Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission

TSCC Commissioner's
Retreat Minutes
Tuesday, July 7, 2026
12:00 p.m.

In Attendance: Chair Matt Donahue, Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore, Commissioners Burton, Kvarsten and Terry were present, as were Executive Director Allegra Willhite and Budget Analyst Brittanie Abayare

Executive Director Allegra Willhite called the meeting to order at 12:00 pm.

Call to Order and Farm Tour

The business meeting commenced at 12:00 pm following a pre-meeting tour of Headwaters Farm conducted with East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District staff.

Written Public Comment Review

The commission noted the receipt of written public comment submitted by a community member named Luke Davis. The comment was received following the recent Mt. Hood Community College budget hearing, with the commenter expressing concerns that inaccurate information or untruths had been shared by district staff during the session.

Executive Director Willhite communicated that she had responded to the commenter, explaining that the statutory jurisdiction of the commission focuses on budget law compliance rather than administrative management of organizations, but confirmed the correspondence would be entered into the public record and uploaded to the website. The commission discussed the nature of the comment and whether matters raised involved interpretation rather than direct misrepresentation.

All written public comment can be found on the Meeting Minutes page of the TSCC website.

TSCC's Objectives & Role

Executive Director Willhite reviewed the baseline objectives of the commission, emphasizing the statutory mandates governing budget reviews, formal certifications, and public hearings. Under statutory text, the commission is legally required to certify budgets by a majority vote of its members. The role of the commission is strictly advisory, a standard established after a 1930s lawsuit brought by the City of Portland.

Technical recommendations are issued when budget estimates contain numerical inaccuracies or lack plain language clarity, while formal objections are utilized if expenditures are not authorized by law. In instances where a district spends funds illegally outside of authorized budget limits due to willful or wanton neglect, the commission possesses the statutory power to certify the violation to the district attorney to seek recovery of the funds. The commission also maintains clear statutory authority to examine district management books, accounts, and internal systems, and can legally convene multiple entities to meet regarding a single topic. Executive Director Willhite provided the Commissioners a series of reference slides containing TSCC statutory guidelines and explained the full PowerPoint would be sent to the Commissioners following the meeting.

The commission also reviewed the newly published Frequently Asked Questions section on its public website. The page outlines the certification workflow and answers public inquiries regarding whether the commission can refuse to certify a budget. The page clarifies that certification is a statutory mandate and does not represent an endorsement or stamp of approval, providing a uniform public resource to replace individual email responses.

Budget Season Recap

The commission completed a review of the spring budget season metrics, noting the execution of 28 budget reviews, 3 tax levy reviews, 12 large district reviews, and 16 small district reviews, totaling 18 days of meetings over a three-month timeframe.

The commission operates by reviewing approved budgets because districts formally establish their property tax rates during the approval stage, whereas reviewing proposed budgets earlier in the calendar year would not give TSCC the opportunity to review approved tax rates. If TSCC were to start reviewing Proposed budgets instead, it would cause significant scheduling shifts for budget hearings and would likely require a multi-phased approach, reviewing first the Proposed budget and then also aspects of the Approved. The budget season concluded with all statutory deadlines met. Outcomes included one formal objection issued to Corbett School District due to an incorrect tax rate calculation and budgeting error, alongside six recommendations. The commission received seven instances of public comment, representing a decrease from 20 instances in the prior year but remaining notably higher than the historical trends of zero to four instances, reflecting broader trends across local government entities that are seeing more public engagement.

Staff highlighted the successful launch of an internal compliance tracking database that captures all errors including minor technical errors caught and corrected through direct interaction with district staff prior to formal certification. These minor touchpoints occurred with approximately half of all reviewed districts during the season,

demonstrating the preventative value of commission oversight before reports are finalized.

Roundtable Hearing Discussions

The commission reviewed follow-up materials arising from prior hearings. Staff compiled research regarding student and family demographics for the Multnomah County Preschool for All initiative, pointing commissioners toward an online county dashboard. Additionally, staff shared a response from the library district indicating plans to improve physical space during the summer, though no immediate partnerships with Preschool for All are active.

The commission discussed the recent TSCC hearings:

- **Prosper Portland and Metro:** The commission discussed the structured and scripted nature of presentations delivered by Metro and Prosper Portland and noted frustration with the sound quality. To improve communication, the commission approved plans to incorporate a higher frequency of unscripted follow-up questions that are not shared with districts in advance, balancing direct inquiry without creating adversarial dynamics.
- **Portland Public Schools:** The hearing was noted as less scripted than prior cycles, and the district staff panels managed technical inquiries effectively. The school board adoption hearing followed with a contentious public forum, passing on a 6 to 1 vote, with board members stating that difficult cuts were necessary to prevent escalating long-term fiscal deficits.
- **Mt. Hood Community College:** The subsequent board adoption meeting involved significant public contention and extensive public comment, ultimately passing on a narrow 3 to 2 vote among board members.
- **City of Portland:** The commission discussed the city's plan to introduce a supplemental budget in July to fund public safety and position restorations by utilizing contingency reserves. Staff confirmed that the Department of Revenue signed off on the legality of the process, though commission staff noted the mechanism establishes a concerning precedent by functionally extending the budget process even further. Under the supplemental ordinance process, the mayor will act as a tie-breaker, whereas regular budget committee regulations resulted in repeated 6 to 6 deadlocks that defeated proposed amendments.

The Commissioners discussed and shared observations regarding when to challenge evasive answers or overly scripted text. Staff reiterated that polite, respectful pushback is entirely appropriate during public hearings.

Timing of Tax Hearings

The commission discussed an ongoing public comment request to accelerate property tax reviews and hearings so that findings could be printed within the official voter pamphlet arguments ahead of the September 8 filing deadline. Statutory rules require taxing districts to notify the commission at least 30 days prior to filing, establishing an August 4 notification deadline and a September 3 measure filing deadline for the upcoming 2026 November election.

The commission determined that moving reviews forward into early September is unfeasible because ballot language is not legally finalized until September 3, small jurisdictions lack the administrative capacity to provide early data, and a compressed timeline would compromise the quality of commission reviews. Furthermore, because the commission maintains strict institutional neutrality and takes no position on active ballot measures, publishing findings within the pamphlet could lead to public misinterpretation. The commission confirmed it will maintain its established timeline of conducting tax hearings to coincide with the mailing of ballots.

Public Meetings Law and Serial Communication Constraints

The commission evaluated operational limits imposed by current public meetings law interpretations regarding serial communications, which prohibit more than two commissioners from adding preliminary notes or text into shared Google Docs ahead of a public session. A legislative effort to clarify these parameters failed to pass after journalistic organizations successfully lobbied the governor to exercise a veto. The commission discussed a summer research project to examine alternative communication methods and to coordinate with regional advisory groups, including the Association of Oregon Counties, League of Oregon Cities, Special Districts Association of Oregon, and Oregon School Boards Association, to support future legislative adjustments.

Summer/Fall Field Trip Options

The commission discussed organizing an additional field trip during August or September. The following prospective sites were reviewed: The Oregon Zoo, to evaluate capital assets and infrastructure; the Broadway Corridor site, focusing on urban renewal funding and adjacent affordable housing financing mechanisms; the Portland International Airport, to evaluate completed terminal renovations; a homeless services facility or deflection center; and the new East County library facility, highlighting its architecture and rooftop community area. Executive Director Willhite will contact the respective agencies to check scheduling availability.

TSCC Work Plan Updates

The commission reviewed FY 2025-26 items on the ongoing TSCC work plan:

- **Website Update and Relaunch:** Public engagement increased, with the site achieving top search visibility for regional taxing district inquiries.
- **Training Sessions:** Attendance at the annual training session dropped to approximately 30 participants compared to 50 in the prior year, a shift attributed to moving the block to an afternoon timeframe due to library operating hours.
- **Lunch and Learn Program:** The newly initiated speaker program proved highly successful, with the initial property tax session led by Chair Donahue.
- **Internal Leadership:** The commission noted that Chair Matt Donahue and Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore are willing to continue in their current leadership seats for the upcoming cycle, with formal officer selections scheduled for February. Long-term planning indicates next year will be Chair Donahue's final term, prompting a recruitment cycle in summer 2027 for a January 2028 transition.
- **Budget Manual Updates:** The comprehensive 100-page operational manual has not been updated since 2013 and remains formatted as a complex two-column document. The commission discussed transitioning away from a full manual revision, opting instead to develop targeted, visual, bite-sized digital training resources to match current user habits. Staff noted the active use of NotebookLM within their Google Suite environment to streamline minute preparation and internal text searches.

Legislative Ask

The commission discussed its long-term legislative request focused on structural fiscal sustainability. The current statutory growth cap limits commission budget expansion to 4% annually, creating an unsustainable deficit against personnel, PERS, and healthcare costs that have increased at an average annual rate of 7% to 9% over the past three years.

The commission approved expanding the legislative concept to incorporate broader budget law modernizations that provide operational relief to member districts, such as prohibitive newspaper publication requirements for smaller jurisdictions. Explored strategies include indexing the budget cap directly to the Consumer Price Index, aligning growth with actual employee wage scales, or lifting the baseline statutory funding threshold. Development and district surveys will be done by staff, as well as a work session in Fall 2026 with the TSCC Commissioners, to refine concepts. The plan is to prepare for the January 2029 long legislative session.

Fiscal Year 2027 Schedule Planning

The upcoming calendar will incorporate Portland Community College under its regular biennial review cycle, while it is the off year for Riverdale Fire. No districts are currently slated for ballot tax measures, though unexpected bond measures may materialize.

The commission discussed a possible fall Lunch and Learn session to target educational funding formulas and state allocations and a late winter session that will address PERS.

The upcoming meetings scheduled include an October session to vote on the finalized work plan and execute the legislative concept brainstorming session, a December session to review the five-year forecast and complete the Executive Director evaluation via a 360-degree review framework, and a February session to approve the budget and for spring budget season preparations.

Wrap Up & Other Business

Executive Director Willhite reviewed the most current budget data which indicates the commission is tracking roughly $49,000 under its approved internal budget and $75,000 under the maximum statutory legislative allowance. The books will close in mid-August, and the finalized year end actuals report will be presented in October.

Chair Donahue gave a Portland Arts Committee update. He discussed the arts access funding fee, noting that the fee was adjusted to annual inflation. The floor was increased to exempt individuals earning under $20,000 annually. Management has transitioned from the external Regional Arts and Culture Council to an internal City of Portland division. The tax currently yields $12 – 13 million in revenue. The local chamber of commerce threatened legal action contesting the council's authority to modify a ballot-passed measure without a direct vote.

There being no other business, the meeting was adjourned.