

**PORT OF BENTON  
COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES  
September 16, 2026**

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

**PRESENT:** Commissioner Scott D. Keller, Commissioner Lori Stevens. Commissioner Keller will be chairing in place of Commissioner O'Neil, who is unable to attend in person or via Zoom due to illness

**PORT STAFF PRESENT:** Stuart Dezember, Summers Miya, Audrey Burney, Bryan Bell, Brandin Lopez, Ron Branine, Quentin Wright, Jorge Celestino

**ALSO PRESENT:** Clif Dyer, Sundance Aviation; Len Burton, City of Benton City Mayor; Gareth Nisbet, Mark Underwood, Richland Airport; Gary Vegar, City of Prosser Mayor; Rachel Shaw, City of Prosser; Nicole Jech, Prosser Chamber of Commerce

**The following attendees attended via remote communications:** Wendy Culverwell, Tri-City Herald; Bryan Condon, Century West Engineering; Angela Sarceno-Lyman; Mardie Romero; Sheri Collins; Julia Mora; Dan Hanson, Apple Valley News; John O'Leary, Gravis Law; Shaylee Nilsson; One unknown phone number

The Commission noticed the meeting as required by RCW 42.30.070.

- B. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Commissioner Lori Stevens led those present in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

**C. CONSENT AGENDA**

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Approval of minutes of August 12, 2026, Commission Meeting
3. Approval of minutes of August 28, 2026, Special Commission Meeting
4. Approval of minutes of September 8, 2026, Special Commission Meeting
5. Approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll for August, totaling \$1,789,006.29
6. Consent to assignment of ground lease – Vitro Building, Richland Airport Business Park
7. Resolution 26-56, A resolution of the Port of Benton to cancel warrant no. 086447, which was printed with errors

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commissioners present, approving the agenda for the**

**September 16, 2026 Commission meeting, approving the minutes from the August 12, 2026 Commission Meeting, approval of minutes from August 28, 2026 Special Commission Meeting, approval of minutes for September 8, 2026 Special Commission Meeting, approval of vouchers and certifications, including payroll for August, totaling \$1,789,006.29, Consent to assignment of Ground Lease- Vitro Building, Richland Airport Business Park, approval of Resolution 26-56, a Resolution of the Port of Benton to cancel Warrant No. 086447, which was printed with errors**

#### **D. PUBLIC COMMENT**

No Comments

#### **E. ITEMS OF BUSINESS**

##### **1. Welcome and Update from Mayor Len Burton, City of Benton City**

Interim Executive Director, Ron Branine, introduced Mayor Len Burton of the City of Benton City.

Mayor Len Burton requested Port support for two community needs:

- The rebuilding of the community stage in the park serves as a central activity space and is part of Benton City's efforts to grow weekend markets and community events.
- Need help with roof repair at the Benton City Chamber of Commerce building, which is estimated to cost around \$16,000.

Mayor Burton said Benton County funding was being pursued for the stage, but additional funding of roughly \$100,000 to \$150,000 may still be needed.

Commissioners acknowledged the requests and said they would discuss the funding further.

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

Interim Executive Director, Ron Branine, introduced Nicole Jech with the Prosser Chamber of Commerce.

Nicole Jech, the Executive Director of the Prosser Chamber of Commerce, presented an overview of Chamber work and Community promotion:

- The Chamber's mission is to support growth and improvement in the business community. Core services include website listings, newsletter promotions, referrals, media promotions, membership luncheons, and a visitor information center.
- The Chamber organized 11 annual events and added 20 new members in 2026.
- Events highlighted included ribbon cuttings, Scottish Fest, and the Old-Fashioned 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Car Show. Scottish Fest drew about 1,600 attendees, and 2027 will be its 25<sup>th</sup> year.
- The Prosser Chamber is also helping promote Prosser through the Northwest Explorer video series; there are six videos produced or planned, including Prosser Vibe, Prosser Wellness, The Science of Winemaking, Winery Hospitality, A Day in Prosser, and the Creative District.
- The presentation emphasized tourism, business visibility, and community storytelling as economic drivers.

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

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine introduced Mayor Gary Vegar of the City of Prosser.

Mayor Gary Vegar described Prosser's strategic-planning process, which focuses on:

- Refreshing mission and vision statements
- Building goals through community participation, Surveys, and student engagement
- Bringing the work through council workshops and public sessions with facilitation support from Michelle Holt, Benton-Franklin Council of Governments

Mayor Vegar describes five council goals and how they connect to city services, budgeting, and measurable results. The city is using a prioritization framework that includes "musts," "needs," and "wants," with an emphasis on:

- Livability and quality of life
- Financial sustainability
- Economic development and jobs
- Infrastructure and transportation
- Operational excellence and communication

Current and recent efforts include:

- Park advisory work and grant applications for park improvements
- Prosser's first roundabout
- A 50/50 sidewalk repair program for homeowners and the city
- Comprehensive plan review, which is currently under state review
- Measuring results and using a corrective feedback loop to adjust priorities

Commissioners asked about development activity near the Hogue production facility and the wine industry's slowdown. Mayor Vegar explained that the area is becoming a storage container business site and that the city is leaning into broader marketing efforts because the agriculture and wine sectors are under pressure.

### 4. Washington State University Tri-Cities White Bluffs Lease

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney brought forward a 3-year lease with two 1-year options for WSU Tri-Cities at 3251 Port of Benton Blvd. for about 7,500 square feet. The lease supports professional, academic research, and educational services for the Hanford History Project. Burney also recommended waiving WSU's rent security deposit because WSU is a Washington State public institution; the waiver was described as limited to WSU and the current permitted use. The lease includes a thirty-day notice provision if grant funding is lost.

**A motion was made by Commissioner Lori Stevens, seconded by Commissioner Scott Keller and unanimously passed by the Commissioners present, approving the Washington State University Tri-Cities White Bluffs Lease and waiving the rent security deposit**

## 5. Long-Term Rail Operations Contract

Director of Capital Projects, Rail & Engineering Brandin Lopez opened discussion on the Port's long-term rail operator strategy because the current Columbia Rail agreement is month-to-month and expires January 31, 2027. Lopez described current responsibilities under the agreement, including rail operations, customer service, class 1 railroad coordination, emergency response, and day-to-day operations.

The Port pays Columbia Rail \$48,500 per month (\$582,000 annually) for operating services. Columbia Rail pays the Port \$14,037 per month (\$168,444 annually) for rent for use of Port-owned rail infrastructure and facilities. The Port may generate additional revenue through railcar storage and other activities authorized under the agreement.

The goal is to pursue a flexible five- or ten-year preferred contract term with optional renewal periods. The agreement will include clear performance standards, periodic review milestones, and termination provisions to maintain accountability and continued value to the Port and community. Lopez said he hopes to post the RFP within 2 weeks.

Commissioners supported the idea and appreciated Columbia Rail's efforts.

## 6. 2025 Financial Statement including Federal Audit Report

Director of Finance, Stuart Dezember, presented the 2025 audit results from the State Auditor's office. The state audit covered both financial statements and federal expenditures. The Federal audit scope included airport and railroad tie replacement projects because the Port spent \$1 million or more on federal funds. Dezember stated that, in reviewing the report, no findings were reported.

Management items identified for improvement included:

- Reassessing fully depreciated capital assets
- Updating the procurement policy to include federal requirements for small and minority-owned businesses, women's business enterprises, labor surplus area firms, and domestic preference language
- Correcting a \$38,000 cash overstatement tied to Yardi implementation deposits
- Correcting the use of a grant reporting number
- Completing the final audit submission more efficiently; although filed on time, it took 63 additional days to finish and reconcile fully

The Port has 346 zero-balance assets that were not reevaluated in 2025 and were originally purchased for about \$19 million. Staff will reassess useful lives, and dispose of or remove obsolete assets as needed.

Dezember stated that the audit report was scheduled to be published on the State Auditor's website on Thursday, September 17, 2026.

## 7. 2026 Budget Update

Director of Finance Stuart Dezember presented a budget update through July, emphasizing that the numbers were estimates but more current than the prior review material.

Major revenue changes include:

- Beginning cash was increased by \$1.7 million after the prior estimate was found to be incorrect
- Lease revenue was reduced because several anticipated leases were not executed
- 3110 Port of Benton Blvd. remains vacant, reducing expected lease revenue by \$360,000
- 2019 Butler Loop (the old Blue Star Property) had not been executed but was expected soon
- Track use revenue was revised from \$881,000 to approximately \$700,000 due to actual car counts
- Tenant utility reimbursements were corrected as they had not been invoiced in 2024 and 2025; approximately \$275,000 has been collected, with about \$330,000 originally unbilled
- Property tax revenue was reduced by \$680,000 due to an error in forms sent to Benton County
- Grant revenue was reduced approximately \$7 million because the Port will not spend the originally budgeted amounts in 2026

The Net Effect was:

- The Net operating income was reduced by \$683,000
- Net deficit increased by \$953,000
- Estimated ending cash increased by \$784,000

Dezember stated that the ending cash figure would become the starting point for the 2027 budget.

## 8. T-Hangar Building New Ground Lease Structure

Commissioner Keller stated that this item of business would be tabled until the October meeting.

## F. INFORMATION REPORTS

### 1. Grants Update

BUILD Grant / Southern Connection Rail Modernization Project:

Director of Capital Projects, Rail & Engineering Brandin Lopez said the Port continues to advance the White Bluffs Southern Connection Rail Line Rehabilitation Project, funded through a \$9.56 million federal BUILD Grant and a \$2.4 million Port match. Staff submitted the grant agreement to the U.S. Department of Transportation and are working through the federal contracting process. Lopez said he hopes for a resolution by November. Because of the timing delay, the Port plans to issue a design services RFP to keep the project moving.

Washington Department of Commerce Grant / CRISI Grant:

Brandin Lopez reported a \$232,800 Commerce Grant for design services related to additional rail spurs and rail yard development. The Port will leverage that work with a \$2.5 million CRISI Grant. The Port is using the funds for design and permitting activities and future construction efforts. Lopez stated the broader funding sequence may push the \$51 million effort into Quarter 1 2027.

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell provided a final round of project updates, including: The RCO Grant application for planning and engineering at Crow Butte moved to completed status and received the highest possible point count. Bell stated the RCO expects to publish results by October 21, 2026. If the planning grant is awarded, the Port will pursue a construction grant in November.

## 2. Capital Projects Update:

### Steptoe Rail Crossing review:

Director of Capital Projects, Rail & Engineering Brandin Lopez reported that the Steptoe Street Rail crossing improvement project is complete and fully open to traffic. The rail portion is in service, and final loose ends such as light adjustments and fiber connections are still being wrapped up.

### Paddle and Row Center –

Brandin Lopez said staff recently met with the Paddle and Row Center and are working through many details. Lopez expects to bring a bigger update and possibly a finalized MOU to the next meeting, followed later by a development agreement if the project moves ahead.

### Permit Center and Internal Process Improvements –

Lopez described a draft Permit Review Center on Port's website. The goal is to streamline permit submittals for utilities, traffic control, water lines, fiber requests, and other development-related approvals. The new portal would provide instructions, required materials, next steps, and automated email routing. Lopez said a fee schedule is also being developed to align with the new permit process.

### Surplus Rail Equipment –

Brandin Lopez said the Port is looking to sell old rail equipment that is no longer being used. Staff may bring forward items for disposal or sale and may coordinate with Facilities on a broader surplus list.

Construction Project Manager Bryan Bell stated that the design for the new building at 2501 Stevens Drive is about 90% complete. Staff is meeting with tenants and stakeholders, including Barnhart, to address relocation and design comments. A state energy-code change was delayed until July 2027, giving the Port more time and realigning the project schedule with Architects West for final design, permitting, and bids.

### 3. Airports Update:

Airport Manager, Quentin Wright, gave an update on the Richland Airport Apron Project. Wright said the project had minor setbacks due to asbestos piping near a fire hazard area, but it is back on schedule now. Wright said there will be a short period without self-serve fuel while work occurs around the fuel tanks. The Port received an unbudgeted \$27,000 from WSDOT Aviation to fund the project match.

The Richland Airport overlay process is moving ahead; a meeting is planned with Warsaw Aviation to review proposed zoning protections.

Wright said the Prosser Balloon Rally is also progressing; the runway will again be closed from 6:30 am to 8:00 a.m. for safety during the event. The FAA will be attending the event this year. Wright said the City of Prosser submitted a letter requesting about a quarter-acre of land outside the fence at Prosser Airport for the roundabout project; staff will return next month with a recommendation.

### 4. Crow Butte Update:

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine said fiscal year revenue for 2026 is up 5.38% because of the fee changes, but attendance is down 8.52%. The decline was partly attributed to higher fuel costs, including diesel prices around \$7.40 per gallon. The park is less than 30 days from closing.

## G. DIRECTOR REPORTS / COMMENTS

### 1. Real Estate

Director of Economic Development Audrey Burney reported that staff executed four agreements in the last month, including an HSI Compliance agreement and others involving North Coast Enterprise, Intera, and Tirridis.

Burney said the staff is working on nine additional items, including GSA, IT Development, ADIOC, and others.

HMIS plans to leave its MO404 space but wants to continue leasing the warehouse behind it. The modular building at MO404 may be demolished if it becomes vacant. The Port would need to budget for that.

Burney stated that other leasing and tenant updates include:

- White Bluffs Computational Facility moving into 3100
- HMIS, PNNL, Sigma building, and Bio-Gro are planning to leave by December 31, 2026
- Several rental and land prospects are being explored to backfill the vacancy
- Work is ongoing with BNSF to obtain a permit to remove trees at the Treetop property before moving forward with development

### 2. Marketing

Marketing & Communications Manager Summers Miya stated that third Thursday USS Triton tours have continued at full capacity since the last Commission meeting, noting that the Port has hosted the following groups since the August meeting: an additional third Thursday tour, Boys & Girls Club, Girl Scouts, Northwest Dodge Brothers, Combat Veterans local chapter (1<sup>st</sup> stop at

poker fun, fundraiser event) and tomorrow will be the September third Thursday tour and Friday the Silent Service Motorcycle group will be hosting an event of 50 people from around the region.

Miya stated displayed recent ads, including the Prosser Record Bulletin Balloon Rally ad, and the October Construction & Real Estate edition ad, which features 3110 and 3190, which are, or will be, available to potential tenants.

Miya stated that several press releases have been issued since the August meeting, Public Bus Tour, Richland Airport Project Begins (following up with weekly project updates), Port Invites Media to Take Flight During Great Prosser Balloon Rally Media Day.

Miya noted that she attended the August Chamber Legislative update at the Convention Center, continued committee duties for the Entrepreneurial Awards event, including flyer and press release, adding that the nomination window was extended one week.

Miya provided an update on the community outreach campaign, noting that the August Meta test is complete. The \$500 investment reached 21,000, with the ad being viewed over 32,000. The site experienced 582 confirmed visits, which brings ad cost to .86/visit. There were 726 click-throughs and over 5,300 interactions. Miya explained that the TikTok campaign is running now and the initial signs are really good.

Miya stated that she is working with the team on round two of the Comprehensive Plan updates. Miya noted that the public tour registration launched in early August and the tour will take place on Wednesday, September 30. There are currently 17 RSVPs.

Miya stated that the team enjoyed the Chukar Cherries visitor experience yesterday and a follow-up video will be shared in the near future. Miya added that the American World War II Heritage City signs have been installed throughout the North Richland Port district. Miya added that the IRONMAN event is coming up on Sunday, September 20 and the Port has assisted with communicating about the traffic plan and also provided the 3110 parking lot as a supply lot for the crew, through an indemnification agreement. Miya added that she will be attending the Balloon Rally Media Day with a media representative and RiverFest on Saturday, October 3, and invited the Commissioners to attend the event.

### 3. Port Attorney

Port Attorney John O'Leary stated that there were no items for the regular session.

### 4. Finance Director

Director of Finance, Stuart Dezember stated that he had no further items for his report.

### 5. Interim Executive Director

Interim Executive Director Ron Branine said he is continuing one-on-one meetings with managers and directors, as well as monthly all-staff meetings.

Branine said they are preparing for the 2027 budget, which will look and feel different. Finance Director Stuart Dezember will be able to elaborate as he prepares it. Progress is being made on the in-house counsel hiring process; finalists have been narrowed down.

Branine acknowledged the EDA discussion around the vacant building and the plan to pursue a letter supporting broader use beyond grant assurances.

Staff and Commissioners discussed using the building more effectively to improve the core area and market it better.

## **H. COMMISSIONER REPORTS/COMMENTS**

Commissioner Scott Keller thanked the entire staff.

Commissioner Lori Stevens thanked everyone; work is getting done, and the team is still focused on the mission.

## **I. RECESS TO EXECUTIVE SESSION**

The regular commission meeting was recessed at 10:09 a.m. with an announcement that an executive session would commence at 10:09 a.m. For 45 minutes with a brief 5-minute break before reconvening under RCW 42.30.110(1)(c), to discuss real estate; RCW 42.30.110(1)(i), to discuss with legal counsel regarding potential litigation/legal risks; RCW 42.30.110(1)(g), to evaluate the qualifications of a candidate for appointment or performance of a public employee. The regular meeting will reconvene at 10:59 a.m.

\*Attorney Carolyn Lake joined the meeting at 10:54 am.

At 11:05 a.m., it was announced that an additional 10 minutes would be added to executive session.

## **J. RECONVENE COMMISSION MEETING**

The regular meeting was reconvened at 11:15 am.

**Commissioner Scott Keller made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lori Stevens, and the motion was passed by those present, allowing Interim Executive Director Ron Branine to offer an employment agreement to candidate #1 to serve as the Port's in-house General Counsel.**

No other action was reported after the executive session.

## **K. ADJOURNMENT**

The regular meeting was adjourned at 11:16 am.



Lori Stevens, Commission Secretary