

**PORT OF BENTON
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES
July 8, 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

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

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

ALSO PRESENT: John O'Leary, Gravis Law; Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Jon Ray, Richland Airport; Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation; Jane Hagarty; Roy Keck; Marie Noorani; Eugene Pratt; Michelle Hrycauk Nassif, WSU Cougar Tracks

The following attendees attended via remote communications: Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Bryan Condon, Century West Engineering; Angela Sarceno-Lyman, Shaylee Nilsson, Mardie Romero, Christy Rasmussen, Sheri Collins, Julia Mora, Jorge Celestino, Rachel Mercer, Joe Pisca, Stuart Dezember, Joe Quick, Bunge; Corey Denkla, Bunge; two unknown phone numbers

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

1. Approval of Agenda

2. Approval of minutes of June 10, 2026, Commission Meeting

3. Approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll for the month of June, totaling \$2,684,723.38

4. Acceptance of work to Columbia Sweeping Services, 2345 Stevens Drive, back lot seal coat project, \$86,319.20 (Includes WSST)

5. Acceptance of work to Impervious Roof Coatings, 2579 Stevens Drive Roof Coating Area #1, \$126,078.53 (Includes WSST and one \$7,450.72 Change Order)

6. Acceptance of work to Impervious Roof Coatings, 2579 Stevens Drive Roof Coating Area #3, \$118,895.91 (Includes WSST)

7. Acceptance of work to Granite Construction Company, Port of Benton Boulevard Asphalt Replacement Project, \$91,049.28 (Includes WSST)

8. Resolution 26-48, a Resolution of the Port of Benton to cancel Warrant No. 086273, which was printed with errors

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commission, approving the agenda for the July 8, 2026 Commission meeting, approving the minutes from the June 10, 2026 Commission meeting, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll for the month of June, totaling \$2,684,723.38, acceptance of work to Columbia Sweeping Services, 2345 Stevens Drive Back Lot Seal Coat Project, \$86,319.20, acceptance of work to Impervious Roof Coatings, 2579 Stevens Drive Roof Coating Area #1, \$126,078.53; with one \$7,450.72 change order, acceptance of work to Impervious Roof Coatings, 2579 Stevens Drive Roof Coating Area #3; \$118,895.91, acceptance of work to Granite Construction Company, Port of Benton Boulevard Asphalt Replacement Project; \$91,049.28 and approval of Resolution 26-48, a Resolution of the Port of Benton to cancel Warrant No. 086273, which was printed with errors.

D. PUBLIC COMMENT

Eugene Pratt, who introduced himself as president of Citizens for a Better Port, stated that the Washington State Supreme Court ruled on July 2, 2026 that the recall against all three Commissioners is legally sufficient, and the highest court has confirmed that there is clear intent to retaliate against an employee. Pratt stated there were no grounds for the suspension of Diahann Howard. Pratt noted that a prolonged recall campaign will cost a lot of money and time and asked the Commissioners to resign now.

Roy Keck, former Port of Benton Commissioner, read a prepared public statement. (See Exhibit A).

Jane Hagarty, former Port of Benton Commissioner, noted deep concern for the future of the port and the cost going to the taxpayers. Hagarty stated that she held the role of Port Commissioner for 25 years and adhered to Washington State law and ethical standards. Hagarty stated that the three Commissioners should resign and stated that their actions have hurt the Port district.

Clif Dyer, Richland Airport tenant, stated that the current happenings are not being caused by the current Commission, but are in fact, caused by those who have lost their elections. Dyer stated that the public has voted for the current Commission and any recent turmoil has been caused by a small group of people in the community.

Christy Rasmussen, former Port of Benton Commissioner, expressed concern over recent setbacks and costs that could have been avoided and the Commission alienating itself from the community. Rasmussen strongly encouraged “service above self” and encouraged the Commission to resign.

E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS

1. Welcome and Update, Washington State University Cougar Tracks; Michelle Hrycauk Nassif

Michelle Hrycauk Nassif provided an update on the WSU Cougar Tracks program, noting 700% growth in two years, 436 Students, and 180 Businesses reached; expanded offerings from initial online business courses to leadership, online certificates (DOE-funded workforce training), and community-engaged workforce workshops; an Art of Pairing workshop, at the Wine and Culinary Center, which attracted 34 Students and 17 Businesses focusing on hospitality and wine service; and the launch of the Resilient Business Builders Network (with Regional Chamber). Hrycauk Nassif also recognized the Port's investment in regional higher education and workforce.

2. Tenant Spotlight, Tri-City Mobile Drug & Alcohol Testing, Dawn Schurman

Due to a scheduling conflict, Tri-City Mobile Drug & Alcohol Testing was unable to provide a tenant spotlight.

3. Resolution 26-43, a Resolution of the Port of Benton Authorizing the Execution of a Conditional Release of Ground Lease with Central Washington Corn Processors, Inc. and Providing Related Matters

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney provided background on Central Washington Corn Processors (CWCP) and Bunge Grain, noting that CWCP is currently in the process of sharing improvements and noted that the Port has been in negotiations with Bunge on a long-term lease for Commission consideration.

Burney introduced Corey Denkla and Joe Quick, who provided a high-level presentation and background on the Bunge company, pointing out that Bunge is a global ag processor and distributor that has recently merged with Viterro Company.

It was highlighted that the Richland Asset complements Bunge's national footprint, offering access to major dairy/feedlot regions in WA, OR, and ID. Bunge is a top 20 container exporter domestically. Its local presence will support the Regional Ag Supply Chain (Darigold's \$1B investment, more cows in the region).

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission; Resolution 26-43, a Resolution of the Port of Benton Authorizing the Execution of a Conditional Release of Ground Lease with Central Washington Corn Processors, Inc. and providing for related matters.

4. Resolution 26-44, a Resolution for The Port of Benton Approving a Lease Agreement with Bunge USA Grain, LLC

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney provided an update on the original ground lease with CWCP.

Burney stated that CWCP is in the process of selling their improvements. Burney reviewed highlights of the proposed lease, noting that it will become effective only upon closing of the CWCP transaction.

Burney highlighted the premises of the lease area and site map, noting different lease areas. Burney provided an overview of the lease terms, including terms, rent structure, and a rail operations plan.

Burney recommended approval of Resolution 26-44.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving Resolution 26-44, a Resolution for The Port of Benton Approving a Lease Agreement with Bunge USA Grain, LLC.

5. Resolution 26-49, a Resolution of The Port of Benton Authorizing Change Order No. 1 for Prosser Airport Pavement Rehabilitation and Lighting Replacement Project

Quentin Wright, Airport Manager, explained additional rock needed for weed control, beacon/lightwork and other minor changes. Wright added that one smaller change order is anticipated.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving Resolution 26-49, a Resolution for The Port of Benton, Authorizing Change Order No. 1 for the Prosser Airport Pavement Rehabilitation and Lighting Replacement Project.

6. Port of Benton Barge Complex Shore Power Deployment – Amendment 4

Brandin Lopez, Engineering and Capital Development Senior Manager, stated that the City of Richland requires a fire line for fire safety requirements, due to the expansion of the public and cruise line considerations. \$27,000 in design fees were authorized for a new 8-inch line to the high dock, which enables future domestic water use.

A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller, and unanimously passed by the Commission approving Amendment 4 for the Port of Benton Barge Complex Shore Power Deployment.

7. Treetop Update and Boundary Line Adjustment

Audrey Burney, Director of Economic Development, stated there is an ongoing negotiation for a 40-acre lot purchase in the Prosser Wine and Food Park. Burney explained that Treetop will maintain the orchard temporarily; Port staff will handle the maintenance.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and unanimously passed by the Commission; Approving a Boundary Line adjustment related to Treetop per City of Prosser standards.

F. INFORMATION REPORTS

1. Grants Update

BUILD Grant – Lopez stated: \$9.56 million USDOT; scope is finalized; the contract revision is under review; aiming for August signature.

CRISI Grant – \$2.5 million; moving forward, to follow BUILD Grant timeline.

WA Commerce Grant – \$232,000; to support design.

CERB Loan – Bryan Bell stated: contract draft returned and board approval expected next week.

RCO Planning Grant – Bell provided an update on the RCO planning grant for \$200,000, with no match. Application due for Crow Butte wastewater ponds, determination in September with awards in October.

2. Capital Projects Update

Brandin Lopez stated that the Steptoe Street/Tapteal Rail Crossing is in the first round of paving. The train car counter is in ongoing testing; AI readers are installed and operational; it is in the final programming process. The car charge billing to the railway companies is to go retroactive to October 1, 2025.

Bryan Bell updated that the chip seal on Richardson Road is to be finished by July 9, 2026, with striping to follow.

3. Airports Update

Quentin Wright stated that the Prosser Airport Runway re-marking is near completion. The apron reconfiguration is to begin August 17, 2026, and flyers will be sent out.

Wright explained that Resolution 26-47 was passed last month and asked for a motion to approve the Century West Contract for \$185,000.

A motion was made by Commissioner Scott Keller, seconded by Commissioner Bill O'Neil, and unanimously passed by the Commission to approve the Century West Contract for \$185,000.

4. Crow Butte Update

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine stated that Crow Butte reservations are up 10.5% versus the prior year; parking Lot revenue is down, with revenue YTD \$116,558 and projected \$182,000 for 2026.

G. DIRECTOR REPORTS/COMMENTS

1. Real Estate

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney stated that there are five leases executed or renewed: Cook, Verdon, Tri-Cities Testing and Pacific Green Fertilizer. Burney stated that there are new prospects for several facilities, including a wind turbine processor at Stevens Drive, adding that many are interested in 2019 Butler Loop.

2. Marketing

Marketing & Communications Manager Summers Miya stated there is high demand for the USS Triton Public Tours on the third Thursday scheduled dates, adding that tours are at full capacity through November. Miya added that additional tours have been added this summer.

Miya stated that she assisted with Prosser Airport project notices, assisted with project communication related to the Richardson Road Pavement Project, assisted with preparation for Brandin, Audrey, and Quentin to provide an update to the Benton Franklin Council of Governments Economic Development Committee and attended that presentation in mid-June.

Miya stated that she attended two Port of Kennewick ribbon-cutting events. Miya noted that she spent the day at Crow Butte Park with Mardie, the comms consultant and videographer, obtaining footage for the tourism and marketing campaign. Miya offered a big “thank you” to the Crow Butte team for their assistance with the shoot.

Miya noted that she attended various meetings, including hosting the National Park Committee meeting at the Port office, kicked off the Entrepreneurial Awards event committee meetings with Fuse and Richland Rotary, and attended the Regional Chamber monthly luncheon.

Miya reminded the team that the Tenant Appreciation BBQ is Thursday, August 6, 2026 at the Clore Center in Prosser.

Miya added that she participated in a recent 90-day administrative check-in with administrative assistants, Mardie Romero and Shaylee Nilsson.

3. Port Attorney

Port Attorney, John O’Leary, stated that he had no items for the regular session but will have items for the executive session.

4. Finance Director

Stuart Dezember stated the car charge billing system is now operational. Dezember added that the 2025 Financial Statement Audit is underway; a single audit is required, and the entrance conference is scheduled for July 15.

5. Interim Executive Director

Ron Branine stated that the Walter Clore A/V system is up and he participated in a walk-through.

Branine noted that he has participated in extensive partnership meeting activities with tenants and potential tenants and Steptoe/240/Center Parkway check-ins.

Branine noted that he met with the Northwest Seaport Alliance, had federal grant discussions, attended the Benton-Franklin Council of Governments Economic Development Committee meeting, and attended the RCO grant meeting, port operations and dinner with Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

Branine stated that he met with the City of Richland Police Department for a new camera initiative with additional details pending.

H. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS

Commissioner Stevens stated that she attended the Prosser Flag and Flight Festival and thanked everyone for the wonderful community event. Stevens added that she also volunteered at the Prosser Visitor Center, noting her appreciation for everything the Prosser Chamber of Commerce does for the community.

Commissioner O'Neil stated that there is a Richland Airport walking tour Friday, July 10 at 8:30am.

Commissioner O'Neil read a prepared Statement (See Exhibit B).

I. EXECUTIVE SESSION

The regular Commission meeting was recessed at 9:59 a.m., with an announcement that an Executive Session would commence at 10:00 a.m. for 45 minutes under RCW 42.30.110(c), (f), (g) and (l) 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 10:45 a.m.

The regular meeting was reconvened at 10:45 a.m.

J. RECONVENE COMMISSION MEETING

Commissioner Bill O'Neil made a motion to approve a legal services agreement with Goldstein Law Group for Investigation Oversight. Commissioner Lori Stevens seconded the motion. Motion carried.

Commissioner Keller made a motion to approve employment contracts for Ron Branine and Stuart Dezember. Commissioner O'Neil seconded the motion. Motion carried.

K. ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Bill O'Neil adjourned the meeting at 10:47 a.m.

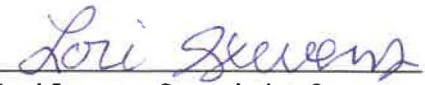

Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary

Exhibit A

I'm Roy Keck, a former Port of Benton Commissioner for 18 years and I have a direct question for this commission,

I'd appreciate a clear answer, either now or in writing before the next meeting.

The Washington State Supreme Court's ruling affirms that Executive Director Diahann Howard's suspension has been found, **by two courts now**,

to show clear intent to retaliate against her for raising concerns about misconduct at this Port.

That is a serious finding.

It means the person who did the right thing - reporting wrongdoing is being punished for it, and a court has said so.

So my question is straightforward: What is the current status of the investigation into Ms. Howard's suspension, and what is this commission's timeline for reinstating her?

Ms. Howard has now been out of her position for months while this Port has spent public funds on outside counsel and consultants to defend individual commissioners. Last meeting you approved \$275,000 for more legal fees.

Meanwhile, the employee the courts say was retaliated against for reporting problems has not been returned to her job.

The public deserves to know: Is there a concrete date by which this investigation will conclude? Will Ms. Howard be reinstated, and if so, when?

And if this commission does not intend to reinstate her, on what basis, given the court's findings, does it justify that decision?

Or will you continue your retaliation and hostile work environment that you have created?

I also want to express further concerns of consideration of any employment contracts for the Director of Finance position when Alicia Meyers retaliation case has not been concluded.

I'm asking for a date, and I'm asking that this commission put its answer on the public record — not in a closed session, but here, where the taxpayers who are paying for all of this can hear it.

I look forward to hearing your response to the taxpayers.

Commissioner Comments

July 8th 2026

Out of respect for the process, I have refrained from making any comments about the actions taken against all three Port of Benton commissioners.

In the wake of the State's Supreme Court disappointing ruling last week, I do have some brief remarks.

It's important for me to review the facts, as opposed to pure political spin which has been predominately reported on, over the past few months.

We must be reminded of those actual FACTS, and some of the evidence that supports them:

On Jan 3rd of this year, all three commissioners were informed by the Port's attorney that employee complaints had been submitted to him. These complaints were against Executive Director Diahann Howard. On the Jan 4th Special Commission Meeting, this commission reviewed and discussed in executive session, and took reasonable action in public session to respond to these complaints.

ACTIONS TAKEN:

1. We began the process of conducting an investigation into the complaints against the Executive Director.
2. The decision to suspend the Executive Director with pay, was discussed in executive session, as is allowed by law, and in public session, ultimately approved by a motion to do so based on the following facts:

- **In 2019 there were a group of POB employees that filed complaints against, then, interim Executive Director Diahann Howard and Commissioner Roy Keck. The independent investigation concluded that both Commissioner Keck and Interim Executive Director Howard actions were retaliatory against Port Staff.**
- **Shortly after Diahann Howard was promoted to permanent Executive Director, an employee with 27 years at the Port, resigned. That employee explained (Quote), “The current work environment has been and is becoming increasingly hostile and negative and I find this is no longer a safe place for me to work” and (Quote)“the continued negativity and hostility from staff and management has resulted in the current work environment that has compromised my health”**
- **During my campaign last year, several current and former Port employees reached out to me with concerns of executive leadership failures and what they viewed as abuses of power by the Executive Director, causing many employees to seek employment elsewhere.**

- **Based on these employee concerns, a list was generated of all the people that have left the Ports employment totaling nearly 20 employees in the past 6 years. It is unclear of the exact reasons why each employee left the Port, but the sheer number of departures is significant. Comparing that to the 20 year period prior to Executive Director Howard taking over, there were a few employees that retired but no one quit. In contrast, during the 6 year period of Executive Director Howard's control, nearly 20 employees have moved on. That's approximately 20 out of 24 Port staff members.**

- **In our view, this Commission has a duty to oversee the health and safety of the Port, including management and staff. This Commission also has a duty to comply with the law.**

- **This Commission was advised, that, Executive Director Howard's employment contract has a specific clause to address this exact situation and what action the Port Commission may take.**
(Quote)
"The Port may suspend the employee, with pay, during any period in which the Port is investigating or determining whether cause for termination exists"

This Commission's actions taken on Jan 4th were solely based on these facts and nothing more. There were no other considerations discussed nor included in our deliberations.

We need you all to know that we put the health and safety of the entire POB staff and the Port's ability to carry out its commitments to this community, ahead of everything else, we will not allow political pressure to bend our will, or compromise that.

That is why the process of investigating the complaints against Executive Director Diahann Howard will now continue. We will ensure a thorough investigation is undertaken.

We cannot ignore the reports by employees or the findings of Human Resource Expert Eileen Griffin-Ray, where concerns regarding organizational and leadership failures were uncovered.

We also learned from our new Finance Director Stuart Dezember, who has in a very short time, uncovered several budget failures resulting in a budget shortfall of over a million dollars.

We do not know whether the current actions against us are motivated by the fear of what we may uncover next, but we are determined to stay the course and remain dedicated to cleaning up the mistakes of the past, in a transparent and open manner. Allowing us to move forward in partnership with our Staff, our customers, and the Community, to whom we serve.

Message to the Staff:

Please stay focused, as you have been, on the business of the Port. We have been so impressed by your professionalism and grateful for the work you all have performed. We see it and many members of our community have seen it. They have reached out to me and echoed the same appreciation for all of us, working so hard on their behalf, despite the distractions.

Final Thoughts:

- I want to Thank the Port Community for this chance to share these facts.
- We are confident in those facts and the evidence that supports them.
- We invite you to do your own review and assessment, all the documents referred to today are available to the public. Just go to the POB website and fill out a public records request.
- Going forward, we will continue to be guided by facts and law, continuing the Port's mission to pursue economic opportunities for all in our community. Please continue to join us in that mission