



TO: Columbia River Gorge Commission

FROM: Krystyna U. Wolniakowski, Executive Director
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DATE: December 13, 2016

SUBJECT: Information Item: County Development Reviews

Background: When the Management Plan was approved, five counties in the National Scenic Area adopted NSA ordinances consistent with the plan: Wasco, Hood River and Multnomah Counties in Oregon and Skamania and Clark Counties in Washington. Since Klickitat County in Washington did not adopt the ordinance, the Commission reviews development applications there. The NSA Act, and therefore the Management Plan requires that the Commission monitor the counties and ensure compliance:

"The Commission shall monitor activities of counties pursuant to sections 544 to 544p of this title and shall take such actions as it determines are necessary to ensure compliance." 16 U.S.C. § 544m(a)(1).

"As part of its monitoring and evaluation program, the Gorge Commission shall evaluate county development review decisions. In consultation with the counties, the Gorge Commission shall develop a method to record and evaluate the decisions. The Gorge Commission shall first discuss the results of its evaluation with each county." Management Plan at IV-1-3.

Columbia River Gorge Commission Planning Program Approach: A critical responsibility of our planning staff is to ensure that development in the six NSA counties is permitted in a manner consistent with the Management Plan, that protects the resources and allows for economic development in the Urban Areas of the Gorge. Our strategy is to foster early and close coordination among county planners, Commission staff, and USFS NSA staff in order to achieve this goal. We do so through quarterly coordination meetings, targeted work sessions (i.e. October's scenic impacts evaluation work session), and individual communication with planners on a regular basis.

Review Process: The Commission receives a copy of each complete application accepted by a County. We assign a Commission planner to the application and review the project to identify any concerns. We track each application in our database and record information about the property including zoning and taxlot information. The planner has an opportunity to provide written comment within 10-20 days, depending on the County.

Commission planners will contact county planners at this time to discuss questions about which policies may apply, how policies have been interpreted in the past, or any resource concerns for the project. Often, we determine a formal letter is not necessary either because the project does not raise any concerns or because we have worked through these issues with the Planner directly.

When a county planner issues a decision, we again receive written notice and a staff report with findings and conditions of approval. We determine whether the planner evaluated the proposal according to the Management Plan and whether he/she incorporated our recommendations adequately. Commission planners enter detailed information in our database about the County's findings related to the SNCRs and conditions of approval.

If the application is approved by the county and the Commission's comments were not considered adequately, then the Commission or any party with standing has a right to appeal the decision to the full Commission. In Klickitat County, the Commission planners, working together with a Klickitat County planner, process and review the development applications, and the Executive Director has the final decision-making authority to approve development applications and conduct post-permit monitoring and compliance.

Recently, the Friends of the Columbia Gorge expressed some concern that the Commission staff may not be complying with the Act and Management Plan because we were not reviewing and commenting on all county development applications. This provided an opportunity for Commission staff to discuss how we conduct and track our review of county development applications.

In response, we have begun improving our Microsoft Access database. We are now recording instances when we reviewed a project and were able to resolve concerns with email or phone conversations rather than a formal letter process. As time allows, we strive to comment on all significant projects. We will likely be developing a set of criteria for prioritizing the types of projects that require more staff time and formal comment letters.

Next Steps: For the time being, we will continue to track projects as consistently as possible with our existing Access database. We will make additional improvements to its functionality, but we are reaching out to other planning programs to identify alternative methods. We see this as an opportunity to reimagine our project tracking to serve multiple purposes. Many counties use software that links application information to map data. By spatially linking development review materials to parcels, we will be able to answer a multitude of questions about development trends, resource impacts, and cumulative effects.