

PORT OF BENTON  
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES  
February 25, 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, Angela Saraceno-Lyman, Bryan Bell

**ALSO PRESENT:** John O'Leary, Gravis Law; Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation/Tym2Fly, Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Gareth Nisbett, Herb Brayton, Richland Airport; Dan Hanson, Apple Valley News; Bryan Condon, Century West Engineering

**The following attendees attended via remote communications:** Sheri Collins, Cassie Losey, Jorge Celestino, Julia Mora, Jeff Moore, Hans Wellenbrack, Christy Rasmussen, RJ Blahut, Rachel Visick, Tri-City Area Journal of Business; One Unidentified Caller

The Commission meeting was noticed as required by RCW 42.30.070.

- B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Commissioner Scott Keller 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 February 25, 2026, Commission meeting and approval of minutes from the February 11, 2026, Commission meeting.**

**Note - Zoom audio and recording issues at the outset; reboot and workaround with laptop for room audio was implemented. Ensured resumption of accessibility for remote staff/public and media. Legal clarification: No legal requirement for remote public attendance but Zoom access is encouraged.**

**D. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Gareth Nisbett read a prepared statement.\*

Clif Dyer read a prepared statement.\*\*

Herb Brayton, a Richland Airport tenant, described his decades of positive economic contributions to the Port via property taxes (~\$500,000 since 1983).

Brayton raised an issue: Protracted (2.5 years) difficulty securing a lease assignment to the LLC due to staff non-communication, complex processes, and reference to "onerous" Resolution 22-42.

Brayton challenged the commission to review and streamline assignment practices, suggesting equal lease rates across Prosser and Richland and base rates on hangar footprint (as is common in industry and for tax/insurance purposes). Brayton recommended removal of the "toxic" perception of handling leases.

Brayton requested direct engagement with Port staff and noted a stagnation in development as a consequence of the issues he described.

\*Attachment A

\*\*Attachment B

## E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

### 1. Welcome and Update from Scott Urban, North American Trainers Association Formation Clinic

Speaker unavailable.

### 2. Resolution 26-19, Resolution Confirming Matching Funds for WSDOT Aviation Grant – Richland Airport Apron Project

Airport Manager Quentin Wright explained that Resolution 26-19 is an administrative requirement for the WSDOT aviation grant application prior to securing the grant. Wright reminded the Commission that the port is responsible for the 2.5% match.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-19, a resolution confirming matching funds for the WSDOT Aviation Grant, Richland Airport Apron Project.**

### 3. Resolution 26-20, Resolution Relating to Land Rates, Prosser Airport

Airport Manager Quentin Wright provided background on this topic, explaining that a market rental survey was conducted by Associated Appraisers, Walla Walla, and compared rates with nine airports, recommending \$0.20 square foot/year as the market rate.

Wright provided context on the current landscape, stating that there is variation in how lease footprints are defined, with many existing tenants paying below-market rates. Wright stated that there are plans to ramp up those below market rate over the next five years.

Wright stated that a public meeting will be held on Wednesday, March 11, at the Clore Center to discuss the changes and the upcoming airport project.

Wright added that many tenants are at market rate, but Westwind Aviation is under and approval of Resolution 26-20 would allow for contractually planned increases.

**The Commission determined that this item should be tabled to ensure tenants are briefed and can provide feedback.**

### 4. Resolution 26-21, Adoption of Revised Port of Benton Commission Rules of Policy and Procedure

Attorney John O'Leary stated that Resolution 26-21 adopts the final draft of the Port of Benton Commission Rules of Policy and Procedure, with the revisions that were incorporated for the January 7, 2026, special meeting.

O'Leary noted that there were some minor errors in the draft version included in the packet, which were non-substantive.

O'Leary stated that Summers Miya would update the non-substantive errors and finalize the revisions upon approval of Resolution 26-21.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-21, adoption of the revised Port of Benton Commission Rules of Policy and Procedure.**

#### 5. Request for Authorization to Begin Negotiations with AHBL for the Crow Butte Master Plan

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell explained that there is a six-year cycle related to the Crow Butte Master Plan, with the next update due in 2026.

Bell stated that five firms submitted qualifications, and the scoring consisted of six criteria.

Bell added that AHBL is a local company that also completed the 2020 master plan and ranked the highest.

Bell noted that there is intent to update the current plan, add five new construction projects and ensure readiness for the 2026 RCO grant applications.

Bryan added that submissions are due on March 3, with the updated plan due by August 1. Bell added that public input will be included in the 2026 update, with a meeting planned for Paterson.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, authorizing the port to begin negotiations with AHBL for the Crow Butte Master Plan.**

#### 6. Main Apron Reconfiguration Project – Richland Airport

Airport Manager Quentin Wright introduced Bryan Condon of Century West Engineering.

Condon overviewed the key objectives of the project, adding a designated large aircraft parking area, better utilization of space and maintain/enhance small aircraft capacity and hangar protection.

Condon presented design and cost alternatives.

Commission approved moving forward with the more robust option to prioritize doing the job right for long-term maintenance and operational flexibility.

#### 7. Richland Airport Water Utility Ad Hoc Committee Update

Port Attorney John O'Leary provided a summary of the first committee meeting, which was held on Monday.

O'Leary stated that the committee reviewed the charter and required outcomes.

O'Leary stated that the committee focused on 1999 correspondence regarding utility reconfiguration.

O'Leary noted that the committee is actively gathering documents, which may require archival research and stated that the objective is to establish a full chronology before broader outreach and action.

O'Leary stated that the next update will take place at the next Commission meeting.

It was noted that City leaders are supportive and open to further engagement.

## **F. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil stated that he has been attending and becoming acquainted with various boards, noting that he advocates for the Richland Airport at these meetings, including promoting the airport's economic impact, which totals \$114 million/year, and Prosser's, which totals \$22 million/year.

O'Neil emphasized the need to continue community education and pride in this economic engine of the Port.

Commissioner Lori Stevens had no comments.

Commissioner Scott Keller had no comments.

## **G. INFORMATION REPORTS**

### **1. Rail Update**

Engineer Roger Wright provided an overview presentation of the port-owned and operated rail line. Wright overviewed that there are 11 miles of mainline, five miles of siding and ladder track, four bridges, 10 at-grade crossings, and 75,000 vehicles/day cross Port tracks.

Wright included historical facts, noting that the rail originated post-World War II as a dual-track line to Hanford for security and was turned over to the Port in the late 90s by the Department of Energy to avoid abandonment.

Wright stated that Columbia Rail has operated the track since February 2023, following the dissolution of the previous rail operating agreement with Tri-City Rail in 2022. Wright added that in addition to the track, the Port owns locomotives and equipment.

Wright reviewed the recent rail projects, most grant-funded, to improve signals, crossings and track. Wright added that the maintenance has recovered from excepted track status (5 mph) to full Class 1 (10 mph for freight), noting that the goal is to reach full Class 2 status (25 mph).

Wright mentioned ongoing projects, including the Steptoe crossing realignment, which is in progress and developer-funded. Wright also mentioned the BUILD grant, which is a \$9.56 million Federal grant with a \$2.4 million Port match for the reconstruction of approximately 4 miles of track, replacement of 2 rail crossings, and installation of 8,000-10,000 ties throughout the track.

In addition, the Port has been awarded approximately \$2.75 million from the State Department of Commerce and a Federal Budget Allocation from Senator Maria Cantwell to begin construction of a rail intermodal area within the Port property. This will also require approximately \$250,000 in Port matching funds.

Finally, Wright added that the Port is prepared to apply for a Freight Mobility Strategic Investment Board (FMSIB) grant for \$1 million, plus a \$200,000 Port match, next week, pending Commission support. Wright noted that the substantial matches are provided for in the Port capital budget.

Wright noted that the Port track is the second-busiest short-line track in Washington, handling 1.3 million tons of goods from major customers such as Lamb Weston, Central Washington Corn Processors, Lineage Logistics, Packaging Corp of America, and more.

Wright provided the economic impact from these customers:

Lineage Logistics - \$400 million product/year; 300 direct jobs

Central Washington Corn Processors - \$170 million product/year; 25 direct jobs + 100 indirect jobs.

Wright added that there are approximately 900 direct jobs tied to rail, with \$67 million in annual wages.

Wright provided an update on the proposed intermodal yard, noting the strong demand for expanded truck-rail connectivity. Wright mentioned the recent ILA signed with the Northwest Seaport Alliance and the Ports of Pasco and Walla Walla for a coordinated logistics hub.

Wright stated that there are customer and support needs driving the push for new spurs/yard, which is readying support for container movement from a wider region.

Wright explained the differentiation from other facilities, noting that the Port track already serves BNSF and UP, while others serve one or the other.

Wright provided an overview on train operations and safety, noting that most unit trains are one product – one customer and there are typically 50-60/year coming into the Port track. Wright added that the Port is working toward increased operational track speeds to reduce intersection blockages from up to 18 minutes at 5 mph to approximately four minutes at 25 mph.

Wright stated that the Port has been working with BN and UP for over two years to amend the original track use agreement from the 1940s. The agreement will include a maintenance car charge to fund ongoing and future maintenance. Wright stated that he expects the agreement to be finalized soon, noting that both Class 1s (*class of railroad is Roman Numeral and Class of track is numbers*) have agreed to backdate the start of the car charge to October 1, 2025.

Wright asked for Commission direction to proceed with grant applications and project contract signings as scheduled.

The Port Commission granted approval to continue moving forward with grant applications and project contract signings in recognition of the increasing strategic and economic value of Port-owned track.

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

### **1. Port Attorney**

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

### **2. Executive Director**

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine stated that he continues to meet regularly with the HR consultant.

Branine added that phase two of the admin assistant interviews begins later that day, with the hope of making a decision late next week and having someone start in March.

Branine announced that the port is continuing to actively search for a Director of Finance and is currently reviewing all submitted resumes.

Branine added that the Director of Economic Development, Audrey Burney, is not attending the Commission meeting because she is traveling to Lacey to attend the Washington Economic

Development Association's Winter Conference. Branine shared that TRIDEC nominated the Port of Benton Avalanche Energy FusionWERX project as the Economic Development Project of the Year. Audrey will accept this award at the ceremony later today and will also present on this project, providing a timeline and telling the story of how the Port worked collaboratively with TRIDEC, Veolia, and Avalanche to bring this company to North Richland.

Branine added that the Steptoe project has installed a temporary railroad track warning device and gate to control the northbound vehicle traffic. This temporary device will likely be in place until the end of April, but the signal is currently fully functional for trains and vehicles. Branine added that this past Monday (Feb. 23), the Steptoe project moved all vehicle traffic over to the west side of Steptoe (one lane in each direction) and will be performing construction on the east side of the roadway. Branine stated that this will likely be in place until we replace the rail crossing panels the weekend of April 16-19.

Branine stated that the Port was asked and recently provided two letters of support to the City of Richland, regarding the FY 2026 BUILD Grant Application for the State Route 240 & Aaron Drive Reconstruction Project and State Route 240 Corridor Widening and Intersection Enhancement Engineering.

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

Summers Miya stated that no changes were made to the February Good of the Order document.

#### **J. EXECUTIVE SESSION**

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 10:01 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 10:05 a.m. for 45 minutes to discuss RCW 42.30.110(1)(c) (f), (g) and (i), to discuss real estate, complaints, evaluate personnel, and to discuss potential litigation/legal risks with Port counsel. It was noted that the regular meeting would be reconvened at 10:50 a.m.

At 10:50 a.m., it was announced that an additional 15 minutes were needed in executive session.

At 11:05 a.m., it was announced that an additional 10 minutes were needed in executive session.

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion to authorize the hiring of a real estate manager. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.**

#### **K. ADJOURNMENT**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 11:16 a.m.

  
Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary