

Economic Vitality Committee
Meeting Highlights
March 4, 2026

Commissioners Present:

Lach Litwer, Chair
Steve Hochman
Pah-tu Pitt (absent)
Laura Brennan Bissell (absent)

Staff Present:

Krystyna Wolniakowski
Connie Acker
Jeff Litwak

After roll call, approval of the December 2, 2025 Economic Vitality meeting summary was postponed for approval since a quorum of committee members was not present.

County Perspectives: Guest Presentation from Skamania County

Asa Leckie, Skamania County Commission Chair provided an update to the committee:

- County Commissioner Leckie shared history of Skamania County and the Skamania County's concerns with the National Scenic Area Act with the high percentage of federally managed forest lands in the county. He described financial challenges facing the county, including limited space to develop and diversify the economy, challenges coordinating with two National Forests, reductions in revenue from federal Payments in Lieu of Taxes, and limited timber harvest revenues due to missed quotas. He stated that between the National Scenic Area lands and Gifford Pinchot NF, Skamania County has only 1.9% developable lands in the county for tax revenues to support schools etc. Even though tourism is a revenue source, the tourism economy is inconsistent due to rising prices resulting in tourists spending less out of their pockets to support local businesses. He also said that no other county operates with 98% of its tax base in federal ownership or protection. He wants to figure out the economic development path forward that protects Gorge resources and benefits the Skamania County residents. Chair Litwer acknowledged the issues faced by the county and the lack of developable land leading to lower assessment values and lower county property tax revenues. He noted that the Gorge Commission doesn't control the process of federal acquisitions nor how forests are harvested or administered. Although it is out of the Gorge Commission's jurisdiction, Chair Litwer offered to continue

the conversation with partners and agencies to better understand what is within our reach to assist counties in the NSA.

- County Commissioner Leckie suggested communities want assured income and reduced uncertainty. He proposed several possible solutions related to timber harvesting in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and expressed frustration with slow action by the US Forest Service. Chair Litwer suggested that the Gorge Commission could facilitate continued discussion with partner agencies regarding those ideas. He suggested focusing efforts on the most impacted places.
- Jessica Metta, Executive Director from MCEDD, noted that the Oregon Investment Board has funds available for loans to Oregon businesses. She stated she can't speak to the Washington Investment Board. Chair Litwer suggested outreach to Skamania County businesses to advertise the WIB loan availability.
- County Commissioner Leckie stated that housing is a big issue in the county and that impacts businesses because high salaries are needed to attract employees, particularly a younger workforce. He noted a lack of young families also contributes to lower school enrollment.
- County Commissioner Leckie stated that the Department of Commerce in Washington doesn't provide as much help to smaller businesses as Oregon's state government provides. Chair Litwer asked if Commissioner Leckie has reached out to the WIB or the housing authority. County Commissioner Leckie noted he supported a project in Carson to promote affordable housing. He noted that lack of sewer service in unincorporated Skamania County is an ongoing challenge for housing density and development.
- Chair Litwer suggested today to be a springboard for future conversations and proposed convening a conversation with the US Forest Service and exploring opportunities to support sewer development applications in the county. Krystyna noted that the Gorge Commission wrote a support letter for the wastewater treatment facility in Stevenson and would support other sewer development projects as well as other requests for infrastructure support.
- Krystyna asked County Commissioner Leckie about discussions with the Gifford Pinchot to try to develop a process to obtain more revenues from forest management activities. He suggested that they could consider expanding fuel breaks along roads from 500 feet to 5000 feet and use the revenues from increased timber harvests from the expansion to support the County with the increased benefit of reduction of fuel load and wildfire risks.
- Commissioner Hochman expressed support for and alignment with Chair Litwer's suggested actions. County Commissioner Leckie reiterated that the US Forest Service must be at the table for a solution and that the Gorge Commission can help drive that effort.

Public Comment

- Mary Repar stated that the County used to have more money from logging. She stated that industries and economies change. She stated that in-lieu funds should have become permanent and suggested it is a legislative issue for Congress to address. She expressed concern about large fire breaks being proposed.

Discussion of Accessory Dwelling Units in the NSA

- Krystyna noted that a discussion of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) has reached a fork in the road; the committee must decide if there is enough interest to pursue the topic and if so, how to proceed.
- Chair Litwer noted that while there is not a quorum to decide today, he would recommend against a Plan Amendment due to pending Management Plan review in 2027. He plans to recommend convening an outside working group with community experts to start looking at questions that may arise.

Public Comment

- Mary Repar suggested collecting data from MCEDD, Chambers of Commerce, and the WIB. She also stated that housing is a big issue and Washington is a regressive tax state. She mentioned that there are many second homes and median income has been raised by corporations that come into the community. She also stated that local communities have rejected sewer systems out of a desire for independence, that there were funds granted for a feasibility study (maybe through the legislature?) but she was uncertain of the status.
- Jessica Metta shared that there are three videos uploaded to YouTube about MCEDD loan recipients.

Chair Litwer suggested the Gorge Commission amplify the work the WIB and OIB are doing to raise awareness and tell the stories of participating businesses.

Follow-up Actions

- Chair Litwer will reach out to other county commissions and invite them to participate in the Economic Vitality Committee meetings in the future to engage in conversations about how the Gorge Commission and counties can move forward with a better understanding of issues facing the counties in the National Scenic Area.
- At the next committee meeting, Chair Litwer will suggest that the committee not recommend a Plan Amendment to consider ADUs but wait until the next review of the Management Plan. He will ask the Economic Vitality Committee about making a recommendation to the full Commission whether to convene an "ADU community advisory committee" that could assist with discussions about the benefits and risks of allowing ADUs in the National Scenic Area.

- Chair Litwer also requested that we find ways to amplify the work of MCEDD and NSA loan recipients.