

Union County Board of Commissioners

Joseph Building Annex Conference Room

Regular Commission Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, June 3, 2026

Present: Commissioner R. Matthew Scarfo, Chair
Commissioner Paul Anderes
Commissioner Jake Seavert

Commissioner Scarfo opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m. and the Pledge of Allegiance was given with all three Commissioners present.

AGENDA REVIEW

Shelley Burgess, Administrative Officer, requested to postpone the Joint MOA for Tourism Services as the agreement is still under negotiations.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Shelley Burgess, Administrative Officer, read out loud a public comment submitted via email on June 1, 2026 by Tim Wallander regarding the Conley Lake Letter of Support. After 8 years of attending the Place Based Water meetings he is disappointed to see the Conley Lake idea making it on the agenda and taking Commissioner time for discussion. He stated the Conley Lake concept will create more problems then it would solve. He encouraged the Commissioners to not consider signing the letter of support for Conley Lake.

ELECTED OFFICIAL, DEPARTMENT HEAD & EMPLOYEE COMMENTS

Recommendation for Early Entry into Regulated Fire Season

James Sauer, Fire Defense Board Chief, provided a brief summary related to early entry into fire season to the Commissioners for their consideration.

Based on the conditions we are seeing in Union County; the Fire Defense Board has been in communication with each of the seven chiefs in the county. All but two voted to go in to regulated fire season today June 3, 2026. The other two were indifferent on the date being June 3 or 15. They are concerned about forecasted weather conditions and fuel loads.

On behalf of the Fire Defense Board, Chief Sauer recommends that Union County enter into early fire season. He noted that Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) will be going into fire season on Monday, June 8.

Emergency Manager Vora noted that this action would fall under Ordinance 2024-02 which refers to fire restrictions for Union County. Open burning would no longer be allowed, except for campfires, pellet barbeques and burn barrels within a specific time of each day. To check on smoke management considerations call the smoke line number or check the county website to verify if burning is allowed that day.

The restrictions that ODF will go into on June 8 will be substantially similar. The difference between the county and ODF is that ODF will require a permit for burn barrels, whereas the county ordinance does not require a permit.

Commissioner Seavert asked if the county has seen any fires get out of hand in Union County. Chief Sauer indicated that there has not been anything drastic. Island City had a fire a couple of days ago on Hot Lake Lane that was spotted.

Commissioner Scarfo asked if the two who were indifferent just wanted to see it extended for another two weeks. Chief Sauer clarified that they were fine with June 3 or 15.

Commissioner Seavert asked if there would be anything working against each other if approved to enter earlier than ODF. Chief Sauer doesn't think going in early is going to make much complexity out of it.

Commissioner Anderes asked how unprotected land calculates into this. Emergency Manager Vora indicated unprotected land falls under the county ordinance, which is one of the reasons Union County has an ordinance versus the individual fire districts having their own independent entries in the fire season.

Commissioner Anderes made a motion to accept the Fire Defense Board Recommendation to Enter into an Early Fire Season on June 3, 2026. Commissioner Seavert seconded.

Commissioner Anderes thanked Emergency Manager Vora for his work on the workgroup that the state of Oregon has for unprotected lands.

Motion carried unanimously.

2026-27 Tourism Program of Work & Budget

Saajan Chauhan, Executive Director of UC Chamber of Commerce, provided a brief summary of the 2026-27 Tourism Program of Work and Budget.

The Union County Chamber of Commerce recently updated their website and created a strong partnership with CrowdRiff, creating visual content for digital platforms. They have also maintained regional partnerships and expanded distribution of visitor materials. Union County Chamber of Commerce continues to support high impact events that bring in overnight stays.

Compared to the rest of the state, Eastern Oregon is doing really well in short-term vacation rentals. The increase in demand is up by 9.5% compared to other areas in Oregon.

Director Chauhan reported that there is a significant change in the proposed 2026-27 budget. Last year the Chamber was granted \$103,338 in transient room tax dollars from the City of La Grande. This year the amount was decreased by over \$58,000 for 2026-27. With the decrease in funds, the Chamber will also no longer be able to provide TRT grants to the community.

Administrative Officer Burgess indicated in January 2025; the Commissioners revisited the Transient Room Tax County Ordinance related to the distribution of funds. Based on those revisions, the percentage dedicated to tourism will provide \$91,800 to the tourism program as compared to the Chamber's budgeted amount of \$65,000.

Commissioner Anderes asked if Director Chauhan sees changes in transient room tax at the state level affecting occupancy. Director Chauhan indicated that the changes made recently didn't directly impact occupancy rates in his opinion.

Commissioner Seavert asked how effective print marketing is year to year. Director Chauhan indicated that the long-term strategy has depreciated and the idea is to leverage more digital. A lot of people still prefer print, so they still print material.

All three Commissioners thanked him for his presentation.

CONSENT AGENDA

Commissioner Anderes moved approval of the consent agenda which included the May 20 & 27, 2026 claims journals and meeting minutes of May 6 & 20, 2026 as presented. Commissioner Seavert seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Conley Lake Letter of Support

Shelley Burgess, Administrative Officer, read out loud the Conley Lake Letter of Support to the Commissioners for their consideration.

The letter states the Board of Commissioners express their support for the removal of the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) designation on the Conley Lake property in Union County. The parcel consists of 180-acres located in the middle of the Grande Ronde valley. The wetland was once thriving and utilized by migratory waterfowl but has now been a dry lake bed for more than a decade.

During the past two decades, during the dry year, a former property owner ripped the lake bed eliminating the ability to retain water. The Nature Conservancy and grantor acquired the property and entered into an agreement with the United States and Commodity Credit Corporation who have the authority to modify or terminate the easement in accordance with applicable law.

The Nature Conservancy received compensation in the amount of \$149,500 for enrolling the parcel into the WRP. Subsequently the Nature Conservancy transferred management of the property to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for the management of the recreation opportunities and bird habitat.

Commissioner Seavert stated the reason for taking it out of the WRP is it limits the ability of excavation or restoration of the wetland project. It is capped at a total depth of 6.5 feet deep, which is not a significant amount of water to be stored on the piece of property. The ability to change that is very limited.

Commissioner Seavert has full support from the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife for taking it out of the WRP.

Commissioner Scarfo indicated that he spoke with Mr. Wallander after the email was received and talked in length with him about why they shouldn't be doing this. Mr. Wallander told Commissioner Scarfo he would like to see the reservoir at Tony Vey Meadows be the project.

Commissioner Seavert stated they are in the very initial stage of investigating the project and won't have a cost or modeling of what this can do until the WRP lifts from the property. It's a long shot because of the several WRP's throughout the US that have tried to get the property out of WRP, none have been successful.

Commissioner Seavert made a motion to accept the Letter of Support for the Conley Lake Project. Commissioner Anderes seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

NEXT MEETING

The next special Commission meeting is scheduled to be held Wednesday, June 10, 2026 at 9 am.

The next regular Commission meeting is scheduled to be held Wednesday, June 24, 2026 at 9 am.

GOOD OF THE ORDER

Commissioner Seavert reminded everyone that next week (June 8-14) is the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show.

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Scarfo adjourned the meeting at 9:47 am.

Respectfully submitted,



Allison Moore
Senior Department Specialist