

Board of Okanogan County Commissioners
Monday, Nov. 21, 2022 AM

JD—Jim DeTro, BOCC, District 3, absent
AH—Andy Hover, BOCC, Chair, District 1
CB—Chris Branch, BOCC, Vice Chair, District 2
CHa—Crystal Hawley, Deputy Clerk of the Board
SK—Shelly Keitzman, Human Resources
PP—Pete Palmer, Director of Planning
NP—Naomie Peasley, Fairgrounds Manager
Ken—Ken McNamee, Washington Dept of Natural Resources
Tim—Tim Love, Washington Dept of Natural Resources

These notes were taken by an Okanogan County Watch volunteer. Every attempt is made to be accurate. Notes are verbatim when possible, and otherwise summarized or paraphrased. Note takers comments or clarifications are in italics. These notes are published at <https://www.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 https://okanogancounty.org/offices/commissioners/commissioners_proceedings.php

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Summary of significant discussions:

- *Commissioners Hover and Branch discuss the reintroduction of grizzly bears into the North Cascades. Commissioner Hover wonders if there are enough large game animals for the bears to survive.*
- *Shelley Keitzman, HR and Risk Management, updates the commissioners on the premium hikes for medical and dental insurance beginning in 2023. The county will pay the increases itself.*
- *SK also discusses the changes in the threshold salary for exempt workers. Commissioner Hover would like to reclassify all the exempt employees into hourly employees and gather data on how much overtime they are working. Then they will be able to see how increases in the threshold in the future will affect the county's payroll budget.*
- *Pete Palmer, Planning Director and Naomie Peasley, Fairgrounds Manager give brief updates.*
- *Tim McNamee and Tim Love of the DNR update the commissioners about last summer's fires. The county had 56 fires that burned only 386 acres.*
- *Commissioners recess at 11:00 because Commissioner Hover has to attend the Canvas Board meeting. He asks Commissioner Branch to attend a virtual meeting with the FBI at 12:00, arranged by the Washington State Association of Counties. The open meeting was cancelled and instead, due to its sensitive nature, only county commission and town council chairs or their designates are to attend.*

00:00:22—Pledge of Allegiance

CB—Agenda looks fine.

AH—Discussion items. I had a discussion with Chelan Commissioners and then talked with Heather at Natural Resources about the grizzly bear EIS (Environmental Impact Statement)

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CB—I talked to people at the conference last week. Larger context and I’m in the Forest Collaborative. Doesn’t do any good to beat up on the Supervisor. Let’s talk about the limitations and what people would like to see done—like getting the Northwest Forest Plan updated. We always bring it up during the collaborative because it’s a mix of people.

CB—And the Travel Plan of course. Again, somebody brings it up frequently with the Forest Supervisor, CB—Re: grizzly bears. I know there are people with problems with the bears. We have to talk about why the environmentalists want bears. If you introduce them and they don’t behave the way you want them to behave, you’re going to have to kill them. That doesn’t fare well for the species you’re introducing. Kevin emphasizes the road up to Stehekin. If it’s the intent for the National Park Service not to open the road because of the bears, let’s get that out on the table.

AH—I propose we write a letter that should point out what should be in the EIS. It’s the scoping period. Will you look at that?

CB—Sure.

AH—Lots of data they’re using from Rocky Mountain bears, to relate it to bears here. Also south British Columbia. But both of those places have an elk population. Zero elk in the North Cascades. And how many black bears use the North Cascades?

CB—Black bears pretty prevalent outside of that area.

AH—Black bears more omnivorous, eat more veg. Deer populations in the alpine and subalpine areas—what do they look like? And the territories here are steeper than the other two. And large river tributaries not inhabited by people.

CB—In Alaska there are grizzly and black bears.

AH—But there are more game animals. But that’s a lot of conjecture on my part. But I wonder what they are going to eat.

CB—The range in the Rocky Mountains is a lot larger.

CB—Only grizzly I ever saw was when I was driving on the highway in Montana.

CB—Thinking about the food—what happens if they’re driven to lower elevations?

AH—What really got me when I went to the joint counties meeting in Skagit County, they showed helicopter drop sites for bears. One was right up the road from Mazama. And all of the spur roads off Highway 20 lead to campgrounds.

CB—Those issues are scoping, but there’s the EIS from the last time and they’ll be a lot of overlap. Let’s look at that together, and put some reasoning behind it. People ask me why did we make that decision and I say “How are we doing with wolves?” We’ve got an advisory group we go to.

AH—And then the governor tells the advisory group what to do, and I’m not just saying that, because I was there when it happened. That’s one of the reasons I left. We were trying to work through things thoughtfully and we were given a letter by the governor saying we needed to do things a certain way.

CB—And the weight of that letter was.... Was the advisory group all his?

AH—No. It was selected by Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Advisory group helps set policy in....

AH—He was saying “I want this outcome”.

CB—Demanding the outcome?

AH—Not demanding, but saying “this is the outcome we need. Get there”. And I can’t do that.

CB—My response is—he can do that, but why would the group follow his orders if there was a balanced group of people who wanted something else.

AH—Well, the director of Fish & Wildlife is the governor’s.

CB—If I’m the director, I say “this is what the advisory group told me, and it’s contrary to the outcome you expected”. I guess it depends on how much you like your job as director.

CB—There’s the science rules and what the objective is. What’s the objective of the environmental community re: grizzly. Without grizzlies, there’s not diversity. But we’ll never going to get that diversity

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we would if there were no humans on the earth. Try to get a place that's as natural as you can get it, even though there are people using it. That's what people are trying to preserve—a piece of the natural state.

AH—How do we know what the natural state of that place was? We have to use historical inferences, how many grizzly were there? Did Native Americans see them because the bears wandered into their hunting grounds in the river bottoms? They probably weren't hiking all over the mountains.

CB—I think Native Americans went there to learn what might be useful up there or learn new routes to somewhere. Indians were used as guides.

AH—Again, I wonder how we determine that the area can carry 250 bears. 250 bears in the goal.

CB—I bet someone will argue with you and explain the methodology. And then you'd have to look at it. There's always an argument about methodology in science.

AH—I look at what I know—there's not a population of large game animals in the area.

CB—Mule deer are the only ones. Your point is that if they don't have a food source, they'll have to move to one.

CB—Did we pass up our public comment?

There are no public comments.

CB—I'm looking forward to this conversation. Lots of what you've said are good points. By the way, I've spent many hunting seasons watching black bears on McClure.

AH—Fawns are a major source of food for black bears. But I've seen black bears eating roots, etc.

CB—But I've see the bears and also goats on McClure, but there aren't as many now.

AH—Also less deer.

CB—Let's go forward with this conversation. No matter what people's dreams are for the wilderness, let's be as practical as we can. Lots of people want the opportunity to see the grizzly bears, and I say, well, OK.

AH—You can be driving along a highway and the area is vast and you might see a bear. Highway 20? You won't be able to see a bear there.

00:27:15—AH—I'll change the subject. I met with the Audubon Society about Pearrygin Lake a couple of week ago. I just got an email from Cindy Morris, area manager for Washington State Parks. She says there's a request for ice recreation on Pearrygin Lake. Hockey players cleared the lake last winter to play hockey. Alex Ott, the Park Ranger there, spoke with people doing that. They're hoping to do the same this year. No time or effort for park staff and they're selling more SnoPark Pass sales. They'd like to leave the two hockey nets on the lake all winter. Are there any issues with this?

AH—Cindy says the county has some jurisdiction about the lake because the lake isn't not completely surrounded by the park. Parking would be required to have a SnoPark Pass. Don't know if the county cares about this but wanted to be sure you're in the loop.

AH—I don't have any desire to regulate this. But I do take issue with another situation. Between the gun range and the wildlife area, that was all typically mule deer range. Recently, they've put in fat tire trails all over the park. I want to know if they did an EIS. Did they have a blanket EIS for winter recreation? I have an issue for these trails being put in shrub-steppe type places that are in mule deer wintering grounds.

CB—I'd like to see the EIS too.

00:32:15—AH—And now, on to another topic.

SK—I'm Shelley Keitzman, Human Resources Director, Risk Management. I'm having a do-over today for health insurance rates for 2023.

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SK—Delta Dental has a 12.61% increase, raising premiums from \$80.89 to \$91.09. If we don't buy down the premiums, the increase is approximately \$17,136 for all employees on the dental. One option is 5% buy down, making the increase \$9492. We're getting close to the where we'd think hard about taking more out of reserve. We've got \$63,000 now in reserves, but goes in part to pay charges that come in before the end of the year. After we pay that, we'd have about \$34,000 and we need \$12,000 as the minimum.

AH—I propose we just transfer money from current expense to the insurance fund because we can use that to pay bills. Transfer the whole \$17,000 there and not tap the reserve.

CB—I agree. Just pay out of current expense.

AH—The reserves pay if there's a lot of claims or more dependents.

CB—Do it because we can. If we can't do it anymore...

SK—Hopefully, we'd have a decent reserve by then, so we could buy down at that time.

CB—That's just dental?

SK—Yes.

AH—We need to budget more in the insurance fund and do a resolution.

CB—How much do we pay?

SK—100% except for the Sheriff's employee.

CB—But that doesn't count deductibles.

SK—Medical—PEBB (Public Employees Benefits Board) is looking at an increase of \$86.68/month. That's \$113,377.44 for current employees. The other medical plan—The LEF Admin went up \$12.45 to about \$11,504. We came up with about \$150,000 for all of the increases—the dental and the two medical groups.

AH—It's a big one, but I still think we should cover it, up until we have to start laying people off.

CB—I agree.

SK—Again, I'll do a resolution.

AH—Resolution and change to the entire budget sheet.

SK—I'll talk to the auditor.

AH—The unions sell insurance, too.

SK—But everyone would be paying a portion of the premium then.

AH—We'd have to do a survey.

00:39:45—AH—The next topic will be a tough one.

SK—There's a new salary threshold for exempt employees. For 2022, it's \$52,743. For 2023, it'll be \$65,478. Reasons for the jump—increase in minimum wage and increase the multiplier. The multiplier in 2020 was 1.25 and it increases every two years. Multiply by 2X in 2023 and 2024, and in 2025 it's 2.25.

AH—This is what I'd like to do. Remove everyone from exempt and have them go hourly at whatever grade and step they're in. Have them keep track of their overtime. Then in a year, we'd have data about how much overtime we'd be paying.

SK—Also on the handout, it lists who's not at the threshold yet.

AH—There's \$60,000 of overtime right there.

SK—We need to talk about Chief Deputies and see what this will look like. I don't know if people in the Prosecutor's Office already above the threshold should be included.

AH—Maybe attorneys shouldn't be included.

CB—Are we assuming that everyone who is an exempt employee is working overtime?

SK—No, but some are.

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CB—That's your justification to run everyone on OT for a year, because it might also change their behavior.

AH—We'll say OT is limited to approval by department head or elected official.

CB—Makes sense. What about exempt employees. Does it coordinate with at-will employees?

AH—Mostly does. Most at-will employees aren't included in union contracts, but we still would have to follow the law and county procedures about terminating employees.

AH—This is just my opinion, but I think all the department heads should go hourly. It's a good idea to do more research.

CB—Did you discuss this with others.

SK—I've talked to some department heads about possibility of feelings of disparity.

CB—What about Emergency Management employees?

AH—EMS and attorneys should be exempt. They're exceeding regular hours.

SK—What about the Chiefs? If they're not exempt, you'll be paying them OT.

AH—Only if they work OT. If they continue exempt, by 2028, they could be making more than the elected officials because of the multiplier. I've done a lot of thinking about this.

00:51:10—SK—While we're talking about this, I asked eight counties about exempt leave. None of them front-load. It's all accrual. Carried over. Most limit it to 240 hours, some more, and they all can get a cash-out. It's an incentive for people to stay. Accrual amounts based on longevity.

SK—I'll talk to the elected officials and see what they think about it.

AH—Remember, we're not just talking about next year. This is a five year plan with the threshold going from \$52,000 to \$92,000 and it could be more they change the rate.

SK—Depends of CPI (Consumer Price Index) and the minimum wage.

CB—As an employee who works OT, what would you rather have?

AH—OT.

CB—I used to keep track of my time as an exempt employee. I did a lot of OT, but I just wanted it to be known how much work I was doing. Some didn't want to be exempt, because even if they'd never worked OT before, they might in the future. So I think it's good to see what people think about this plan.

SK—I'll broach it as—this is being considered. Please reach out to your employees and see what they think.

AH—So we're good paying for the rise in Dental and Medical plans?

CB—Yes. They're finding more and more that the health of teeth affects your overall health, including heart health.

AH—to SK—so, please do the resolutions to move forward.

SK—Will do. I'll talk to Cari (Hall, County Auditor).

00:57:05—AH—Time for Pete.

PP—Pete Palmer, Planning Director. Just a few quick updates.

PP—I met with Oneza (a consulting firm) and reached out to Yakama Nation, Futurewise and MVCC via email, to let them know that Oneza would be in contact to talk about updates to the zone code. Shared the Word version of the zoning code, various contacts and our comment matrix from the Comprehensive Plan so they get an idea what we're looking for.

AH—Are they just going to listen to all that and say—OK, this is the way we'll change the zone code?

PP—No.

PP—Last week also talked with Brightly (formerly Dude Solutions, providing on-line permit tracking) via Zoom. Asked the questions you'd wanted answered.

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- What the public would see and when they would see it.
- Reports and attachments that would be available to the public.
- Would it be possible to make the document available just a few days after they're received?

The public would be able to do a parcel search and see what documents are attached to it.

AH—So if I'm applying for a permit to build a house, I'd fill out the site analysis/permit application on-line. And if I don't know who to fill out the application, I can come to the Planning Department. There will be a terminal and you can help me. When I finish, it will populate on the screen, so anyone interested in that parcel can see there's an application.

PP—In addition to that, it'll add language to the report tabs and you'll be able to print current applications. Brightly will send us a video demo. The meeting was pretty productive.

PP—This will save a lot of time in Public Information Requests and answering the phone.

PP—I'm getting a new zoning map printed like you wanted.

AH tells CB that because of the correction made to the zoning map, they'll get an updated map for the wall in the Commissioners' meeting room. The current map is labeled "DRAFT".

PP—Asked them to wait until after the Tunk rezone due to the cost of printing such a big map.

CB—Maybe need some insets because some of the zoning is more specific.

PP—Another meeting I had last week was with Michael (*inaudible*), the interim Health Director. Very productive. We've had several meetings with the prior director, but I think this one will be better.

On site analysis—he thinks they should come before any permits are issued. They're being included in the Brightly meetings so they can see what the software is like.

PP—Talked a little about enforcement, and talked a lot about their ordinary high water determination. They base the determination by soils and we and the Dept. of Ecology base it on vegetation. So there's a discrepancy. Talked about set-backs and importance that we each recognize the other's set-backs.

AH—There's a 25' set-back in our zoning code for structures. But does that include septic systems?

CB—Depends on what you're trying to achieve in the set-back.

AH—Aesthetics.

CB—Light and air.

AH—So septic system doesn't hurt light and air.

PP—But you are concerned with encroachment and the water doesn't know where the property line is. Also, you don't want anyone driving over the septic system. And need room in case it fails, you'll have somewhere else to put it.

CB—It could have an impact.

PP—There was an instance where variance was denied, but Hearing Examiner overturned the denial based on the Health Department approving a variance. Planning Dept. denied the variance based on the zone code. Didn't hurt anything *this* time, but it could in the future.

PP—I really think we're moving in a positive direction.

CB—Back to set-backs. We can avoid a lot of work when we make lots if these issues are taken into consideration from the beginning.

PP—That's all for me.

1:10:15—AH—Time for Naomie.

NP—I have nothing pressing to discuss. We got the camera footage from the well and I don't know if you've see it or not.

AH—I haven't because I couldn't get it on my phone.

NP—Any recommendations about who should look at it and how to move forward?

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AH—We'll look at it and make a decision.

CB—My first thought—an engineering firm who deals with wells all the time should look at it.

NP—Two events at the Fairgrounds this week. And advertised for a maintenance tech. We'd like to hire someone by Jan 1 so we can begin the year working on the replacing the Annex floors.

AH—It's in the portico. Replace with rubberized mats.

NP—That's all for me. Except I'm scheduled for another update at 11:30 today. Do you really want me to come back?

AH—No. That's great. We can move Mike Worden from this afternoon to 11:30.

AH and CB discuss the well video. CB says the civil engineers that work for cities and town will know who to call.

1:25:05—CB to AH—Did you see the email from Paul Jewell about the Center for Public Lands proposal. There's a proposal to creating the Center. Memo attached and it tells all. Have the timber counties across the county contribute an amount like 1% of the money we received through the bill that passed that gave us the \$6,000,000. Local and Tribal Consistency Fund. Proposal for every county to contribute. By the way, there was a lot of envy about how much we received.

AH—Did you tell them about how our budget sessions have been going?

CB—I didn't say anything. My comments are I'd be willing to advocate for this with my commission if I knew they'd address what we're interested in.

1:30:10—AH—I hate to interrupt, but it's time for the DNR update. (via zoom.)

AH—Ken, how are you? Tim and I are both at home.

Ken—We'll give you a summary of the fire season this year. Thanks for not having any big ones this year.

AH—Thank you for jumping on little ones so they didn't become big.

Ken—I'll turn it over to Tim for a summary.

Tim—Here's the data: It was a pretty light year.

- Okanogan County had its first fire April 6—2.0 acres.
- Total of 56 fires this season—368 acres. A pretty light year and I think we're OK for the rest of the year.
- Staffing down to one co-op engine in Brewster, mentions other engines around the county.
- Looking at IA capacity. Kept one team of fire bosses at all time.
- We had a Blackhawk with a 1,200 gallon belly tank and 45 second fill time. Much faster more capacity than other aircraft.

AH—Blackhawk owned by the DNR.

Tim—It's an exclusive use contract, so we can move it around. Contracted for the year. It can be used near structures. It was used for several weeks for the fire on the west side near Index.

Tim—Electric City had an issue with repeater affecting radio communications. Partnered with BLM and now it's a lot better.

AH—We're doing a big communications upgrade in Okanogan County, so I suggest you talk to Mike Worden in the Sheriff's Office. Partnering with the DOT and having our own towers.

Tim—I know we're working to make sure our systems are compatible.

Ken—A couple of other things. Last year we started a post-fire recovery program to help property owners with re-forestation, etc. There's still some money available. Call Skylar, Sam, Tim or me.

Ken—The other thing we're excited about is a new work center lease in Twisp. Last year we tried Camp Disautel, owned by the Omak School District. Worked out well in the early summer, but later we had logistical problems. Hoping to use Camp Disautel but not at the same capacity. Tried to come up with a

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place in Twisp and also the Highlands area. We need opportunities for housing for our workers. Five or six people in Twisp. It'll be small. House a few engines and the five or six people. We've found if we don't have housing, we miss out on hiring people. Camp Disautel was a good staging area.

Ken—State lands and recreation—nothing new to report there unless you have questions.

CB—No questions.

Ken—My news is I'm probably going to retire in the next six months. It's hard to leave the position and the agency. I've been treated real well in my 35 years here. I honestly say I couldn't have picked a better career. It's been a pleasure working with you guys.

AH & CB—Thanks, Ken.

Ken—I'll call and let you know when I'll retire.

1:47:10—AH—At 11:00, I have the Canvas Board, and we won't have a quorum here. I don't know how long it'll last. Plus, there's a WSAC (Washington State Association of Counties) thing with the FBI. It says "cancelled/replaced". Replaced with a closed presentation, limited to chairs of each county commission due to the sensitive nature of the communication. Chair can have another commission member attend if he/she can't attend. Asks CB if he can attend at noon.

CB—Yes.

AH—It sounds important.

AH—OK. We'll recess until 1:30.