Benton County OREGON

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MINUTES OF THE MEETING
BENTON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

Present: Nancy Wyse, Chair; Pat Malone, Vice Chair, Gabe Shepherd, Commissioner; Vance Croney, County Counsel; Rachel McEneny, County Administrator; Rick Crager, Assistant County Administrator

Elected Officials: Ryan Joslin, District Attorney; Jef Van Arsdall, Sheriff

Staff: Rachel Bulder, Maura Kwiatkowski, Board staff; Dawn Dale, Joel Pickard, Sheriff's Office; Jennifer Ferrer-Santa Ines, Financial Services; Cory Grogan, Anne Thwaits, Public Information; Adam Loerts, Information Technology; Tracy Martineau, Jo Missler, Human Resources; Sean McGuire, Sustainability; Erika Milo, Board Recorder; Charlene Pech, Gary Stockhoff, Public Works

Guests: John Gardner, Mary Powelson, Corvallis residents; Nick Meltzer, Kittelson Associates

1. Call to Order and Introductions

Chair Wyse called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM and introductions were made.

2. Review and Approve Agenda

No changes were made to the agenda.

3. Announcements

No announcements were made.

4. Proclamations

4.1 Proclaiming September 2025 as National Preparedness Month in Benton County, Proclamation No. P2025-024 - Chelsea Chytka, Emergency Management Coordinator, Sheriff's Office

Chytka read the Proclamation aloud.

MOTION: Malone moved to adopt Proclamation #P2025-024, proclaiming September 2025 as National Preparedness Month in Benton County. Shepherd seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

Chytka announced that the Benton County Sheriff's Office had produced several preparedness campaigns on social media and held a mass care and shelter training in August 2025, to be followed by a Community Emergency Response Training in October 2025.

5. Comments from the Public

Mary Powelson, Corvallis resident, Dial-A-Bus (DAB) client, requested that Benton County provide signage for Benton Area Transit (BAT) buses indicating that BAT is associated with DAB, and that DAB is a non-profit agency. Powelson consulted about 50 friends and acquaintances in the senior age group, and found that none knew about the connection between the agencies or DAB's non-profit status.

Wyse noted that one of the Commissioners would follow up with Powelson.

John Gardner, Corvallis resident, commented that in the five or so years since BAT was adopted as the logo of the area transit system, the number of volunteer drivers for DAB has declined considerably. Most of the people who no longer volunteer state that they will not drive a BAT vehicle because they are DAB volunteers, not County volunteers, and that many of the BAT vehicles require a Commercial Drivers License, which most volunteers do not have. Gardner also requested that the County change the DAB voicemail message, stating that many callers find it confusing, offensive, or frightening and may simply hang up rather than request service.

Wyse noted that the County is looking into the voicemail issue, and one of the Commissioners will follow up about the other issues.

6. Work Session

6.1 Benton Area Transit (BAT) Self-Perform Analysis Summary -
Charlene Pech, Special & Rural Transportation Coordinator; Gary Stockhoff, Director, Public Works; Nick Meltzer, Associate Planner/Engineer, Kittelson Associates

Meltzer reported that Kittelson Associates had finished a Benton County transit services assessment, completed peer interviews, drafted a vision for service operation, and identified future service alternatives with staff input. Takeaways from the work to date include:

- The transit service delivery model should align with Board values.
- Additional County staff are needed to support transit service cost and capital planning.
- Costs will increase if anything changes, but the actual costs of service have been higher due to liability, and the majority of funding is at risk due to Federal noncompliance findings.
- The service cost of the non-profit contractor (Dial-A-Bus) is below market value.
- The County's historical approach to these services is not well suited to current and future service needs.

Meltzer shared the BAT vision statement and service goals [see presentation slide 6]. Previously, the Board felt that the vision was too utilitarian, so staff relabeled that version as 'Service Goals' and wrote a new vision statement. Meltzer described how the analysis team calculated the cost of various approaches to service coordination [slide 7], then described three service scenarios:

1. BAT could self-perform transit, providing the fixed route and demand response (DR) services in-house.
2. BAT could continue to contract out for fixed route and DR services to one or more contractors.
3. BAT could enhance inter-agency coordination with the City of Corvallis Transit System (CTS), sharing operations and staffing. For instance, CTS could add BAT's fixed route services to their operations contract with a private provider.

The team then examined goal alignment, staffing considerations, cost implications, and operations of the current model and the three scenarios, noting strengths and weaknesses of each [slide 11]:

- Scenario 1 aligns best with the County's current goals.
- Scenario 2 offers more predictable costs and potentially lower costs through a contract, but peer organizations report that a renewal contract can cost 30-40% more than the initial term.
- Scenario 3: additional coordination requires additional staff effort. The team discussed this option with the City of Corvallis, but the City is not ready to proceed with more detailed discussions.
- Non-operational staffing: one full-time equivalent (FTE) is not sufficient to run the transit program; the employees for scenario 2 would be Corvallis support staff. The team recommends two FTE for all scenarios. Some previous issues with BAT were caused by lack of County staff.

Meltzer described the assumptions used for this evaluation, which were vetted by County staff, and shared the following:

- With existing revenue, and operating only core services and paratransit, Scenario 1 would have a $460,000 (47%) budget shortfall if maintaining current service levels.

- Corvallis is Federally required to provide paratransit, and contracts for that with the County, but the County is not required to provide paratransit, so that cost was split in the evaluation.
- Because paratransit includes more service hours, which creates efficiencies, paratransit lowers the overall cost per service hour.
- With existing annual revenue, there will be a $705,000 funding shortfall (54%) for Benton County core services and paratransit.
- The team used an all-inclusive cost per service hour and compared Benton to other jurisdictions to arrive at a regional median of $125 per hour.
- If the County maintains its current budget, there will be a 40% reduction in service hours.

In Scenario 1, there would still be a shortfall if the County received additional State Transportation Improvement Fund (STIF) allocations, or if Corvallis contributed more paratransit funding. However, if funding is received from both sources, that would create some savings for the County.

Within the current budget, the County would need to reduce fixed route service, reduce DR service, and discontinue paratransit. For instance, DR would be reduced from six to five days per week and from 11 to eight hours per day. The 99 Express service to the City of Adair Village would be reduced from five to three days per week.

Scenario 2: if the County contracts out, operates without paratransit, and receives additional STIF funding, there would be a potential 19% reduction in service hours. Ride grouping could provide paratransit efficiencies, but this requires more analysis. The budget would be level if the County contracts paratransit operations and receives additional funding from Corvallis. If the County contracts out, maintains funding, reduces DR service, and does not provide paratransit, service hours would be reduced up to 39%.

Meltzer outlined these takeaways:

- Federal compliance challenges risk the County's overall transit funding.
- Scenario 1 best aligns with Board visions and goals.
- Scenarios 1 and 2 require additional revenue and potential service reductions to remain fiscally sustainable.
- Smaller transit programs have higher overhead than larger ones.
- Scenario 1 would create up to 14 new jobs with benefits in Benton County.
- CTS receives a competitive rate for fixed route service; achieving a similar contract could minimize costs of adjusting service delivery models.
    - If Benton County continues to contract for some services, one recommendation is to separate paratransit and fixed route services. Contractor competition could result in more cost-effective bids.

- DR is expensive to provide. Additional cost sharing would help achieve financial sustainability.
- The above cost assumptions do not consider future service expansion or developing a reserve for capital expenses or annual budget overages.
- The County should consider developing a long-range transit plan to align mobility needs of residents with projected funding and costs of providing service under the new service model. Transit is addressed in just two pages in the current Transportation System Plan.

Next, the analysis team will refine cost details. Any change in service model would begin July 1, 2027. The current Oregon transportation bill would increase STIF payroll tax, but sunset it in two years, so it is challenging to estimate future costs. Meltzer asked whether the Board concurred that Scenario 1 best meets the County's transit vision and goals.

Stockhoff shared that the County's fixed routes are Coastal Valley and 99 Express. In developing the County's 2027-2029 STIF program, staff assumed that Benton would request extra legislative funds. It is helpful to work with Corvallis to ensure the City compensates the County fairly for paratransit.

Responding to Shepherd's question about the difference between DR (clients requesting service) and fixed route, Meltzer explained that if an agency operates fixed route service, that agency is required to provide paratransit, which is a three-quarters of a mile buffer for people who cannot ride the fixed route. The County provides fixed route service, but these are Federally classified as commuter buses, which are not required to provide paratransit. DR includes paratransit, but DR is more curb-to-curb and only serves qualifying individuals. Regarding the potential reduction in hours of service, the Federal government requires counties to provide DR service, but does not dictate how much. Paratransit must operate any time fixed route service is operating, so requirements for that are much higher.

Shepherd noted that much of this information is based on the assumption that at the current service level, there will be more non-compliance findings, which will risk funding, which is why a contract with DAB costs the same as self-performing. Shepherd requested more details about the findings.

Chytka replied that the previous triennial review by the Federal government had repeat findings related to operational issues and internal processes. If Benton County were to self-perform and modify how service is provided and administered, the County would have more control over the programs, reducing compliance issues. It is difficult to have oversight of another transit provider, especially one whose transit model does not align with Federal requirements. The compliance issues relate to Title VI and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and could result in loss of funding from or more oversight by the Federal government. Part of Chytka's role in 2025 is to address compliance to avoid future noncompliance findings.

Shepherd noted that the bar graphs on presentation pages 14-15 seem very subjective, not quantitative. It was unclear why one scenario ranked higher than another.

Meltzer confirmed that the process was subjective. The team selected a low, medium, or high probability that each scenario could align with County goals. Scenario 1 has a better chance of being Federally compliant and customer-focused. An explanatory table can be found in the full report.

Shepherd wanted to ensure the County aligns with Corvallis on paratransit services. People inside and outside of city limits should not have to contact different agencies, because that would be incredibly confusing.

Malone asked about the decline in volunteer hours described during Public Comment.

Chytka receives a monthly DAB report including volunteer hours. In 2025, that level has remained consistent at about $10,000 worth of volunteer hours per quarter. This does not reduce the County's bill from DAB. It is rare for a non-profit to provide transit.

Stockhoff shared that the County now has vehicles that meet ADA standards and may be larger than past vehicles, making it harder to find volunteer drivers. The current model worked well for a time, but transit has become more regulated to meet State and Federal requirements. The volunteer model will be hard to maintain, hence Scenario 1.

Responding to a question from Malone, Stockhoff replied the County could sustain the current model until June 30, 2027, when the current DAB contract expires. Staff recommend that any change and new contract take effect in the 2027-29 STIF cycle. If the Board selects Scenario 1, staff will need time to set up the new model well before July 1, 2027. Stockhoff noted these changes aim to maintain the current service level, not increase it.

Wyse asked for clarification of the term paratransit.

Chytka shared that paratransit is a required service for people with disabilities; DR is also required, but not specific to that population.

Meltzer added that paratransit clients live within three-quarters of a mile of a city's fixed-route service. Ridership requests outside that area constitute DR.

Wyse asked how cutting the County's service hours would affect riders.

Meltzer noted that the numbers provided here were broad estimates of funding shortfalls.

Stockhoff explained that staff hope that during the 2027 long session, the State legislature will increase and extend the transit payroll tax, which would provide the necessary stable funding. Staff seek to maintain the current level of service. The County has extra funding for one and a half to two years that will roll into the next biennium.

Meltzer added that there is funding to maintain current service if the County self-performs; the team simply provided details of outcomes if the County does not increase its revenue based on current services. When the team and the City discussed increasing the amount Corvallis pays for paratransit service, City staff did not express immediate concerns. Another option is to seek additional STIF funding. The current model and Scenario 2 could be the same, or the County could seek more competitive bids by splitting services into separate contracts or using a private provider instead of a non-profit organization. Private providers are often more familiar with Federal requirements.

Wyse asked about the likelihood of the County being able to hire enough drivers for Scenario 1.

Meltzer replied that driver shortages had improved overall in the last three years. The City of Albany self-performs and has been fully staffed. Lincoln County also self-performs.

Wyse favored providing a high level of reliable service to constituents, with no Federal compliance issues. Wyse was concerned about the cost of service during an already tight County budget. Wyse was reluctant to cut total service or hours without knowing how that would directly impact riders. The information provided was fairly hypothetical. Still, there is room for improvement in the current system.

Malone asked why the County had struggled to meet Federal transit guidelines.

Stockhoff indicated that the contractor could not always provide the County with the necessary reporting information, but the County also needs more BAT staff, hence the recommendation to increase FTE. The County only finished addressing 2022 compliance issues in early 2025. In the current model, the contractor will always struggle to obtain that information, and the trend is for Federal and State governments to continue to request more information.

Malone asked whether the County had experienced financial setbacks due to non-compliance.

Stockhoff replied that the County's past non-compliant status may have contributed to the County not receiving a STIF discretionary grant. Currently, the County is in compliance. The next audit will occur in March 2026.

Malone favored keeping at least close to the current service level and seeking increased funding.

Wyse asked about the timeline for a Board decision on the matter.

Stockhoff suggested staff could provide more information and return in November or early December 2025. Stockhoff requested Board direction before January 1, 2026.

Wyse asked whether riders could be surveyed about the effects of a hypothetical cut in hours.

Stockhoff agreed that the County can do rider surveys, but the County does not expect cuts with the current approach or Scenario 1.

Wyse asked about the aforementioned cuts.

Meltzer clarified that cuts would only be necessary if no additional funds are sought. There is revenue to maintain the current service. The team now has a better cost estimate of providing paratransit for Corvallis. Additional funding is earmarked in the current STIF Plan. Since there is currently no funding for a second non-operational staff position to help administer the County STIF program, BAT is paying for the County to administer the program. Under the umbrella of BAT, quarterly reports go to all the transportation service providers, but perhaps reporting should be paid for by the County's broader STIF program funds. The team can provide more details on cost estimates, ways to maintain current service, and places to seek additional revenue.

Stockhoff emphasized that this proposal aims to refine current service and obtain the best value. Staff do not want to reduce service. The County can self-perform and maintain current routes with existing funding.

Shepherd was also not ready to make a decision on this matter today. Shepherd requested to meet individually with staff once more information from the legislature is available.

Chair Wyse recessed the meeting at 10:16 AM and reconvened at 10:22 AM.

7. Consent Calendar

7.1 Application for a New Liquor License, Manufacturing/Production for Harold Dean Underwood, dba Barakel Vineyards, LLC

7.2 Statewide Transportation Improvement Fund Advisory Committee Appointment, Order D2025-063

7.3 Approval of the September 2, 2025 Board of Commissioners Meeting Minutes

MOTION: Malone moved to approve the Consent Calendar. Shepherd seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

8. Old Business

8.1 Personnel and Information Technology Policy Updates - Tracy Martineau, Human Resources Director; Jo Missler, Senior Human Resources Analyst; Adam Loerts, Information Technology Director

Martineau reviewed changes in Policy 200. Changes were made at the request of the County Administrator, after receiving a guidance letter from the Secretary of State's Office. The County is implementing the recommended version, which states that the County or County Departments may occasionally provide food and non-alcoholic drinks to employees and volunteers. These will be considered de minimis and will not be included in an employee's wage or other compensation.

Shepherd asked whether the Board was allowed to vote on this item, as the Commissioners are considered employees and would benefit from such a policy.

Counsel confirmed that it was appropriate for the Board to vote on this item.

Martineau reviewed a group of changes to County personnel policies [summarized on packet page 59, P200 Employee Conduct and Anti-Discrimination Tracked Changes]. The changes include a general rules statement, classified and unclassified service, administration of personnel rules, and personnel records. This policy will include parts of the Equal Employment Opportunity Policy, Americans with Disabilities Act Policy, Affirmative Action Policy, Employee Behavior and Ethical Conduct Policy, and a Whistleblower Policy. The changes are very minor (mainly format and publishing changes). Based on input from City/ County Insurance Services (CIS), language was added to provide examples of non/appropriate behavior. The changes clarify the difference between due supervisory instruction or performance feedback and legal discrimination or harassment.

Missler noted that directions from supervisors do not constitute harassment or bullying.

Martineau reviewed the list of policy changes. There is a reference to an Open Door Policy, which remains to be developed. Staff needed a clear, easy-access version of these policies.

Loerts introduced a new policy on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Model (LLM) tools at the County [packet page 76, AI103 Artificial Intelligence Use]. The use of these tools has grown significantly in recent years, especially in government. This policy is written at a local level but also integrates standards from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the State of Oregon AI guidance. The new policy includes a policy with behavior guidelines, and a procedure that discusses certain workflows. Annual review and frequent updates are part of the policy. The Information Technology (IT) Department has roles in data protection enforcement, approving AI projects and tools, and ensuring vendors disclose how such tools are used. County sensitive information includes Criminal Justice information, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) data, payment card data, and other forms of personally identifiable information. All employees, and contractors using County infrastructure, must use vetted AI tools safely and ethically, complete training, and report any security issues to IT for investigation. For public transparency, as established by NIST, the County must list all AI tools it is using and for what purpose, and what kind of information about the public that the County might use in an AI tool. That policy will be placed on the County website as part of a disclaimer. IT will provide baseline staff training on safe and secure use of AI tools and how to communicate to the public that employees are using AI tools to produce work. IT is implementing ways to monitor use of AI tools on the County network and flag tools that IT has not approved. There will be a yearly audit of AI tools.

Wyse asked whether the policy would need to go to the Policy Oversight Committee and the Board each time it is updated (every 6 months).

Loerts replied probably, but it depends on the nature of the changes. When existing vendors add a new AI tool, IT must vet the tool, which could affect how the policy is written.

Shepherd noted that the Oregon Secretary of State is working on a new city and county retention schedule for public records. Shepherd asked whether that office had broached AI, and what the retention schedule of such information would be.

Loerts replied that any work product made and stored by the County adheres to the laws of the Freedom of Information Act and public record.

Counsel added that the topic of a document is more significant that how it is produced.

Shepherd supported clearly marking and disclosing work product involving AI, but had concerns about what level of demarcation is required. For instance, does that include autocorrect in Microsoft Word and images edited with Canva software?

Loerts replied that the level needing to be disclosed will probably change over time. IT will address this through training. Those guidelines will also appear on the County's website transparency page. IT will work with managers and directors on how information should be disclosed to align with State policy. NIST is only a guideline, while State policy is mandatory. IT's role is to help diagnose and identify what the County should share.

Malone asked about AI security implications.

Loerts replied that training will address security in more detail. If a user gives an AI tool information to work with as part of an LLM, the tool temporarily sends that data out of County control. Some companies have used such data to further train LLMs. Training will cover data security. The main approved tool will be Microsoft CoPilot, an LLM that is guaranteed to be private within an organization's data domain.

MOTION: Shepherd moved to approve, as presented, Personnel Policy #200 and Information Technology Policy #103 and the amendment to the Salary Administration Policy, effective October 1, 2025. Malone seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

9. New Business

9.1 Granting Authority to Chief Financial Officer Jennifer Ferrer-Santa Ines to Provide Banking Services and Designating Custodian of Funds, County Treasurer, and Investment Officer, Order No. D2025-062 - Rick Crager, Assistant County Administrator

Crager explained that this Resolution formally passes the role of chief financial officer (CFO) to Ferrer Santa-Ines, making her the County custodian of funds, treasurer, and investment officer. The Resolution also gives Ferrer Santa-Ines the ability to make new contracts and bank agreements on behalf of the County (with primary accounts at Wells Fargo Bank, Oregon State Credit Union, and Umpqua Bank). The Board retains final approvals. Item six provides the Deputy CFO with signature authority to sign in the CFO's stead. After approval, the transfer will be completed at the banking institution.

McEneny praised Crager for providing leadership during the 2025-27 biennial budget process in addition to Crager's regular duties as Assistant County Administrator.

MOTION: Malone moved to adopt Order #D2025-062, granting authority to Chief Financial Officer Ferrer-Santa Ines to provide banking services and designating custodian of funds, County treasurer, and investment officer. Shepherd seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

9.2 Albany Chamber of Commerce 2025-26 Membership Renewal - Maura Kwiatkowski, Administrative Services Manager, Board of Commissioners Office

Wyse noted that the Board has been a member of the organization since 2016.

The Board discussed benefits of membership. Wyse and Shepherd mentioned community contribution, investing in local partners, building relationships with local businesses, and County brand visibility.

MOTION: Shepherd moved to approve renewal of Benton County's membership in the Albany Chamber of Commerce for 2026. Malone seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

9.3 Approval of the 2025-27 Community Corrections Plan and Measure 57 Supplemental Fund Program with Corresponding Intergovernmental Agreement Nos. 6891 and 6925 between the State of Oregon and Benton County - Joel Pickard, Acting in Capacity Parole and Probation Captain, Dawn Dale, Business Analyst II; Sheriff's Office

Pickard presented the 2025-27 Community Corrections Plan (CCP), which must be submitted to the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC). The DOC also requires the County to enter an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) to receive grant aid funds for Community Corrections programs. This biennium, Benton County’s share of the statewide Community Corrections budget is about $3.1 million. BC also received $165,000 in Measure 57 funds for certain justice-involved individuals. Pickard acknowledged Parole and Probation staff and their work.

Community Corrections is involved with supervision of convicted adult justice-involved individuals whom the courts and the parole board have placed back into the community. One of staff’s main goals is to help such individuals address the issues that caused them to enter the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and help them leave. Staff prioritize the program’s highest resources on the highest-risk population. Another important element is the use of validated risk assessments (VRAs) to direct resources and organize the caseload. VRAs also help avoid over-exposing low-risk clients to the CJS. Pickard described caseloads and programs, as outlined in the CCP. In January 2023, DOC formally reviewed County programming and issued a formal response showing the overall effectiveness of the program. As a result, Benton County is not due for another DOC audit until 2028. In August 2025, Parole and Probation was informed that Community Corrections Act funding could no longer be used to supervise unfunded misdemeanor cases. Staff are developing a strategy to address that population.

MOTION: Malone moved to approve the Fiscal Years 2025-2027 Community Corrections Plan, Measure 57 Supplemental Fund Program, and the corresponding Intergovernmental Agreements #6891 and #6925 between the State of Oregon and Benton County. Shepherd seconded the motion, which **carried 3-0.**

10. Other

No other business was discussed.

11. Adjournment

Chair Wyse adjourned the meeting at 11:31 AM.

Nancy Wyse, Chair

Erika Milo, Recorder

* NOTE: Items denoted with an asterisk do NOT have accompanying written materials in the meeting packet.