

**MEETING MINUTES**  
**Benton County Planning Commission**  
**January 16, 2024**

Benton County Planning Commission Chair Fowler called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm. The meeting was open to the public virtually via a published Zoom link.

**COMMISSION MEMBERS**

Nicholas Fowler, *Chair*  
Greg Hamann, *Vice Chair*  
Catherine Biscoe  
Elizabeth Irish  
John Wilson  
Evelyn Lee  
Sara Cash  
Andrew Struthers  
Ed Fulford

Chair noted **FULL COMMISSION** attendance.

**STAFF**

Darren Nichols, *Director*  
Petra Schuetz, *Planning Official*  
Shannon Bush, *Interim Deputy  
Director*  
Linda Ray, *Assistant*  
Alyssa Thompson, *Recorder*

**INTRODUCTION OF PLANNING COMMISSION: All members**

**INTRODUCTION OF NEW COMMISSIONER:** Sara Cash, New Planning Commission Member

**INTRODUCTION OF NEW STAFF:** Petra Schuetz, New County Planning Official

**ELECTION OF 2024 OFFICERS**

**Office of Chair Nominations:**

Chair Fowler opened the floor for nominations for Planning Commission Chair. Commissioner Hamann nominated Nick Fowler as Chair of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Biscoe provided a second.

Chair Fowler opened the floor for other nominations; no other nominations were offered.

**DISCUSSION:**

Commissioner Irish stated her support for Nick Fowler. Others agreed.

Chair Fowler call for the vote: unanimous approval, none opposed.

Nomination **APPROVED at 5:48 PM**

**Office of Vice Chair Nominations:**

Commissioner Struthers nominated Greg Hamann as Vice Chair of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Biscoe provided a second.

Chair Fowler opened the floor for other nominations; no other nominations were offered.

**DISCUSSION: NONE**

Chair Fowler called for the vote: unanimous approval, none opposed.

Nomination **APPROVED at 5:49 PM**

## **MINUTES**

Commissioner Struthers **MOVED** to **APPROVE** the July 18, 2023; Minutes as written.

Commissioner Irish: **SECOND**.

**Discussion:** Commissioner Wilson will abstain from voting regarding July 18, 2023, minute approval.

**APPROVED AS WRITTEN 8-0.** Commissioner Wilson **ABSTAINED**.

Commissioner Wilson **MOVED** to **APPROVE** the August 29, 2023; Minutes as written.

Commissioner Hamann: **SECOND**.

**Discussion:** Commissioner Biscoe requested clarification on the date listed, then withdrew her comment.

**APPROVED** as written **9-0**.

Commissioner Irish **MOVED** to **APPROVE** the September 19, 2023; Minutes as written.

Commissioner Struthers and Commissioner Wilson: **SECOND**.

**Discussion: NONE**

**APPROVED** as written **9-0**.

Minutes from the Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission's September 26, 2023, quarterly joint meeting will be available at the next Planning Commission Meeting.

## **DISCUSSION OF 2024 PLANNING COMMISSION ACTIVITIES**

**STAFF UPDATE:** Director Nichols discussed needed Code Updates and a Voluntary Periodic Review of the Benton County Comprehensive Plan.

Three-phase Code Audit/Update

Phase 1: Updating the County Code with Legislative changes and getting caught up with real time code updates.

Phase 2: Comprehensive Plan Update with Voluntary Periodic Review will be opportunity to change Benton County Code and Policies.

Phase 3: Benton County Code and Comprehensive Plan will need to be made as legible and accessible for Board of Commissioners, Planning Commission, Public and Staff.

Interim Deputy Director Bush shared an update on the process of securing a new software (CivicPlus MuniCode) to help with accessibility and ease of use. MuniCode will likely take 3 months to complete the platform, scanning and uploading of the Benton County Code. The contract is in the queue for signature.

Director Nichols noted that the entirety of the Benton County Code will be included in the software platform, including the Development Code.

Benton County Community Development received a \$50,000 grant from Department of Land Conservation and Development to help the department employ and build best practices regarding community engagement. Staff will want assistance from the Planning Commission in vetting potential firms as a first step. Based on that work, recommendations will be presented to the Board of Commissioners for what a Periodic Review work plan and implementation

strategy will be. That paperwork would then be taken to the Land Conservation and Development Commission for approval of that work plan.

Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission previously identified major issues:

1. Wildfire risk, transportation, outdoor recreation;
2. Water and data-informed policy; and
3. Housing.

Nichols mentioned that statewide planning Goal 1 is citizen involvement, and the periodic review will include input from all parts of Benton County, asking community members what it would take to make sure that all parts of Benton County are involved in comprehensive planning.

Bush referenced geography of the county, inclusivity of all realms and what that might mean, especially regarding availability of county meetings surrounding times and days, hearing, or visual access needs.

Nichols also shared that Petra Schuetz has experience with the City of Coburg's Periodic Review. Also requested that the Chair consider creating subcommittees to:

1. Help identify a consultant and scope of the work for community engagement;
2. Help identify needed code updates; and
3. For specific planning issues – for example, housing, including growth management, economic development, and transportation.

Nichols will assign a staff member to help with each of these subcommittees. Bush recommended a Survey Monkey be sent out to all commissioners to see what topics/subcommittees they would be interested in assisting.

#### **Commissioner Discussion:**

- Chair Fowler suggested having a staff lead assigned to help keep forward motion with Code Update.
- Chair Fowler stated he would have one-on-one conversations with Planning Commissioners regarding the subcommittees, time availability, and what interest each person has.
- Commissioners shared their concerns regarding reaching out to the community and using all communication options available with print, social media, and otherwise.

#### **Upcoming Applications/Projects:**

Nichols provided a 2023 recap:

- Building permit volume is down approximately 10%
  - Benton County is roughly 5,000 housing units behind demand.
  - Interest rates may continue to affect housing prices and production.
- Land Use applications are down to a 2023 total of 55.
  - In the previous 5 or 6 years Land Use applications were around 80-100 per year.
- Application-driven work for the Planning Commission may continue to be slower throughout the 2024 year.

The Chair asked about any anticipated or upcoming land use applications:

- Nichols mentioned that, for the past two years Republic Services has consistently stated it plans to submit a conditional use permit for landfill expansion.

- Based on their consistent communication over the last 2 years since their cancelled appeal of the last Planning Commission decision, Republic Services will likely submit an application in 2024.
- Before an application is submitted there will be a Pre-Application Conference, which will be made available for public observation.
- Staff have identified an outside land use firm and outside counsel to help the Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners with the application review, staff report, and public hearings process.
- Both outside land use firm and counsel will have access to earlier Planning Commission hearing materials, staff reports, and Benton County Talks Trash Final Report to help fully vet the issues that matter to the community.

**Commissioner Discussion:**

- Republic Services application will receive a lot of scrutiny.
- Chair Fowler asked if there is a need for formal counsel advice to the planning commission before the process starts?
- Will planning commissioners be involved in the Pre-Application Conference?

**Staff Response:**

The Pre-Application Conference will be available for the public to observe so the community can hear questions from Benton County Departments, and any regional, state, or federal agencies in attendance. Outside and county counsel will be asked for guidance regarding commissioners viewing the pre-application conference in a way that does not taint their objective, unbiased decision.

Chair Fowler asked for any final thoughts or topics. None were offered.

The meeting adjourned at 7:34 pm.