Economic Vitality Committee

Meeting Highlights
July 1, 2026

Commissioners Present:
Lach Litwer, Chair
Steve Hochman
Jerry Meninick
Laura Brennan Bissell (absent)

Staff Present:
Krystyna Wolniakowski
Kelly Foster

After roll call, the May 6, 2026, Economic Vitality meeting summaries were approved by a voice vote.

Commissioner Rodger Nichols would like to join the Communications Committee, so Commission Chair Carina Miller will need to appoint him at the next full Commission meeting.

Review of Avarna's Recommendations to Support Economic Vitality:

Krystyna provided a summary of the purposes of the Avarna Report, which was part of a commissioner training in May and June 2025, and shared their specific recommendations. One area they highlighted was economic vitality, and the Committee reviewed those recommendations. The slides with the recommendations are attached (Attachment 1). The recommendations were based on interviews with Commissioners, during which they discussed several aspects of the Commission's work.

Commissioner Hochman noted that some of the statements prompt us to ask what constitutes truth versus belief. When discussing the statement that Commission rules may be overly restrictive for landowners, it is important to better understand how the Commission communicates those rules to the public. This issue may benefit from a discussion with the Communications Committee.

One of the recommendations involved the Commission addressing housing affordability. Krystyna explained that the Commission does not set real estate prices, so it is unclear how we can influence housing affordability or gentrification – what is our role if we do not control who buys land or what they can do on their property? Chair Litwer said supply and demand dictate prices, but we do have a role by influencing the availability of developable land, which affects what is possible. We should look at it more closely. He recommended that we review each recommendation to see whether it aligns with what we are already doing and what we need to do, and to identify priority items.

1. **Establish an economic vitality committee** – Accomplished

2. **Identify a few high-priority items to focus on** – Accomplished in the last two meetings, which are ADUs and the agriculture income test.

3. **Conduct an inventory of the investments made through the OIB and WIB** – Capture learnings from the Vital Sign Indicators Program.
   Chair Litwer emphasized the importance of setting forward-looking goals – what we see as the policy purpose for this funding, how it links to that purpose, what is recommended for the funds, and whether the intended impacts were achieved. Is there a framework for evaluating the funds' efficacy? He recommended doing this with our partners, discussing shared policy objectives, and measuring how the funds are achieving their outcomes and policy purposes. Krystyna stated that CRGC certifies the loans and remains engaged with OIB and WIB. Jessica Metta, MCEDD, said all loans are consistent with the Act, but disbursing the funds is up to OIB and WIB. Chair Litwer suggested an opportunity for policy coordination – what are our policy objectives for this region, then OIB and WIB say what specific measures they want to implement to achieve those objectives, and how to measure that. Did the funds do what we had hoped to support policy objectives? Jessica mentioned that the EV Plan sets the policies for how those funds are used. It does not specify metrics, but it could tie in well with VSI. Krystyna pointed out that the last $2 million appropriation came from a different process through USDA and had very specific requirements. Jessica hopes we get the last dollars out soon. Chair Litwer asked that we have a consultative conversation to make sure we are supportive and fully engaged in policy conversations about what we are doing collectively for the region. (Action item – KW to follow up with MCEDD on measuring impacts and engaging in policy conversations).

4. **Brand National Scenic Area economic development –** Krystyna said that MCEDD has produced short videos about the loan program and is communicating the results of the loans. The Communications Committee can assist with messaging. Chair Litwer just wants CRGC to amplify the impact of the loans. (Action items: Krystyna will see if there is a way to upload those videos and follow up with Comms.)

5. **Clarify policies that protect agriculture** – It was suggested that the Communications Committee address this issue.

6. **Expand indicators to include workforce housing, employment rates, and economic development** – Krystyna said we permit workforce housing on agricultural lands in NSA and can influence this, but if it is workforce housing in urban areas, we can write support letters but not have any other influence. We looked at this when we looked at direct links with the Management Plan and created indicators that reflect what we can influence. Chair Litwer asked which indicators can feed into our decision-making process – we are entering into a new cycle with the new Management Plan, and we should line diagram those indicators and link them to the Plan goals. Our staff capacity is limited for this, but to the extent VSI can be calibrated to help with indicators of these trends, it could be pursued.

7. **Highlight and promote economic practices such as agritourism and regenerative practices** – Commissioner Hochman said there is commonality, as these seem like good guiding principles but not specific actions.

8. **Address gentrification by studying the conversion of agricultural land and protecting land from speculative development** – Krystyna stated that we have strong policies to protect agricultural lands for farming. Speculative development, such as commercial, is not allowed in the NSA. Chair Litwer said "estates" seem like low-density housing, and each county has likely done a lot of thinking about housing development in their counties. Krystyna stated that this points to more work on the ag income test to ensure it supports our agricultural goals. Commissioner Hochman asked about compliance with the ag income test for past decisions. Krystyna mentioned that no one has done an inventory of how many ag lands are in active ag vs not in active farming. Conversion of lands is only allowed for forestry to be converted to agriculture and vice versa, but not conversion to housing or estates. Krystyna said we just did an analysis of the agricultural lands to look at agricultural characterization – but there is one more layer we can explore, which is active farming. (Action Item: Krystyna will work with GIS to see if more information can be identified as active farming).

9. **Explore loosening restrictions, such as allowing yurts and ADUs** – This will be addressed during the Gorge 2030 Management Plan review.

Commissioner Meninick asked which responsibilities fall under authority, which under management, and which under compliance. Who has the greatest authority, and how successful are these programs for economic vitality? He mentioned Commissioners serving on the OIB and WIB boards. He asked to meet with Krystyna to better understand the Commission's role and the risks to economic vitality. Chair Litwer would also like to participate in the meeting.

Public Comment

Lynn Burditt appreciated the discussion and the thoughtfulness of the approach. She shared a reminder that there was no clarification on the separation of Special Management Areas, General Management Areas, and Urban Areas. The Forest Service is responsible for all SMA policies, and the Commission accepts those policies. How can we present visuals that illustrate all the economic relationships among partners in the NSA? She commented that the Economic Vitality Plan is a good place to start. She also mentioned the Commission's work with MCEDD in a broader context.

Review of Agriculture Income Test- Next Steps - Follow-up for Next Steps

Chair Litwer noted that since Commissioner Brennan Bissell was not present, we can postpone this discussion. Krystyna stated, for the benefit of those listening in, that the agriculture income test is a tool for protecting farmland for agricultural use. When a home is approved, it should be done only to support agriculture on that property, not simply to

build a home and then not use the land for farming, because that raises the land's value substantially and may make it impossible for a farmer to buy it in the future and use it for agriculture. The Oregon standard uses the $80,000 income test, and the Commission adopted that value. Staff will follow up with additional analyses of agriculture in the NSA. There have been comments that the agriculture income test has put farmers out of business, but this needs to be reframed to focus on how best to protect farmland and to talk more with farmers. This topic will be explored further in Gorge 2030 to determine whether this is the best tool to use to protect agricultural land in the NSA.

Public Comment

Lynn Burditt appreciated Krystyna's summary and the reminder of the purposes of the agricultural income test. Commissioners should re-familiarize themselves with the agricultural section of the Management Plan. The updated $80,000 was suggested by the orchardists during Gorge 2020 to protect agricultural lands. This policy should be framed with a long-term view to protect agriculture. Krystyna said we are not just trying to protect the landscape but also the working lands of the NSA. Chair Litwer mentioned that the policies to achieve protection of agriculture and provide for adequate housing need to be discussed and resolved.

Update on Economic Vitality Plan - Bistate Advisory

Krystyna mentioned that the Bi-State Advisory Committee includes representatives from OIB, WIB, and MCEDD, as well as the Commission and the Forest Service. The 5-year Economic Vitality Plan was last updated in 2021 and is due again in 2026. It is submitted to Business Oregon and the Washington Department of Commerce. The Economic Vitality Plan can be an opportunity for the EV Committee to review it and give legislators a better understanding of the Commission’s role. The report is well-written but could be updated and include visual graphics to help communicate its importance. Jessica reviewed the process, in which staff review it, OIB/WIB review it separately, it then goes to the states, and finally to the Secretary of Agriculture. She also mentioned that the CEDS update should be completed by March, yet the Economic Vitality Plan has significant overlap and is due sooner, in December. Krystyna asked whether there is flexibility to align both deadlines in March. Lynn Burditt has been through 5 of these updates and asked Jessica to check with the agencies to see if the deadlines can align. Krystyna suggested that a 2-pager focusing on economic vitality, highlighting our work and what is most relevant, could reference the 5-year plan. Even if CEDS/EV Plan is completed in March, that would still work for legislative testimony on our budget.

Chair Litwer asked Commissioner Meninick if he had any other comments, and he responded that he appreciated the discussion, Lynn Burditt’s comments, and Krystyna’s description of the process regarding compliance and systematic requirements.

Public Comment

No other public comments were received.

Other Business:

No other business was discussed.

Approved: August 5, 2026