

# *The Role of a Port Commissioner At Their Port*

## WPPA New Commissioner Seminar December 5, 2023

Kathy Pittis,  
Commissioner – Port of Anacortes

Kristine Meyer,  
Commissioner – Port of Whitman County

Frank Chmelik,  
WPPA General Counsel

# The Panel

Kathy Pittis, Commissioner Port of Anacortes  
Former Port staff member  
Commissioner 2018 to Present  
Past President, Washington Public Ports Association

Kristine Meyer, Commissioner Port of Whitman County  
Commissioner 2017 to present  
Past President, Washington Public Ports Association

Frank Chmelik  
Port District lawyer since 1987  
WPPA General Counsel – 2012 to Present

# The Central Thesis

- 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.
- Critical components of port success are (i) defining the lanes and (ii) staying in the lane.
- “Those who never change their minds, never change anything.”

# Define Terms

- “**Leadership**” - is the art of developing vision, direction and support of an organization and its members.
- “**Management**” - describes the science of systems, processes and controls to achieve an end state.
- “**Culture**” - is the common values, customs and social institutions of an organization.

# Governance vs. Management

- Balancing the fundamental role of the Board of Directors (Commission), the Chief Executive Officer (the Executive Director) and Staff is critical
  - Strategic vs. Tactical
  - “Why-What-How”
  - “30,000 feet vs. in the weeds”
  - “End State” - describes the specific situation at the successful completion of an operation or project

## Why Look at “Governance”?

- It is both “substance” and “culture”
- It is not intuitive
- Each Commissioner approaches the job from a different perspective
- There are no “commissioner qualifications”
- It makes the Commission and each of you more effective
- It helps avoid mistakes – taxpayers may not bail you out
- It makes everyone’s service much more rewarding
- It will yield future results

**Governance**  
**The Individual Commissioner**  
**and**  
**The Commission**

# Authority and Responsibility of Individual Commissioners

- Nada, nyet, nothing
- Only the Commission can grant authority
- Do not task staff – they do not work for you
- Expect the Executive Director to take responsibility for what “staff does or fails to do”
- Refrain from becoming involved in management – even if you are good at it
- Be careful about perception when
  - Speaking to other governments
  - Speaking to tenants
  - Speaking to civic groups
- Once an issue is decided, support the Commissions’ decision

# The Commissioners' Perspective

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

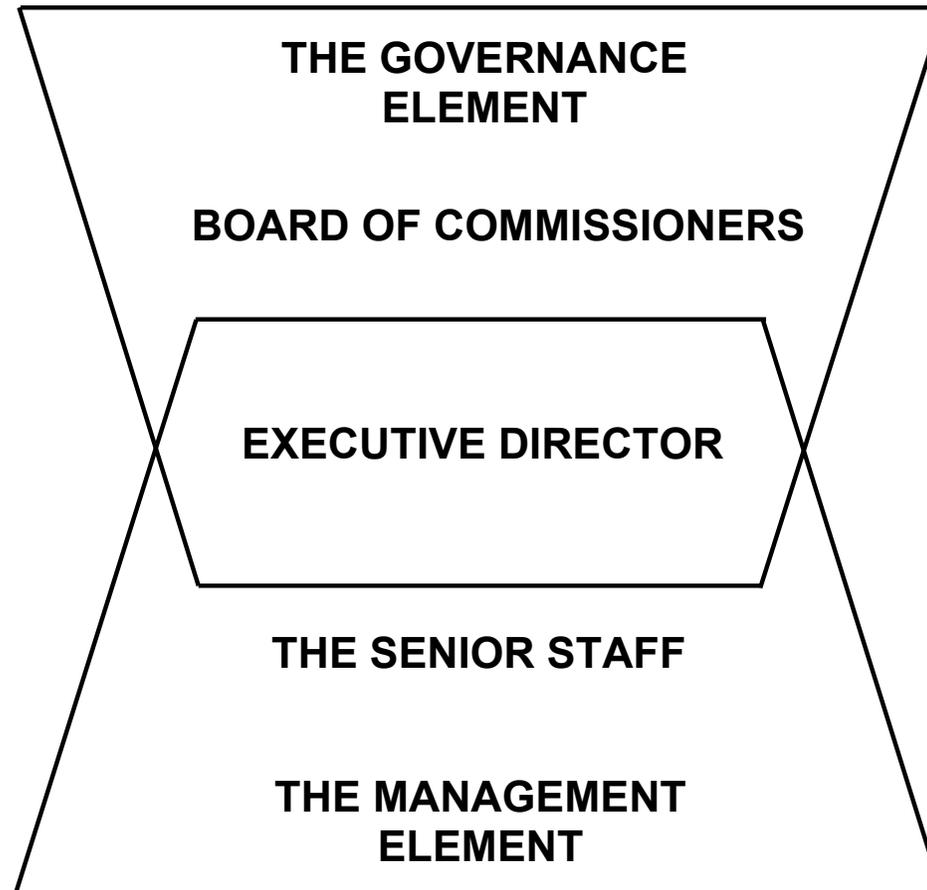
# The Commissioners' Perspective

- a. Involvement with the WPPA
- b. Involvement with the community
- c. Involvement with other government

# Commission Leadership Lane

- Governance is a lot harder than management – but it is what the Commissioner is elected to do
- Figure out why you are a Commissioner
- Set the culture - every human organization has one
- Be a leader – not a spectator or a critic
- Always seek consensus
- No decisions are worth “blowing up the Commission”
- You cannot always be right
- Look for opportunities to be persuaded
- Do no harm

# The Governance -Management Interface



The Commission  
As  
The “Public Body”

# The Commission

- Has the statutory authority to operate the port
- Commissioners can achieve amazing results when acting together as a Commission
- Disagreements on substance between Commissioners is healthy, needed and expected
- Decides, as a group, what to expect in voting
  - Consensus vs. Majority
- Sets the culture of the Commission and the entire Port
  - Avoid “Reaching” into staff
  - Avoid relitigating / not supporting past decisions

# All The Substance Starts With The Commission



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

**Parkinson's Law:** Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion

And the corollary for a Board or Commission...

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

– *C. Northcote Parkinson*

# The Commission – Vision and Strategy

- The Commission establishes the strategic vision
  - What does the port district and its citizens value most?
  - What is your vision? Where do you want to be in the next year, 5 years, 10 years, and 20 years?
  - What is the roadmap for achieving the Commission’s vision?
- Keystone documents
  - Comprehensive Scheme of Harbor Improvements
  - Capital Budget
  - Strategic Plan
- The Commission and Executive Director establish an annual “commission workplan”
- Consider an annual review of the Commission’s performance

# The Commission – Managing 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
      - Marina Rates
  - Leadership of the Executive Director
    - Imparting the vision
    - Seeking input

# The Commission – Inter-government Relations

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

# The Commission Lane – Efficient Commission Meetings

- The Commission must run efficient and productive commission meetings
  - Managing the agenda
  - Managing public input
  - Balancing tasks and strategy
  - Achieving a good and respectful relationship with the other commissioners

# Commission Decorum

- The Commission maintains its own decorum at its meetings
  - The disruptive citizen
  - The disruptive commissioner
- Commissioners' relationship with each other
  - Off the dais relationships
- Commissioners' relationship with executive director and staff
  - Public discourse

# Effective Commission Meetings

# Effective Commission Meetings

- Clarity about the Commissions primary functions
- Ease of agenda
  - Business vs. Work-Study
- A clear understanding of when Commission input is expected and received
- Staff preparation
- Commissioner preparation

# Effective Commission Meetings

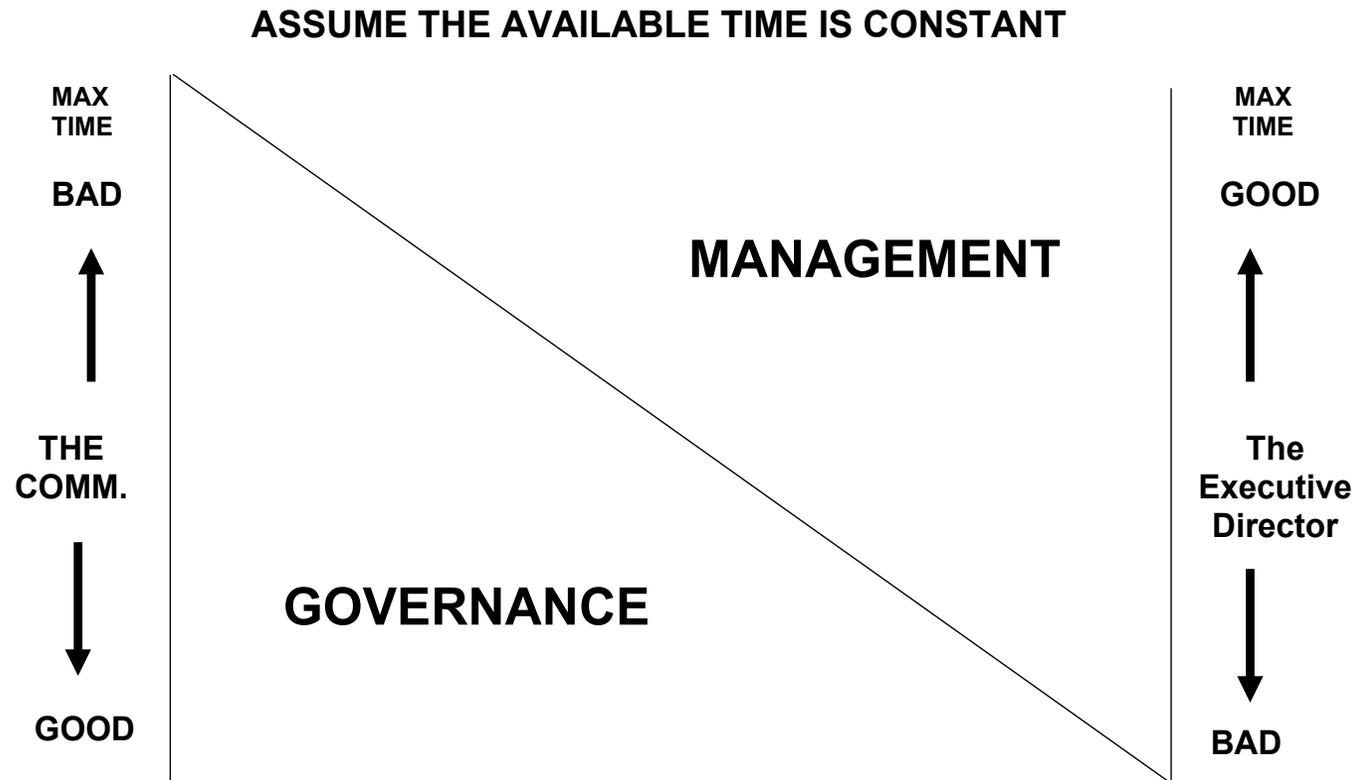
- Clear understanding of roles
  - Commission: Needs room to govern and would like to be kept “in the loop”
  - Executive Director: Needs room to manage
- Clear understanding on how a decision will be made
- A respectful Commission culture
  - Playing “Staff Jeopardy”
- A plan for contentious issues
- Respect for the public

# Managing the Executive Director

# The Commission Manages the Executive Director

- The Commission:
  - Thinks primarily about the larger, long-term strategic issues
  - Provides the overall direction
  - Wants to make the Port a success
  - Develops KPIs
- 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

# The Governance - Management Paradigm



# Commissioners Perspective on Hiring, Managing and Changing Executive Directors

- Hiring an Executive Director
  - Determine what skills your Port needs
  - Process vs. internal hiring
- What makes a successful executive director
- Executive director responsive to the Commission
- Performance reviews
- Changing Executive Directors

# The Commissioners and the Commission Support of the Organization

- The Commissioners purposeful set of the Commission culture
- The Commission build the team with the senior staff and employees – they are always listening
- The Commission sets clear pathways for control and information and stages of decisions
- Commissioners resist the temptation to become the direct pipeline for tenants, employees or other governments

# 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 in early and demand 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

# 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) advise to the Commission.

# 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.

# Budget Based Governance

# The Importance of Budget Based Governance

- Adopting a budget is the most important thing the Commission can do
- Only opportunity to make decisions in perspective
  - Staff prepares draft
  - Commission sets broad priorities

# How to Use a Budget

- Streamline meetings
  - “Is this in the budget?”
  - “Which line item is this coming from?”
  - “Are there any deviations from the budget?”
- Acts within the budget are good management
- Acts outside the budget require a solid explanation

# THANK YOU !

Kathy Pittis, Commissioner Port of Anacortes

(360) 420-4446

[Pittis@portofanacortes.com](mailto:Pittis@portofanacortes.com)

Kristine Meyer, Commissioner Port of Whitman County

(509) 553-1275

[kmeyer@portwhitman.com](mailto:kmeyer@portwhitman.com)

Frank Chmelik, WPPA General Counsel

(360)223-5633

[fchmelik@csdlaw.com](mailto:fchmelik@csdlaw.com)