

From: [Kevin Waters](#)
To: [Krystyna Wolniakowski](#); [Connie Acker](#)
Cc: [Rob Farris - Skamania County](#)
Subject: Editorial on Robert Liberty's Resignation
Date: Wednesday, January 14, 2026 11:24:02 AM

Hi Krystyna,

Please attach my comments to the next commission meeting. These comments are reflected as my own and as the Director of the EDC. I look forward to continuing to work with you and the Commission.

Thank you,

Kevin

A Time for new Direction -

As the Executive Director of the Skamania County Economic Development Council and someone who works closely with county planning, I feel compelled to respond to recent public statements made by former Gorge Commission Chair Robert Liberty following his resignation.

Mr. Liberty has warned that major developers and business interests are poised to overrun the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area. From my position working daily on development and land-use issues in Skamania County, I can say plainly: this does not reflect reality.

Skamania County processes and implements roughly 68 percent of all planning and permitting within the Scenic Area on both the Washington and Oregon sides. In my experience, I have never met with a serious large-scale developer attempting to build within the Scenic Area. The notion that major conglomerates are waiting in the wings is simply not supported by what counties are actually seeing.

Concerns about gentrification, however, are real—and here is where leadership has fallen short. Current Scenic Area policies make it far easier for wealthy individuals to build than for working families or generational residents. Those with significant financial resources can wait years and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars navigating planning and engineering requirements. Most local residents cannot.

The Underwood area is a clear example. Today, it is effectively impossible for someone earning a median Skamania County wage to build a home under current Gorge Commission policies. That is not preservation—it is exclusion.

The same contradiction applies to agriculture. While Mr. Liberty has expressed concern about the loss of working farms, policies advanced under his leadership made it more difficult for farmers to operate sustainably. Requirements that limit farm stands, sales, and housing flexibility undermine the very agricultural viability the Commission claims to protect.

Mr. Liberty has also suggested that major infrastructure projects, such as the Hood River Bridge replacement, were being rushed or rubber-stamped by federal and state agencies. In reality, these efforts require years of coordination, extensive stakeholder engagement, and

cooperation between Washington and Oregon. This work is complex, necessary, and essential for the region's future.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that during Mr. Liberty's tenure, the Gorge Commission increasingly aligned with advocacy organizations that pursue land acquisition strategies removing property from the local tax base. When private land is taken out of taxable use, the impacts are felt by schools, public services, and rural communities. These consequences deserve more honest discussion than they have received.

This is not written in anger. It is written out of responsibility.

The Scenic Area Act carries two mandates: protecting the Gorge from inappropriate development and supporting the economic vitality of local communities. Development has unquestionably been restrained. The harder truth is that economic sustainability has been largely left to counties to manage—without sufficient partnership from the Commission.

Mr. Liberty's resignation presents an opportunity for meaningful course correction.

The Gorge Commission must recognize who is truly doing its work. Counties are on the ground every day implementing policy, processing permits, and working directly with residents, farmers, and businesses. That reality should shape how the Commission operates—and who serves on it.

Future Commission members should bring lived experience in the Gorge and a working understanding of local communities. Equally important is a renewed commitment to open dialogue, transparent decision-making, and genuine collaboration with counties, tribes, and residents.

The Gorge does not need more division. It needs balance.

As a generational Skamania County resident and Executive Director of the Skamania County Economic Development Council, I am hopeful. With thoughtful leadership and a recommitment to partnership, the Gorge Commission can better honor both the land and the people who call it home.

Kevin Waters
Skamania EDC
Executive Director
503.560.5241
kwaters@skamania-edc.org