical easement at Richland Airport for the City of Richland.**

6. Resolution 26-07, Approval of Amendment to Resolution 25-22, Six-Year Transportation Improvement Plan

Project and Construction Manager Bryan Bell explained that Resolution 26-07 amends Resolution 25-22, which is the Six-Year Transportation Improvement Plan. Bell highlighted the changes:

- Increases White Bluffs Rail project cost from \$3.5 million to \$11.2 million
- Changes funding from RAISE grant to BUILD
- Adds Northwest Intermodal Project (\$240,000 from federal appropriations)

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-07, approving an amendment to Resolution 25-22, the Six-Year Transportation Improvement Plan.**

7. Resolution 26-08, Approving Amendment No. One to the Electric Vehicle Charging Towers and Ground Lease Agreement with WOW, Women of Wisdom of Tri-Cities – Richland Business Park

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney explained that Resolution 26-08 expands the lease for EV charging stations, Women of Wisdom, Tri-Cities, from 720 to 1,080 sq ft; rent adjusted to \$10,800/year. Burney added that this agreement supports the Port's innovation and sustainability initiatives.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-08, approving amendment number one to the electric vehicle charging towers and ground lease agreement with WOW, Women of Wisdom of Tri-Cities – Richland Business Park.**

8. Approval of Purchase of Rail Car Counter, \$68,000

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine asked for approval to purchase a railcar counter, noting the \$68,000 includes installation and contingency. Branine noted that the equipment will track railcar traffic as required by rail agreements.

Branine clarified that the car reader can count bar codes on each car, including date and time analytics.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the purchase of a railcar counter, up to \$68,000.**

9. HVAC Emergency Replacement, 2345 Stevens Drive, \$53,195 + Washington State Sales Tax – Richland Business Park

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine stated that a 25-ton unit failed last week at the 2345 Stevens Drive building due to a heat-exchanger crack. Branine noted that this particular unit has been problematic and is recommending a full replacement. Branine stated that the total cost, including sales tax, is \$57,822.97. Branine recommended replacing it as soon as possible due to the winter weather.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the HVAC emergency replacement, 2345 Stevens Drive, \$53,195 + WSST, \$57,822.97 in the Richland Business Park.**

10. Membership & Committee Review

Marketing and Communications Manager Summers Miya reviewed committee and membership assignments, including assignments for national, regional, and local associations, such as AAPA, AAAE, Chambers, Councils of Governments, Economic Development groups, etc.) The full list was reviewed and updated for 2026.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the 2026 committee and membership assignments.**

11. Review Annual Conflict of Interest Form

Director of Finance Alicia Myers presented the annual conflict of interest form to the Commissioners, noting that this is an annual housekeeping item required from all staff and the Commission. Myers noted that a copy was included in the packet and on their place setting.

12. Motion to Contract for Human Resources Support Services, 60-Day Term, Not to Exceed \$50,000

Commission President Bill O’Neil requested that this motion be tabled until after the executive session. There were no objections to this request.

**F. INFORMATION REPORTS**

1. Grants Update

Airports – Quentin Wright stated that he will be working with Century West to plan a public meeting to discuss the Prosser Airport project. Wright stated that this meeting will likely take place in early May, as they aim to provide details to the public since the project will require airport closures.

Wright stated that the runway will be open for Memorial Day, but due to open trenches throughout the project, it will not be possible to have the airport open every weekend.

Wright stated that the Port has started the RFQ process for engineering consultants. Wright added that funds have been set aside to move forward with an appraisal on the Prosser Airport and the Port has selected Mike Fredrickson. Wright noted that the report will be shared at a future Commission meeting.

Wright stated that he has received some information from Mark Underwood, noting that Underwood is the property manager for Herb Brayton. Wright stated that the information has

been placed in Brayton's file.

## 2. Legislative Update

Director of Governmental Affairs Cassie Losey outlined recent legislative updates, updating that a bill to classify ports as consumer-owned utilities under the Clean Energy Transformation Act has been presented, which ports are opposing due to compliance burden and inapplicability.

Losey added that support has been provided toward a federal grant matching act (MATCH Act) and economic development expansion.

Losey added that she is coordinating with regional and federal partners, particularly because of the changing legislative districts.

Losey added that Ports Day is taking place February 5-6 in Olympia, which she will be attending.

## 3. Capital Projects Update

Director of Facilities and Operations Ron Branine noted that the lighting project for 3250 and 2579 is in the close-out project, adding that the changes have been significant. Branine added that there is a bit more programming to complete on the project, but is very satisfied overall.

## H. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS

Commissioner Bill O'Neil extended a thank you to the directors and staff of the Port of Benton, noting that the team has demonstrated professionalism and exceptional leadership in the last week.

O'Neil added that during the executive director's absence, the Commission has 100% confidence in Port directors and the staff's ability to execute the Port's mission and meet all of its obligations.

Commissioner Lori Stevens stated that she attended a ribbon-cutting on Monday because there is a new restaurant in Prosser. Stevens stated that the Prosser Economic Development Association had their board meeting last week and they are kicking off their leadership class. Stevens added that she will be attending the ribbon-cutting for the Prosser City Hall, which has moved at the courthouse. Stevens added that she will be attending the Prosser Community Awards at the Walter Clore Center at the end of the month.

Commissioner Scott Keller had no comments.

## I. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS

### 1. Finance Director

Director of Finance Alicia Myers provided a financial status report.

Myers reviewed the cash financial status, stating that the reserves and restricted bond funds remain flat. Myers stated that available cash dropped in December due to predictable year-end expense settlements.

Myers reviewed November cash receipts and disbursements.

Myers reviewed the accounts receivable financial status report over 90 days.

Myers stated that there are no financial red flags and regular monitoring continues.

## 2. Port Attorney

Contract Port attorney John O'Leary stated that he had no updates for the regular session.

## 3. Executive Director

Interim Executive Director Alicia Myers provided an update on recent lease administration, noting that there are approximately 13 active leases or lease modifications in progress.

Myers highlighted a joint letter regarding river maintenance structures, advocating for federal cost-sharing.

## J. FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER

Summers Miya pointed out that this document includes a list of upcoming meetings and events and will be included in the monthly packets for transparency.

## K. EXECUTIVE SESSION

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 9:35 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 9:35 a.m. for 60 minutes to discuss personnel matters. It was noted that the regular meeting would be reconvened at 10:35 a.m.

At 10:35 a.m., it was announced that an additional 60 minutes were needed in executive session.

The regular meeting was reconvened at 11:35 a.m.

**Commissioner Stevens made a motion to exempt the human resources contract from the Commission solicitation process, due to the urgency of the need. Commissioner Stevens stated that it had been determined that a competitive solicitation process is not appropriate or cost-effective. Commissioner Bill O'Neil seconded the motion and the motion was unanimously passed by the Commission.**

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion that the Commission delegate interim executive director duties to Ron Branine from this day, January 14, 2026, at 11:37 a.m. until further notice of this Commission. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion and the motion was unanimously passed by the Commission.**

**Commissioner Lori Stevens made a motion to add two regular Commission meetings, one at the end of January and one at the end of February. Commissioner Scott Keller seconded the motion and the motion was unanimously passed by the Commission.**

Commission President Bill O'Neil read the Disposition of Findings.

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion that no action would be taken on the finding related to finding number 1, whether Commissioner Keller violated Washington State gifting laws (Article 8, Section 7), when the Port entered into a new lease with Buckskin Golf Course on August 1, 2008. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil commented on finding number 2, whether Commissioner Keller violated Washington State gifting laws, (Article 8, Section 7, RCW 42.23.030 or .070), by knowingly receiving public water and sewer services paid for by the Port of Benton for the hangar that he purchased in the name of his personal business, The Axe, LLC, located at 2049 Butler Loop. Commissioner O'Neil made a motion that no action would be taken related to this finding. Commissioner Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil commented on finding number 3, whether Commissioner Keller violated Washington State gifting laws (Article 8, section 7, RCW 42.23.030 or .070) when he reduced the ground lease premises area and rent rate for his hangar at 2049 Butler Loop from the amounts previously approved by the Commission.**

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion to direct the interim Executive Director, Ron Branine, to determine whether the Port has a current standard easement size to be applied to hangar leases. If there is no standard, then determine the average from the two neighboring hangars and apply that average to Commissioner Keller's hangar lease. Additionally, identify the rate difference, if any, to Commissioner Keller's current lease and make the proper adjustments to his lease. Commissioner O'Neil added that he moved to initiate a reassessment of Commissioner Keller's lease from the start date to the present, and that Commissioner Keller be invoiced for any past-due amounts without penalties. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

Commissioner O'Neil read the investigator's findings on Executive Director Diahann Howard's complaints, which warrant Commission disposition.

Regarding Executive Director Howard's complaint that Commissioner Keller violated Port Rule 12.3 when he interacted with Wally Williams in Mr. Williams' Port office and discussed the upcoming Commissioner race and further stated that once Bill O'Neil is elected, things would change.

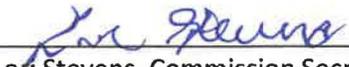
**Commissioner Bill O'Neil stated that the Commission's conclusion is that Commissioner Keller's actions did violate Rule 12.3 of the Port Commission Rules of Policy and Procedure. Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion that the Commission admonish Commissioner Keller for violating Rule 12.3 and further move that he be instructed to review all of Resolution 24-41, the Commission's Rules of Policy and Procedure, in particular, Rule 12.3, and to comply with it. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil stated that the Commission is now and will continue to be committed to open and full disclosure within the laws, policies, and regulations that govern it. O'Neil stated that there are 24 complaints, of which 85% lack sufficient evidence to support them, and some are nearly two decades old. Commissioner O'Neil referenced the convenient timing of the complaints during a Port Commissioner re-election campaign and added that the parties involved have worked together for nearly 20 years.

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion to release the full investigative report, pending appropriate redactions to protect personal privacy. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

**L. ADJOURNMENT**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 11:51 a.m.

  
Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary