

The Role of a Port Commissioner At Their Port

WPPA New Commissioners Seminar November 18-19, 2025

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Commissioner – Port of Everett

Jack Ng
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The Panel

Glen Bachman, Commissioner Port of Everett
Commissioner 2013 to present
WPPA President

Jack Ng, Commissioner Port of South Whidbey
Commissioner 2015 to present
WPPA Vice-President

Eric ffitch
Executive Director – WPPA 2023 to present

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Port district lawyer since 1987 to 2025
WPPA General Counsel – 2012 to 2025
Helmsman Strategic, LLC - 2025

The Central Theses

- The job of Commissioners is critical and must be done well because the “big issues” are not going away
- The smooth relationship between the commissioners and the chief executive officer – here the executive director – is critical for success
- What you do as commissioners is very important now and into the future
- Governance is harder than management
- Voters value governance done well
- Critical components of port success are (i) articulating the strategic vision of the commission, (ii) defining the lanes of commissioners and executive director and (iii) staying in the commission lane

Define Terms

- **“Leadership”** - is the art of developing strategic vision, direction and support of an organization and its members
- **“Culture”** - is the common values, customs and social institutions of an organization
- **“Strategic Vision”**- is a compelling and achievable forward-looking description of an organization. Stated another way “what will the organization look like in five, ten or twenty years?”
- **“Management”** – is the planning, organizing , leading and controlling the day-to-day operation of an organization to achieve its goals efficiently and effectively
- **“Political Bank Account”** – is the trust of the public in the government organization

Governance

“Governance” – is leadership that

- (i) establishes the organization’s culture
- (ii) identifies the compelling and achievable strategic vision
- (iii) establishes goals that the organization will pursue in the short, medium and long term
- (iv) implements systems, budgets, reporting processes and controls for the organization
- (v) Is deliberative and thoughtful. Generally, governance is slow, deliberate and contemplative

Port Governance vs. Port Management

- Governance - external facing (for example)
 - Develops the strategic vision
 - Maintains relationships with other governments
 - Preserves the public trust
 - Guards the port's "political bank account"
- Governance - internal facing (for example)
 - Develops appropriate internal systems for accountability and reporting to the commission to protect the public resources
 - Develops appropriate budgets
 - Establishes the commission culture and the organization culture
 - Hires, reviews, and supervises the executive director
 - Develops and periodically reviews the delegation of powers resolution
- Management – internal facing (for example)
 - Manages the day-to day operations of the port and its staff
 - Implements the governance directions
 - Supports the port's culture
 - Provides accurate information to all commissioners
- Management – external facing (for example)
 - Protects the public resources
 - Provides materials for commissioner presentations to the public
 - Guards the port's political bank account

Why Look At (Now and in the Future) Governance?

- Governance done well is essential to a port district success
- It is not intuitive
- Each commissioner approaches the job from a different perspective
- There are no “commissioner qualifications”
- It makes the commission, each of you and the executive director more effective
- It helps avoid mistakes – voters recognize and reward good governance
- It makes everyone’s service much more rewarding
- It will yield future results for your port

Avoiding Getting Off Track on Governance

- Recognize that governance is much more difficult than management
 - No curblines
 - Usually no immediate measure of success
- Commission has limited time together based upon the per diem limitation in chapter 53.12 RCW
- The tendency is to drift into management and put off governance for another day
- Getting governance done
 - Consider a yearly commission work plan on governance items
 - Have pre-scheduled quarterly check-ins with the executive director and the commission on governance vs. management
 - Schedule an annual retreat with a moderator to discuss governance and the governance issues
 - Evaluate the commission performance at year end
- Consult the WPPA **Port Governance and Management Guide**
 - Update the “Keystone documents”

Parkinson's
Law
and
The Law of Triviality...
briefly stated

“Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”

“The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the (dollar) sum involved.”

– *C. Northcote Parkinson*

Governance

The Individual Commissioner and The Commission

Guidelines For Individual Commissioners

- Your individual authority - nada, nyet, nothing
 - Only the Commission can grant authority
- Do not task staff – they do not work for you
- Let your fellow commissioners know what is important to you
- Be careful about perception when
 - Speaking to other governments
 - Speaking to tenants
 - Speaking to civic groups
- Seek consensus but once an issue is decided, support the Commissions' decision
- Ask is this management or governance?

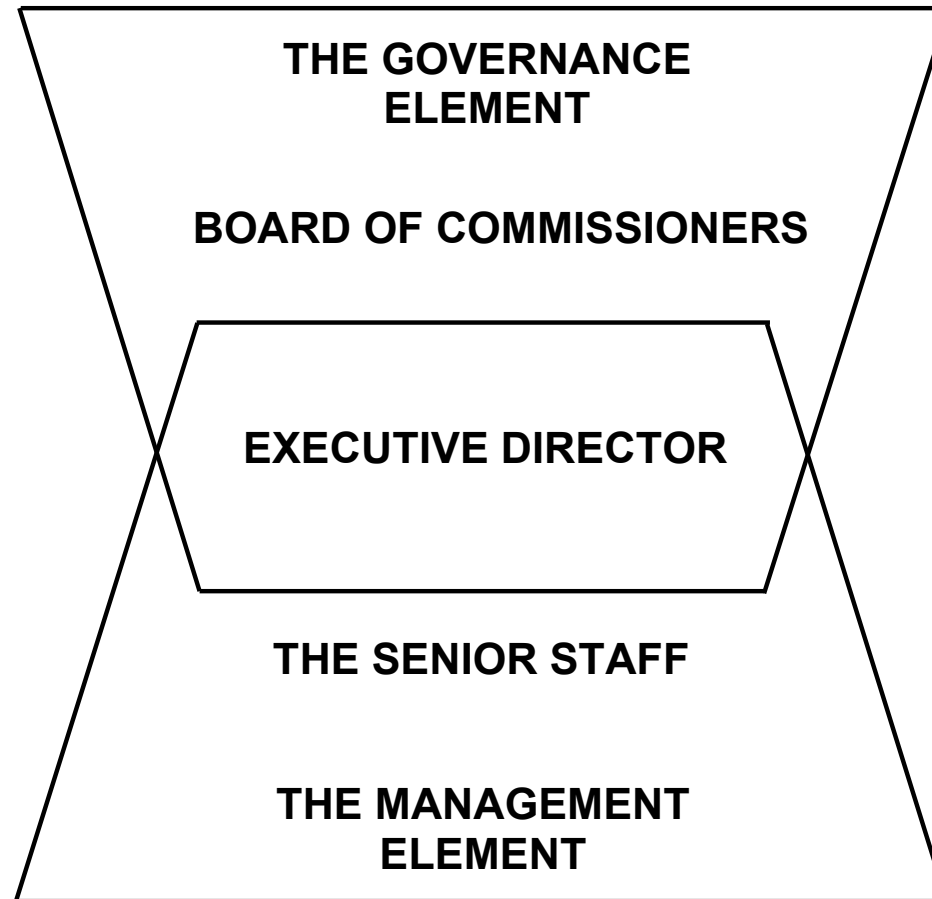
Guidelines For Individual Commissioners (continued)

- Be a leader – not a spectator or a critic
- Understand that no decision is worth “blowing up the commission”
- You cannot always be right
- Look for opportunities to be persuaded
- Do no harm
- Refrain from becoming involved in management of the port – even if you are good at it

EXTRA CREDIT: Who said “Those who never change their minds, never change anything”

Winston Churchill

The Governance -Management Interface



All The Substance At A Port Starts With The Commission



The Commissioners' Perspective - Exercise

- a. Please provide up to five +/- attributes of the perfect Commissioner
- b. Please provide up to five +/- attributes of the perfect Executive Director

The Commission As The “Public Body”

The Commission

- Adopts rules for the transaction of its business
 - Read motion, discuss and vote
 - May adopt a more formal procedure
- Decide, as a commission, what to expect in voting
 - consensus vs. majority
- Disagreements on substance between commissioners is healthy, needed and expected
 - How disagreement is handled defines the commission
- Sets the culture of the Commission and the entire Port
 - respectful, professional, collaborative with each other and staff
 - Avoid relitigating/not supporting past decisions
 - respectful to the public
- The commission president
 - Meets with the executive director to set the agenda
 - Presides over the meeting
 - Makes sure all commissioners have an opportunity to be heard
 - “are we ready to vote?”

EXTRA CREDIT: What does Robert’s Rules of Order have to do with the Port of Friday Harbor?

Lt. Henry Martin Robert, the author of *Robert's Rules of Order*, was a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers and was assigned in 1859 (around the time of the Pig War) to San Juan Island where he built fortifications

The Commission – Governing and Leading the Executive Director

- The Commission leads and manages the Executive Director
 - Systems to manage performance
 - Job description
 - Annual review
 - Delegation of Powers Resolution
 - Succession plan
 - Information flow (both ways)
 - Budget based management
 - Policies
 - Leasing Rates
 - Marina Rates
 - Leadership of the Executive Director
 - Imparting the vision
 - Seeking input
 - Of course, you will change executive directors
 - Different skill sets for different times
 - Change in commission direction

The Commission – Inter-government Relations

- The Commission leads and manages the relationship with other elected officials, other governments and the community
 - Coordinated approach with the Executive Director
 - Familiarity with other electeds
 - Standard presentations prepared by staff

Effective Commission Meetings

- Typically, port commissions meet only 24 times a year
 - State law limits the annual per diem compensation of commissioners
 - State law precludes a majority of the commission discussing port business outside of an open public meeting except for narrow issues qualifying for executive session
- Therefore, a commission must run efficient and productive commission meetings to allow time to govern
 - agenda packet materials provided and reviewed
 - consent agendas
 - public input
 - work-study commission meetings

Effective Commission Meetings (cont.)

- Clear understanding of roles
 - Commission: Needs room to govern
 - Executive Director: Needs room to manage
- Clear understanding on how a decision will be made
 - majority or consensus
- A respectful Commission culture
- Avoid overusing executive sessions
- Develop a plan for contentious issues
 - The Commission represents the public and must decide between alternatives
 - Public input
 - Plan the process with the executive director for the decision
- Respect for the public

Managing the Executive Director

The Commission Manages the Executive Director

- The Executive Director:
 - Works for the Commission
 - Thinks primarily about the day-to-day operations
 - Implements the direction of the Commission
 - Wants to make the Port a success
 - Provides all Commissioners with the same information
 - Develops KPIs

Hiring, Managing and Changing Executive Directors

- Hiring an Executive Director
 - Determine what skills your port needs
 - External process vs. internal hiring
- What makes a successful executive director
- Executive director responsive to the commission
- Performance reviews
 - At least annually but the more the better
- When the Commission Changes Executive Directors
 - The employment agreement is designed to remove the emotion out of this event

The Commission and the Staff

Role of Staff at a Commission Meeting

- It depends – the Executive Director delegates responsibility
 - Who regularly attends meetings?
 - Is a staff member responsible for a specific agenda item?
 - Can staff be called on to speak to other issues?
 - What should be off-limits?
 - The next generation of port senior leaders.
- The Commissioners should get questions on an agenda to the executive director before the meeting so staff can be prepared
- The commission should require complete staff work.
- How should staff respond to a “left field” question?
 - “I will get you a complete answer.”
 - “We should schedule this for a work-study session”

Building an Effective Commission - Staff Relationship

- The Executive Director manages the commissioner-staff relationship
 - Workload
 - Urgency
 - Uniform information to all Commissioners
- The staff wants to provide information to the Commissioners
 - But they have full time jobs
- At Commission meetings the staff appreciates
 - No pop quizzes
 - No grandstanding
 - “Job well done” when appropriate

Budget-Based Governance

The Importance of Budget-Based Governance

- The budget process is one of the most important governance tools
- Adopting the operating budget and a capital budget is one of the most important things the commission does
 - Annual operating budget (required by law)
 - Can extend out multiple years
 - Annual capital budget
 - Frequently extends out several years
- Allows the commission to see all operations for a year in perspective
- Allows commission to weigh and evaluate the merits of all capital projects, including projects that will extend over several years

How to Use a Budget

- Budget-based governance streamlines meetings leaving more time for governance
 - “Is this in the budget?”
 - “Which line item is this coming from?”
 - “Are there any deviations from the budget?”
- Acts within the budget are presumptively good management
- Acts outside the budget require a solid explanation

Developing or Modifying A Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan

- Develop and periodically review a port strategic plan
 - What are the port's top priorities (for example)?
 - Community?
 - Port property development?
 - New lines of business?
 - Maintenance of facilities?
 - Relationships with other governments?
 - Consolidation with another port district?
 - What are the intermediate steps to achieve each priority?
 - Developing or updating a strategic plan usually requires a multi-month Commission led process
 - Retreats, consultants and hard work by the commission
 - Not a Comprehensive Scheme of Harbor Improvements

The Commission, the Port Attorney and the Port Auditor

The Port Attorney

- Is appointed by the Commission and represents the port district
- Ultimately reports to the Commission
- Works with the Executive Director and staff on a day-to-day basis
- Provides legal (and sometimes business) advice to the Commission
- Attorney-client privileged
- Expect the attorney to keep all commissioners informed

The Port Auditor

- Is appointed by the Commission and certifies all payments
- Usually the port district CFO
- Works for the Executive Director on a day-to-day basis
- Reports any suspected irregularities to the Commission
- Provides accurate financial information
- Provides systems and processes for the commission's financial accountability function

In Closing – Your Commission Has Resources

- Other ports have
 - Agenda forms
 - Capital budgets
 - Strategic Plans
 - Delegation of Powers Resolutions
 - Executive director employment agreements
 - Executive director annual review forms
- The WPPA
 - WPPA staff
 - Has the institutional knowledge of the port industry
 - Propose a topic for a future meeting or seminar
 - Propose a “Knowing the Waters “ topic
 - WPPA meetings and seminars
 - At the meeting ask other commissioners – how did your port . . . ?
 - Get new ideas

THANK YOU FOR STEPPING UP TO SERVE YOUR COMMUNITIES

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