

PORT OF BENTON
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES
May 13, 2026

A. CALL TO ORDER: The regular monthly meeting was called to order at 8:30 a.m. at 3250 Port of Benton Blvd. Richland, WA 99354.

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

PORT STAFF PRESENT: Ron Branine, Quentin Wright, Summers Miya, Audrey Burney, Shaylee Nilsson, Bryan Bell, Brandin Lopez, Stuart Dezember

ALSO PRESENT: John O’Leary, Gravis Law; Herb Brayton, Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Jon Ray, Richland Airport; Davis Raile, KNDU; Cliff Dyer, Richland Airport; Council Member Shayne Van Dyke, City of Richland; Steve Agni, Willow Pointe Development; David Kern, Tri-Cities Rowing Association; Guy Auld, Willow Pointe Development; Pete Rogalsky

The following attendees attended via remote communications: Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Rachel Visick, Tri-City Area Journal of Business; Jorge Celestino; Bryan Condon, Century West; Lynn Carlson; Dan Hanson, Apple Valley News; Carl and Debbie; Angela Sarceno-Lyman; Julia Mora; Mardie Romero; Christy Rasmussen

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 Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving the agenda for May 13, 2026, Commission meeting, approval of minutes from the April 8, 2026, Commission meeting, Approval of minutes of the April 29, 2026, Special Commission meeting, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll for the month of April, totaling \$808,437.57

D. PUBLIC COMMENT

Lynn Carlson:

Expressed concerns over: Costs and authorization of the Supreme Court appeal regarding the Port associated parties; the timing and transparency of release of findings from the internal water hookup investigation; status and due process for Executive Director Diahann Howard; concerns about an alleged \$50,000 public funds expenditure for HR

consulting/report, questioning potential conflicts of interest and lack of inclusion (not interviewing Diahann Howard); the need for public accountability, expedited resolution and restorative process rather than criminal legal involvement.

E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

1. Welcome & Update from Steve Agni and Guy Auld, Willow Pointe Development - Guy Auld, Steve Agni (Willow Pointe Development) and Dave Kern (Tri-Cities Rowing Association)
 - Proposal for new recreational rowing and paddle sports facilities.
 - Location: Port Lands south of Battelle Blvd. and east of Richardson, adjacent to storm drain pond/lift station.
 - Footprint: 60,000 sq ft, utilizing existing informal launch area for river access.
 - 5,000 sq ft, 2-level boathouse with spaces for rowing/paddle equipment storage, club dryland training, social/event space and food and beverage services.
 - Economic and community benefits: Cited success in similar projects (Austin, TX). The sports tourism sector is quickly growing, expected to draw amateur sporting events and drive revenue. Ancillary paddle-sport rentals (kayaks, paddleboards) are recognized as major revenue generators.
 - Community/Educational opportunities: Partnership interest from Pocock Rowing Center (Seattle), desire to introduce youth programs. Facility improvements would support external grant funding.
 - Project vision and next steps: Sale/Leaseback or comparable development agreement proposed; Emphasis on limited ecological impact (limited bank disturbance, minimal new dock required, permits (JARPA) anticipated to be feasible). Long-term public access protected by ground lease; increases the value of the surrounding land and complements the existing Port missions.

Desire for further conversations with Commissioners and staff after presentation.

2. Resolution 26-34, A Resolution of the Port of Benton Providing a Hiring Policy

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine introduced the adoption of a new formal hiring policy; a structured 12-step process from recruitment through selection. Addresses historic lack of formal process and aims for clarity, effectiveness and legal compliance. Legal Counsel (John O'Leary Present) reviewed and approved policy and accompanying materials.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller seconded by Lori Stevens and unanimously passed by the Commission approving Resolution 26-34. Recognized significant staff contribution in policy development.

3. Resolution 26-35, A Resolution of the Port of Benton Providing a Public Relations Policy

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine introduced Port of Benton, providing a Public Relations Policy, assigning all public-facing communications and materials origination/approval to the manager of communications and public relations or the Executive Director. Aimed at clarifying practices into written policy.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission to approve Resolution 26-35.

4. Charter Communications Easement Request 9th St. – Technology and Business Campus

Engineering and Capital Development Senior Manager Brandin Lopez introduced a request from Charter who is seeking an easement to cross Port property (near 9th St/fire station) – purpose to serve a customer North of 9th St. Work Details include Open Trench vs. boring, yet to be finalized. Further feasibility and coordination are required.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission to approve the Charter easement request.

5. RGW Enterprises Contract Update

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine requested adding \$80,000 to the contract for project support during transitions on projects (noted: Rail, Build, Direct appropriation of federal grants).

Existing contract: \$45,000 (\$43,000 invoiced to date). New funds will bridge the “obligation phase” of major projects; eligible expenses will be covered by grants.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the Contract Update for RGW Enterprises.

6. Proclamation 26-01 – Honoring Robert D. Larson

Marketing and Communications Manager Summers Miya introduced the Proclamation to Honor Robert D. Larson; Event Date dedication is June 4, 2026. Larson honored 27 years of service as Port Commissioner and as the driving force behind securing the USS Triton Sail and establishment of USS Triton Sail Park. Proclamation to be read at ceremony with family in attendance.

Commissioner Bill O’Neil read Proclamation 26-01.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission; the Proclamation was formally adopted and will be presented at the event.

7. Richland Airport Water Utility Ad Hoc Committee update:

Port Attorney John O’Leary (Gravis Law) reported the report was submitted May 11, 2026; the Committee reached consensus on all findings; Commissioners will review and may discuss further. Appreciation expressed to the committee for their efforts.

F. INFORMATION REPORTS

1. Grants Update

Engineering and Capital Development Senior Manager Brandin Lopez provided an update on grant projects:

Build / Raise Grant (\$9.56 million):

\$9.56 million via DOT; first application submitted – contracting expected in several months.

Commerce Grant 25-96647-125 (\$232,800)

\$232,800 for design (including rail, pads, lighting, etc.); new project manager is being assigned by the agency.

Direct Appropriation:

A \$2.5 million grant for expanded rail spurs; contracting phase underway.

CERB Grant / Loan

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell explained that the project is moving very rapidly (several meetings in the past weeks); expected to be on or ahead of schedule for July 16, 2026, implementation deadline.

Airport Update:

Airport Manager Quentin Wright addressed the Prosser Airport Runway Project; on schedule/ahead of schedule; wide and narrow crack repair, lighting, slurry seal and striping to be finished before Memorial Day runway reopening (contractual milestone) and the contractor is Western United Civil Group.

Richland Apron Project: Granite Construction low bidder (just under \$1M).

Upcoming Events:

Prosser Flag and Flight Festival (airport/farmers' market, June 6 official kickoff; preview on May 30).

Richland Airport: Career Fair and Formation Clinic later in May.

Public Meeting next week at Richland Library.

Capital Projects Update:

Engineering and Capital Development Senior Manager Brandin Lopez provided an update on several capital projects.

Car (Rail) Charge:

Rate set at \$71/car, retroactive to Oct. 1, 2025; approximately \$360,000 in retroactive fees due as of March 2026; projected annualized revenue of \$800,000. Final minor legal issues are being resolved, approval/signature anticipated in June.

Steptoe Rail Crossing

The full road and rail closure is scheduled for May 14-17, 2026. Work will occur Thursday through Sunday, replacing the crossing panels, rail and signals.

Traffic control and public outreach are handled by the contractor and the city.

Fee Schedule Update:

New comprehensive fee schedule under development for all Port Services (development/review fees, conference room, etc.); expected June/July.

Phase 1 Waterfront (Maul Foster Report):

Preliminary report received, phased approach with shoreline/critical area/JARPA compliance; Report and Presentation to follow.

G. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS

Commissioner Bill O’Neil expressed appreciation for the Spring Newsletter and for cross-departmental collaboration.

Commissioner Lori Stevens stated that she attended the Prosser Chamber Luncheon, noting that the Prosser Farmers’ Market is preparing to launch on June 6; a preview event on May 30, and will move to the Prosser Airport for the Prosser fly-in event on June 13.

Stevens stated that the Scottish Fest event will be held on June 20.

Commissioner Scott Keller had no comments.

H. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS

1. Finance:

Director of Finance, Stuart Dezember, provided an update on several finance-related projects:

- I-9 reviews for all staff completed
- Clifton Larson Allen (CPA firm) assisting with 2025 annual report (Due May 30, 2026); on track for timely filing
- State Auditor to begin 2026 audit on June 1 due to \$1M + federal funds expenditure (federal audit required for September deadline)
- President O’Neil confirmed as the board’s audit representative for the upcoming audit

- 2026 Budget deep-dive underway; proposal to schedule special budget workshop with commission for last week of May/first week of June

2. Port Attorney

Contract Port Attorney John O’Leary stated that he had no report for regular session; multiple pending items to be discussed in executive session.

3. Executive Director (Interim)

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine provided an update on the day-to-day at the Port.

- Noted new team member: Stuart (CPA, certified court professional manager, CGMA) returning with prior Port experience (2003-2020).
- Recent Activities: Hosted Benton Franklin Council of Governments public meeting.
- Crow Butte master plan open house held in Paterson – well attended, 500+ survey responses as of May 9 (survey open through May 15).
- Attended Commissioner one-on-one meetings, airport training, meetings/luncheons, and site visitations (Steptoe Crossing).
- Upcoming Conferences: WAMA (Airport Manager Quentin Wright & Commissioner O’Neil), WPPA Spring (Marketing & Communications Manager Summers Miya).
- June 4 event honoring Commissioner Larson is being finalized.

Real Estate Updates:

Lease modifications/new agreements: Central WA Corn Processors (10-year lease) and eight additional leases or lease modifications in progress, seven rental prospects, two land prospects

I. FOR THE GOOD OF THE ORDER

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

J. EXECUTIVE SESSION

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 9:25 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 9:25 a.m. for 45 minutes under RCW 42.30.110(c), (f), (g) and (i) to discuss real estate, evaluate personnel and to discuss potential litigation/legal risks with Port counsel. It was noted that the regular meeting would be reconvened at 10:10 a.m. At 10:10 a.m., 30 minutes were added to the executive session. At 10:40 a.m., 15 minutes were added to the executive session. At 10:55 a.m., 5 minutes were added to the executive session.

The regular meeting was reconvened at 11:00 a.m.

Commissioner Bill O’Neil clarified a few items:

“The Commission gives this update on certain pending employee matters, and to clarify the recent investigations have not been halted.

The investigations are temporarily paused on the advice of legal counsel for due process reasons, pending the ruling by the Washington Supreme Court on the remaining recall petition issues.

Upon the ruling, which is expected in the near term, the investigation will re-commence in the sequential order that they were raised:

1. Investigate complaints involving the Executive Director leadership and management
2. Investigate complaint by the Executive Director of retaliation (for being suspended while the above investigation is ongoing).

Pending the investigation outcome, the Commission will review the results/recommendations and appropriate action will be taken.

Because these are pending legal matters, this concludes our remarks, except to say:

We are proud of the current management and staff at the Port, who are moving the Port forward despite the outside distractions, and we look forward to continued progress on all of the Port's missions."

K. ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 11:02 a.m.



Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary