

Okanogan Board of Health (BOH)
Tuesday, June 11th, 2024, 1:30 PM

These notes were taken by a County Watch volunteer. Every attempt is made to be accurate. Notes are verbatim when possible, and otherwise summarized. Note taker comments or clarifications are in italics. These notes are published at <https://countywatch.org> and are not the official county record of the meeting. For officially approved minutes, which are normally published at a later time, see the Okanogan County Commissioners' website at <https://www.okanogancounty.org>.

Present:

Lauri Jones (LJ), Board of Health Director
Mike Harr (MH), Okanogan County Health District
Andy Hover (AH), County Commissioner, BOH
Jim Wright, BOH board member
Jon Neil (JN), County Commissioner, BOH board chairman (via Zoom)
Chris Branch (CB), County Commissioner, BOH board member
Jill Gates (JG), BOH, Secretary
Maria Hines (MaH), Blue Sky Minds
Krisha Warnstadt, Okanogan County Health District
Janice, Okanogan County Health District
Miss Jackson (MJ), community member (Zoom)

Time stamps refer to a recording posted on the County Watch website. (Recording is missing the first five minutes.)

Summary of Important Discussions:

- *Maria Hines presents non-profit Blue Sky Minds' food assessment covering farmers, needy consumers, food waste and infrastructure; 10-year Food Action Plan outlined; Food Council membership up from 35 to 135 members in two years*
- *Environmental Health Director Mike Harr faced with applying newly-signed bills reducing organic waste at solid waste plants, suggests opportunity to create new industry since no composting facilities in county*
- *Covid death reported, two pertussis cases in past two weeks; increase noted in EMS service calls and ER visits, some not emergencies, Health Officer Jim Wallace calls for systems to make services more available, or recognition of need to expand resources*
- *In community health report hiring woes mentioned, efficiency at Confluence praised, director Lauri Jones laments record-setting 20 overdoses in May*
- *Environmental Health Director satisfied, enthused after meeting with counterparts from other counties*

1 :30 - Food Assessment Program - MaH : My non-profit (*Blue Sky Minds*) is working for Okanogan County and Colville Reservation food systems in general, everything from the land food is grown on to the folks that are growing our food to the folks that are having a hard time accessing the food, to food waste and infrastructure. We're looking at the whole food system systematically and convening decision makers to see the problems that we can address (so) we can eventually collaborate together. ...Blue Sky Minds started a food council about two years ago. We've had a meeting every six months. Everyone would like to meet every quarter. It went from people meeting an

hour and a half to wanting to meet two hours, to wanting an hour of networking time after the sessions. We went from 35 people to 135, so there are a lot of people interested in getting together and some of the great impacts of (the meetings) are a lot of collaborations. Nils Johnson in Stevens County at Rural Community Action has \$600,000 in funding to be able to spend with farmers for the food pantry and for the food pantry on the Colville Reservation. He was able to meet with the farm manager at the Methow Valley Food Shed so he could get connected to the farmers so they could disperse food to the people that need it. That keeps the money in the county, it takes care of the farmers, it takes care of people who need food. There are lots of cool examples, but I came today because I wanted to report on the Community Food System Assessment which has taken a year and a half to put together and a lot of the community has put their stamp on this. ...Krisha (*Warnstadt*) helped a lot with the public health and nutrition pieces that are in the document. There's an educator from Pascal Sherman who provided information... Jeff Hardesty, school superintendent in Oroville, looked through some of the school lunch aspects of it, one of the ranchers in the Methow, she made sure... the ranchers were represented in the document. The bulk of it was put together by the technical writing students at WSU. I gave them an outline... They helped compile a lot of that information. This assessment gives us the big picture of food in our county... waste, infrastructure, school lunch program, nutrition, everything is in there. The next step is the 10-year Food Action Plan. This will be heavy on process, we'll go out to the community. I'm working with the Food Bank, different non-profits that will help get the surveys out. This will help inform what goes on the Food Action Plan. It's really important that we're hearing (*from*) all the voices within the county and the Colville reservation what we'd like to see with the food system... What will it take to not go hungry. So we get to think about... preserving farmland, creating better land access for our farmers. With property taxes going up and up we have some challenges. What can we do so farmers don't have to fight so hard. It's hard enough that they have to fight in the fields and deal with the weather and everything else. We'd like (*to remove*) some of those barriers to getting food on our table.

MaH encourages the board's input. She outlines the goals of the Food Action Plan : indigenous food sovereignty, resilient land practices for food production for generations to come (sustainable practices, land access), end hunger for all community members, economic security for agricultural and food retail businesses (advertising, cold storage, housing for labor...), and equitable healthy, culturally appropriate food access (nutrition and gardening education, a gleaning program for non conform produce).

MaH : About 40% of the food that's grown on the farm stays on the farm. Meanwhile we have a 52% food insecurity rate, so we could really close that gap if we have some of these solutions... (*for*) more local access to healthy food. *She mentions the problem of food pantries only being open for a few hours a week, preventing access by working people. Possible solutions : a mobile food pantry, and cold storage lockers for around-the-clock access. MH has passed out several copies of the assessment. LJ will send it to everyone by email. MaH asks if there are questions.*

16 : 22 - MH : Ken Kovalenko, the solid waste manager, and I have been having conversations. There's some new bills that have been signed into place to basically reduce organic waste going into the landfill. We've got one USDA packing facility already approved in our county and we've already got a conditional use permit on

another one so I am, in the next couple of weeks, going to be reaching out to people in the meat industry. We've got a real issue as far as the law being in place by 2027. We have zero composting facilities in our county. Zero rendering trucks. It's permit exempt... The big rendering trucks from Spokane aren't here anymore. Other counties are maxed out on their compost facilities. It's going to be a challenge trying to transport it out of the county. *MH thinks that the county shouldn't have to shoulder this, that it is an opportunity for stakeholders to create some sort of industry around this. He invites MaH to participate in a round table discussion. She thanks him for including her. She leaves the meeting to consult with a farmer in Tonasket.*

The Board approves the previous meeting minutes and the financial report.

22 :05 - Medical Officer's Report - JW : Communicable diseases are relatively low. Some cases have been reported in the last couple of weeks and one unfortunately resulted in death of the patient who had been in a facility with a higher level of care. We've been notified of two separate cases of pertussis over the past two weeks. They were not linked to each other. We have sent notice out and we are on close watch. We are getting ready for upticks on tick-borne illnesses, rabies, and the impact of wildfire smoke... I met with health care providers, with Lauri and her team, and there's continued concern with health care access. Wayne at Lifeline and Cindy Button at Air Methow were both noting increased volume of medical calls, people who are sick. Often times it's related to inability to access urgent care services so they have to call 911. At the same time Mid Valley Hospital reports they're seeing an increase in emergency room visits. Health care partners who operate out-patient clinics and urgent care report that their supply of staffing is less than sufficient to meet the demand that folks have right now. There are some hires that are coming throughout the summer but we're really struggling right now... We continue to work with partners on ways of overcoming (*this shortage*). ...Behavioral health access is quite the concern, regionally as it is locally. We also met with people from the epi-team in Chelan-Douglas counties. There is a mapping process for behavioral health access across the region that's ongoing but hopefully within the month or two we'll have some deliverables and a report saying where the biggest gaps are... and we can work with partners to cover some of those needs. I know it's been reported, and the (courts ?) with the sheriff's office have been busy with crime and homicides and some of that has a behavioral health component, increases in substance use disorder and opioid overdoses. A more robust behavioral health program would certainly help us (*inaudible*) a lot of those concerns that are unfortunately growing. We're paying close attention and looking for short term as well as long term solutions. If you are seeing solutions, please let us know.

AH : When there's an uptick in people using the ambulance, is it transportation cost, or is it people not having insurance so they want to go to the emergency room ? Is there any correlation... ?

JW : ...Sometimes it's off hours, and if they can't get to their local clinic because it's a weekend, they may need transport assistance to get to the next closest opportunity. Vance (?) is one of those organizations that has stepped up to help with transportation within the county. There's Trango as well but they don't run 24-7. It's something we need to do as we do our community health assessments, and have discussions around the results of those assessments. Access continually comes up

but we need to dig deeper than that and look at questions like the one you posed, ... encourage health care to be more available, to come up with systems to make their services more available, or recognize the need for expanded resources, expanded hours... If you talk to our EMTs, not all of our calls are emergencies that require their assistance.

LJ : 30 :26 - I want to piggy-back a little on what Dr. Wallace has mentioned. Talking with Wayne Walker, he has a need for six medics in Grant County. Four in Chelan County, four in Okanogan County. Besides Behavioral Health which is sorely understaffed in key areas such as mental health professionals. Confluence, uh, my nurse advisory committee meeting had a hundred openings for registered nurses. People are frustrated... On a positive note they did mention that Confluence is bringing on board in July a couple of new providers, and Three Rivers Clinic is bringing in an ER block (*nurse*). Family Health Centers has a couple of providers and Three Rivers said they've had walk-in spaces whenever somebody's needed that. We usually think in just our little block, Okanogan-Omak, but who's thinking of Three Rivers ? Just a thought. I was asked by Commissioner Neal about ARPA (*American Rescue Plan*) funding. I've talked to Josh (*inaudible*), our landlord, and there's a thought about (*inaudible*) our infrastructure but we really need to talk to the commissioners before, I want to put it on the agenda for next month. Also we're looking at an extended lease. It's a win-win for the county. Years ago we looked at grants to purchase a building. It was unsuccessful. There weren't any that met our needs. We really want to stay close to the county departments, especially building and planning. And the jail and juvy.

32 :56 - CB : Just my own observation from recent times, Confluence has been very responsive. I've experienced walking in the door and having them in ten minutes.

AH : Is that after hours ? The transportation thing, I can see—(*hesitates*)

CB : I've been finding that when I've gone there—there are services I just can't get at Mid-Valley—they have just been really great. For lab, EKG kind of stuff, I don't know if I'm just lucky.

LJ : I'm impressed with their cardiac that comes up, their endocrinology team that comes up—

CB : That virtual thing, their technology is pretty good. I've with Wayne about the potential for Confluence to expand. to make up for real hospitals... Another situation, I was involved in a conversation in Chelan County about EMS actually out in the field. And if they had the capacity, they were excited about being able to check in some people in the rural areas.

LJ : Community para-medecine—Cindy Button with Air Methow was part of a pilot that did (*that*) and during Covid we did the health checks. That really did take the burden off the hospital ERs. If Wayne and Cindy could hire enough paramedics...

CB talks about hiring problems not just in health but the jails and « ...everywhere. We steal from each other.» Employers attract workers with higher salaries. « I've seen nurses who stay at the fairgrounds RV park. We need people who are mobile. «

LJ : The only other thing that I have that is deeply concerning, and should be, as we hash through addiction, we've had a record number of overdoses in May. I'm not talking deaths but we've had those as well. Before we've had 10 to 15. We had 20 in May. It's very concerning trying to figure out what to do.

AH : Any questions ? All right. Environmental Health.

MJ: I was just wondering, that's not mostly like the homeless, these are regular citizens in our community, correct ?

LJ : These are people with addresses.

MH : Krisha and I had the luxury of going over to the summer (*inaudible*), conference. It was super-nice meeting with our counterparts, seeing how they used foundational public health funds to implement environmental health programs that were, in the history of public health, never really available, and they were able to expand out programs that are actually environmental health issues, and utilize a lot of those –

39 :30 - Internet interruption for 14 minutes. Connection re-established for several seconds during which CB is discussing a building near an elderly facility, an investment strategy for housing, and tax credits—« Things you've never seen before from Community Action. »

Meeting adjourned at 2 :24 p.m.