



Minutes For May 28, 2025
Crook County Planning Commission
Meeting

Meeting minutes are not a complete representation of discussions at the meeting. An audio recording is available from Crook County Community Development at plan@crookcountyor.gov or (541) 447-3211.

Chair Warren called the meeting to order at 4:01 p.m.

The meeting was conducted by Zoom, phone, and in-person at the Crook County Annex.

Attendance

Commissioners Attending:

In Person	Zoom	Commissioner	Excused Absence	Unexcused Absence
x		George Ponte		
x		Marlo Dill		
x		Laquita Stec		
x		Les Williamson		
x		Mike Warren		

Staff Attending:

In Person	Zoom	Crook County Staff
x		John Eisler
x		Katie McDonald
x		Hannah Elliott

Public Comment

None

Planning Commission Vacancy Interviews

The Planning Commission met to conduct interviews for the open positions on the Commission. Chair Warren explained that six applications had been received and that the order of interviews was determined by a random draw.

The Commission discussed the format of the interviews, deciding to call each candidate up individually to answer questions from the members. Regarding the duration of the interviews, the Commission reached a consensus not to set strict time limits, opting instead for a flexible approach to ensure each candidate has an adequate opportunity to present their qualifications and respond to the Commission's inquiries.

John Eisler, Community Development Director, provided the procedural framework for the interview process. He clarified that there is currently one permanent Planning Commission vacancy and one pro tem vacancy. Following the interviews, the Planning Commission will provide a recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners, which holds the final appointment authority.

Eisler also reviewed the statutory requirements under Crook County Code 18.172.080, emphasizing the following constraints for board composition:

Geographic Representation: Members should reside in various areas of the county; Eisler noted a current lack of representation from the Powell Butte and Paulina areas.

Real Estate Cap: No more than two members may be principally engaged in the buying, selling, or developing of real estate for profit.

Professional Diversity: No more than two voting members may be engaged in the same business, trade, or profession.

To manage the session, Eisler suggested a target of roughly 15 to 20 minutes per candidate to ensure the meeting remains within a two-hour window while allowing sufficient time for evaluation.

Eisler clarified that the current vacancy is to complete a term ending in 2026 and introduced a strategic shift regarding pro tem appointments, suggesting they be used as a "training ground" for future permanent members. He noted that the Commission is not limited to a single pro tem appointment and encouraged recommending multiple qualified candidates to ensure a full seven-member panel is always available for decisions. Eisler also highlighted that a second permanent vacancy is currently being advertised, providing further flexibility to move pro tem appointees into full-time roles as early as next month.

Candidate Hunter Neuharth, a resident of Prineville Valley, shared that he was motivated to apply for the Planning Commission to protect the community and uphold its agricultural roots amidst expected regional growth. During the interview, he acknowledged having limited land-use experience beyond personal projects like a family cemetery and future residential planning, but emphasized his commitment to the role, noting that he is a disciplined reader who can dedicate the necessary hours for prep work despite his ranching responsibilities. Neuharth described his communication style as level-headed and rational, confirmed his proficiency with digital tools, and highlighted his active involvement in local committees such as the Wolf Committee and County Stockgrowers. While he was unfamiliar with Robert's Rules of Order, he expressed confidence in his ability to attend all meetings due to having staff support on his property, and he noted his strong working relationship with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Candidate Kirk Giovanini, a lifelong resident of Prineville living on Riches Lane, introduced himself as a business owner and father motivated by a desire to create a sustainable future for the county's youth. Having previously participated in parliamentary procedure competitions, he expressed a willingness to relearn meeting protocols and indicated that his decision to scale back his business operations would provide him with ample time for the Commission's demanding workload. During the interview, Giovanini highlighted his diverse background in agriculture, aggregate resources, and property management—including a two-year degree in the field—and noted that his experience as a licensed contractor has familiarized him with the complexities of state and local permitting processes. When questioned about his decision-making approach, he emphasized "common sense" and a level-headed communication style developed over years of managing projects and a large family. The Commission and staff also discussed potential conflicts of interest related to his DEQ certifications and septic contracting business; however, it was determined that any such issues could be managed through standard recusal procedures. Giovanini concluded by affirming his commitment to being an active participant in local government rather than "sitting on the sidelines."

Candidate Necole Ontko, a lifelong Crook County resident and paramedic, expressed a desire to move from the "sidelines" to a position where she can actively help preserve the county's unique customs and culture during a period of rapid growth. While her work as a fire season medical unit leader sometimes takes her to remote areas, she assured the Commission that she could utilize satellite internet to "zoom in" and complete the necessary preparatory homework. Ontko spoke candidly about her "moral compass," identifying greed as a primary driver of local issues and citing the conversion of cattle ranches into solar farms as a specific concern. She emphasized that a commissioner's most important quality is the ability to listen to both sides of an issue regardless of personal opinion. Though she acknowledged having much to learn about formal land-use planning and Robert's Rules of Order, she highlighted her roots in the local ranching community and her commitment to ensuring the county remains a viable place for future generations to live and work.

Candidate Jack Rabenberg, a military veteran's son and former Fortune 500 employee who retired to Prineville in 2016, presented himself as a seasoned professional with deep roots in the community through his wife's family. During his interview, he identified honesty, integrity, and transparency as the core values of a public servant and emphasized his ability to handle conflict by remaining open to new information presented during public testimony. Rabenberg highlighted his extensive experience observing local government meetings and his familiarity with Robert's Rules of Order, noting that his past community involvement included organizing the "Don't Bend Prineville" movement regarding a proposed mountain bike park. He also shared a personal anecdote about successfully navigating a complex permit process for an electrical drop on his property as evidence of his understanding of the frustrations inherent in land-use regulations. Currently working part-time at a local funeral home, he assured the Commission that his schedule allows ample time for the required workload and that he is committed to preserving the local culture while managing the economic pressures of growth.

Candidate Monty Kurtz, a Powell Butte resident since 2016, highlighted his extensive background as a commercial project manager and business owner, noting that his career has taken him to nearly 30 countries and provided him with a broad perspective on diverse cultures and problem-solving. Having grown up in a small town similar to Prineville, he emphasized the importance of community service, citing his work with the Kiwanis Club and his personal experience navigating county regulations to build an ADA-compliant accessory dwelling unit for his parents. During his interview, Kurtz demonstrated a strong understanding of the Planning Commission's role, acknowledging that decisions are strictly governed by state and county laws and that the body often serves to mitigate impacts through conditions of approval rather than simply issuing a "yes" or "no." He identified as a data-driven decision-maker who values transparency and public involvement, expressing a desire to ensure the county's growth is managed with common sense while addressing the pressures of becoming a "bedroom community." Kurtz also noted that his schedule as a business owner provides him with the necessary flexibility to thoroughly research materials and attend all required sessions.

Candidate Necole Ontko returned to the microphone before deliberations began to share two observations. First, she expressed a desire to know more about the background and origins of the commissioners themselves, noting that while the candidates had been thoroughly questioned, the commission members remained relatively unknown to the applicants. Second, Ontko stated her belief that it was inappropriate for candidates to remain in the room during the Commission's deliberation process, noting she preferred to leave to allow the members to speak freely. Following her comments, several other candidates also chose to exit the chambers.

To accommodate Necole Ontko's request, the Commissioners provided brief biographical backgrounds detailing their professional experience and ties to Crook County:

- **George Ponte:** A resident of nearly 30 years, Ponte spent his career with the Oregon Department of Forestry, giving him extensive experience in fire management. He also serves on the local fire department's board of directors.
- **Marlo Dill:** Raised on a farm in California, Dill moved to the county in 2003. She has been an agricultural real estate appraiser since 1996 and has operated her own firm since 2001.

- **Mike Warren (Chair):** A lifelong resident, Warren is a local realtor for both the city and county. He is active with the National Association of Realtors on land-use committees, providing him with a national perspective on local growth.
- **Les Williamson:** A Prineville native, Williamson returned in 2019 after a 51-year career in electrical distribution, which included designing infrastructure for Facebook and Hoodoo. He serves on multiple boards, including Kiwanis and Crook County Rodders.
- **Laquita Stec:** A resident of 20 years, Stec has a background in municipal government as a city recorder and judge. She and her husband, a retired railroader, previously ranched in the Willamette Valley.

Director John Eisler clarified a "legal quirk" regarding the deliberation process, noting that while executive sessions are typically permitted for discussing the employment of paid staff, there is no such carve-out for volunteer, unpaid boards like the Planning Commission. He explained that due to the high level of public interest in the selection of these officers, the discussion must remain open to the public to avoid legal repercussions. Chair Mike Warren acknowledged the requirement and invited the commissioners to begin an informal discussion on the candidates, reminding those in attendance that they were welcome to stay or leave as the Commission moved into the deliberation phase.

Planning Commission Action

Commissioner Steck initiated the deliberations by suggesting Hunter Neuharth for the permanent vacancy, awarding him a "four-star" rating. She highlighted two primary justifications for her support: first, his residency in the Post/Paulina area addresses the Commission's current need for geographic diversity; second, she expressed high confidence in his character and fit for the role based on the strong endorsement from former commissioner Gary Bedora.

Commissioner Williamson shared that he ranked Necole Ontko as his top choice, primarily due to the value of her younger perspective and outstanding work ethic as evidenced by her recommendations. While he expressed slight concern regarding the potential for seasonal scheduling conflicts due to her occupation as a paramedic, he ultimately placed both Ontko and Hunter Neuharth at the same high level of qualification for the position.

Chair Warren shared his assessment of Necole Ontko, noting that while her occupation was a point of concern, her testimony suggested the lack of service might only occur during the initial stages of a fire assignment. He observed that once an incident is established, she would likely have the necessary internet access to participate. To confirm this, he deferred to Commissioner Ponte, seeking his professional insight into how communication systems are typically deployed during fire operations.

Commissioner Ponte expressed skepticism regarding a candidate's ability to participate remotely from a fire camp. Drawing on his professional background, he noted that most fire camps lack reliable cellular access and are high-activity environments that would make attending a Zoom meeting difficult. He further cautioned that the unpredictable nature of fire assignments could lead to last-minute absences, even if a member initially planned to attend a scheduled hearing.

Commissioner Ponte presented his final rankings, placing Monty Kurtz as his top choice due to his performance in previous applications, though he noted a preference for "listening" over Kurtz's "data-driven" approach. Hunter Neuharth was ranked second, followed by Kirk Giovanini in third. Pond placed Necole Ontko fourth, citing significant concerns regarding the logistical difficulty of her firefighting career and her ability to remain available during the summer months. Jack Rabenberg was ranked fifth.

The Commission and Director Eisler discussed the procedural relationship between the permanent vacancy and the pro tem positions, clarifying that the pro tem role serves as a "bench" or substitute capacity rather than a direct ladder to permanent membership. Eisler confirmed that even if a candidate is appointed as a pro tem member now, they would not automatically "bump up" to fill future permanent vacancies, such as the one

currently being advertised for June. Per county code, any permanent opening must be advertised for 30 days and undergo a formal interview and recommendation process, though the Commission may use the pro tem roles to gain consensus on candidates and prepare them for future full-time consideration.

Commissioner Williamson expressed his support for Hunter Neuharth as the top choice for the permanent position. While he reiterated his personal liking for Necole Ontko, he ultimately concurred with the other commissioners' concerns regarding her availability and potential scheduling conflicts during the fire season.

Commissioners Ponte and Dill said Neuharth was also their number one choice.

Chair Warren shared that Neuharth and Kurtz were at the top of his list.

Commissioner Williamson shared he had the same concerns regarding Kurtz as Commissioner Ponte did and he'd like to talk about him on the pro tem discussion.

MOTION: Commissioner Ponte moved to recommend Hunter Neuharth to fill Commissioner Walter's position on the Planning Commission. Commissioner Dill seconded.

No discussion.

VOTE: Yes votes: Laquita Stec, Marlo Dill, George Ponte, Les Williamson, and Michael Warren. No votes: none. Motion passed 5-0-0.

Director Eisler and the commissioners discussed the logistical requirements for filling the pro tem positions, debating both the number of appointees and the selection process. While some members suggested appointing up to three alternates to ensure deep coverage, the consensus leaned toward two, with some commissioners noting that a single alternate had been sufficient in the past. Eisler clarified that the Commission could recommend multiple individuals in a single motion and confirmed that serving as a pro tem member does not disqualify an individual from applying for future permanent vacancies. The discussion concluded with the understanding that if a pro tem member were eventually moved into a permanent seat, the Commission could simply reopen the process to replenish their "bench" of alternates as needed.

MOTION: Commissioner Ponte moved to recommend appointing two pro tem commissioners to the Planning Commission. Commissioner Williamson seconded.

No discussion.

VOTE: Yes votes: Laquita Stec, Marlo Dill, George Ponte, Les Williamson, and Michael Warren. No votes: none. Motion passed 5-0-0.

Commissioner Williamson recommended Monty Kurtz and Kirk Giovanini as his two selections for the pro tem positions. He highlighted Kurtz's long-standing interest in the role and his extensive professional experience, while noting that Giovanini's deep local knowledge and diversified background within the community made him an ideal candidate for the alternate pool.

Commissioner Ponte and Commissioner Stec agreed.

Commissioner Warren agreed and the commission agreed that Ontko would be a better candidate at another time when her commitments were lighter.

MOTION: Commissioner Ponte moved to recommend that Monty Kurtz and Kirk Gionvanini be appointed as planning commissioners pro tem. Commissioner Dill seconded.

No discussion.

VOTE: Yes votes: Laquita Stec, Marlo Dill, George Ponte, Les Williamson, and Michael Warren. No votes: none. Motion passed 5-0-0.

Staff Updates/Planning Commission Comments

Director Eisler provided a comprehensive update on several high-profile land-use projects, noting that while things are currently calm for the Planning Commission, significant activity is occurring at the Board of Commissioners level. He reported that the City of Prineville is reassessing its Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) expansion and seeking more citizen input, meaning no UGB matters will reach the Commission in the immediate future. Regarding county projects, Eisler highlighted the Board's recent written decisions on the Green Bar rock pit—which included expanded setbacks—and the West Prineville solar project, where a habitat mitigation plan was finally reached with ODFW. He also noted that an upcoming "Goal 3" exception for the TSR North solar project is scheduled for hearings in June, alongside a new military overlay code change. While current permit volumes are status quo, Eisler cautioned that this is likely the "calm before the storm," as several large-scale projects are currently preparing their formal applications. Eisler concluded the session by highlighting a significant uptick in code compliance issues, noting that many property owners performed work without permits during the 2020–2021 period and are only now facing the consequences—often while attempting to sell their homes. He emphasized that while many are now trying to "make it right," the process is more expensive after the fact, and he expressed a commitment to ensuring county rules remain meaningful to prevent an "epidemic" of unpermitted work.

The meeting wrapped up with the following logistical notes:

- Next Meeting: The June 11th meeting is canceled; the Commission will reconvene on June 25th.
- Notifications: Staff will reach out to all candidates as a matter of courtesy. Monty Kurtz and Hunter Neuharth (who remained present) were informed of their recommendations immediately, while the others will receive phone calls or emails.

MOTION: Commissioner Ponte moved to adjourn. Commissioner Stec seconded.

No discussion.

VOTE: Yes votes: Laquita Stec, Marlo Dill, George Ponte, Les Williamson, and Michael Warren. No votes: none. Motion passed 5-0-0.

Meeting adjourned at 6:00 p.m.