

Board of Okanogan County Commissioners

September 9, 2024 AM & PM

JN—Jon Neal, BOCC, Chair, District 3
AH—Andy Hover, BOCC, District 1
CB—Chris Branch, BOCC, District 2
LJ—Lanie Johns, Clerk of the Board
SM—Stacy McClellan, Deputy Clerk of the Board
MJ—Ms. Jackson, commenter
NB—Nick Bates, Fairgrounds Manager
PP—Pete Palmer, Director of Planning
TM—Tim Meadows, Maintenance Supervisor

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Summary of significant discussions:

- Ms. Jackson makes a comment about her daughter being harassed at the fair by the boyfriend of someone who has been previously served with a protection order. She says the protection order has been broken 11 times, but no one will take it seriously.
- Pete Palmer, Planning Director says the zone code revision will soon be ready for its comment period. The commissioners ask her to make a press release in hopes that the papers will all carry the story. The press release will be in addition to a legal notice. Palmer is also ready to start the process to update the Shorelines Management Plan.
- Nick Bates had a busy week during the fair. He reported that the barn managers did exceptional jobs in managing their barns.
- Commissioners meet with members of the Homeless Housing Coalition to discuss drawing up a strategic plan to deal with homelessness in the county. Commissioner Branch says a good plan will take a lot of work to develop.
- Commissioners meet in executive session for 35 minutes under RCW 40.32.110(1)(i), potential litigation with the sheriff, the undersheriff, one more person from the sheriff's department, Shelley Keitzman (Human Resources and Risk Management) and Esther Milner (Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor).
- Commissioners meet in executive session for 30 minutes under RCW 40.32.110(1)(i), potential litigation with Albert Lin (County Prosecutor) Shelley Keitzman and Esther Milner.
- Meeting adjourns for the day at 2:48.

-3:36:22—Pledge of Allegiance

JN—In an email to Karen (Beatty, Director of Central Services) I asked how hard it would be to move the audio-visual stuff during the court room remodels. It sounds simple.

Commissioners discuss an email that they think may be a phishing scam.

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-3:41:37—JN—It's 9:15. Time for public comment.

Ms. Jackson—It's not easy to make a comment, but it can bring awareness. When making a complaint against the system, that's not easy, either. I've been complaining for years about getting justice for my daughter's harasser.

My daughter called me Saturday to say that the harasser's boyfriend confronted her without the harasser around and was frightened and yelling for her to leave. My daughter said this was scary and intimidating. It was done before children at the fair. The harassed boyfriend has a (*inaudible*) as well as the harasser.

The sheriff has failed to take my report and reports of other witnesses in a timely manner. It would only take a few minutes to confirm a statement. The protection order has been broken over 11 times. I understand that some might not take this seriously, but this is serious. My daughter has had so much anxiety over a long time.

The harasser doesn't just harass my daughter but other daughters as well. We've all asked her and her friends to stop but the courts have said "You're not to harass even her friends or family or Social Media." For this to keep happening is not OK.

Can you please help find justice? It's getting worse again. Thank you for your time and service.

JN—All right. Thank you.

AH—Thank you.

-3:25:37—JN—Mo, you're up.

MG—I'm Maurice Goodall, Emergency Management. I don't have anything. The burn ban is still in effect. We'll talk to fire chiefs and see what they think. It's the ban that stops campfires.

MG—There were a few small fires, but they've all been put out.

JN—I'm impressed with how quickly they were put out.

MG—Not just fire fighters. I've seen video of people stopping their cars and stomping on the fire.

MG—Things could still happen. It's supposed to be windy, but it's starting to cool off.

MG—Any questions? No? OK, I'm done.

-3:23:17—JN—Pete?

PP—I'm Pete Palmer, Planning Director. Just a few quick announcements.

PP—Our permit tracking software is on-line now. We're currently tracking site analysis and applications as they come in, including the approvals that don't require a comment period. We're fine-tuning it. We'll have a tutorial tomorrow with Camden.

AH—Did you talk with Esther (Milner, Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor) about sending it to the Yakama Nation?

PP—I haven't talked about sending it anywhere, yet, but I'll talk to Esther.

PP—Second thing—two Fridays ago, I sent the zone code to the (*inaudible*) for legal review. We're preparing the updated SEPA checklist. It'll be ready for comment soon.

AH—When it goes out for comment, it'll cost a little more, but let's put it in all of the newspapers as a news blurb. We don't see the legal advertising a lot of the time, so how do we publicize it better?

PP—We had the public notice in all of the papers.

AH—Public notice gets buried back in the legal notices. Maybe it'll be better off if we ask them to put a little block on the front page.

CB—Do a new release. I don't know that it'll get it on the front page, though.

AH—Yeah. Do a news release.

MG—We have people subscribed to us for important meetings, etc. We can send the announcement out to our subscribers.

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PP—I was asked by Tadas (Kisielius, lawyer with VanNess Feldman) to put together a timeline. So, I'll try to get the hearing in the beginning of November. Should the hearing be during the day or evening?

AH—I think it should be in the evening at the Fairgrounds. If we can't zoom over there, so be it. We're trying to accommodate as many people as possible.

PP—I'm ready to start the process to update the Shoreline Management Plan (SMP) and the application process under Title 20 because of the stipulation. It'll have the minor changes with permits and software. The information will be in the packets going out for the next Planning Commission meeting. It'll get the process going.

JN—Sounds good.

PP leaves.

-3:17:23—JN—Tim?

TM—Good morning. I put in a cabinet in the Auditor's Office last Saturday. Rich put in the glass. I'll meet with Rich today about the Prosecutor's Office.

AH—Good. They had an issue the other day they were concerned about. A person had a gun on him, and he shouldn't have, but he did. He said he forgot, but a lot of people were worried about it. I think it'd be good to look at putting in counters in like in the Auditor's Office.

TM and AH talk about various doors in the Court House and whether they should be changed.

-3:04:59—TM—The fire alarm system at the Forest Service building doesn't work in the Day Care. It'll say there's a fire when there isn't. If they're going to renovate the building, they should just turn it off. The Day Care is compliant because they've got battery operated smoke alarms. I think the system that doesn't work should be disabled.

TM—I'm installing the tablets in the jail today. Their cable is supposed to be switched over from analog. LJ brings up a couple of items concerning Court House renovation, but she is very difficult to hear. One topic concerns wells at the fairgrounds. CB thinks the irrigation system discussion should include Nick Bates and Maurice Goodall, too.

AH—If the irrigation well can supply enough water for domestic use, we should use it for that and drill another well for irrigation.

Discussion continues about fairgrounds wells.

-2:42:39 NB—Nick Bates, Fairgrounds Manager. There were water lines broken at the fair before it even started. They weren't even run over. There were issues about the septic behind the new bathrooms. We needed to get it pumped and clean the screen.

NB—All and all, the Fair Commissioner was there, and he thought it was nice. He thought we needed to do some sprucing up. The little beef barn was fixed. Bobby Wilson and her daughter painted it all up and had a great display. They won a state award. He was very impressed.

NB—I met with most of the supers to see what we could do to improve the area. I'll go to the Horticulture Building and rebuild the displays. Do it during the winter.

NB—A couple of problems with water in the huts. MG helped to repair it.

NB—There was a lot of garbage.

NB—I put in a lot of hours. Worked 4 days starting at 5:30 AM and left at midnight or later.

NB—I'm going to up the security. I had three people there all night long, but we need more patrol. I saw a guy yesterday smash the chain link fence, so he didn't have to walk around. I have a photo of his car.

NB—The contract for the food vendors needs one line added to it. We need to know who needs 110 and who needs 220. It'll make set-up a lot easier and there will be fewer cords running all over.

AH—Check the application.

NB—I will.

AH—How'd the auction go?

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JN—I talked to Brent, and he said it was over \$550,000 without the fir and feathers.

NB—Pam was there all weekend. Ticket Tomato worked well.

AH—Here’s a thought I’ve had for two years. The government makes the Fair difficult because of constraints we have to have for purchasing and contracts. I know a lot of counties have gone to non-profits to run the fair. What do you guys think?

JN—I’d have to see the details.

AH—Pam has to go everyday because of the government rules for handling cash.

CB—It would be interesting to see how those who’ve done that got there. You’d have to have someone interested in forming a non-profit. And there would still be things the commissioners had to decide on.

AH—The fair is almost self-sustaining. We put up some money for the headliner.

Pam—Last year you guys authorized county employees to work at the fair, but I don’t know if you put up anything for the headliner.

NB—I thought about this one night as I was driving home—each of the superintendents put their barn together without a FAC (Fair Advisory Committee) members. Superintendents did a lot. One takes care of the parking.

NB—They smoked a few boxes, and we needed to do the wiring system before the campers got there. But all in all, I think a few FAC people put out a lot of effort, but the superintendents also did a lot of effort. We just need a little more control at night.

NB—Anything else? OK. Back to work. NB leaves.

-2:23:40—Housing Coalition members ask the commissioners to move to the table to sit with them during their discussion. The commissioners do so.

Introductions:

Michelle Sandoval (MS) I’m the facilitator today. I’m here from FYRE (Foundation for Youth Resiliency and Engagement). I hope to get a greater understanding of where the BOCC sits with respect to housing problems and an open and lively discussion about solutions.

John Ackerson (JA) consultant with West East Design.

Katherine Diller Gonzales with West East Design. I hope to learn more about your community and your thoughts about homelessness in the county.

Carol Felbranch (?) (CF). I’m part of the Homeless Housing Coalition and I represent Okanogan Behavioral Healthcare (OBHC). I’d like to better understand the needs of our community and partnership opportunities to resolve homelessness.

Chris Branch (CB) Okanogan County Commissioner District 1—includes most of Okanogan, Omak and the Reservation. As a planner for many years, a mix of housing is important. Addressing the issues that put people into homelessness is important. Families used to be the ones that addressed homelessness, but not so much anymore. Also, infrastructure needed for housing isn’t always there, and somebody needs to be driving that process.

Mike Beaver (MB) Director of Juvenile Family Services. Also have Housing Stability for Youth in Courts. I’ve seen the impact of homelessness for juveniles. It’s the first thing that has to be addressed before we can deal with other matters.

Nancy Nash-Mendez (NNM) I’m with the Okanogan County Housing Authority. I’m trying to create a plan for housing stability, working with the elected officials.

Erik Hind (EH) On the coalition. Charter member of the Okanogan Community Shelter Board. I currently work for Nancy managing property. Frontline for the housing situation. My hope for today is to get some barebones outlines of a system to address the housing shortage.

Jess Russell (JR) I represent Room 1 in Twisp. It’s easy to look at all the obstacles to housing and I’d like a barebones structure with a shred of hope.

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Jon Neal (JN) County commissioner District 3. I don't believe it's the county's obligation to provide housing, but I'm interested in seeing how we can create infrastructure or assist other entities in housing.

Rena Shawver (RS) Executive Director, Community Action Council. Member of the Housing Coalition. We have 45 people on our waiting list for motel rooms. Half live in tents. How are we going to support them? I'm here to share what I know.

Andy Hover (AH) BOCC District #2. Unprepared to give thoughts today because I was expecting an update. People sometimes think commissioners can do more than they really can do legally. Trying to figure out solutions to this. I don't know that we can come up with a solution but we can see what's possible.

MS—We're not trying to put you on the spot but instead we'll have a two-way conversation to learn what you can and can't do. Housing is at an intersection of issues that you're in a position to take action on. Any comments?

CB—Lots of things have occurred here—like COVID—that have affected Okanogan County. If we have more people on the edge, there's more crime. It's all tied together. We have a role here. I've been on the Community Action Council Board for years. When we have a shortage of housing, it affects people's ability to work. We're big players for grants and loans from the state of Washington.

MS—We can explore personal beliefs we hold. I'll ask some questions, but we'll try to stay on schedule. And we'll all respect each other. We're looking for partnership today, and you've showed good faith by agreeing to sit at the table with us. We know nobody here has the whole answer, but we need to look at things with an open mind.

MS—The first activity. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- We are living in a housing crisis. *Most people strongly agree.*
- People living under 50% median income are those most impacted by the crisis. *Strongly disagree say it's because I don't have the information to know where the income cutoff is to see who's most impacted. There are lots of people above 50% median income who are having a hard time finding housing.* MS says the smaller income, the bigger the impact, but lots of people with larger incomes are impacted, too.
- Housing is a basic need in Okanogan County like food or water. *CB says he sees people who need food and water to survive. Housing is a basic need but not exactly food and water. AH agrees. You need to work at whatever level they can work. Discussion of changing "housing" to "shelter". AH says people really do need shelter in the wintertime.* (Discussion is hard to hear because no one is near the mics.)

MS talks about homelessness among people with disabilities. Vouchers available.

1:43:59—MS responds to message in the chat box—"There needs to be more data done." And "Need more boots out on the ground... I go to Manfishers weekly and I never see anyone come in asking the people if they need help... but Mansfishers helps as they can.... The helpers and organizers need to get involved with the people.. not just from the office..."

In the winter the homeless could use that shelter next to Caso's Grocery store."

AH and another person say the shelter next to Caso's can't be used because of its source of money. It's just one barrier.

MS—Two questions:

- What is the state of housing in Okanogan County?
- Who is more impacted by these circumstances?

I'll direct these questions to Mike and John.

MB—With the families we serve are low income. Some cling to their housing. Trying to help some youth to get housing. Stability in housing is a key issue with youth.

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MS—And if we don't address the housing issue, what will be the impact on the family and the young person?

MB—It creates more instability and maybe more drug issues and higher risk of being the victim of a crime.

MS—Jon, we'll turn to you as a member of the county. What's the state of housing in north county?

JN—There's a shortage across the board. It's not just low income. Teachers can't move here because they can't afford a house. Physicians, too. A lot of employment that isn't happening because of the cost of housing. Problems with fewer teachers and doctors trickles down to problems for low-income people, too.

MS—We're going to share a couple of stories. The activity is—read the story and try to think about what barriers and strengths these people have?

MS—First story—*Mary (age 32) and her daughter, Emma (15) have been sleeping in a tent for five months. Mary was previously employed in an above minimum wage job but couldn't afford rent and expenses. She wants to work a job that's not in fast food but has applied for over 15 jobs and has not secured anything. She's on the OCCAC waitlist and working with FYRE. Emma needs to re-enroll in school but she is not sure where because they live in a tent that they have to move from place to place.*

-1:35:56—AH reads the story aloud.

AH—Her strengths—she was employed before, so she has some job skills. She may be a good candidate for a rental—single wide trailer or example. But housing stock is so limited she can't get into it.

MS—She has many barriers. What are her opportunities?

?—She could go to the Okanogan Housing Authority.

RS—If we can put any kind of a roof over her head, we can begin to work on other issues. If you live in a tent, it's almost impossible to get a job.

MS—They seem to have resiliency and are able to advocate for themselves. She's still trying to get a job.

MS—How many know a version of Mary and Emma?—*Most raise their hands.*

MS—How many people are trying like Mary and Emma?—*Again, lots of hands raised.*

AH—Mary said she didn't want to work in fast foods, but she should probably take that.

MB—That's an issue the case manager will work on. It won't solve the whole problem, but it's a step forward.

AH—What's the current job market in the county? Are there a lot of minimum wage jobs open? For trades, I hear that there are.

?—It feels like even if there were lots of service jobs, it won't help get housing.

AH—That's a barrier. There has to be a stock of housing. I worked at a lumber yard for a long time.

What's the barrier to creating more housing? I'm on the TRANGO Board and we're looking to relocate the office. I see there are a lot of properties within Okanogan and Omak that are buildable for multi-family dwellings. So what's the issue other than just not being able to build this many units. The other thing is—we produced a lot of housing stock in inner-city American HUD house, and why did that go wrong? High crime rates?

?—There was a mass pulling of funding.

MS—We need to move around. Summary—For Mary and Emma, we have told Mary to accept a lower wage job. But we don't tell a teacher or a doctor to accept a different job when they can't find housing. So there's some income bias.

MB—There are some trade jobs out there, but they're hard to qualify for.

CB—Also with fast food jobs, they're often not full time with hours you can plan on. She's got a 15-year-old daughter who needs attention. There are challenges. But you've got to have a place to live and someone who can help with the daughter.

-1:22:25—MS—We'll move on to the next question.

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- What is the role of county leadership?
- What issues do you feel best positioned to support and how?

AH—We asked the USDA this question a few years ago: Could the county take USDA money to create infrastructure? They didn't really know. We want to do this. If there could be infrastructure out where Omak wants to develop now, we could put in 300 houses. We put in smaller pods of low-income housing in Winthrop.

AH—If you put a lot of low-income people together, the really bad apples bring everybody down. If you mix income levels, does it bring society back? For us, the cities aren't on the development path. We can go to the state legislature and try to get money to partner with cities but there are lots of restrictions on the money.

RS—You're saying—well, we want to do this, but we can't. I appreciate that. What's the role of the county?

AH—It's a mixed bag. We don't want urban sprawl. The parts outside of city limits, not counting the urban growth areas, you'll create sprawl. Our role is to work with cities. How far should we push the infrastructure out. The advocate for state or federal funds to build housing stock.

MS—I'll ask Jon. Can you take a more active role?

JN—Not really. Our hands are tied in so many areas. We administer lots of grants for you. We're positioned well to do that. There are probably lots more. But as far as the county just making it happen, I don't see that.

RS—Do you have the capacity to add more grants? Can you get a grant administrator?

JN—We're looking at that.

AH—If we could get more grants that Lanie could administer, I'd look at a new position to do that.

JN—And a good grant administrator almost pays for itself.

1:14:22—MS—The next question is

- What do you hope the new commissioner will bring with respect to partnership around housing and housing solutions?

JN—I don't have any expectations at all. But it's always good to look at something with a different set of eyes. Whoever it is, he may come in with brilliant ideas.

AH—I'll say if you become a commissioner without being in office before, you're always amazed at the things you can't do. You're slapped down by laws. I'm hoping he comes in with the perspective of knowing employees that can't find housing.

JN—Andy said in a forum a while ago that it takes two years two years after you get into office to really know what you're doing.

CB—We sat down at this table as we're partners. The Housing Coalition isn't a separate entity. There are opportunities out there right now. If we're ready to push and we're ready to take risks, I hope the new commissioner is ready to help.

AH—I don't understand the risks. We need to know what the risks are.

RS—Well, Community Action is putting itself out pretty far on this housing issue. We're trying to get 50 acres out in Omak. Our board is putting our existing properties up for collateral. If we don't get housing built we'll lose what we're got now. We're restricted by government just the way you are. We don't have matching money coming out of the communities sometimes. We need more money for case managers. We have 1000s of people homeless. What are we doing about it in partnership. Sorry to get so emotional. But we're a small agency with very little income.

RS—If you look at our data, we need >2,000 homes in the next 20 years. Of those, >1,900 is for those with less than 80% AMI. AMI is \$72,000. It's a large part of the community who qualify for low-income housing. Teachers and police with a stay-at-home spouse and 2 or 3 children will qualify for the mixed income housing.

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MS—I love your passion.

NNM talks about difficulties of finding the money to build the units they built.

CB—There's opportunity right now.

1:05:10—MS—The next part of our conversation—we have a handout. To summarize—we're making risky business decisions. Non-profits are making risky decisions and you're just hanging out there.

AH—We have to be involved before you take the risk. We need to know you need a financial safety net. I've never heard you ask for a financial safety net. We have funds we could probably commit to using. It's all hypothetical. We can commit to \$2,000,000 in safety net but with lots of stipulations.

MS—We put together this handout. It's got some ideas we'll give to visiting federal funding folks this week. The safety net isn't on the handout. Reflect on what you'd ask of us to help with our application for funds. The county has leadership in fires, FEMA floods, etc.

AH—I know what they'll say—What do you want to do? And it's got to be pretty simple because they get so many asks.

CB—One thing we haven't done is spend the time to make a strategies plan. It takes days and days to develop the strategies and realize the barriers. The cities are pushing back some, saying they're not developers, don't have the money for infrastructure. We can see the gaps that need to be filled. Having the BOCC invested in the idea full bore. It would take more time than we commit to any other issue, even the fair. But there's knowledge and experience here.

MS—We came here today to to see us as partners and have on-going conversations. I want to finish by doing another activity. What appetite do we have for making an issue we all come together on and agree to spend more time on this than any other issue?

MB—I'd like to rephrase that. We've been around this table for several years. But AH says we never came in and asked for money. Right now, we have an opportunity because federal funders will be here in two days. Will the BOCC agree to be at that meeting and ask for money at the county level? We can't draw that interest without the county being there.

RS—It's Wednesday and Thursday at the Casino.

CB—Part of it will be about the purchase and development of infrastructure of (*inaudible*) Flats. There's a lot of opportunity for everybody. This is a major focus.

RS—Housing isn't a one-off issue. It'll be with us for the next 20 years.

CB—The money available for housing will help with mental health issues. Creating work force housing will help with lots of other things.

RS—How committed are we to take the time we need to work forward.

AH—The hard part for me is when you say—let's commit to this. From our housing plan we'll develop a strategy for funding. Or we need to find a piece of property. That's where I have issues. I want to do things, not sit around to hypothesize things. We paid good money for a plan so let's do it.

CB—But you've got to sit at the table to see how to do it.

AH—We need somebody to delegate to.

NNM—I see the Housing Authority helping you to do your work. Not just funding sources and systemic change where we're repeatedly coming in to beg.

AH—We also need the mayors and city managers. They're the biggest players because we're not going to be the developers. Even in the Urban Growth Area will be annexed in eventually. We need them.

MS—What level do you need us? We need the level you were at when you said Financial Safety Net. We don't need you at the level of individual projects. It's helpful for one project.

RS—How committed are we to take the time we need to?

MS reads one final chat box comment: "The school bought land without the Peoples Vote... Will the people be able to vote on something like the city buying more land? Thank you."

AH—She's talking about the school buying land out there prior to a bond. A bunch of people were upset. But we have to take opportunities as they arise.

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JN—If they're got the money, it doesn't require a vote. They're not bonding it.

People line us to demonstrate their level of commitment.

?—I'm all in on partnership but I've got so many things I've got to do, I have to be there on a high level.

CB—There are a few things on your list the commissioners are already working on—water rights for example.

MS—It's helpful to know when to call on the commissioners.

?—Under the financial section I found it helpful to know you commissioners have access to funds we don't. And we know that you don't control the cities, but you do have some influence.

MS—OK. Thank you all.

Applause.

-26:40—AH—I move we go in to executive session for 24 minutes inviting the Sheriff, the Undersheriff, you three (?-people in Sheriff's Office uniforms) Shelley Keitzman, Human Resources and Risk Management, Esther Milner, Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor. Meeting under RCW 42.30.110(1)(i) potential litigation. Later extended for another 10 minutes.

-1:20—SM—I didn't get it recorded, but they (Albert Lin, County Prosecutor, Shelley Keitzman, Human Resources and Risk Management, Esther Milner, Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor) are in executive session under RCW:42.30.110(1)(i) from 2:10 to 2:40.

-49—LJ—Can we schedule another executive session tomorrow for 25 minutes with Pete Palmer, Tadas Kisielius, and Esther Miler?

Commissioners agree to do it.

JN—And we'll have more (*inaudible*) with the Sheriff's Department with more information tomorrow.

Adjourn at 2:48 for the day.