

Okanogan County Board of County Commissioners meeting
Tuesday, February 6th, 2024 AM session

CB – Chris Branch, BOCC Vice-chair District 1
JN – Jon Neal, BOCC Chair, District 3
LJ – Lanie Johns, Clerk of the Board
ZK – Zak Kennedy, Lobbyist for Okanogan County
PJ – Pam Johnson, Okanogan County Treasurer
CH – Cari Hall, Okanogan County Auditor
LS – Lisa Schreckengost, Finance Manager
MW – Mike Worden, Chief Deputy of Communications, Sheriff Dept
EM – Esther Milner, County Civil Attorney
PP – Pete Palmer, Planning Director
IS – Isabelle Spohn, member of public

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/bocc-boh-notes> and are not the official county record of the meeting. For officially approved minutes, which are normally published at a later time, click [here](#).

Summary of Significant Discussion:

- *Public comments regarding ATVs, logging in the Methow Valley*
- *Legislative update: new definition of ‘Frontier County’; wolf bills; 6 initiatives on ballot; property tax assessment methods*
- *Finance Committee discussion*
- *Election observing*
- *Update on communications and mobile command unit; legal complications of ordering a coffee maker*

The time notations refer to the time stamp on video that is published on the county’s AV Capture site. To watch the video for this meeting, click [here](#).

00:01:30 – LJ asks BOCC if they want her to draft a letter regarding a bill introduced by Joel Kretz ([HB1835](#)) to create a category called “Frontier Counties” that is based on population density. There would be two tiers, and Okanogan County would be Tier 1 (<20 people per square mile). (*Note - Okanogan County [has 8 people per square mile](#)*).

CB – says that one good thing about something like that is that it makes it easier to separate out the rural counties. Says that doing it by population doesn’t really capture the picture of what a particular county looks like and what their needs are. Doesn’t see a down side.

00:06:50 – A similar situation came up earlier when we were competing for some grants.

JN – when you look for state funding you get docked if you are not affiliated with other counties, or if you don't have a full time employee. When what you need is the money to pay for those things. It's skewed towards the urban counties.

Discussion about how rural counties get the short end of the stick. Large rural counties have the most extensive road system without the tax base to support it. We often waive fees for developers regarding roads because it's just too expensive for them.

JN – the push is for affordable housing, but the more rules you put on them the more expensive it becomes. There has to be a happy medium.

CB – talks about how people in the city have rules about parking that they have to deal with. Gives example of developing corner lots with higher density, but then they don't have enough parking. People park their cars on the street.

JN – I couldn't do that – I have too many cars.

00:15:10 – IS calls in with public comment about limiting the size of groups of ATVs that are allowed.

CB – says that enforcement would be difficult.

IS – agrees, and points out that in Gold Creek for example there are already ATVs operating in places where they aren't allowed.

(Note- the audio of the two people who called in by phone with public comments is very poor and difficult to hear on AV Capture video.)

Unidentified woman calls in with concern about ATVs, growler jets and logging trucks. Says they will deter tourism in the Methow Valley. Comments that logging is happening on melted roads. Further comments that the USFS is not following through with their promises on the restoration projects. Gives some specific examples.

Another unidentified woman calls in with concern about the Mission restoration project. Says it looks like a monoculture with all the trees left standing the same diameter. There is no diversity. There will be blowdown. People need to go and look in person. The other thing is Mission Pond, at the top by Black Pine Lake. It looks terrible, and there were cattle grazing in there. We need to focus on the areas near the towns.

00:31:30 – ZK gives legislative update. We are at a time where committees have been cut off . The cutoff date for house of origin is Feb 13th. [HB 1835](#) is the frontier county bill by Joel Kretz. His wolf bill [HB 2423](#) is not going through. His other wolf bill [HB 2424](#) will move and we will watch for amendments. One thing we are talking about is that Republicans have about 40% of the seats, but only have about 20% of the bills. They are trying to increase that number. It comes down to priorities and we are trying to work to increase the priority. That's why we are working with this bill - because it involves the tribes. Another is [HB 5843](#) regarding election security. It kind of takes authority away from the counties and gives it to the State. A lot of counties will be opposing this.

Do you have any questions?

JN – where are we with addressing the 6 initiatives?

ZK – Looks like all 6 are going to be on the ballot.

JN – perfect.

ZK – The Dems don't have any incentive to do anything with them since they basically gut all the work the Dems have done over the past few years. I'm hearing that the initiatives are polling around 75% positive.

CB – what's the schedule for the capital budget items? We have a request in.

ZK – everybody is looking at the budget right now, especially in light of the initiatives that they are assuming will pass. That will totally gut the budget, losing the capital gains tax and the cap and trade, so they are looking at what, if anything, they can do. They planned on having billions of dollars that aren't going to show up. There is never a conversation about shrinking the agencies. It's an interesting approach. The R's are talking about what will happen when they gain seats back. There will be conversations about where our money is going with agency personnel. The [Chevron case before the US Supreme Court](#) could have big impact. For example, Congress passed something like 85 new laws, but the Federal agencies made over 3000 rules. If they reverse the Chevron decision and it trickles down to the States it could make it so that agencies could not overreach. It could really pull back agency power. It will be interesting to see what happens over the next couple of years.

CB – could you summarize that bill [HB 2423](#)?

ZK – it would have required formation of a work group that involved Sheriffs and county personnel. That one is not moving. The other one that is moving involves the tribes.

Goes on to talk about how full time employees are calculated and how it inflates agency budgets. Gave an example of how a different way of calculating dropped the budget by 50%.

JN – asks about a bill that would increase property taxes infinitely. ([HB 5770](#))

ZK – that one will probably move. It would allow for a 3% increase of property tax, but it would be optional.

JN – but if you don't increase then you don't get any other money.

ZK – It's interesting that other counties are looking for new ways to assess property. Especially smaller counties. They bring up a good point. In small counties the population density measurements get less accurate. For example, take Whitman County. It's an urbanized rural county. Most of the people live in Pullman, the rest of the land is Ag production. When you look at the population it's almost all in the towns. So the taxes the county is able to collect are quite small. Skamania County has commissioned a study to look at other ways of doing assessments to distribute more of the money to the county. They might find a creative solution. In these types of counties we have this split where if you raise your taxes, you don't get all that much, but when they do it in King County they get millions of dollars.

CB – the only thing I would think about, like in Whitman County for example is that the cost to serve those remote areas should be a lot less.

ZK – It's a real interesting question to address, and there is no simple answer.

CB – It's important to recognize how much difference there can be even within rural counties.

JN – what happens if cap and trade gets repealed, what happens to the money that has already been collected?

ZK – I don't know. But I can ask around. It may be that they just don't collect it in the future.

Talks about a whistleblower who said that he wasn't allowed to reveal information indicating that gas prices would go up.

Joking about how the Gov will make the oil and gas industry pay us back.

1:01:00 – Finance committee. Pam Johnson, Lisa Schrekengast, Cari Hall, Mike Wordon. Getting ready for our annual report. Previous meeting BOCC asked about some carryover funds. We followed up with the departments – fund 125 parks & rec, 161 emergency communications, 171 LTGO bond, 405 solid waste. 171 has difference of \$705K. We are looking into that and will let you know later.

Fund 161 – MW – early adopter project moved slower than planned, so we adjusted carryover \$169K. Then we got funds earlier than expected but budget was already done. Auditor made necessary adjustments.

PJ – has not heard from public works about the other two funds yet. CH – points out that the carryover is greater than expected which is a good thing.

1:07:30 – PJ asked if BOCC has any questions on debt or investment policy?

CB – no, haven't read it yet.

1:08:00 – PJ – what procedure we need to do about the vehicle that Sheriff dept purchased? In the past the dept or the BOCC will request the funds transfer.

CB – says to have Sheriff's office request the transfer.

CH – the BOCC approves the budget, which includes an amount that can be transferred. Yet we still require the department to request the transfer and the BOCC to approve it. Can we look at allowing the transfer to take place without Specific BOCC approval as long as it is within the approved budget amount?

PJ – says that could work as long as the treasurer is kept in the loop.

CH – explains the thought process about how it would simplify.

CB – says he doesn't have any concerns about it.

JN – says he doesn't have any concerns as long as it can all be tracked properly.

PJ – Yes, it would all be smoother.

CH – my only concern is that it puts the onus on each department to keep close track of their budgets.

MW – clarifies how the communication would work in Sheriff department, for example, when they need to purchase a vehicle.

CH – explains the system, and how the Sheriff's department is a little different because they have a different procedure for vehicle purchases. The new procedure would mainly affect other departments.

1:17:15 – CH – says new location for ballot inspection board is working beautifully.

JN – asks how CH feels about having a political science class come to observe her department.

CH – says she would love to, would need to coordinate around elections, based on space available.

CB – asks if any counties have built ballot processing facilities with specific space for observers?

CH – says it's different based on the size of the county. Some of the big ones have warehouse sized space, and observers are outside the processing room looking in through windows.

She welcomes observers and accommodates as many as she can. Explains some of the rules about how observers can interact with processing. The current method of using the room down the hall is working out well.

CB – mentions new facility design possibilities.

CH – would love something with room for 10-15 people to observe.

CB – says video is working OK.

CH – says that their system of live feed to the You Tube channel is good, but people have a right to be there in person. Mentions the crunch they are feeling with having to essentially run three elections within a couple of weeks (February special, and D & R presidential primaries).

1:24:30 – PJ says property tax statements are going out today.

Brief discussion about how property taxes work.

1:31:15 – JN mentions that he had a call from Newhouse's office regarding a letter about the catastrophic cherry harvest. It's been sent.

1:31:50 – MW – nothing huge with dispatch. The early adopter project is about 80% done. We have some coordination to do with DOT. Lots of computer minutia to fuss with. Every radio has an ID, it's assigned groups and can only communicate with certain groups. DOT will authorize us to use radio towers near our county. We will have some access to state network. It's all very complicated and needs to be managed so that there are no conflicting communications. We've been talking about these statewide plans, but now we are actually doing it and there is a learning curve.

CB – says it's kind of exciting.

MW – gives example of Lifeline ambulance that travels between regions.

MW – spoke with Patty Murray's office – they wanted to clarify some things. Was talking to Sen Short regarding funding from Leg. She's targeting the operational side of the budget. She is very positive about it.

Working on USDA loan application. It's quite a process. I will learn a lot even if we don't get the money.

CB – says lots of people look just at whether you apply.

MW – if we receive funding one of the goals is how do we distribute it fairly between agencies.

Radio needs are different, need to determine priority in a fair and equitable way.

Short discussion about technical details of radio communications.

MW – got final report from ATCOM with site assessments and high level design. I will be coming back for more money for project management.

The mobile command trailer is here, decals and equipment are installed. I'm finishing up stocking with furniture and equipment, and will write an ops manual. One big question – can we buy a coffee maker for it? I talked with the Auditor about it. I know it has been an issue in the past.

LJ – says there was an issue with the State Auditor and the fact that if it's available to the public, then there are all kinds of rules about providing refreshments, etc.

Short discussion about how the mobile command trailer will be used, and how having coffee available could be necessary for keeping people alert in a long term emergency situation. Also a similar concern about providing outlets for phone charging.

LJ – says they had a similar resolution regarding bottled water that could be a template for a coffee maker resolution.

MW – will follow up on that. My next job is to get the word out that we have this new resource.

Maybe take it around and park it in prominent places so folks can see it and ask questions.

One challenge is to learn how to use it across departments. Each agency (Fire dept, Law enforcement, EMS) are very good at managing their own responses when it's just them. Where we don't have a lot of experience is when those agencies need to respond all together and coordinate with each other. I was thinking that it might be good training to use the new unit as

a command center during events like the Stampede or the County Fair so that they can get used to working together.

CB – relates anecdote about a recent situation that he witnessed in Cle Elum when he had stopped for a break on his way home. Someone overdosed on fentanyl in the back of his truck, and when he called 911 the response was incredible. Several agencies showed up and they all worked together so smoothly and saved the guy's life.

MW – Yes, we all work together on a day to day basis really well. It's when we have the bigger incidents that we might need to do things a little bit different.

MW – I'm looking at a second radio tech position – it's on your consent agenda.

JN – asks about another vehicle

MW – says yes they are watching for an opportunity. They are very expensive. Other counties have been able to do cost recovery. For example, our neighbor to the south, when they have a wildfire that reaches a certain point it automatically triggers the dispatch of the mobile unit, and then they qualify for some funds to help pay the costs.

MW – after the radio project, I'm moving on to the dispatch center. That's the next thing that needs attention.

JN – says he has a relationship with Newhouse, asks MW if there is anything he needs from the Federal side.

MW – no, I'm not real familiar with what is out there.

1:57:20 – MW leaves.

LJ – asks BOCC if they want to consider the Frontier County support letter.

JN – yes.

1:58:30 – JN leaves and says he is going for a walk and will be back.

2:00:00 – BOCC goes into Executive session to discuss potential litigation with EM and PP.

(Note- video is stopped while BOCC is gone – resumes again at 2:03:00 timestamp when they return.)

2:03:00 – BOCC returns from exec session. Votes on a couple of resolutions regarding bottled water and signing letter supporting [HB 1835](#) (Frontier counties).

2:30:00 – BOCC adjourns for lunch.