



**Comprehensive Thematic Summary:
Columbia River Gorge Commission
Commissioner Interviews & Public Meetings**

June 25, 2025
The Avarna Group

The Avarna Group was contracted in April 2025 to support the Columbia River Gorge Commission (the Commission) with workshops for Commissioners around topics of equity, inclusion, and belonging. Our scope of work included a discovery phase where we facilitated ten one-on-one listening sessions with individual Commissioners and staff from April through June to help inform our live workshops and to glean information that would allow us to make some preliminary recommendations for concrete action. In each one-on-one meeting, we asked the following questions:

1. Why did you decide to join the Commission?
2. What has your involvement been (or what do you hope for it to be)?
3. What is your understanding of the Commission's overall mission, vision, values, and strategic evolution and how it is connected to DEI?
4. What challenges do you anticipate we will encounter, particularly around change management?
5. What can you share with us about any external factors that might impact our work (e.g., the current state of the law on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the states of Washington and Oregon and the shifting federal landscape)?

Below is a thematic summary of the data we gathered during the one-on-one meetings.

Summary Takeaway

The Columbia River Gorge Commission sits at a complex intersection of environmental conservation, local economic realities, and diverse stakeholder interests.

Commissioners bring varied backgrounds and sometimes conflicting views on mission and governance, creating internal tensions that complicate decision-making. While the Commission has made strides in conservation and management planning, persistent challenges remain in balancing economic vitality, community inclusion, and equity in the application of land use rules. Mission clarity, strong leadership, clearer communication, governance support, and collaborative reforms offer promising paths forward.

Detailed Themes:

1. Motivations for Joining the Commission

- **Place-based commitment:** Many joined due to personal or professional ties to the Gorge, agriculture, conservation, or local communities.
- **Desire to influence land use and conservation:** Commissioners want to balance environmental protection with economic vitality and community needs.
- **Frustration with bureaucracy and red tape:** Ag/land owner commissioners have a desire to create processes and policies that are accessible to community members.
- **Diverse backgrounds:** Commissioners are interested in diversifying the commission by bringing a wealth of expertise from conservation, agriculture, philanthropy, law, business, Tribal government, and local governance, reflecting a well-rounded body.
- **Passion for the Gorge and its stewardship:** Many commissioners show genuine passion, commitment, and deep personal or professional ties to the Gorge and its stewardship.

2. Perceptions of Commission's Mission, Role & Effectiveness

- **Thoughtful planning:** The commission has clear strengths in land conservation and protection, with thoughtful management plans (e.g., Gorge 2020 Plan) that include DEI and climate change chapters.
- **Ambiguity and confusion about role:** Many commissioners express uncertainty or disagreement about the commission's core mission – balancing environmental protection and economic development.
- **Not an economic development agency:** Commissioners acknowledge the Commission's formal limits on economic development, yet the Commission's charge related to economic vitality is a recurring concern and source of tension.
- **Economic vitality & agriculture focus:** Ag and rural economic survival are key themes; some feel the Commission rules hurt small farms and ag businesses.
- **Tensions around growth and gentrification:** Some commissioners perceive that the Commission and partners like Friends of the Gorge push an agenda that favors "gentrification" and benefits elites, sidelining working-class landowners and rural Gorge residents.
- **Regulatory challenges:** Some commissioners perceive the Commission's land use regulations as overly restrictive, complex, and favoring well-

resourced or outside interests rather than local residents.

3. Commissioner Dynamics and Governance Challenges

- **Goal misalignment:** There are some tensions in goals between commissioners representing county/local interests vs. those aligned with conservation or state priorities.
- **Micromanagement & overreach:** There is a concern that some commissioners overstep the boundaries of their role as it relates to staff interaction and oversight.
- **Lack of mutual respect and collaboration:** Some report that Commissioners often struggle to respect differing perspectives; political and personal tensions are common.
- **Generational and geographic disconnect:** Some commissioners express that commissioners living outside the scenic area may be out of touch with on-the-ground realities faced by local farmers and residents.

4. Community Relationships

- **Positive connections:** the Commission maintains active connections with local governments, Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, nonprofits (like Friends of the Gorge), and the public, showing commitment to multi-stakeholder engagement
- **Tribal representation:** The presence of Tribal citizens/community members on the Commission demonstrates a commitment to including Indigenous worldviews and values in Gorge stewardship.
- **Friends of the Gorge (FOTG):** Seen as a powerful player with substantial resources, shaping commission decisions and strategy, sometimes in controversial ways.
- **County governments and residents:** Counties often resent commission restrictions and advocate strongly for local property rights and economic opportunity.
- **Public perception & communication gaps:** Commissioners report general confusion about what the commission does, compounded by technical jargon and lack of clear messaging.

5. Economic Vitality and Land Use Conflicts

- **The economic vitality workgroup:** The workgroup is a bright spot, having met multiple times to address balancing conservation with agriculture and small business needs.

- **Supporting small business:** The Commission’s revolving loan fund for small business loans reflects innovative approaches to supporting economic vitality within the Gorge’s unique context.
- **Rules seen as restrictive to landowners:** Some believe Commission rules are overly restrictive. Examples include high fees (\$90k business thresholds), limits on ag-tourism, restrictions on ADUs, yurts, and short-term rentals.
- **Housing affordability and workforce issues:** Lack of affordable housing limits ability to retain workers; there are tensions around what types of housing and rentals are acceptable.
- **Concerns about “land grabs” and gentrification:** Some commissioners speculate that high-value lands are being purchased for conservation or other purposes that exclude current residents or landowners.

6. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Efforts and Challenges

- **Emerging awareness:** DEI was incorporated in the Gorge 2020 Plan, but Commissioners report that real integration remains uneven.
- **Community representation gaps:** Commissioners recognize renters, low-income residents, and Indigenous people are often underrepresented or insufficiently served.
- **Communication and accessibility:** Zoom meetings and virtual formats have hampered relationship-building and contributed to misunderstandings.
- **Cultural and political divides:** The Commission struggles to reconcile differing cultural values and priorities across diverse constituencies..

7. Leadership and Organizational Culture

- **Leadership challenges:** Staff face balancing commissioner demands, polarized politics, and limited resources.
- **Morale and staff capacity:** Growth in staff size is positive, but tensions among commissioners strain relationships and workflow.
- **Commissioner training and orientation:** Newer commissioners often lack historical context, contributing to lack of clarity.

8. Opportunities and Hopes for the Commission

- **Potential to clarify mission and values:** Commissioners seek to build a shared vision that balances conservation, economic vitality, and community needs.
- **Need for regulatory reform:** Commissioners call to simplify, relax, or clarify rules to support farmers, landowners, and small businesses.

- **Improved communication and branding:** Respondents believe simplified messaging that clarifies the Commission’s work and limits will increase public support.
 - **Economic committee role:** Strengthening this committee to effectively address economic vitality within the commission’s mandate.
 - **Collaborative governance:** Rebuild respectful working relationships among commissioners and with communities.
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Concrete Action Steps for the Columbia River Gorge Commission

1. Strengthen Commissioner Relations & Governance

- A. **Engage a professional governance facilitator** to support the Commission in navigating interpersonal tensions, clarifying roles, and improving group dynamics.
- B. **Develop a commissioner onboarding and orientation program** to ensure new members understand the Commission’s mission, limits, governance style, and role expectations.
- C. **Establish regular one-on-one check-ins** between Executive Director and commissioners to build rapport and address concerns proactively.
- D. **Develop and adopt clear commissioner role guidelines** that delineate strategic governance from operational micromanagement and provide pathways to address overreach..
- E. **Develop and codify a commission-wide code of conduct or community agreements** (draft [here](#)) focused on respect, collaboration, and constructive discourse.
- F. **Implement a confidential reporting mechanism** for commissioners and staff to raise concerns about behavior or conflicts without fear of retaliation.
- G. **Review past meeting recordings to identify harmful patterns** and hold space for healing and accountability.
- H. **Facilitate in a way that honors cultural communication norms** and minimizes pressure to speak or make motions in Western formats.
- I. **Use equity-informed facilitation tools** (e.g., rounds, equity pauses) to ensure all commissioners can fully contribute.
- J. **Pilot anonymous polling or digital engagement** during meetings to gather candid input from the public and commissioners.

- K. **Return to or increase in-person meetings and gatherings** when possible to rebuild trust, improve understanding, and reduce virtual meeting fatigue.
- L. **Reinstate post-meeting relationship-building time**, especially during in-person or hybrid meetings.
- M. **Hold non-decisional, educational workshops outside of official public meeting formats** when feasible (ensuring compliance with quorum and public records laws).
- N. **Create a commissioner equity and accessibility policy** that centers diverse experiences (e.g., single parents, disabled, neurodivergent).

2. Navigate Political Polarization Thoughtfully

- A. **Develop a “common ground” framing toolkit** for commissioners to discuss challenging topics across ideological lines.
- B. **Use shared concerns** (e.g., wildfire, farming viability, salmon restoration) as entry points for broader justice conversations.
- C. **Train commissioners and staff** on how to talk about equity in politically nuanced ways while remaining aligned with core values.

3. Enhance Communication & Public Messaging

- A. **Hire or contract a communications strategist** to develop a values-driven, community-friendly way to describe the agency (e.g., “guardians of the Gorge,” “bi-state stewards of land and community,” etc.).
- B. **Launch a public education campaign** clarifying what the commission does and does not do, particularly regarding economic development and land use. (Include a “What We’re Not” section in all outreach materials to distinguish the Commission from Friends of the Gorge and other agencies.)
- C. **Craft messaging that explicitly communicates the Commission’s dual purpose:** preserving the natural beauty of the Gorge while advancing sustainable economic development for its communities.
- D. **Develop a public storytelling campaign that highlights how conservation and economic development reinforce one another** (e.g., sustainable tourism, infrastructure that protects landscapes and builds livelihoods).
- E. **Use inclusive language** that connects with broader constituencies beyond traditional conservation audiences.
- F. **Create messaging guides** for commissioners and staff to talk about the broader intent and potential of the Act (e.g., natural and cultural resource enhancement, economic resilience).

- G. **Improve transparency by publishing easy-to-understand summaries** of commission decisions, plans, and economic programs for public consumption.
 - H. **Regularly highlight success stories and community benefits** arising from the Commission’s work to build goodwill.
 - I. **Frame DEI work using values-aligned language** (e.g., fairness, resilience, stewardship, community voice) instead of academic or political jargon that may alienate stakeholders.
 - J. **Create a commissioner Storytelling Series** (videos or blogs) where each commissioner shares their perspective, values, and hopes for the Gorge — to humanize the Commission.
- 4. Support Economic Vitality While Upholding Conservation**
- A. **Elevate and empower the Economic Vitality Committee** to serve as a visible commission sub-group addressing economic concerns and opportunities within the Gorge.
 - B. **Identify and prioritize 2–3 specific economic issues of highest concern to commissioners and constituents** for focused work
 - C. **Conduct an audit** of how CRGC has supported economic development to date (e.g., the \$10M business loan program via Investment Boards)
 - D. **Brand this support clearly as “Scenic Area economic development”** and publicize success stories using this framing.
 - E. **Clarify and communicate policies that support agriculture, small business, and tourism**, ensuring the commission’s protective role is well-understood.
 - F. **Expand the existing key indicator system** beyond the single economic vitality indicator to include indicators such as workforce housing, employment rates, broadband access, and small business success.
 - G. **Partner with economic development organizations** to co-develop indicators that reflect local priorities.
 - H. **Supporting small business growth**, including leveraging and expanding loan programs in urban and rural cores
 - I. **Review permit and fee structures** (e.g., business thresholds) for fairness and economic impact, adjusting where possible to ease burdens on small/local businesses.
 - J. **Highlight and lift up economic development practices** (e.g., regenerative ag, agritourism) that align with protection goals.
 - K. Address gentrification by: conducting a study on the **conversion of working lands into estates** and develop policies to address this trend, and

partnering with counties and conservation easement programs to **protect agricultural land** from speculative development.

- L. **Explore loosening restrictions on existing informal practices that do not negatively impact the Commission's mandate**, such as farm-based yurts, ADUs, and agro-tourism accommodations.

5. **Connect Housing & Conservation**

- A. **Develop a policy white paper or toolkit** on how the Commission could support rural-appropriate housing solutions without undermining conservation goals (e.g., clustered housing, worker housing on ag land, infill).
- B. **Work with cities within the Scenic Area boundary** to explore coordinated approaches to rural housing affordability.
- C. **Pair “no to sprawl” messages with “yes to equitable housing” strategies** that align with the Scenic Act’s economic development mandate.
- D. **Revisit the Commission’s position and policies on Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)**, especially as they support intergenerational living and workforce housing.
- E. **Consider how the Management Plan can better support affordable and multi-generational housing** in alignment with community needs.

6. **Strengthen Staff Capacity & Leadership Support**

- A. **Ensure the Chair and ED are supported** in learning how and when to intervene when disrespect or power imbalances arise.
- B. **Continue efforts to maintain or grow staff capacity** to ensure adequate support for expanding commission work and community engagement.
- C. **Define clear staff roles and boundaries** to protect time and prevent commissioner overreach.
- D. **Promote leadership development and coaching** for the Executive Director and senior staff to navigate political and interpersonal challenges effectively.
- E. **Encourage staff participation in regional equity/inclusion and governance networks** to stay connected with best practices and peer learning.
- F. **Continue professional learning for staff and commissioners**, prioritizing:
 - Navigating race, land, and power.
 - Tribal rights and histories.
 - Communicating across ideological divides.
 - Recognizing and disrupting dominant cultural norms
 - Recognizing and disrupting gender bias

7. Foster Stronger Relationships with Constituents and Communities

- A. **Conduct landscape analysis of communities currently engaged vs. those missing** (e.g., rural residents, working families, Indigenous communities and Tribes, small businesses, development community).
- B. **Create tailored engagement strategies** that resonate with these groups' values and concerns (e.g., affordability, infrastructure, local jobs).
- C. **Enhance collaboration with Tribal representatives** by clarifying roles and resourcing needed to support their participation and leadership.
- D. **Build partnerships with local governments, chambers, and economic development organizations** to foster shared goals
- E. **Design new community-led listening sessions** across the region, learning from the Hood River sessions.
- F. Prioritize Latine, Tribal, low-income, and rural communities historically excluded from Gorge planning.
- G. Include questions on access, safety, transportation, jobs, and cultural ties.
- H. **Coordinate messaging and outreach with Friends of the Gorge and other nonprofits** to align public education efforts.
- I. **Facilitate community conversations that ask: "Protection for whom? From what? To what end?"** Include BIPOC, Indigenous, and working-class voices in these conversations.

8. Integrate Equity Into Commission Work and Operations

- A. **Pilot an equity impact assessment for land use decisions**, asking:
 - Who benefits?
 - Who bears the burden?
 - Are impacts racially or economically disparate?
- B. **Establish protocols to prioritize Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty** in relevant decisions (e.g., fishing rights, land stewardship).
- C. **Create space in meetings to deliberate on impacts on people and place** alongside regulatory compliance.
- D. **Evaluate how current design and use standards (e.g., architectural guidelines)** may unintentionally exclude or harm marginalized communities.
- E. **Identify systemic and practical barriers** (e.g., housing, transportation, cultural unwelcomeness) that prevent BIPOC and working-class communities from residing in or benefiting from the Gorge.
- F. **Create a proactive economic development pipeline** to identify, support, and fund Indigenous-, Latine-, and BIPOC-owned businesses, ensuring visibility of past success stories (e.g., the Indigenous-owned fish market in Cascade Locks).

- G. **Develop sustained relationships with Latine and other BIPOC communities** that go beyond single-issue lenses (e.g., farmworker housing) and into broader economic, cultural, and civic opportunity.
 - H. **Develop a multilingual signage and access strategy** with community-based organizations (e.g., Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinook Jargon, etc.).
 - I. **Support and amplify efforts that increase infrastructure**, such as transit connectivity and digital access, for communities with limited mobility or car access.
 - J. **Work with WSDOT and ODOT to advocate for safer and more equitable transportation infrastructure** to address disparate transportation infrastructure and traffic burdens on the WA versus OR side of Gorge
 - K. **Conduct a needs assessment for rural infrastructure** (sanitation, roads, transit) in impacted counties.
 - L. **Use current vacancies and appointments** to increase BIPOC, rural, and working-class representation on the Commission.
 - M. **Evaluate current internship pipeline** (e.g., USC) and actively expand partnerships to include: Local colleges and community colleges, Tribal colleges and education programs from the 4 Treaty Tribes, HBCUs and HSIs; and redefine qualifications to value lived experience, not just formal credentials.
 - N. **Conduct access equity audits** on trails, recreational zones, and scenic areas to identify where public benefit is not reaching marginalized residents.
 - O. **Conduct a review of regulations** that disproportionately burden small farmers and regenerative operations.
 - P. **Consider a tiered permitting system based on scale and risk** to expedite simple projects (e.g., steel roofs, food service at wineries, roadside stands).
 - Q. **Develop plain-language guides and flowcharts** to support the public in advocating for land uses without needing to retain an attorney or specialist.
- 9. Clarify & Reinforce Commission Mission & Values**
- A. **Regularly revisit the Commission’s bi-state governmental identity and responsibilities** to reinforce unity and shared purpose.
 - B. **Host internal sessions or retreats** to reexamine the Scenic Area Act’s full mandate, highlighting under-leveraged aspects (e.g., economic development, cultural enhancement, recreation access).

- C. **Transparently explain that economic development is permitted only when it does not compromise conservation goals**, and define how “jeopardizing the first mandate” is assessed beyond aesthetics.
- D. **Revise the Management Plan preamble and public messaging** to clarify that the Gorge is *for all people*, not just for recreation or visual aesthetics.
- E. **Facilitate a strategic meeting with commissioners and staff** to solidify the Commission’s values (draft [here](#)).
- F. **Integrate updated values into all communications, policies, and onboarding materials.**
- G. **Conduct a strategic prioritization session** to identify 3–5 top policy focus areas for the year (e.g., climate adaptation, agricultural viability, affordable housing).
- H. **Revisit indicators to ensure greater balance** of ecosystem, cultural, community, environmental justice, and economic indicators.

10. Build capacity

- A. **Identify specific funding opportunities** (e.g., watershed resilience, Tribal co-stewardship, rural economic development) that could be accessed through coordinated proposals.
- B. **Proactively seek grants from non-federal sources** (e.g., Meyer Memorial Trust, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, private foundations) to insulate Commission work from political attacks and risks of state defunding.
- C. **Explore leveraging Scenic Area identity to access additional funding** tied to rural resilience, broadband, and climate adaptation.
- D. **Document and analyze past funding threats** (like the Washington defunding effort) and develop a political risk strategy that:
 - Educates lawmakers
 - Builds constituent coalitions
 - Centers rural and Indigenous community benefits
- E. **Document best practices, lessons learned, and procedural knowledge** for the next Commission Chair.
- F. **Build a succession pipeline that emphasizes values alignment**, especially as hostile or obstructionist appointments increase.
- G. **Keep an internal archive of past decisions, tensions, and successes**, so that each new commissioner isn’t starting from zero and reopening settled debates.