

Economic Vitality Committee

Meeting Highlights

September 30, 2025

Commissioners Present:

Lach Litwer, Chair
Alex Johnson
Robert Liberty
Laura Brennan Bissell

Staff Present:

Krystyna Wolniakowski
Sage Ebel
Connie Acker
Bryce Guske

ADU Background:

Chair Lach Litwer and other commissioners discussed whether Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in the National Scenic Area (NSA) should be a topic for the committee to undertake. The focus of the discussion would be to determine the opportunities and trade-offs, and whether to ask the staff to explore costs, consequences, and benefits of allowing ADUs outside of the urban areas, and to consider the qualitative benefits to economic development. The Management Plan does not currently allow ADUs in the NSA. They are only allowed in the urban areas.

Commissioner Liberty referenced research studies from Berkeley and Portland State University that provide information on who builds ADUs, their costs, affordability, uses, and the renters. Commissioner Johnson shared a link to a report, "Oregon's Choice," by ECO Northwest.

- ✓ **Follow up action :** Review report by former president of ECO Northwest: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/26084816-oregons-choice-09-09-25-1/#document/p24>
- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Staff to bring a summary of housing requirements for WA and OR to November meeting.

ADU Discussion

Chair Litwer requested that the discussion first focus on the potential benefits of ADUs: What community needs could ADUs address if policies related to them change?

Commissioners discussed several potential benefits, including the following:

- Commissioner Brennan Bissell emphasized that ADUs could provide extra income for struggling agricultural families that could support farmers living on their land, and there is a housing shortage that ADUs could help provide additional workforce housing.
- Commissioner Johnson stated that ADUs are not a “silver bullet” to solve the housing crisis, but could be a step in the right direction and would be additional income for agricultural properties in the General Management Areas, but commented that they should not be used for short-term rentals. It would be good for CRGC to do something to address the housing issues.
- Commissioner Johnson also stated that there would be economic benefits to provide housing to support tourism and recreation, as well as housing for seasonal and farm workers.
- Commissioner Brennan Bissell also emphasized that economic vitality would result in creating more opportunities for people to live in the Gorge, especially seasonal workers who need lower rents.

Chair Litwer asked about the potential risks and resource Impacts of ADUs:

- Commissioner Liberty stated that increased housing would lead to a higher fire risk, along with higher costs for additional infrastructure and maintenance in rural areas. There would also be greater risks to people involved in forestry and farming as new residents who do not appreciate those activities move in. Finally, enforcement of ADUs used as short-term rentals would be challenging because counties rely on a complaint-driven process, and neighbors often refrain from complaining due to fear of retribution.
- Commissioner Brennan Bissell said there are already unpermitted ADUs in the NSA because they need the extra income and need it to make ends meet. She stated that we need to consider the needs of the community.
- Commissioner Johnson supported exploring ADUs for rural residents to gain economic benefits from living in the NSA. The lack of housing limits economic growth in the region, and CRGC may seek funding to assist with housing incentives.
- Commissioner Liberty stated that ADUs will increase property value and could make purchasing properties less accessible due to higher costs.

Chair Litwer asked what role the committee should play in addressing housing pressure:

- Commissioners discussed that our role might be limited due to funding concerns, but shared the excitement to incorporate economic work into our work plans more in the future.

- ✓ **Follow-up Action:** Staff to investigate the following questions for the November Committee Meeting:
 - Who builds ADUs, how they are maintained, and who benefits (owner, occupant, etc.)?
 - What impact do ADUs have on home prices?
 - What are the best practices for ADUs in non-urban areas?
 - What is the relationship between ADUs and home/property price changes? How does that relate to the overhead cost of living in the NSA?

Public Comment:

- Jessica Metta
 - CRGC staff led an economic vitality work group as part of Gorge 2020 that was related to housing and agriculture. She suggested that another similar committee with public experts could be an additional opportunity to bring ideas and expertise into the conversation. Some of the items in the staff work plan were developed by that committee.
 - She also mentioned that MCEDD is hosting a Bi-State Advisory Council meeting this Thursday in Stevenson with the Oregon Investment Board and the Washington Investment Board, as well as CRGC.
- Chasen
 - Requested information about her permit and will follow up with Multnomah County planning (which is where she lives).
- Sherri Irish (comment email attached)
 - Lives in Washougal and believes in the economic development of the Gorge.
 - Bringing businesses to the cities is the responsibility of the cities. This beautiful place is an economic driver in itself. She stated that people live here for the beauty, recreation opportunities, etc. The Gorge Commission's role is to protect and ensure economic opportunities blend with the two purposes of the act.
- Lynn Burditt
 - Posed a question to the committee: How can you make your economic work add value, vs working on something that is outside of the purview of the Commission? She provided some reviews on the history and development of economic work. She reminded the Committee that this is a unique place with all the federal and state agencies, cities, ports, etc., working together to accomplish these objectives. There are many people available to help. She also stated that the Forest Service is responsible for changing the SMA regulations, and that the CRGC is not authorized to modify them.

Closing:

Chair Litwer wrapped up the meeting by stating that we need to better understand the pros and cons - the "guardrails" on this topic in the context of the Management Plan and state laws regulating ADUs. He requested that these committee meetings be extended to 90 minutes in the future and that the next committee meeting be held at the end of November, to give staff time to compile further information on ADUs as per the action items requested by the committee.