

# The Economic Alliance Board Meeting

March 25, 2026

County Commissioners' Hearing Room, Okanogan

## Attending Board Members:

Maria Lassila, 1st Chairman, Tourism Rep. Omak Chamber	Cal Goolsby, WVC, At Large #A2
Nick Timm, County Commissioners Rep., Rep. #1, Treasurer	Steve Quick, Central #2 Okanogan School Super
Kurt Danison, Secretary, City Rep. #1, City Planner	Jord Wilson, South County #1, City of Pateros
Sarah Jo Lightner, Methow Arts, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Vice Chair., Arts Comm Rep	Lisa Bauer, City Rep., City of Okanogan
Anna Dalbey, Past Chairman, So. Co. #2, Keller Williams Realty	Rocklyn Culp, Town of Winthrop, Planner
Andy Bertapalle, At-Large #1, Chief Admin Mid Valley Hosp.	Patrick Law, Methow Valley #1, Twisp Works
William Marchand, CCT Planning	

## Absent Board Members:

Anthony Popelier, 1st Vice Chair Reman & Reload, North Co. #2	Cindy Simpson, Finance Rep, WA Federal Bank
Beth Stroshane, Applied Bldg Infor, At-Large #4	Crystal Gage, Confluence Heath, Central Co. Area #1
Monica Garza Acevedo, WorkSource, At-Large #3	Jordan Ruiz, NNDF, Nespelem/Coulee Dam Area #2
Lanie Johns, Ok Co Commissioners Rep., Ck of the Brd Co Rep #2	Rikki Whipple, Nespelem/Coulee Dam Area #1, NNDF
Vacant, CTFC Representative	Vacant - At Large #5
Vacant, North County #1	

## Guests/Staff:

Roni Holder-Diefenbach, Ex. Director, Economic Alliance	Mason Duke, E. Dev. Specialist, Economic Alliance
Leonel Marcial, Business Outreach Specialist, Economic Alliance	Carolyn Davis, Project Assistant, Economic Alliance
Breanna Sollender, Comm/Outreach Specialist, Economic Alliance	Brent Timm, Tonasket Chamber & Transgo
Johnathon Smith, Yakima EDC	Lew Blakeney, SBDC

Maria Lassila, Chairman called the meeting to order and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

Agenda: No conflicts with the agenda items and no changes to the agenda.

Consent Agenda: Minutes from February 25, 2026, were emailed out and financials as of March 18, 2026, were sent. Kurt Danison made a motion to approve the minutes as presented and the financials as of March 18, 2026, as presented. Jord Wilson seconded. Motion passed with no one opposed or abstained.

Roni Holder-Diefenbach reported that Lew Blakeney, long time SBDC counselor, has decided to retire from his part-time position with the Economic Alliance. Lew Blakeney has worked for over 25 years as the Economic Alliance's Certified Business Advisor under the SBDC program. His extensive experience shaped his approach as a CBA, where he provided hands-on guidance to entrepreneurs at every stage of business development. Throughout his tenure, Lew demonstrated an unwavering commitment to his clients. Lew has received the SBDC "Star Performer" Award in both 2004 and 2018, selected from among 63 SBDC networks across the country. As the SBDC advisor serving a rural region, Lew understood the unique challenges faced by business owners in remote communities. In addition to one-on-one advising, Lew has taught nearly two dozen 10-week "Indianpreneurship – A Native American Journey into Business" courses, along with numerous workshops on topics such as business planning and small-business financing. His expertise, patience, and passion for teaching have empowered hundreds of entrepreneurs across the region.

Lew's retirement marks the end of an extraordinary chapter for the Economic Alliance. His knowledge, dedication, and steady presence will be deeply missed by the many clients he has supported over the past 25+ years, as well as by the colleagues who have had the privilege of working alongside him. Roni Holder-Diefenbach presented Lew Blakeney with a Pendelton Blanket and thanked him for his long tenure with the Economic Alliance.

### **CEDS Update:**

Roni Holder-Diefenbach went through the Community Economic Development Strategies outline and gave an update on where we were in completing these goals.

#### 1. Increase opportunities for external investment in economic growth.

The Economic Alliance is getting ready for the next Prioritization Process, updating the application and setting dates. 2027 will be a funding year and the committee could recommend funding some projects with the County's Infrastructure Fund.

The properties list is continually being updated and some of the properties are being highlighted in the Economic Alliance monthly newsletters.

Currently the development of a Port District is on hold. Those interested in creating a Port District did discuss the creation of a non-taxing district.

Co-working space development – one space has been created in Omak, but we still have lots of vacant buildings that could be used.

Creative Arts Sub Committee was created.

#### 2. Enhance opportunities for visitors and residents to enjoy the County's recreational opportunities.

Roni Holder-Diefenbach spoke with the Okanogan County Tourism Council (OCTC) Board about enhancing the North County and South County regions to develop signature events to draw tourists to the area.

Continued to collaborate with the OCTC to help market recreational assets. Encouraged OCTC to keep the events page updated. Updated the Economic Alliance website to link to the OCTC's events page and enhance connection to tourism resources.

#### 3. Improve community resources & connectivity

The Economic Alliance needs to go back and update the presentation on Abandoned Buildings that Economic Alliance used when presenting to the cities about their empty buildings.

The city of Okanogan has implemented a business registration.

Omak has hired a firm to explore the type of housing that could be suitable for the North Omak Area. Also looked at land availability for industrial development in the cities and the county. Roni Holder-Diefenbach stated that there could be grants available from the state to provide infrastructure.

To help with the support for seasonal vending opportunities, the Economic Alliance has continued to set up a booth at some of the local Farmers Markets and distributed information about assistance that is available

#### 4. Enhance workforce development opportunities

Young professional networking – not done.

Development of Workforce Pipeline for health care and high school recruitment programs, continued working with health care facilities.

Collaborate with WVC-N to attract more health care – spoken with college about additional health care classes and students

#### **Motions**

North Valley #1 Vacant Position: Roni Holder-Diefenbach introduced Mr. Brent Timm and asked him to give us some information about himself. Brent Timm stated he was born and raised in Okanogan County and has a passion for the county. He is now the director of Transgo, the public transportation system in the county, and was formerly with HeadStart. He is part of the Tonasket Chamber and a Rotarian. Kurt Danison made a motion to seat Brent Timm to the vacant North County #1 position for the remainder of the current term (till 2028). Cal Goolsby seconded. Motion passed with no one opposed or abstained.

#### **Reports**

Executive Director Report: (see attachment #1) Roni Holder-Diefenbach reported on March activities. The NCW EDD has been officially dissolved. She recently attended the WEDA conference along with Mason Duke and Maria Lassila. They were able to do a lot of networking, and they attended a reception at the Governors Mansion. This month she has had several meetings with SBDC to discuss our contract. Both Mason Duke and Leonel Marcial should have their SBDC ABA certification done by the end of March. She was also able to complete her certification as a Crowdfund Better Certified Advisor. Roni Holder-Diefenbach also attended several County Commissioner's meetings to discuss the Fairgrounds and the Cannabis Study. She has also been completing the WEDFA grant request which is due next week.

Roni Holder-Diefenbach also reported that when she did the Economic Alliance 2026 budget, it was projected that medical insurance would be increased by about 18%. However, our renewal date in March shows a 58.9% increase. She moved the employee insurance coverage down one tier, which would lessen the increase.

Infrastructure Committee: The prioritization process will open on August 26, 2026, for funding for 2027.

Business Education/Outreach: Mason Duke reported that he held a computer class in Tonasket at the CCC on Cyber Security and was requested to do one at the Tonasket Senior Center also. He spent a week as a Business Advisor for the Okanogan/Omak Business Week, which went very well. The Start Simple Classes will continue starting April 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> at the WorkSource office.

Leonel Marcial reported that he is looking at workshops that would be in Spanish. He recently held a class on Pricing for Your Food Business, which was held at Twisp Works. He continues to work with Hispanic businesses and teaching them about cash flow and break-even points. He has also attended several Chamber meetings around the county (Brewster, Winthrop, Oroville) to inform them about the services at the Economic Alliance.

Breanna Sollender has been working on the newsletter, doing web site updates and making flyers for various workshops. She is still working on the Board member's Bios.

## **Discussion**

Board Member Recruitment: Roni Holder-Diefenbach reported that she has been in touch with Chris O'Neil, CEO of Tribal Fuels and Grocery Store, and he is still interested in the vacant At-Large position.

Port District: No updates.

Arts in Education and Career & Technical Education: Sarah Jo Lightner reported that the committee did have a meeting and reviewed the workplan and discussed recruiting others to be part of this committee. They discussed doing a county-wide audit on what our school districts have to offer. Their next meeting is scheduled for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of the month (April 16) at noon via Zoom. If anyone is interested in participating, please get in touch with her.

Broadband – Bead Funding: Next meeting is scheduled for tomorrow at 2:00. Conconully is getting homes connected. The Okanogan County PUD grant is being held up, and they might end up returning the grant.

## **Contract/Grant Updates 2026**

Still working on SBDC Contract for 2026. They have had lots of budget cuts, and we might share a part-time counselor with another SBDC. We should hear back in May or June on the WEDFA grant that is being submitted

## **Other Business/News/Member Updates**

Those in attendance provided updates about what is happening in their communities or from their organizations.

Meeting adjourned, 1:07 p.m.

**Next meeting is scheduled for April 22, at 11:00 a.m. vis Zoom.**

Respectfully submitted,  
Carolyn Davis

Roni Holder-Diefenbach Executive Director





## **ECONOMIC ALLIANCE Executive Director Report**

### **March 2026**

As I write this, I am looking out at the beautiful sunny sky. It seems like spring has finally started and we are all excited that it is here!

At our last board meeting I shared that Mason; Chair Maria and I had the opportunity to go to Olympia to attend the WEDA conference. It was a great event as usual, with building relationships, networking and learning about key items related to Economic Development in our state. We attended a reception held by WEDA at the Governors Mansion, and for the first time in many years one of our representatives attended. Rep Engell was there, and we made sure to introduce him to other Economic Developers that are within his district. He invited us to the Capital the next day as Maria had never been, and it was a good experience, we also had the opportunity to talk about issues that are important to all in Okanogan County. I will be inviting him and our other representatives to our June in-person meeting to speak, as well as hold a roundtable for those who have participated in our annual prioritization process to discuss their projects.

This month the team here at the Economic Alliance has been very busy, I have had several meetings with the SBDC to discuss our contract and services moving forward. Mason and Leonel should have their SBDC ABA certification done by the end of March. Which is exciting for them and for the Economic Alliance as this brings another level of expertise to them and adds credentials to their name! Speaking of certificates, I also completed the training and am now the first Economic Development Professional in Washington State to be fully credentialed as a Crowdfund Better Certified Advisor. Woo Hoo, I did it kicking and screaming, but I knew that it would be great to have this knowledge in our county, not only our small businesses, but our communities who have projects as well!

This month I have also attended several BOCC meetings, one to discuss the fairgrounds and future planning for funding for the north part of the facility to include the track and arena. The other three meetings were regarding the Cannabis study where the consultants met with the county to go over the draft plan. The BOCC also met with the PUD to discuss the energy impact that the industry has on the electrical infrastructure in the county and their current moratorium for new indoor grows. I am currently looking at state funding opportunities for infrastructure that assists utilities and or counties who have increase demand in the cannabis industry and who need to make significant upgrades to substations, transmission lines, etc. We know that federal funding is out do to cannabis not being legal at the federal level, but we might find state funding available.

I have also been working on the WEDFA grant that is due next week. We have added two partners to the application, Methow Arts Alliance and Business Impact NW. We are excited to partner with them and hopefully we are successful in our application.

Community Economic Revitalization Board  
Washington Economic Development Association

Partners for Rural Washington  
CCT& Okanogan County BAT

