

**PORT OF BENTON
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES
January 28, 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, Quentin Wright, Summers Miya, Bryan Bell, Audrey Burney

ALSO PRESENT: John O’Leary, Gravis Law; Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation/Tym2Fly; Jon Ray, Richland Airport; Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Rick Heath, Roy Keck, Davis Raile, NBC Right Now; Rachel Visick, Tri-City Area Journal of Business; Jim Millbauer, Kennewick; Dave Furtado, Gareth Nisbett, Shayne Van Dyke, City of Richland; Dan Hanson, Apple Valley News

The following attendees attended via remote communications: Jorge Celestino, Angela Saraceno-Lyman, Julia Mora, Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Bryan Condon, Century West; Jen Cash, Joshua Lott, Anderson Perry; Lynn Carlson, Virginia Tomlinson, Christy Rasmussen, Wayne Langford, Cassie Losey, Josh Woodson, Community UU Church

The Commission meeting was noticed as required by RCW 42.30.070.

- B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Commissioner Scott D. Keller led those present to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

C. CONSENT AGENDA

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving the agenda for the January 28, 2026, Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the January 7, 2026, Special Commission meeting, and approval of minutes from the January 14, 2026, Commission meeting.

D. PUBLIC COMMENT

Roy Keck read a prepared statement.*

Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation, echoed Keck’s concerns, calling for transparency and compliance with FAA funding requirements. Dyer advocated for incentives to attract investment. Dyer criticized the investigation into Commissioner Keller, arguing that most findings were minor and the past Commission shares responsibility for prior irregularities. Dyer requested that investment and trust restoration efforts begin immediately.

Jim Millbauer voiced concern over the suspension of Executive Director Diahann Howard, especially after the recent performance raise and her report of unauthorized water connections at the airport, linked to Commissioner Keller's hangar. Millbauer cited findings of "serious violations" by Commissioner Keller, but noted the Commission voted "no action". Millbauer suggested the process lacked transparency and voiced suspicion of the decision-making process and governance changes made without public input.

Jon Ray of Richland Airport thanked the Commission and Quentin Wright and Summers Miya for their support of the upcoming Aviation Career Day and Job Fair at the Richland Airport. Ray announced that the event is scheduled for May 30, 2026, with Sundance Aviation joining as a sponsor.

Lynn Carlson questioned the legal basis for "no action" findings against an elected official. Carlson criticized the Commission for making sweeping changes on January 7, 2026, without public input or discussion. Carlson asked about compliance with Washington Public Ports Association standards and the specifics of the \$50,000 HR contract with Eileen Griffin.

Virginia Tomlinson requested that the State Auditor conduct an independent review of financial and governance practices due to perceived inconsistencies in how staff and Commissioners are disciplined.

Jen Cash reinforced concerns about process irregularities and transparency around Executive Director Diahann Howard's suspension. Cash requested: specific allegations leading to Howard's suspension, evidence of documented performance concerns prior to her December 10, 2025, raise, and clarification on whether she was given a chance to respond before the Commission.

*See attachment A

E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

1. Resolution 26-09, A Resolution of the Port of Benton Amending Signers for Banner and Key Banks

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine explained that Resolution 26-09 is an administrative task to add the interim Executive Director to the bank accounts, thereby providing authorization to sign checks and approve payroll.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-09, amending signers for Banner and Key Banks, and adding interim Executive Director, Ron Branine.

2. Resolution 26-10, Sandhill Crane Substation – City of Richland Easement Expansion

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine explained that the Port has partnered with the City of Richland for decades on utility projects. The City has had an easement for the Sandhill Crane substation on Port property west of Stevens Drive and just south of Horn Rapids Road for decades.

Branine added that the city has occasionally requested small expansions to this easement to allow further development of the substation, generally benefiting the Port, as more power is made available to the Richland Business Park area.

Branine explained that the city is working on the expansion of an additional feeder for this substation across the Port's railroad track, which will require an additional 20-ft-wide utility easement from the Sandhill substation, east under the Port railroad track, to the Stevens drive right-of-way.

Branine added that the city is aware of and comfortable with the Port's requirements for boring under the railroad track, and that the boring will be reviewed by the Port and Columbia Rail prior to completion.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-10, authorizing the Sandhill Crane – City of Richland easement expansion.

3. Resolution 26-11, A Policy to Standardize Lease Areas at Richland and Prosser Airports

Airport Manager Quentin Wright stated that historically, there has been a wide variation of leased areas, with no policy in place at Richland Airport.

Wright explained that the policy will include a 10-foot easement on each side of the hangar, or to the edge of the lessee's apron, for new leases. Wright explained that this applies to lease renewals and lease adjustments, especially with significant market value increases. Wright noted that the policy excludes public taxiways from tenant responsibility and lease.

Wright explained that the policy provides consistency, code and fire compliance and clarity to tenants.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-11, a policy to standardize lease areas at Richland and Prosser Airports.

4. Resolution 26-12, Sky Hangars Association Lease Modification Number 3 – 1945 Terminal Drive, Richland Airport

Airport Manager Quentin Wright explained that this modification is for the Sky Hangars Association, which is a 50-year-old lease. Wright noted that when the lease was created in 1978, the leased area was much larger than needed.

Wright explained that the lease is due for a market increase and the reduction in the leased area will align with the new policy.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-12, authorizing Sky Hangars Association lease modification No. 3 1945 Terminal Drive, Richland Airport.

5. Wine Country Road & Old Inland Empire Highway Roundabout, Prosser

Airport Manager Quentin Wright explained that the City of Prosser is seeking to construct a roundabout using WSDOT funds. Wright explained that this project requires transfer, not just easement, of Port land, outside the Prosser Airport fencing.

Wright noted that an FAA land transfer process will begin once the Commission reaches consensus to move forward.

Commissioners agreed that Wright move forward with the land transfer process.

Wright stated that the airport sign will be removed and refurbished.

H. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS

Commissioner Bill O'Neil had no updates to report.

Commissioner Scott Keller stated that he attended the Prosser Community Awards event, held earlier that week at the Clore Center. Keller stated that it was a great event, held at a great venue.

Commissioner Lori Stevens thanked Commissioner Keller for attending the Community Awards event, which she also attended. Stevens added that she recently participated in a Prosser Chamber workshop.

I. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS

1. Port Attorney

Contract Port attorney John O'Leary stated that he had no updates for the regular session, but had items related to personnel and real estate for the executive session.

2. Executive Director

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine announced that the HR consultant began last week and has been conducting 1:1 interviews with staff.

Branine provided an update on Director of Governmental Affairs, Cassie Losey's meetings in Olympia, noting that Losey's schedule includes FMSIB meeting, AWB Legislative Day, Washington Economic Development Association, Clean Energy Day (moderating a panel) and rail caucus.

Branine added another note from Losey: the Port of Benton has provided a letter of support to WSU. WSU is applying for an internal research grant that funds "big ideas" with statewide impact. Their proposal focuses on an AI-based planning tool for the Columbia River Basin that helps visualize how water, energy, and environmental systems interact. They are starting with the Tri-Cities.

Because the Port handles industrial land, infrastructure, and economic development, WSU believes the Port's perspective enhances the project's regional relevance. They're asking for a non-binding letter of support that simply acknowledges that this research could benefit local planning and economic development. Branine confirmed that there is no financial commitment, no data-sharing obligation and no formal partnership.

Branine announced that the City of Richland has informed the Port that the contractor for the Steptoe-Tapteal realignment project will begin work the week of February 2. Branine provided a brief update on the project:

- Initial work will consist of some lane closures during daylight hours for the utility extension, as well as utility work outside of the roadway
- Reader boards will be posted soon
- The final schedule will be shared soon, with the expectation that the major construction will begin this spring throughout the summer

- Privately funded project
- Expected to bring long-term transportation and infrastructure improvements to the area
- The project includes realignment of Tapteal Drive so that it intersects Steptoe Street further south, construction of a new intersection leg to the west to provide access to adjacent commercial property, installation of a new traffic signal, and enhanced pedestrian facilities.
- A new water main will also be installed, providing redundancy and increased fire flow capacity to the City's water system, improving reliability and public safety.

Branine announced that the Crow Butte Master Plan request for proposals bid window closed last week and responses are currently being graded. Branine added that the marketing consultant RFPs closed January 27.

J. FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER

Summers Miya stated that there were no updates to the good of the order report.

K. EXECUTIVE SESSION

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 9:02 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 9:02 a.m. for 60 minutes to discuss real estate and personnel matters. It was noted that the regular meeting would be reconvened at 10:02 a.m.

At 10:02 a.m., it was announced that an additional 30 minutes were needed in executive session.

At 10:32 a.m., it was announced that an additional 10 minutes were needed in executive session.

The regular meeting was reconvened at 10:42 a.m.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the interim executive director's salary commensurate with the duties and responsibilities.

L. ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 10:43 a.m.



Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary