

Board of Okanogan County Commissioners

Tuesday, March 26th, 2024, 1:30 p.m.

"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:

Andy Hover (AH), BOCC District 2
Chris Branch (CB), BOCC District 1 (via Zoom)
Jon Neil (JN), BOCC District 3
Laney Johns (LJ), Clerk of the Board
Stephan Wolak (SW), Chief Corrections Officer
Pam Johnson (PJ), Treasurer
Cari Hall (CH), Auditor
Paul Budrow (PB), Sheriff
Albert Lin (AL), Prosecutor
Susan Speiker (SS), Court Clerk
Daniel Higbee (DH), Building Dept.
Dara Schreckengast (DS), District Court Clerk
Karen Beatty (KB), Central Services/IT
Josh Thomsen (JT), Public Works
Larry Gilman (LG), Assessor
Nick Bates (NB), Fairgrounds Manager
Tim Meadows (TM), Maintenance
Larry Hudson (LH), Noxious Weeds David Rodriguez (DR), Coroner
Pete Palmer (PP), Planning Director
Lori Caswell, Emergency Management Support Specialist (for Health Administrator)

Time stamps refer to the time on the wall clock. An AV Capture archive of the meeting on this date is available at:

https://okanogancounty.org/departments/boards/live_streaming_of_meetings.php

Summary of Important Discussions/ Department Head Reports:

- auto purchases over \$50,000 subject to competitive bid*
- Corrections officer after first year reports shifting staff around, wants more interaction with inmates, less filling out forms, is consulting with Tribes on mental health*
- Sheriff's office and Omak Police Dept. seek grant to employ mental health worker; sheriff urges collaboration between agencies to prepare for "a huge fire season"*
- Prosecutor presents new Bar Association guidelines for gradual reduction of average public defender caseloads from 150 to 47, anticipates need to prioritize offenses affecting public safety*
- Court Clerk reports 15-year record number of state filings*

- *Green waste accepted at landfill free of charge thanks to air quality grant*
- *Assessor hopeful state proposal to lower property tax passes next session*
- *Coroner's office faces certification hassle, prepares building swap*
- *Planning director applauded, called "toughest-skinned person of the year" after taking heat for zone code revision, wants to get permit software running*
- *Ag Dept.'s \$17,500 grant to cover Fair program*
- *Commissioners to draw up agreement for opioid settlement spending; fund administrator's report forthcoming*
- *ARPA dollars to pay for recruiting defense attorneys*
- *Commissioners Hover and Branch conjecture on implications of indigent defense legislation proposals, Hover says there's room for NAACP to get involved.*

1:30 - *For half an hour AH pours over prices for legal notices from the Omak Chronicle (\$5.50 per column inch) and another provider (\$5 per column inch) and asks LJ to call the Chronicle to clarify its bid.*

2:00 - Department Heads Quarterly Meeting - JN: I'd like you to introduce yourselves and what you do and say what your goals are for the future.

AH: There's going to be a change in the automobile policy. Now, if the price is over \$50,000, you must have a competitive bid unless you're using state bids. *The jail administrator asks if this applies to a rig with a cage and radio; AH says not if these aren't part of the same purchase.* AH: Make sure the companies you get bids from are not de-barred if you're using ARPA (*American Rescue Plan*) funds. Last year we got dinged for that. There's a form to print (with all the de-barred companies). We heard that the Public Defense Bill passed. The public defender can only take a certain number of cases. We \$186,000 put into public defense. It's going to be tough for a lot of counties to (*cover that*) and still provide the same service to the ones paying taxes.

Corrections Report - SW: I've been Chief Corrections Officer for less than a year. What I'm pushing for is: don't violate rights, make sure we're protecting inmates, staff and the public, and don't release inmates that aren't supposed to be released. The big struggles are the mental health piece, and how tied-in that is with medical issues. The drug abuse issues and all of that piece... staffing issues... My goal is to get the right people in the right spot. We've shifted positions... We're letting staff interact with inmates more instead of filling out forms. We are working with the Tribes on mental health. The set-up is not ideal for addressing needs... If they're not getting the care they need, it's not going to help staff or inmates.

AH: My goals this year are to make sure everyone works together as efficiently and kindly as possible.

CB: That's my goal. I've seen great improvements in that regard.

The treasurer reports that taxes have gone out, and that she wants to work with each department.

Auditor's Report - CH: We just want to get through this year. We're having the fourth election. And it's a presidential year. Thank you for getting your reports out.

Sheriff's Office Report - PB: ...We wrote a \$250,000 grant for somebody imbedded within the agency who can go out hopefully to these locations and get the offender from being a mental health offender and the resources they need prior. If they do go inside, OBHC (*Okanogan Behavioral Health*) has someone who's working on helping them... get resources before they get out. We wrote the grant with the Omak Police Department. It's going to be one person for just under a year. We wrote a wellness thing for family and officers as part of that grant, including police departments, fire departments and first responders. *He says they've lost some of the people they'd hired to better paying jobs but with the new contracts, they should attract more people (patrol, dispatch).* With defense it's going to be a learning curve. When there's not enough manpower, we end up letting people go. We'll be working as close as possible with the Prosecutor to navigate that minefield.

Prosecutor's Office - AL: It might be a good time for me to speak up. (*Laughter.*) ...The State Bar Association passed guidelines for amount of felonies. It's supposed to go in stages from 150 caseloads down to 47. ...The State Superior Court has not yet adopted those standards. They recognize it would have a great impact on counties such as ours. I'm not saying that's going to happen but that's going to be the trend. ...*(We'll have to)* prioritize violent offenses. ...I've got four deputies working on felonies, one or two on the district court side and one in juvenile. We're working with the Omak Police Dept. on organized theft. To address the main concern, the number of cases for the the Public Defender, we'll come to that when that point comes. It's going to increase cost. Unless that WSAC (*Washington Association of Counties*) lawsuit does something to address it.

AH: They just dismissed it, I think.

AL: That's not good news. The state keeps sending all these things to the counties.

AH: They're only providing us 3%.

AL: It's not sufficient. It's Paul's and my responsibility to provide for public safety. I'm going to do the best I can... to address these issues. Our limited resources are not changing...

AH: If the Sheriff's office picks up someone on a non-felony and they can't pay for their own defense, how long can they sit in jail before it's it's not a speedy trial?

AL: A speedy trial doesn't kick in until they get arraigned. ...My office can make a determination what to do with a case. We can always find ways to prioritize those cases... that have the biggest impact on the community: domestic violence, driving under the influence, or criminal traffic, where safety is an issue. ...In theft with not a high value, we can talk to law enforcement about an outside review. We don't really want to do that. It means that the victims won't get their day in court very soon.

2:24 - Court Clerk - SS: This will be our largest year of state filings in 15 years. It's going to be challenging. It's comforting to know we've worked together to build bridges. We've

been engaged in an outreach program—today 17 seniors from Okanogan High School visited. *There will be two more groups visiting from there and one from Tonasket to give students an idea of the court system and hopefully sparking interest in employment opportunities. AH jokes about showing them how cool the jail is. SS won't show them the jail.*

Building Dept. Report - DH: It's business as usual. Our goal is to manage the new regulations without getting shot.

PB: I could deputize you. *(Laughter.)*

District Court Clerk - DS: We're fully staffed after eight months. There are certain qualities you want to look for. We finally got some good (applications).

AH: Is there more interest in working for the county?

DS: It's better than two years ago but people just don't want to work. *AH remembers someone in the Methow asking "We don't work Friday, do we?"*

Central Services/IT - KB: We put the new core switch and back-up in, hired Ethan, a young man from Ferry County. It's going well so far. Our goals are to keep your computers running and the network safe.

County Engineer - JT: Our goals are safety for the public and our crews, and to stay out of the newspaper. Not a big snow year, we saved money but the roads are *(in bad shape)*. ...*(With the)* new air quality grant, green waste can be taken to the landfill for free but you must call first.

2:30 - Assessor - LG: We're on schedule. We have an open position but not many applicants. The Assessors Association is working on changing state laws. Both got turned down this year but it's looking promising for next year. One is a change in personal property to a higher threshold of exemption, personal or for businesses... Another one, King Co. is taking the lead, is for homestead exemption in Washington State, so everybody's private home would get an exemption if it passed. To get it changed *(it would need legislation)* and a change in the state constitution Uniformity Act. I would be very careful about changing this because it's why we don't have state income tax... Basically it would exempt the first \$250,000 from the state portion of property tax. ...It's complicated but we're working on it. It's not as volatile as it used to be.

Fairgrounds - NB: I just took over the challenge of the fairgrounds. *(Laughter.) He is getting organized, with help from the departments, and has met the Fair Advisory Board.* I've done extended observation of the buildings. Hopefully we can get moving and get it organized and get it running.

Maintenance - TM: My goal is to get a couple of the big projects we've got going on done, and cleaning up the exterior of the courthouse. ...I'm getting bids for the front of the courthouse so we don't have that hump with the paper flapping and some stuff out there. We're doing the driveway out front. It's a safety hazard. It's like the fairgrounds; there've been a lot of years of neglect...

Noxious Weeds - My biggest goal is to continue to provide the same level of services. It's hard to find private contractors. ... Employees have been an issue. People want to pay us to do the work but we can't so we need creative solutions.

Coroner - DR: You're probably wondering what goals I might have. *(Laughter.)* Last year a bill passed requiring our office to have a certain certification level. It's a bit of a task for us. Secondly work is starting this year on moving the morgue facility into a new building. *(It is on the same site; the temporary location is in a large garage at the Justice Building on South Second Avenue.*

Planning Dept. - PP: You guys have been outstanding with me and my staff. I've been four years in post. I came in with a lot of lawsuits. I've been *(too busy to get a feel for the whole county)*. ... The department's goal is to get through the zoning code revisions. Our staff is licking its wounds. I want to thank the sheriff. It's good to know we have a good team. *(Another goal is)* to get the permit software running. A "go live" date is still out there. We still have codes needing update or adoption. A goal is to have a level of service that is actually doing something good for the people of the county, and to have competent staff that can provide that service. My goal biggest goal though is to carry out the objectives of the board of commissioners.

2:42 - CB: Pete probably gets the "Toughest Skinned Person of the Year" at this point. She's had to put up with a huge amount of criticism that most people don't have to begin to address. *He thanks the other departments that have supported her.* ... People have said things that are just way out of this world. I'd like to recognize that it's just a very small portion of the county that makes those kinds of comments and they're very disrespectful and I'd just like to commend her for taking that heat. *(Hearty applause.)* AH says he wants to commend everybody for taking the heat that they take while doing their jobs. JN states that in just over a year that he's been there, most of them have made him feel very welcome.

PB says that after focusing on Olympia and legislation, the sheriff's office's new focus is going to be reaching out, in preparation for a huge fire season, to the Treasurer, to the BOCC for FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) grants, to fire departments and Wildfire Protection Plan people so they're prepared and all on the same page.

AH: With the Cold Springs Fire people were having to evacuate animals to the fairgrounds and manage food donations. We need to get a real good process. The commissioners needs to delegate, or direct a non-profit to basically man it. They're not donating to the government.

NB: I'm from the west coast. I spent 26 years with the fire department, 16 years as chief, in Hamilton. If it was going to flood in Skagit County, it was going to be *(in)* Hamilton. *He talks about dealing for seven weeks with mudslides, bringing in feed and hay, even bringing the extra here after the Carlton Complex Fire.* I've got no problem working with that situation.

LG mentions that the Courthouse Security Panel has been revamped to include the whole county and is now the Okanogan County Complex Security Committee. He'll be sending emails to that effect. At 2:55 the department heads leave.

3:05 - LJ: We received the grant agreement draft for the capital project grant with the

Dept. of Agriculture for the fair's program. They need "source of county funds" for the \$17,500. We need to identify where these funds are coming from... so we just need to name them "general fund" or "capital improvements".

AH: I think we put it under the LATC (*Local Assistance and Tribal Consistency fund*).

JN: That was also eligible for "in kind", wasn't it?

AH: We could do all "in kind" if we wanted to but they're asking, if it's monetary, where's it coming from. (*He affirms*) it's the LATC, \$18,750 budgeted in there.

LJ: We need to ratify Commissioner Branch's signature on these two applications for water rights. *AH moves to acknowledge CB's signature on the application for a new water right for the Water Bank from Sullivan Lake.*

3:09 - *CB talks about an inter-local agreement with Chelan County for a certain Connections project re opiate settlement funds: They sent me language they used for a memorandum of understanding. Ours is more an inter-local agreement. CB will rewrite it. A clarification about the opioid funds: the council itself will not be given the discretion of how it will spend their (settlement) money. ...They've already billed us and we should just pay it out of our account. He reassures AH that: You will get a full report, and I hope you read that sucker from cover to cover. Because I will be ready to talk about that, because all our conversations (that morning with the company Carelon which administrates the funds and Behavioral Health/OBHC) today was relevant to that. They will come up with a kind of contract to spell out their actual financial obligation.*

3:12 - *Commissioners approve the fairgrounds rental fee schedule (res. 49-2024) that Commissioner Neil and the new fairgrounds manager have worked out, and res. 50-2024 directing ARPA (American Rescue Plan) funds to recruiting additional attorneys for indigent defense.*

CB: Part of the obligations for (receiving funds from) ARPA was ...county employee work had to be done to substantiate obligation to (*inaudible*). I don't know what that looks like for the health department. *AH says they haven't spent any money either. CB mentions an ARPA workshop coming that would benefit them. He muses over changing orders on projects, for a well, or the coroner's building, with regards to this. CB talks about the legislative effort for lower public defender caseloads. It was remanded in superior court and will be evaluated before being sent back there.* There's going to be a board of directors meeting this week (*to discuss*) strategies.

AH: It seems like the legislative branch doesn't want to get involved in the legislative branch's authority.

CB: One thing they decided about it: the indigent people were the ones that had the standing, not the association of counties, so I would think that would mean get a commission that could address indigent folks' issues. AH wonders if it couldn't be the NAACP. CB: It got a little complicated, judicially. They're going to be taking another look at it. The state still has that obligation.

AH: Maybe we should go to the NAACP—

CB: –and say “these are people who are going to be affected by this.” They might say, “They’re just going to let them go.” I don’t think they would. ...I thought it was a good meeting today with folks who came, provided us with information. *LJ asks them for a list of the boards and committees they sit on, as the auditor and treasurer need to include the money spent by these in their upcoming report. CB lists the association of counties (WSAC) and Community Action (OCCAC).*

LJ: They also report on what we’ve paid Economic Alliance and the City of Omak.

3:25 - *JN adjourns so he can attend a virtual meeting.*