

Board of Okanogan County Commissioners

Tuesday, June 18th, 2024, 1:30 p.m.

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Present:

Andy Hover (AH), BOCC District 2
Chris Branch (CB), BOCC District 1
Laney Johns (LJ), Clerk of the Board
Kate Miller (KM), Okanogan Land Trust
Alexa Whipple, Methow Beaver Project (*via Zoom*)
Nick Bates (NB), Fairgrounds Manager
Michael Egerton (ME), Fair Advisory Committee chair
Brock Hires, Fair Advisory Committee
Kathy Kath" Power (KP), Fair Advisory Committee
Les Sutton (LS), Fair Advisory Committee
Maurice Goodall (MG), Emergency Management
Luis Rodrigues (LR), architect, MJ Neal Associates
Justin Borst, MJ Neal Associates

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<https://okanogancounty.org/departments/boards/livestreamingofmeetings.php>

Summary of Important Discussions:

- Land Trust head Kate Miller drums up county support for Community Forest Project on 500-acre Antoine Creek site, reassures AH, wary of reduction in ag property, of continued mixed use; salmon habitat to benefit, "virtual fencing" envisioned
- Commissioners hash out new wording for fair food vendor contracts with Fair Advisory Committee, will allow arrivals as early as a week before the fair if cleared with the fairgrounds; drains and septic system discussed
- Architects from MJ Neal asked for plan to remodel Public Health office above Public Works on South Second Ave., possibly housing Building and Planning departments there as well

1:31 - KM: ...The Community Forest Project is the first such project in Okanogan County. It's a forest that's owned by a local community and managed by local residents and organizations. The community has access to the benefits that come from the management of the forest and it is permanently protected from conversion or development. We're currently seeking funding from the Washington Conservation Office and it's their community forest program that we're going through. ...We have interest from the tribes in collaborating with the management and setting the priorities for the community forest. A pioneering model is the Nasquale Forest, Mesa Bridge, down south of us, and Gold Hill in Chewelah was formed solely for the purpose of recreation. Some models are heavy on the commercial timber aspect and using that revenue for

community priorities and others, like the one I'm going to present to you, are more multi-faceted. The goal is really to protect the land and give the community input into its management.

KM shows on the screen a map of the 1,300 acre proposal, land owned by Lyle and Sandy Oberg, a multi-generational ranching family. It shares a long boundary with the national forest, with land adjacent to DNR (Dept. of Natural Resources) and BLM (Bureau of Land Management) property and "relates spatially" to Antoine Creek land acquired by the tribes for habitat restoration.

KM: If this acquisition goes through we plan to keep the agricultural activities. There's some grazing across the whole property... Jim Bunch leases much about 500 acres of the property for dry land wheat cultivation, ... and we're in talks with him about the long term and transitioning some of that ground into forest. There's a history of thinning. *AH asks about the ag land.* KM: Ultimately the goal would be to move it into forest or forest-shrub steppe mix.

AH: Why would you be moving 500 acres of wheat production?

KM: RCO (*Recreation and Conservation Office*)'s guidelines and the community forest model really encourages as much of the land as possible to be in timber, in some description. Grazing is compatible, dry land cultivation not so much, but we'll be talking about options including (*inaudible*) pasture, and to make that all fit within the model... There would be a timeline with the lessee. We're not trying to force him into anything.

AW: Jim is retiring in the next ten plus years. ...We're not looking to change that in a short time frame, more like ten, 15, 20 years for the management of that property.

KM: Management of the forest for a mix of habitat and commercial uses will be at the center of the plan. Half of the property is currently forested and there's a considerable portion of regenerating forest, shrub steppe, and a lot of potential, with the Forest Service, for cross-boundary collaboration and to give the community a sense of involvement in forest management. We do have recreational on the site, Loup of the Highlands Nordic Snow Park, a community-founded and much beloved institution near Havilah. We would continue that and expand the potential there as well. We've got a significant portion of Antoine Creek running through (there) as well as a perennial feeder spring... There's also wetland that we'd be looking to restore. With the work being done downstream there's also the potential that steelhead could make it upstream but even now the conservation of those water sources will be of of benefit to water quality downstream. *She shows the map of current uses, with a farmhouse. There are two non-contiguous tracts of property. CB asks about sno-park parking, this is on Forest Service land.*

1:42 - KM: We think the project has the potential to address a lot of the challenges and gaps for our community here, conserves the land from commercial development. That is the challenge, the residential development that reduces the large tracts of land available for agricultural and natural resource uses. Protecting water resources is important. There are also lots of potential economic benefits here from managing the property in that dual way, with community involvement, and it's a significant property for wildlife movement and migration.

CB: Remind me what the flows are from Antoine Creek to the Okanogan River. Is that year-round?

KM: I believe it is. That's why the tribes have focused those recent acquisition efforts and now a major restoration initiative down on the flat there.

CB: I ask that because it often gets ignored, the positive impact of those refug areas.

KM: There aren't that many tributaries that (can) provide cold, clean water to the Okanogan River and continue to provide salmon habitat. *This can be an important model of diversity, and, being less than 10 miles Tonasket and not far from Oroville, provide recreational and educational benefits, including partnership with the Methow Beaver Project. The Land Trust provides educational programs. AH asks if there are beaver on the property. AW says the land is too rugged, although the tribes' fisheries biologist has noted beaver activity. There is evidence of decade-old activity in the wetlands on the east side of the area.*

AW: There needs to be a fair bit of riparian vegetation restored to that site. It has had persistent grazing that has ruined a lot of that typical wetland vegetation. That said, it can accommodate both restoration and livestock, especially considering virtual fencing management and that's something that the current leaseholder is very open to exploring... *The spring can be restored to become an important water source for Antoine Creek, (inaudible) and wildfire-resilient.*

CB: Does it have off-stream water available to cattle now?

KM: We'd be looking to develop that.

AW: There is a water right for that on the property.

AH: I'll be honest. This one doesn't give me a warm fuzzy feeling... I understand why you're doing it. I don't really like to see wheat ground taken out. We have very little of it. I know it's over a period of years. I don't like the conversion of agricultural ground to anything, really. As a community forest, there's a lot of people who think they're experts at managing forests, managing agricultural lands. When you talk about sharp-tailed grouse and cattle some people think those can't co-exist. You have to have some sort of over-arching strategy. The community as a whole has ideas—somewhere in between (*"don't touch it" and "cut it for harvest"*) is a good balance. How are you going to stave off those who want to get the cattle off completely, not harvest anything?

KM: The community forest model and the RCO grant program that would be proving the majority of the funds to acquire, it really is a model that is rooted in working lands. It's not a preserve, an untouched piece of wilderness, and it doesn't have a history either, so RCO would require... deed terms that would specify what the model and purposes are. Starting from the ground up, we're already dedicating the land to a mixture of uses with working land being a part of that. So in the governing documents that would all be very clear. You're absolutely right that when it comes to the actual details of the management, we will find ourselves eye-brow deep in opinions of all different types. It's easy to dream about these compatible uses in theory but at some point we'll have to make decisions that prioritize some over others, at least parts of the property. But I think the ground is already a good model of what good stewardship and good management can do, so part

of what we're doing is try to keep that legacy alive. The Oberg's have really been generous to give us their support in that.

AH: I'm all for keeping cattle out of riparian areas... but, hopefully, it's a model that people understand that this is working agriculture and we can't remove it.

KM: If folks have *(the "don't touch it")* model this is not the right project *(for them)* to be involved in, but it's really built into the model, the funding source, the governing structure and the partnerships: USFS, DNR, a lot of other agencies... I think the safeguards are built-in...

AH: This is just being managed for health forest, not necessarily for timber production?

KM: ...The assumption is that the management of the land will pay for itself... No, we don't anticipate significant revenue from it. It's really about seeing those uses in balance.

CB: In the community forest is there a community group that is involved? *KM says it will be a year or so before they initiate the community forest and they will be working out the management and input model; they will look at what exists elsewhere. Many of those involve a land trust. This will be a resources for them.*

1:55 - AW: An advisory group that guides the management of the forest is what Kate and I have envisioned in bringing in the most critical partners and stake-holders, including *(inaudible)*, Jim Bunch, Forest Service, DNR... also including educational parties, academic university involvement, tribal groups, to consider prescribed burning. Definitely this is rooted in the community managing this trust. The Okanogan Land Trust would be the primary holder of the property.

KM: We have letters of support from all of the entities that Alexa mentioned. Everybody's been really excited about it. We haven't talked with the neighboring communities. That's the next step, engaging that support.

AW: *(As for)* building trust in our approach to keeping this as working lands, is something that the Beaver Project has been working on for the last four years with ...stream restoration or stream flow restoration on their properties including *(inaudible)*, Loup Loup area, *(inaudible)*, Tunk Creek. We're really focused on how do we accommodate all the uses and still have all the benefits from it, especially looking at longer term, sustainable use... It really is where we're coming from, is to keep agricultural lands functioning. The funding is about forest, what's traditionally forest in the highlands...

AH: I appreciate that, Alexis. It's a lot easier, dealing with a single land owner who's willing to participate in riparian restoration, to accommodate both a working property and trying to be a good steward of the land. We've had a lot of different people who think they have a vested interest in the day-to-day operations of something. I'm involved in those things right now. You just have a lot of opinions from people, like "Round-up is evil", right? You don't want to overuse it. Sometimes you've got to use it... You've got to manage your property. Those are some of the tools. As long as they're not abused, they work fine. It's just a little bit of skepticism. You mentioned cattle, wolves, sharp-tailed grouse, all in the same sentence. Those three have a tendency not to mix together... I appreciate conservation easements—

CB: Wheatland may never be forest again if it's sold for another purpose.

AH: You're right. Farming's hard enough. If people can save their property by selling off their right to convert it to single family residence—

KM: What they're hoping not to have to do anyway.

AH: That's good. I'm a little bit leery, because you always have this over-arching goal of what you're talking about, and you get down to the nitty gritty and people think they have a lot of vested interest when it says "community-run properties".

KM: I appreciate that caution. There will be a lot of days when we'll be tearing our hair out. We know it's what we're signing up for, and a thoughtful governance structure with some good by-laws will hopefully make sure that the loudest voices aren't running away with—

AH: Like when people say "why are the cows here?"—

CB: Sometimes it's easier to come up with solutions when it's not landowners and folks in the area that are at odds with, like cows in the riparian place that I lived. I just proposed to the landowners to fence them out. *(He)* didn't want them there and the cows weren't all that happy stuck in the mud down there. *He sees more problems when there aren't just two landowners.* I've seen that as well. There's a lot of good aspects to *(the Land Trust proposal)*. I actually support it, myself.

AH: I'd like to write a letter to RCO saying we're supportive of this, with the understanding that this is something new in Okanogan County and we will be watching to see what the outcomes are.

KM: I greatly appreciate that support. ...It's an experiment, and hopefully it works.

CB: I look forward to the utilization of the fencing.

KM: We're hoping to be a bit of an experiment there too, and hopefully that is one that really—

AH: There's a couple of people that are doing that now. It depends on what type of cattle they're range— Coming back, they'll get used to it. If they're younger cattle it's kind of harder 'cause they're pushing the boundaries of it. It'll be interesting, though. Fixing fencing in this county is hard.

CB: Especially after it burns up.

AH: Or if you have five feet of snow on top of it. It'll be interesting to see as more people use it. ...Multiple people can have ownership of the receivers, so if there are some people around who are interested in that, ...try to build a better network so people can utilize the benefits of those.

CB: We have one *(inaudible)* located with our own facilities up here. *KM hopes the Forest Service will move quickly to set up virtual fencing so they can "piggy back" on that and others can join in. AW mentions ranchers in the county who are leading the way, and the role of government agencies in financing transmitting towers for virtual fencing which*

could also tie into the Beaver Project's riparian restoration. KM will send info for the commissioners' letter of support. She leaves.

2:11 - *Rewording of previous meeting minutes. AH had commented that the time spent on water transfers amounted to the Water Conservancy (WCD) doing work for the Dept. of Ecology for free. CB says the Conservancy is not charging enough fees to cover their costs. He had mentioned that the parties transferring water should pay their own fees. They keep the part of the minutes in which CB says the WCD should charge enough to cover its costs. June 11th and 12th minutes are approved.*

2:22 - *Board approves fairgrounds water system well improvement project.*

2:24 - Fair Advisory Committee (FAC) - *A document is passed out. KP expresses concern about a certain video. She says FAC began in 1977. It is more than a food vendor, has brought revenue in. Despite the risks of a bad year, they do it because "people love us". They feed the trustees for free.*

KP: *We make money for the fair. That's something I really wanted you to understand. If you want to see the proof, I've got it. They're able to do a lot of "cool things that people don't know about", like with the Omak Fire Department.*

ME: *There have been three vendors at the fair for forty years: The Cowbells, Omak Fire Department Ice Cream, and Kath. The first is all home cooking, the second has 18 flavors, the third is deep-fried buns, the topping is "out of this world".*

AH: *I want to make sure for everyone that's watching, we never have once said that you can't be there. We're not talking about not letting you be at the fair. ME continues. He's a retired fireman. Says Kath prepared a shady spot to give workers (20-25 people rotating) relief from the heat. Kath serves workers hamburgers for free. NB helps install the trailer, leveling, adding decorations. Says they should give her the variance she is asking for. They leave the ice cream freezers on the site because too heavy to keep moving in and out, in exchange for County using them, which they did during wildfires. They got an exception for the refrigerated truck to deliver directly to the trailer.*

AH: *You're not selling anything? No, just setting up. You're not asking to sell stuff prior to Fair opening? Food vendors can sell starting Wednesday before the fair. When do you want to bring stuff in? KP says they usually come the Thursday, Friday or Saturday before the fair.*

KP: *For 11 years there's never been an issue. ...It takes me three days to get it ready. They can't do the fair if they can't bring stuff in Thursday, or Friday morning.*

AH: *Mike, has the county ever had something going on that weekend before the fair?*

NB: *Even before I came on it was established that the week before and the week after are (just) for the fair. My question was because the contract says Monday, because we do allow it, it has to be the same for everybody.*

CB: *If we do that, the thought here is that nobody else wants to do that.*

ME: For the average vendor, coming in on Monday is a waste of money. *Because they are on the move doing other events.* It works for (Kath) because she lives here. *(Inaudible.)*

CB: If we changed the rules and if somebody wants to they could open another business.

AH: What would be the day you'd want to mow the courtyard?

NB: Wednesday or Thursday, a week before. *If they do for one, they have to for all.*

AH: If we say "Yeah Kathy, you can do it," there's no variance. It's for everybody. *ME says the contract language used to allow for "things like this". CB suggests changing the contract for all the food contractors. He doesn't like the idea of making individual exceptions. AH says each is responsible for their site because the mower might not be able to cut the grass.*

ME: *(You could say)* any set-up prior to Monday morning is by appointment only?

CB: You don't want to make an appointment to come in but someone else is going to have to make that decision on whether you can come.

AH: It's just like camping. It has to be on a certain day. I agree with Mike, before Monday you have to make an appointment.

CB: If it's an appointment, you're going to accommodate every appointment, right? ...We've been through this before. Mike makes these decisions. Then people are coming to us about how Mike makes these decisions.

ME: I can bet you money that nobody is going to want to come in before Monday. They can't afford to. *Now AH agrees with CB, says they should change the contract to allow arrivals Thursday the week before the fair. ME comes back to wanting early arrival by appointment. They finally on a wording that gives a Monday morning arrival time and adds that if an earlier arrival is necessary, you must clear it with the fair office. NB will make an amendment to the contract.*

KP wants to discuss the drain the Country Buns truck was directed in 1989 to put in. It went into the septic system. She mentioned it to Fair Manager Nick Bates. She puts dishwasher into it. She is pretty sure the other fore-mentioned concessions use that drain as well. Thinks there ought to be more drains put in because other vendors are emptying out into the bathrooms or port-a-potties which is "disgusting". ME says you can't ever dump drain water into municipal sewer because it could freeze and destroy the system. It's fairly common, he says, to dump drain water into an outhouse where the grease doesn't cause a problem. NB wonders about where the drain empties on the other end. KP answers that it stays in the septic tank that's been in place for 35 years. AH talks about the new bathrooms, they say the old bathrooms don't connect to the new ones' drain. AH says everything goes to holding tanks that get pumped. LS says he has a drain for his building as well. Says they need running water all the time. AH is going to do some research.

MG intervenes, says the drains in question don't connect with any system but go to a dry well, which isn't good. NB proposes to put in a tank. They will check it out. AH says it was working for the old bathrooms five years ago so it must go somewhere and get pumped.

ME talks about water getting dumped into the potties at the blues festival. He is hard to understand. The Fair representatives leave as the two architects from MJ Neal arrive.

3:09 - AH: Public Health has the space above Public Works, next to the old Forest Service. The commissioners gave the Public Health district a million dollars worth of ARPA (*American Rescue Plan*) money. She wants to remodel that building. With that we think that Building and Planning might be able to fit in that top floor with them if it's remodeled. We want to do another addendum to our contract, see if you can talk with the health district administrator, the building official and the planning director.

CB: We're looking for an additional analysis of that space.

L: What kind of services were you thinking of putting there?

AH: ...There (*would be*) Public Works on the bottom, and Noxious Weeds and WSU extension are already there, then upstairs would be Public Health and Planning. Auditor, treasurer and assessor are different animals. There's a lot of unused space that Public Health has now. *The wonder if Planning would have enough space and CB reminds AH that there was conflict when Planning had to move into the emergency manager's office, sticking them "in a corner". They don't have a good meeting room. AH tells LR the \$1M allocated for that remodel has to be spent by mid-2026. JB asks if there's a column line in that upstairs space. The commissioners don't know. AH talks about the heat pump and LJ reminds him the HVAC has just been redone. There would just need to be duct work and wiring, no major upgrades. CB explains the practicality of having Public Health next to where building permits are issued. AH comments on the hoped-for feasibility of having court offices together in the courthouse, says this remodel goes in the same direction (as the moving of the three finance-oriented services down to the old Forest Service Building). He mentions a central lobby with windows all around.*

AH: Why are you guys staying so long up here? (*They work in Wenatchee*).

LR: We're going through the courthouse to verify the structure.

JB: We're seeing if we can take out some of the walls that we were planning to. We're in pretty good shape. A lot what we had in the original drawing seems to line up.

LJ: We need to set up a meeting with the judges and the court to continue that discussion, solidify with changes the judge had made.

AH: (*We need to make sure*) we separate the pots of funding.

3:24 -LJ: That would be out of ARPA, we have the coroner out of the LATC, the (*courthouse*) window project out of capital improvements, and then we have this project, which is the courthouse study, coming out of the bond.

CB: and eventually you'll get into the historical courthouse grant.

AH: Public Health is a separate entity, but we own the building. There will have to be an agreement. We will partly bill Public Health. They will bill the ARPA fund... *JB says they'll modify the contract. ...LJ asks if they should cancel the following week's department heads meeting. Yes, they should.*

3:39 - Meeting adjourned.