



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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Pioneering pathways to prosperity.

June 29, 2020

Dear Chair Liberty and Columbia River Gorge Commission:

Wasco County Economic Development Commission (EDC) has been coming together with partners to support access to opportunity in Wasco County since its inception in 1987. The EDC is comprised of 11 members and includes representation from key industries, communities and local economic development partners. Today the Economic Development Commission acts as the economic development arm of Wasco County, with a focus on job creation and increasing capacity throughout the County. The EDC focuses on four goals to support Wasco County in meeting its vision of a robust local economy and livable communities. These include economic diversification, robust infrastructure to support appropriate development, growing community capacity, and acting as an information source for local partners and businesses around economic conditions and opportunities.

The focus of the Commission is countywide, but the Commission acknowledges that The Dalles area is a key driver for the local and regional economy. The north end of Wasco County includes two urban areas and the bulk of the industrial and commercial land in Wasco County as well as significant high value agricultural activity, including cherries and wheat production as well as wine grapes and orchards growing a variety of products and adding value to increase local economic impacts where appropriate.

Through the lens of supporting a robust local economy and livable communities, the EDC reviewed several sections of the proposed Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area 2020 Management Plan Update's attempt to balance the two purposes incorporated in the act. The current draft provided for public comment does not provide adequate balance for supporting future economic development that is consistent with the resources of the Gorge.

The EDC requests consideration for the following items in conducting revisions to the draft plan:

1. At its core, economic development requires developable land with adequate infrastructure. To support this purpose of the act, there must be a clear and achievable process for a community to expand its urban area to meet changing economic conditions and demand moving forward. Without opportunity for growth moving forward, the communities in the Gorge will not be able to support a strong economy and livable places for their residents into the future.
2. For a robust economy, communities need a diverse business base that includes industrial and commercial businesses with opportunities for firms to stay in the area when they grow. This is a well-respected approach to economic development that yields positive impacts for communities but does require opportunities for both new development and redevelopment.
3. We hear from existing employers within our community boundaries that they cannot fill positions because of challenges finding housing in the Columbia River Gorge. If this trend continues, the housing shortage will become more critical in Wasco County. This has direct impacts on our most vulnerable populations as well as our community's ability to maintain the income and population diversity that makes us a livable place.

4. Agriculture is still the dominant force in Wasco County's economy. Production and opportunities to add value to those products are key opportunities to maintain family farms and diverse food production in Wasco County. Reducing the ability for these family businesses who have been working on this land for generations to think creatively about how to sustain their operations challenges this economic driver that is in line with the CRGNSA's values as is indicated in many places in the draft plan.

In addition to these overarching comments, attached is more specific feedback on key topics in the Urban Area Boundary Chapter revision and the Economic Development Chapter revision. The EDC is aware that this is not a redline edit, but does hope that these considerations are reflected in the next draft document. Additionally, the EDC is supportive of the more specific proposed edits included in the comments identified by Wasco County and the Port of The Dalles and strongly encourages consideration of those revisions.

Thank you for your consideration on behalf of the Wasco County Economic Development Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joan Silver". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joan Silver
Chair

CC: Wasco County Commission

Appendix

Related to the Urban Area Boundary chapter:

- The lack of clarity and considerable discretion provided to the Gorge Commission related to hearing a request for a boundary amendment creates a costly and challenging process for small, rural communities to consider beginning with no certainty around how, or if, their applications will be considered. With the limited resources available to both those communities with urban area boundaries and Gorge Commission, this approach does not provide a realistic path for boundary amendment.
- 20 acres over time is not enough land to support true economic development for communities in the Columbia River Gorge. This size parcel could barely be used for one smaller scale development, let alone a larger opportunity for strategic growth.
- Requiring consideration of communities in two states, some incorporated and some not, with two different policy frameworks, and very different access to resources for investment in infrastructure and site readiness for either residential or employment lands when looking at meeting demand for development is not realistic. Additionally, a mix of uses and opportunity for development within an individual community impacts their ability to provide services like infrastructure, education, parks, public safety, and community economic development. These funding streams are specific to communities and the boundaries should be looked at through the ability of an individual community to make smart decisions about how to develop.
- While there were many public meetings on this topic, there was little time for consideration and discussion of the draft policy once it was put forth. The EDC encourages slowing down on this chapter and working with stakeholders to come to consensus on a path forward.

Related to the Economic Development Chapter:

- The EDC appreciates acknowledgement of adequate infrastructure as critical to supporting existing communities. These investments are critical to supporting the residents and agricultural enterprise in the Gorge as well as resource protection.
- The EDC also appreciates the acknowledgement of the importance of the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy in the draft chapter. This strategy provides a framework for economic development efforts in the region and is updated every five years through robust stakeholder engagement to reflect the local community's needs.
- However, the EDC has concerns about reducing opportunities for agricultural producers to incorporate value added efforts like cider for apples, fruit stands, or events that support their primary agricultural use if they can be done with adequate public safety needs met as ensured by the local review process. As noted above, for these producers the ability to sell direct to consumers or process their own crops to add value can support continuation of farming for these businesses. These smaller producers, along with larger cherry, wheat, and cattle production provide the foundation of our local economy. Continuing the working landscape is in line with the Act and is a prime opportunity for the Gorge Commission to support both purposes outlined.