

**Economic Vitality Committee
Meeting Summary
July 29, 2025**

Commissioners Present:

Lack Litwer, Chair
Laura Brennan Bissell, Vice Chair
Michael Mills
Alex Johnson
Robert Liberty

Staff Present:

Krystyna Wolniakowski
Connie Acker
Sage Ebel
Lisa Naas Cook

Review and finalize the draft purpose and scope of work:

Chair Litwer asked that staff add a task to the workplan related to fire recovery, rebuilding in the National Scenic Area, and addressing climate change in the next Management Plan review process. The committee then proceeded to discuss the tasks listed in the draft scope of work as below.

Review highlights of the Economic Development Chapter of the Management Plan:

Chair Litwer asked members of the committee to review the Chapter and become familiar with its contents for a future discussion. Krystyna provided background information about the development of the chapter during the Gorge 2020 Management Plan review. With all but one commissioner being new since Gorge 2020, they did not have the background of its origin or the thought and public process that went into creating it. Once committee members have a chance to review it, gaps can be identified to be addressed in the next Management Plan review process.

Request an orientation on the Oregon Investment Board's work and the role of the Gorge Commission:

Jessica Metta, Executive Director of the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD), and Gil Kelley, Chair of the Oregon Investment Board (OIB), provided an overview of the small business start-ups revolving loan fund and the role of the Gorge Commission in certifying these loans as being consistent with the National Scenic Area Act. The original funds for the loan program were authorized and appropriated as part of the NSA Act passed in 1986 (approx. \$5 million per state). When the small start-up loans are awarded, the recipients use the funds to begin their business and then pay them back over time with low interest. With the payback of these initial OIB loans, they establish a credit track record and then can qualify for larger commercial loans. The repayment goes back into the fund to be used by future loan applicants. When a loan is approved by OIB, it comes to the Gorge Commission who then review the terms, write a staff report with findings of consistency,

and then “certify” that the loan is consistent with the NSA Act. There was considerable discussion about how to examine the long-term impact of these loans in the NSA in terms of job creation and multiplier effect/leverage of funds invested vs outcomes. Discussion centered on how to more fully capture the nature of the loans, the outcomes of the loans, and the benefit of these loans in both urban and rural areas, since most of the loans are granted in urban areas. However, there are efforts to diversify the recipients of these loans, from small size of business to larger loans and to extend them into the rural areas. There has also been a proactive approach to focus on women and minority owned businesses. Currently, the Vital Sign Indicators Planner is working with MCEDD, WIB and OIB to develop measurable indicators that can be used to measure progress and cumulative impacts and outcomes over time from these investments. Commissioner Liberty suggested that we need to get demographic and types of jobs data to show where people live and work and how they commute between rural and urban areas in the NSA.

A Bi-State Advisory Council with reps from CRGC, Forest Service, OIB, WIB, Dept of Commerce and Business Oregon convenes a meeting annually in the fall to discuss progress. They also prepare the 5-year Economic Vitality Plan that is submitted to both states. The next one is due in 2026.

Determine support for Accessory Dwelling Units

Chair Litwer asked if there is support for this topic. Commissioner Liberty stated that there is a lot of information on this topic and there has to be consistency with state laws, so suggested this should be part of Management Plan review and questioned why this topic should be included as part of the Economic Vitality Committee’s workplan. He would not support this topic as part of the committee’s work. Commissioner Johnson stated that housing is part of Chair Litwer’s expertise and asked for his opinion. Chair Litwer said he would be open to discussions about ADUs.

Commissioner Brennan Bissell stated that this committee needs to look at housing issues because it is a major issue and can become additional income for farmers from ADUs.

Commissioner Liberty discussed his experience working on ADU issues and suggested the committee get facts and seek some outside expert advice on this topic to determine who will benefit and why, as well as financing.

Chair Litwer agreed to explore this policy area as part of the scope of work for this committee.

Agriculture Income Test for Large Scale Agriculture Land Use Designation

The committee was not able to discuss this topic since the one-hour meeting time was done. Commissioner Brennan Bissell supports this topic. Commissioner Liberty is strongly against taking on this topic for this committee. Krystyna stated that she would give an explanation about this topic at the next meeting on August 26, 2025, at 11:00 am.

There was no public comment.