Communications Committee
Meeting Summary

June 18, 2026

Executive Summary

- **Best Practices doc, v2:** New Part 1 (Proactive Communications) addresses prior feedback; committee is holding it one more week for comments before likely advancing to XCOM. Chair Weisfeld's absence drove the delay.
- **Avarna DEI recommendations:** Recs #2 and #3 are largely covered by the updated Best Practices framework. The committee will pursue low-cost, volunteer-driven items now and defer anything requiring new funding (strategist hire, education campaigns).
- **Energy projects:** No public statement on Pushpum Energy Storage (active litigation) or Cascade Renewal Transmission (potential future appeal to the Commission). Staff will circulate a one-page briefing.
- **2027–29 budget:** Both states have barred requests above current service levels. The objective is preservation, not expansion — and ~80% of agency work is mandatory administration that can't be cut.
- **Legislative outreach:** Priorities are one-page materials, impact stories, and in-person engagement. A legislative Gorge tour is in early discussion for late summer/early fall, ahead of the next session.
- **Economic messaging:** Tie conservation to tourism, recreation, and jobs. The newly merged Gorge Tourism Alliance / Gorge Stewardship Alliance is a potential advocacy partner; Travel Oregon engagement to be explored.
- **Gorge 2030:** Upcoming outreach for the Management Plan review is the natural vehicle for implementing many Avarna recommendations; staff will bring the framework to this committee for input.

Key Decisions, Actions, and Owners

Decision / Action	Owner	Timing
Hold Best Practices doc in committee; collect final comments and tracked changes	All commissioners, via Christina	~1 week
Present revised Best Practices doc to Executive Committee (XCOM)	Committee	After review window
Review Best Practices doc for added common-ground framing language (Avarna Rec. #2)	Commissioner Johnson	Open
No public statement on Pushpum Energy Storage or Cascade Renewal Transmission projects	Committee (per staff/legal advice)	Decided
Distribute one-page briefing on Cascade Renewal Transmission and permitting process	Christina / staff	Near term
Present Gorge 2030 outreach and engagement framework to Communications Committee; add to XCOM agenda	Staff	Planning underway
Explore Travel Oregon / tourism-partner collaboration; pursue legislative Gorge tour	Staff	Late summer / early fall tour target

Add 40th Anniversary communications planning to a future agenda	Committee	Future meeting

1. Communications Best Practices Document (v2)

Version 2 responds to feedback that the draft was too reactive. A new Part 1 covers proactive communications — the evidence for it, a core commission narrative and key messages, and guidance for using them consistently across channels. Part 2 (reactive) is largely unchanged, as are purpose, scope, statutory foundation, and core principles.

The document names key audiences (residents and landowners, community groups, legislators and governors, treaty tribes, regional partners, general public) and channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, press releases, legislative briefings, community meetings). No gaps were identified. Content splits into evergreen and responsive categories, with best practices covering data-backed messaging, community impact framing, plain language, engagement metrics, and coordination across commissioners, staff, and committees. Appendix B adds templates, legislative talking points, and sample social content.

Feedback

- **Litwer:** Praised the framework; proposed a future engagement plan with measurable goals, defined triggers, and outcome assessment — acknowledged as resource-dependent. Response: this is a best-practices guide, not an operational plan; formal planning can follow if staffing allows.
- **Hochman:** Supports the revisions; expects only minor final comments. Backs future goal-setting and performance measurement.
- **Staff (Christina):** Revisions resolve Chair Weisfeld's concern about the proactive/reactive balance.

Outcome

Document held in committee (Chair absent). One more week for tracked changes via Christina, then likely presentation to XCOM. Suggested follow-up: review metrics after a full year and decide whether a formal plan and performance measures are warranted.

2. Avarna DEI Recommendations (#2 and #3)

XCOM assigned Recommendations #2 and #3 from last year's Avarna Group DEI assessment to this committee. Presenter: Commissioner Johnson.

Rec. #2 — Navigate political polarization

Calls for a common-ground framing toolkit, shared-concern entry points for equity conversations, and training for politically nuanced communication. The committee concluded the updated Best Practices document already substantially covers this. Johnson will review whether added common-ground language is needed and endorsed a peer-review "buddy system" for sensitive messaging. Ongoing PAIR team outreach already builds engagement with diverse communities.

Rec. #3 — Improve public understanding of the Commission

Recommendations include a communications strategist, public education campaign, dual-mission clarification, storytelling campaigns, messaging guides, and plain-language summaries. Much is already reflected in the Best Practices document and social media strategy; the funded items (strategist, large campaigns) are deferred until resources exist. The committee will prioritize what volunteers and existing staff can execute now.

Future planning

Gorge 2030 outreach is the practical vehicle for many of these recommendations. Johnson asked staff to present the emerging Gorge 2030 engagement framework to this committee; staff agreed and will also propose it as an XCOM agenda item.

3. Pushpum & Cascade Renewal Transmission Inquiries

Raised by Commissioner Pitt via Commissioner Johnson: should the Commission issue a public statement, including possible opposition to the Pushpum Energy Storage Facility?

- **Pushpum:** In active litigation. Staff advised no public comment or official position. The facility sits outside the National Scenic Area (though impacts may still touch Scenic Area interests), further reducing any expectation of a statement.
- **Cascade Renewal Transmission:** A segment crosses the National Scenic Area and is subject to Scenic Area permitting, coordinated via MOU among county and state authorities. Permitting decisions could be appealed to the Gorge Commission, so a public position would compromise its adjudicative role.

Decision: No public statement on either project. Christina will distribute a one-page informational summary on the transmission project and permitting process.

4. Legislative Strategy & 2027–29 Budget

Budget reality

Preliminary instructions from Oregon and Washington bar requests beyond current service levels ("current service level" in OR, "carry forward" in WA). Staffing restorations and increases won't be approved; climate-related funding is uncertain and contingency planning is underway. Roughly 80% of agency work is mandatory administration that can't shrink, so expanded Management Plan review work will require prioritization and efficiency gains, not new money. The budget objective: preserve current funding and operations.

Outreach strategy

With election turnover likely, identifying key decision-makers in both legislatures is the first task. Priority tools: concise one-pagers, compelling impact stories, and engagement formats beyond short virtual meetings. In-person Gorge tours remain the most effective advocacy tool — a 2018 Washington tour is the precedent — and discussions with legislative leaders are underway for a late-summer/early-fall tour before the next session.

Economic messaging & partners

Messaging should explicitly link conservation to tourism, recreation, and local jobs. The merger of the Gorge Tourism Alliance and Gorge Stewardship Alliance creates a promising advocacy partner; staff will explore engagement with Travel Oregon, chambers of commerce, and regional economic development organizations, including possible participation in Commission or committee meetings.

Committee role

The committee will help review legislative outreach materials, review Gorge 2030 communications and engagement plans, and continue shaping outreach and messaging strategy.

5. Other Business

40th Anniversary: Communications and planning added as a future agenda topic.

Approved: August 13, 2026