

PORT OF BENTON  
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES  
March 11, 2026

- A. CALL TO ORDER:** The regular monthly meeting was called to order at 8:30 a.m. at the Clore Center, located at 2140 Wine Country Road, Prosser, Washington.

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

**PORT STAFF PRESENT:** Ron Branine, Quentin Wright, Summers Miya, Audrey Burney, Cassie Losey, Angela Saraceno-Lyman, Bryan Bell, Jeff Moore, Jorge Celestino

**ALSO PRESENT:** John O'Leary, Gravis Law; Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation/Tym2Fly, Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Bryan Condon, Century West Engineering; Kurt Addicott, Century West Engineering; Trent Ward, Century West Engineering; Ben Hoppe, JUB Engineers; Toby Epler, JUB Engineers; Chuck Larson, JUB Engineers; RJ Blahut, West Wind Aviation Services; Nicole Jech, Prosser Chamber of Commerce; Neal Ripplinger, Prosser Economic Development Association; Jon Ray, Richland Airport, Eileen Griffin-Ray, Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Tri-City Herald Photographer; Matthew Colvin, Tree Top; Troy Grimes, Tree Top; Rachel Shaw, City of Prosser; Mayor Gary Vegar, City of Prosser

**The following attendees attended via remote communications:** Sheri Collins, Julia Mora, Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Virginia Tomlinson; K. Hoover; Roy Keck; Amanda; Julia L., Rachel Mercer; Jeff Losey; Jeannie Beckett; Christy Rasmussen; Community UU Church; Rachel Visick, Tri-City Area Journal of Business

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 March 11, 2026, Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the February 25, 2026, Commission meeting, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll, for the month of February totaling \$870,943.97 and approving Resolution 26-22, to cancel warrant no. 085642, which was printed with errors and warrant no. 085300, which has been deemed lost.**

## D. PUBLIC COMMENT

Virginia Tomlinson raised points on several agenda items:

1. Tree Top partnership: Praised opportunities for Prosser.
2. Grant item: Endorsed for small business growth.
3. On-call airport engineering selection (JUB): Raised conflict-of-interest concerns due to previous work and the 1999 water connection issue; advocated for continued Century West engagement.
4. HR contract procurement: Questioned the necessity and process, noted the existing Archbright contract. Suggested resolving the former CFO's whistleblower lawsuit before hiring a new finance director.

Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation, responded to the previous public comment to clarify JUB's previous engineering role and support credentials of the HR consultant.

## E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

### 1. Welcome and Update from Neal Ripplinger, Prosser Economic Development Association

Neal Ripplinger provided an overview and update on the Prosser Economic Development Association, including the current leadership class, college and career fair, Prosser Memorial Hospital workforce growth, WSU Cougar Tracks training, Prosser Business Connect, and an update on the Creative District strategies.

### 2. Welcome and Update from Matthew Colvin, Tree Top, Inc.

Matthew Colvin provided a brief history of Tree Top Cooperative, noting that since 1960, 1000 employees across 7 locations, a large processor of "ugly fruit" with sustainable practices.

Colvin provided additional information, including:

- **Investment:** \$30 million in the past 3 years for expansion at the Prosser plant.
- **Proposal:** To purchase 40 acres adjacent to Prosser facility (includes 26 acres of cherry orchard, drop yard, possible warehouse, and long-term manufacturing expansion).
  - Immediate use: Drop yard.
  - Within 36 months: Water pretreatment infrastructure.
  - 48–60 months: 100–150k sq. ft. warehouse (+25 jobs).
  - Long term: Center of manufacturing excellence (100–300 jobs).
- **Commitment:** Full appraisal value, including \$100K for water rights, keep residential buffer, open to further Port partnership.

### 3. Welcome and Update from Nicole Jech, Prosser Chamber of Commerce

Nicole Jech announced that the recent Prosser Community Awards Banquet raised \$23,000.

Jech overviewed upcoming events, including ribbon cuttings (Merlot model home, Sip & Savor Mobile Kitchen), participation in Taste Washington (March 21), Sip & Stroll fundraiser (March 28), Easter Egg Hunt (April 4), Scottish Fest (June 20), Old-Fashioned Festival (July 15), Art Walk & Wine (July 18).

Jech highlighted Chamber growth: Visitor guides, membership drives, new social media/communications focus, and strong board support.

#### 4. Welcome and Update from Mayor Gary Vegar, City of Prosser

City of Prosser Mayor Gary Vegar provided an overview of recent updates within the City of Prosser.

- **City Hall Move:** Lease with Benton County for courthouse first floor completed after lengthy negotiations; move complete, police station phase next.
- **New Council Members:** Sworn in January 2026 (Julie Mercer, Bill Jenkin, Felix Cortez).
- **Roundabout Project:** At Wine Country Road and Inland Empire; right-of-way and design phase; construction expected end of 2026 or early 2027.
- **Legislative Advocacy:** Olympia conference and legislative asks—focus on public safety facility (police station), \$4–5 million secured so far toward \$10–12 million goal, seeking additional state and federal funds to reduce need for local bond.
- **Parks & Recreation/Open Space Committee:** Advisory to council, prioritizing \$200K+ for parks and walkability improvements. Interactive city map highlighted; focus on connectivity (e.g., Crawford Park to Centennial Path).
- **City Properties for Sale:** Six properties, including Wamba Road and old police station, being sold to raise public safety facility funds.

#### 5. Resolution 26-23, Acceptance of Contract to Columbia Sweeping Services Inc. for Crack Sealing and Seal Coating at 2345 Stevens Drive, \$86,239.86 – Richland Business Park

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell presented the Crack Sealing and Seal Coating project at 2345 Stevens Drive, \$89,239.86, asking for acceptance of contract to Columbia Sweeping Services Inc.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission to approve Resolution 26-23, acceptance of contract to Columbia Sweeping Services Inc. for crack sealing and seal coating at 2345 Stevens Drive, \$86,239.86 – Richland Business Park**

#### 6. Resolution 26-24, Acceptance of Contract to Granite Construction Company for Asphalt Replacement of Port of Benton Blvd., \$90,965.60 – Technology & Business Campus

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell requested the acceptance of the contract to Granite Construction Company for Asphalt Replacement of Port of Benton Blvd., for \$90,965.60 in the Technology & Business Campus.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller**

**and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-24, acceptance of contract to Granite Construction Company for asphalt replacement of Port of Benton Blvd., \$90,965.60 – Technology & Business Campus**

7. Resolution 26-25, Acceptance of Contract to AHBL Inc. for Crow Butte Park Master Plan, \$42,500.00 – Crow Butte Park

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell requested an acceptance of contract to AHBL Inc. for the Crow Butte Park Master Plan, \$42,500.00.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving Resolution 26-25, acceptance of contract to AHBL Inc. for Crow Butte Park Master Plan, \$42,500.00 – Crow Butte Park.**

8. Request for Authorization to Begin Negotiations with Architects West for 2501 Stevens Drive Building Design – Richland Business Park

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell requested authorization to begin negotiations with Architects West for the 2501 Stevens Drive building design in the Richland Business Park.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission to authorize negotiations with Architects West for 2501 Stevens Drive building design – Richland Business Park.**

9. Acceptance of Work to Total Energy Management, Emergency HVAC Replacement Project, \$57,822.97 – Richland Business Park

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine explained that this emergency HVAC replacement project was completed at 2345 Stevens Drive in the Richland Business Park, for \$57,822.97 and the project can now be closed out upon the acceptance of work to Total Energy Management.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the acceptance of work to Total Energy Management, Emergency HVAC Replacement Project, \$57,822.97 – Richland Business Park**

10. Richland Airport Water Utility Ad Hoc Committee Update

Attorney John O’Leary explained that weekly committee meetings are underway. The committee is gaining a foundational understanding of the 1999 realignment project and water connection history. O’Leary explained that interviews and further documentation are slated for the near future. A report to the Commission will take place soon.

11. Presentations for On-Call Engineering (Airport) Professional Services, Century West Engineering Corporation & JUB Engineers, Inc.

Airport Manager Quentin Wright introduced Century West, who provided a presentation to the Port Commission.

Century West highlighted 100+ regional airports, \$7 million secured in FAA funding for the Port of Benton in the last five years, expertise in planning, funding, implementation and operations.

JUB Engineers highlighted 50 local staff with deep Tri-Cities roots, 30 years history with the Port of Benton, in-house surveying, construction management, relationships with local agencies and a focus on local economic impact.

**Commissioners expressed appreciation for both presentations and tabled the decision until next meeting or special session for further evaluation.**

#### 12. Request for 60-Day Extension of HR Contract, Eileen Griffin-Ray

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine requested a 30-day extension of the HR contract to Eileen Griffin-Ray. Branine praised the recent report that Griffin-Ray completed and strongly recommended adopting the suggestions noted in the report.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving a 30-Day extension of the HR contract to Eileen Griffin-Ray.**

### F. INFORMATION REPORTS

#### 1. Grants Update

Director of Governmental Affairs Cassie Losey provided an update on the federal earmark that will be submitted on behalf of both airports for the upgrade of the Airport Weather Observation System (AWOS), noting that the Prosser AWOS system provides only wind and needs modernization.

Additional grant-related updates included:

- **RCO Grants:** Three new applications planned for Crow Butte projects; master plan update by AHBL required.
- **CERB Grant:** Progress on compliance; down to two design items; City of Richland SEPA completed.

#### 2. Legislative Update

Director of Governmental Affairs Cassie Losey provided an update on the recent session, with an update on targeted urban area tax preference (likely to pass), capital funding for energy facilities, fertilizer incentive (failed), supply chain infrastructure program (not adopted), open position at WPPA.

#### 3. Capital Projects Update

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine stated that the middle conference room at 3250 update and break room upgrade at 3100 are underway.

Branine added that a 2020 F250 has been acquired for the facility fleet and a John Deere Gator has been purchased for Crow Butte Park operations.

#### 4. Airports Update

Airport Manager Quentin Wright stated that a public meeting will be held at the Clore Center later that evening at 5:30 p.m. to review the upcoming pavement maintenance and electrical update project.

Wright added that he recently met with Century West and the contractor hired for the project to review the project schedule, which will be reviewed at the public meeting this evening.

Wright added that the Port is also performing a Port-funded upgrade to the Prosser Airport restroom facility and new services lines for water and sewer.

#### H. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS

Commissioners Lori Stevens, Bill O'Neil and Scott Keller had no comments.

#### I. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS

##### 1. Finance Director

Senior Accountant Angela Saraceno-Lyman provided a financial status report.

Presentation highlights included:

- **Cash position:** Steady with slight increase (\$180K this month); main outflows include \$870K disbursements.
- **Accounts Receivable:** \$87K over 90 days (reduced by \$35K after March payment).
- **Outstanding payables managed;** regular check runs taking place.

##### 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 Ron Branine provided an update on day-to-day at the Port.

Branine noted that Eileen Griffin-Ray recently completed an extensive HR report. Branine added that Brandin Lopez will be returning as Engineering & Capital Development Senior Manager, starting Thursday, March 12.

Branine announced that Mardie Romero has been hired to fill the Administrative Assistant position and her first day will be Monday, March 23.

Branine stated that he will be attending a Goose Lock and Dam tour with Brandin Lopez and Summers Miya on Monday, March 16, which has been organized by PNWA.

Branine added that several letters of support have been provided to the City of Richland in the past two weeks, including support for the brownfield remediation properties, many Congressional Directed Spending requests under the Transportation & Housing Urban Development Appropriations Bill, Interior & Environmental Appropriations Bill, Energy & Water Appropriations Bill, and the Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Bill – all for various city projects.

Branine provided a real estate update, noting that the Barnhart lease amendment has been executed.

Branine stated that there are 10 working real estate items along with upcoming terminations. Branine added that there are currently six land prospects.

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

Summers Miya noted that the Good of the Order report was unintentionally left out of the Commission packet.

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

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 10:19 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 10:20 a.m. for 60 minutes to discuss RCW 42.30.110(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 11:20 a.m.

The regular meeting was reconvened at 11:20 a.m.

Commissioner Bill O'Neil read a statement addressing the second complaint submitted on December 10, 2025, by former Commissioner Roy Keck against Commissioner Scott Keller.

O'Neil stated there were a total of five complaint items, four of the five were determined to have insufficient evidence.

The fifth complaint was evaluated to be determined whether there was sufficient evidence to proceed with an investigation.

O'Neil explained that the fifth complaint item concerned whether, while Scott Keller served as Port executive director, he gifted Port land to Cannon Hill to build a building, which Hill then sold the building to the Tri-Cities Steel Drum Band for \$150,000 and then Keller executed a land lease with the Tri-Cities Steel Drum Band for no monetary value.

O'Neil stated, in summary, there is no evidence that Commissioner Keller, while he served as executive director of the port, gifted land to Cannon Hill. The evidence established that Port entered into a 20-year ground lease with Cannon Hill for raw land with a negotiated rent amount. The investigation could not find evidence that Commissioner Keller presented this 20-year lease to the Commission for approval as would have been required by his delegation of authority. However, this matter was outside of the scope of this investigation.

Second, whether Commissioner Keller, while serving as Executive Director, executed a ground lease with Tri-City Steel Drum Band for no monetary value. In summary, the investigation was unable to determine whether the leases were, which then-Executive Director Scott Keller signed on behalf of the Port of Benton with the Tri-City Steel Drum Band were for no value, or that he intentionally violated public gifting laws. The former Port General Counsel reviewed and possibly drafted these leases. At the time, in 2012, he determined that a short-term lease, exchanging rent for four performances per year by the band at Port functions, was a fair exchange and did not violate public gifting laws.

Third, whether the leases with Cannon Hill and the Tri-Cities Steel Drum Band went to the commission. In summary, the investigation found no evidence that the 2008 20-year ground lease with Cannon Hill went to the commission. With respect to the Tri-Cities Steel Drum Band leases, they were all short-term leases that were within the executive director, Scott Keller's delegation of authority.

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion based on the investigative findings and the recommendation from Port of Benton attorney, that this commission dismisses Mr. Keck's December 10, 2025, complaint. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Commissioner Scott Keller abstained. The motion carried.**

**Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion that this Commission authorizes the Interim Executive Director to release the HR report. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion and the motion was unanimously passed by the Commission.**

#### **K. ADJOURNMENT**

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 11:26 a.m.

  
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Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary