

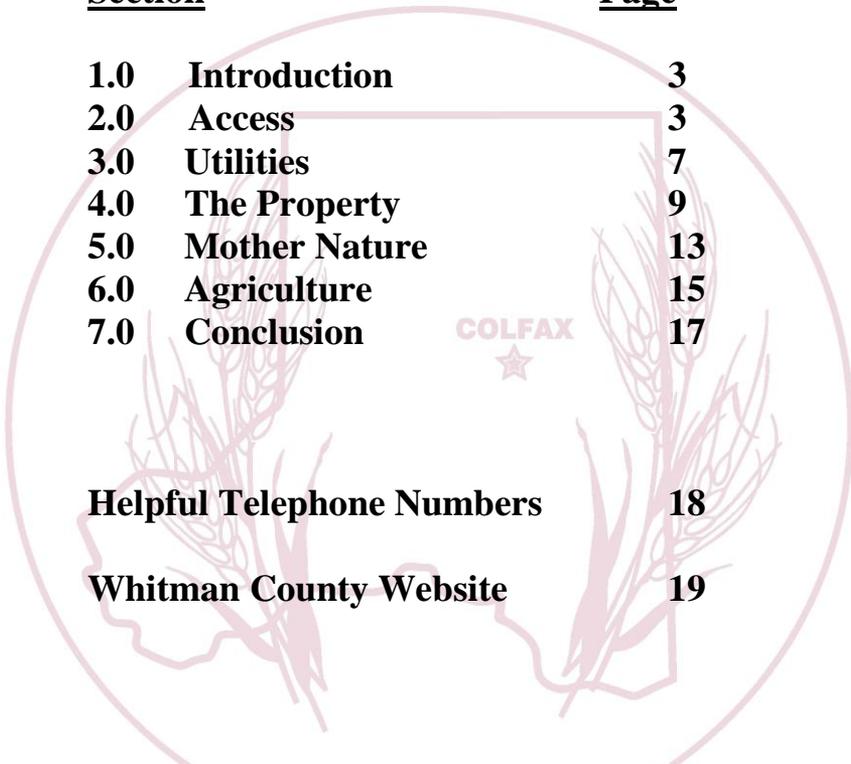
# **PONDERING THE PALOUSE?**



**What to Know Before You Move to  
Rural Whitman County.**

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# WELCOME TO WHITMAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The men and women who came to this part of the country during the United States' westward expansion were bound by an unwritten code of conduct. The values of integrity and self-reliance guided their decisions, actions, and interactions. Famous western writer Zane Grey first chronicled the *Code of the West*. In keeping with that same spirit, we offer this information to help citizens of Whitman County who wish to follow in the footsteps of those rugged individualists and live outside the metropolitan areas of Whitman County. The body of this document and most of the original wording was taken from a work by John Clarke, Commissioner of Larimer County, Colorado.

The following information is provided for prospective rural residents in the hopes that they may make informed decisions regarding their property purchases and living arrangements. Many of the residents of Whitman County love the rural lifestyle, but most would agree that it sometimes presents greater challenges and less convenience than living in the city. Although this document attempts to educate people about the realities of living in the country, it is probably not an exhaustive list. A little homework and a few phone calls can greatly improve a person's understanding of the realities of living in the country.

## 2.0 ACCESS TO YOUR PROPERTY

The fact that you can drive to your property today does not necessarily guarantee that you, your guests, or emergency service vehicles can achieve that same level of access at all times. Please consider:

- **Emergency Response:** Response times for the sheriff, fire suppression, medical care, etc., cannot be guaranteed in rural areas. To make this worse, access and travel often become slower during some extreme winter conditions.
- **Legal Access Issues:** There can be problems with the legal aspects of access to a property, especially if you gain access across property belonging to others via privately owned easements or access roads. It is wise to obtain legal advice or advice from a professional land surveyor, and understand the easements that may be necessary when these types of questions arise before purchasing property.
- **Private Roads:** You may experience problems with the maintenance and cost of maintaining your road. Whitman County maintains just under 2000 miles of public roads, but many rural properties are served by privately owned access roads, that are maintained by homeowners' associations, private parties, or other landowners. There are some County roads not maintained by the County year round such as seasonal dirt roads. Make sure you know what type of maintenance to expect and who will provide that maintenance.
- **Weather and Disasters:** Natural weather related conditions and disasters, especially floods, can render roads impassable. Whitman County strives to repair and maintain County roads. Private roads, including private subdivision roads, are the responsibility of the landowners. A dry creek bed can become a raging torrent and wash out roads, bridges, and culverts in a matter of hours. Private roads and/or bridge repairs and/or reconstruction after floods can be very expensive and must be borne by the owner(s). School buses, delivery and other types of vehicles may occasionally be limited to emergency routes only.
- **Winter Snow and Ice:** Winter snow and ice control on County Roads are handled according to specific priorities. First Priority are paved roads; second priority are the remaining school, bus and mail

routes; third priority are other access routes. Priority two and three roads (gravel), will not be plowed unless there is at least six inches of accumulated snow or drifting conditions. All paved surface roads will be opened to provide county-wide mobility as work shifts or snow weather conditions permit. Weekend snow removal will only occur at the discretion of road superintendents. Whitman County does not close individual roads except under limited circumstances. These priorities also apply to maintenance of roads, such as grading.

- **Dust Control:** Unpaved roads generate dust, especially during harvest when grain trucks are prevalent. Whitman County does not treat roads to suppress dust. If you reside near an unpaved road, you may want to have the road treated for dust suppression by one of the contractors authorized by the County. See the Public Works Department for further information.
- **Road Improvements:** If your road is unpaved, it is highly unlikely that Whitman County will ever have the resources to improve or pave it. Check directly with the County Public Works Department when the seller of any property indicates that any unpaved road will be improved or paved in the future.
- **Road Grading:** Unpaved roads are not always smooth and are often rough when they are dry and muddy during the spring thaw. You may experience an increase in vehicle maintenance costs when you regularly travel on rural, unpaved County roads. Potholes and washboards are usually created by traffic traveling too fast on unpaved roads.
- **Flying Rock:** Whitman County has over 1,100 miles of gravel roads. Driving on gravel roads is quite different from paved roads and can be dangerous if drivers do not drive slowly and cautiously. There are hazards such as flying rock, which can damage windshields, paint and tires. Whitman County accepts no responsibility for damage due to flying rock from the roadway. That must be borne by the individual or his/her insurer.

- **Slow Moving Equipment:** Most County roads are haul routes from farm to market. Large and often slow farm equipment use County roads to move from farm area to farm area. Be sure to watch carefully during farm work seasons especially on hilltops and corners.
- **School Bus Routes:** School buses travel only on maintained County roads designated as school bus routes by the school district. If you live on a private road, you may need to drive your children to the nearest County road or bus stop so they can get to school or deliver them yourselves. Buses travel on so many miles of roads that it is impossible to assign a higher priority to one school bus route over another. Be sure to check with your local school district and County Road Department. School routes occasionally have local media, i.e. TV, radio, etc. reporting on conditions and emergency situations.
- **Deliveries:** Mail Delivery will be based upon the location of your house relative to established delivery routes. Ask the appropriate postmaster to describe the system for your area. Newspaper delivery is not always available to rural areas. Check with the newspaper of your choice before assuming you can get delivery. Standard parcel and overnight package delivery can be a problem for those who live in the country. You may want to confirm your delivery status with the individual service providers.
- **Property Taxes:** Although rural property owners pay property taxes to the County, the amount of tax collected does not nearly cover the cost of the services provided to rural residents. In general, those living in the metropolitan areas of the state subsidize the lifestyle of those who live in rural areas by making up the shortfall between the cost of services and the revenues received from rural dwellers.

### 3.0 UTILITY SERVICES

Water, sewer, electrical, telephone, cell phone, internet and other services may be unavailable, or may not operate at urban standards. Repairs can often take much longer than in towns and cities.

- **Community Sewer Systems:** A community sewer system is generally not available to individual properties. It may be expensive to maintain the septic system serving your property. Be sure and consult a licensed contractor or service should you have concerns before purchasing.
- **On-Site Septic Sewer Systems:** If sewer service is not available, as is often the case in rural areas, you will need to use an approved on-site septic system or other treatment process. The type of soil you have available for a drain field will be very important in determining the cost and function of your system. Have the system or soil checked. The Environmental Health Division of the Whitman County Health Department is available for consultation concerning state and local requirements.
- **Septic Tanks:** Septic tanks should be pumped every three to five years to prevent sludge from entering the drain field and clogging the soil pores. This must be done by a septic tank cleaning firm permitted by the County Health Department. Some older rural residences have antiquated sewage disposal systems that discharge sewage directly on the ground surface or in the streams and ditches. This creates a public health hazard that is in violation of Washington State Law. Correction is mandatory but not always possible due to lack of a suitable area for a proper drain field. More expensive solutions may be required such as the need to pump effluent to a nearby hillside or may require an easement on neighboring land. When considering a rural residence, it is imperative to have the on-site sewage system evaluated by the Environmental Health Division of the County Health Department before purchasing.

- **Telecommunications:** If you require more than one private telephone line or telecommunication services, you may need to check with local providers to see what can be done to provide for your needs, and ultimately help you make a decision. Cellular telephones often do not work in remote areas of the County.
- **Water:** If you have access to a supply of treated, domestic water you should check with the provider regarding fees. If you do not have access to a supply of treated domestic water you will have to provide an alternate supply. The most common source of water in rural areas is private wells. The Washington State Department of Ecology regulates private wells. Please check with the local health department for guidance.
- **Electric Service:** Electric service is available in most areas of Whitman County. For new structures it is important to contact the serving electric utility to determine the route of the electric lines necessary and any associated costs to provide this service to your needs. It may be necessary to cross property owned by others in order to extend electric service to your property in the most cost efficient manner. Proper easements from you and your neighbors will need to be acquired to allow lines to serve your property. If you have special power requirements, check with the electric utility to determine what level of service can be provided to your property.

If you are purchasing land with the plan to build at a future date, there is a possibility that current electric lines (and other utilities) may not be large enough to accommodate you should others connect before the time you intend to build.

The cost of electric service is usually divided into a one time fee to hook up to the system and a monthly charge for energy consumed. It is important to know both costs before making a decision to purchase a specific piece of property.

- **Power Outages:** Breaks in electric service occur in outlying areas with more frequency than in more developed areas. Among other

things, a loss of electric power can interrupt your supply of water from a well which may be critical in the event of fire. A back-up source of power is recommended. Long term interruptions in power may cause you to lose the food in your freezer or refrigerator and may cause problems with computers as well. If you live in the country, it is important to be able to live a week or longer in severe cold with limited or no utilities.

- **Solid Waste (garbage) Removal:** Garbage service is available everywhere in Whitman County, but removal is often more expensive in rural areas than in metropolitan areas. Burning trash with the exception of natural plant materials (branches, leaves) is strictly prohibited in Whitman County. Recycling is encouraged but you must deliver the materials to a recycling center yourself. Call the Whitman County Solid Waste Recycling Department for further information.
- **Animal Control:** Animal control services are not available in the County. Neighboring dog complaints must be handled between neighbors.

#### **4.0 THE PROPERTY**

Many issues can affect your property. It is important to research these items before purchasing land.

- **Permits and Approvals:** Review for compliance with Zoning and Critical Areas Ordinance. Construction of dwellings and most buildings in Whitman County require County-issued building permits and inspections prior to use or occupancy. The permitting process helps assure you that your proposed project is in conformance with applicable state construction codes, and that it is consistent with other requirements regulating property divisions and uses. Such requirements include setbacks, minimum frontage, potable water supply, and sewage disposal systems. Before commencing construction, be sure you have checked to see if you

need permits for impacts, flood plains, wetlands and other activities that may require a permit.

Even though you have a legal description of your property, unless the land has been surveyed and pins (corner markers) placed by a licensed surveyor, you cannot assume that the legal description is accurate and that the assumed or indicated boundaries are correct.

- **Building Lots:** If you plan to build, it is prudent to check out construction access. Not all lots are buildable. The Whitman County Assessor shows many parcels that are separate for the purpose of taxation but are not legal lots in the sense that a building permit can be issued. You should check with the Whitman County Planning Division of the Public Works Department to verify that a piece of land is suitable for building before purchasing with that intent.
- **Easements:** Your property may contain existing easements that may require you to allow construction of roads, power lines, water lines, sewer lines, etc., across your land. Check these issues carefully as you will have very little recourse should that be necessary.
- **Mineral Rights:** Some property owners do not own the mineral rights under their property. Owners of mineral rights have the ability to change the surface characteristics in order to extract their minerals. It is very important to know what minerals may be located under the land and who owns them. Much of the rural land in Whitman County can be used for mining, mostly to extract rock for gravel. The mining is subject to current land use zoning standards. Be aware that adjacent mining uses can expand and cause impacts of which you may not have been aware.
- **Fences:** Fences that separate properties are often misaligned with the property lines over the years. A survey of the land is the only way to confirm the location of your property lines. Whitman

County does not verify the location of property lines or become involved in property line disputes should they arise.

- **Subdivisions:** Subdivisions may have covenants that limit or deny the use of certain property elements. It is important to obtain a copy of any covenants (or confirm that there are none) and make sure that you can live with those pre-existing rules should they be encountered. Whitman County does not become involved in the enforcement of covenants.
- **Homeowners' Associations:** Neighbor agreements often are created to take care of common elements such as roads, water systems, open spaces, etc. A dysfunctional homeowners' association or poor covenants can cause problems for you and even result in expensive litigation. Be sure you are aware of any such agreements before purchasing.

**Dues** are almost always a requirement of a homeowners association. The by-laws of the homeowners' association will tell you how the organization operates and how the dues are set. This is strictly between the owner and the association.

- **Stormwater** often flows through low areas at some time or another in the Palouse. If you build in low areas, you may experience water damage. It is not legal to fill designated flood plain or wetland areas without an engineering and wetland report. Doing so may lead to unintentional consequences and could lead to costly civil actions in court. Be sure to contact the Whitman County Planning Office before changing any land formations in a possible wetland or flood hazard area.
- **Undeveloped Property:** Surrounding properties may not remain as they are today. You can check with the Whitman County Building and Planning Division of Public Works to find out what the Comprehensive Plan designation for the area is, how neighboring properties are currently zoned, and what future developments may

be in the planning stages. This will help you determine what can be expected in your area in the future.

- **Water Rights:** Water rights that come with the property may not give you the right to use the water from any streams or other sources crossing your land without coordinating with the water district, a neighbor who also uses the water, or the Department of Health and Department of Ecology. Other users may have senior rights to the water that may limit your use or require you to pay for the over-sizing or other improvements to the source. It is important to make sure that any water rights you purchase with the land will provide enough water in the future to maintain fruit trees, pastures, gardens, livestock, etc. which you intend to supply from water rights.

The water flowing in creeks or streams may belong to someone else. You cannot assume that because the water flows across your property that it is yours and you can use it as you want.

- **Streams:** Flowing water or even standing water can be a hazard, especially to young children or animals. Before you decide to locate your home near perennial or intermittent streams, consider the potential effects it may have.
- **Shoreline Ordinance:** Many creeks, streams, and rivers are subject to either the Whitman County Shoreline Ordinance and/or the Whitman County Critical Areas Ordinances governing wetlands and habitats. These regulations establish setbacks and buffer zones adjacent to various bodies of water. Natural vegetation can only be disturbed in these areas with an accepted wetland mitigation plan drawn up by a qualified wetland specialist. If you are contemplating any development on property near water, marsh or other designated wet areas, be sure to check with Whitman County Planning Division before commencing any work. These areas can often look dry during certain times of the year so be sure to inquire before working in any areas of possible wetland significance.

## 5.0 MOTHER NATURE

Residents of the county can experience problems when the elements and environment turn unfriendly. Here are some thoughts for you to consider:

- **Rural Fires:** The physical characteristics of your property can be positive and negative. Trees are a wonderful environmental amenity, but can be detrimental should a fire occur. Homes built in timbered areas can face the very real potential of being involved with rural land fires. Determine which Fire District services your area and contact them to understand what you need to know in the event of a rural fire.

Homes and buildings built in grasslands or near grain fields can also be threatened by grass, grain, or stubble field fires. Here are a few simple things a property owner can do to reduce the danger:

- **Clear land around the house** of excess trees and ground vegetation; a minimum 50 to 100 feet of clear area or "defensible space" around structures, consisting of maintained and watered lawn, pruned shrubs and trees can help mitigate the spread of rural land fires to buildings.
- **Replace combustible roofs** (wood shingles) and other building materials with non-combustibles; such as composite, tile or cement and store combustible materials such as firewood away from your house.
- **Maintain adequate access roads** and driveways and remove overgrowth and flammable vegetation immediately adjacent to the traveled roadway.
- **Have your address posted and visible** at the intersection of your driveway and the County road.
- **Maintain a reliable water supply.**
- **Develop a fire safety plan** for your home and your family.
- Respect the danger of fire in rural land areas by learning more about rural land fires and **BE PREPARED**. If you start a rural land fire, you may be responsible for paying for the cost of extinguishing that fire. For further information on fire safety, you can contact the

Public Works Department, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources or your local Fire District.

- **Slopes:** The many steep slopes of the county can slide or fail in unusually wet weather. Be sure to appreciate the damage this could cause in relationship to your house or belongings.
- **North Facing Slopes:** Northern slopes and canyons are rarely exposed to direct sunlight in the winter. Snow can accumulate and not melt throughout the winter on northern exposures.
- **Topography:** The topography of the land will dictate where water will go in the case of heavy precipitation. Pay close attention to these areas in order to determine how water will flow on the land and plan your improvements accordingly. Occasional flash floods may occur, especially during the summer months, and can turn a dry gully into a river. It is wise to consider this possibility when building. You need to ask if your property is in a flood zone or has experienced any flash flooding in the past. Homes and outbuildings should be sited above the flooded areas. The County Zoning Ordinance, administered by the Planning Office regulates construction in areas designated on the Flood Insurance Rate Maps but other areas may be prone to water damage.
- **Spring run-off:** Snowmelt can cause small creeks to flood, and occur anytime from December through April. The County does not provide sand, sandbags, equipment, or people to protect private property from flooding. This is the property owner's responsibility.
- **Nature:** Nature can provide you with some wonderful neighbors. Many, such as deer and eagles, are positive additions to the environment. However, even "harmless" animals like deer can cross the road unexpectedly and cause traffic accidents. Deer can decimate vegetation and gardens as well. Rural development often encroaches on the traditional habitat of coyotes, bobcats, cougar, bears, rattlesnakes, raccoons, skunks, porcupines, mice, ticks and other animals that can be a nuisance or a possible danger to you,

your family or pets. You need to know how to deal with them safely and effectively. In general, it is best to enjoy wildlife from a distance. Let the animals be themselves. The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Whitman County Health Department are two good resources for information should you have questions. They have many free publications to help educate you about rural living.

- **Hunting:** Many areas in the County are open for seasonal hunting. Hunting, both bird and game while providing recreational opportunities, is also a tool for managing wildlife populations. While most hunters respect private property, some may trespass, litter or discharge weapons illegally. Contact the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife for information concerning both your property rights and the rights of hunters.

## 6.0 AGRICULTURE

Whitman County is largely an agricultural area. Much of the rural land is actively used for grain crops. Owning rural land implies that you will know how to care for it, and respect the rights of agricultural producers on their property. Here are a few things you need to know.

- **Farmers Work Schedules:** Farmers often work around the clock, especially during spring planting, fall planting, and summer harvest.
- **Spray Planes:** Low-flying agricultural spray planes may fly overhead during irregular hours. It is best to keep a buffer zone between you and the adjacent agricultural ground. Buffer zones should be compatible with farming and agricultural operation and not harmed by regularly used “ag” chemicals.
- **Dust:** Land preparation and other operations often cause dust, especially during windy and dry weather. This can be a health issue

for some as well as a nuisance in keeping your home and belongings free of dust.

- **Field Burning:** Farmers occasionally burn their fields and ditches to keep them clean of debris, weeds and other obstructions. This burning creates smoke that you may find objectionable both physically and visually.
- **Chemicals:** Chemicals (mainly fertilizers and herbicides) are often used in growing local crops. Some people can be very sensitive to these substances. Farmers are typically very careful in application. Airplanes that fly early in the morning apply many of these chemicals.
- **Livestock:** While Whitman County is primarily an agricultural County a great number of livestock animals such as hogs, sheep and cattle are raised. Sounds and smells accompany these animals.
- **Agricultural Liability:** Agriculture is an important business in Whitman County. If you choose to live among the farms and ranches of our rural countryside, do not expect County government to intervene in the normal day-to-day operations of your agribusiness neighbors. In fact, Washington State protects farmers and ranchers from nuisance and liability lawsuits, which allows them to continue producing food, without the fear of unfounded lawsuits.
- **Open Range Laws:** Washington State has a **closed range law except** for specific roads. This means that your neighbor's cattle, sheep or other livestock should not be on your property. It is the responsibility of the rancher or farmer to keep his/her livestock off your property except for specified open areas.
- **Animals** such as bulls, stallions, pigs, and rams can be dangerous. Children need to know it is not safe to enter pens or cross fences where animals are kept.

- **Noxious Weeds:** Before buying land, you should know landowners are responsible to control noxious weeds on their property. The Whitman County Weed Control Board has the authority to assess fines if needed. A list and description of classified noxious weeds is available from the Whitman County Weed Control Board. Should you have property with noxious weeds that are unattended, you may be contacted by our Weed Control Department to deal with them or be subject to fine.
- **Dust Storms:** Much of Whitman County receives around 15-20 inches (38 cm) of precipitation per year. As a result, some areas can have a problem with dust storms usually coming from the dry western regions of Central Washington. The Washington State Extension Office can help you understand what effects it may have on you and your property.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION:

We have offered these comments in the sincere hope that it can help you prepare for and enjoy your decision to reside in the country. You may encounter other issues we have overlooked. We encourage you to be vigilant to explore and examine those things that could cause your new home to be less than you expect. Please feel free to contact Whitman County Government with any concerns or questions about living in rural Whitman County. We have provided a list of helpful phone numbers below. Also be sure to visit our website at [www.whitmancounty.org](http://www.whitmancounty.org).

**Helpful Whitman County Phone Numbers: (509)**

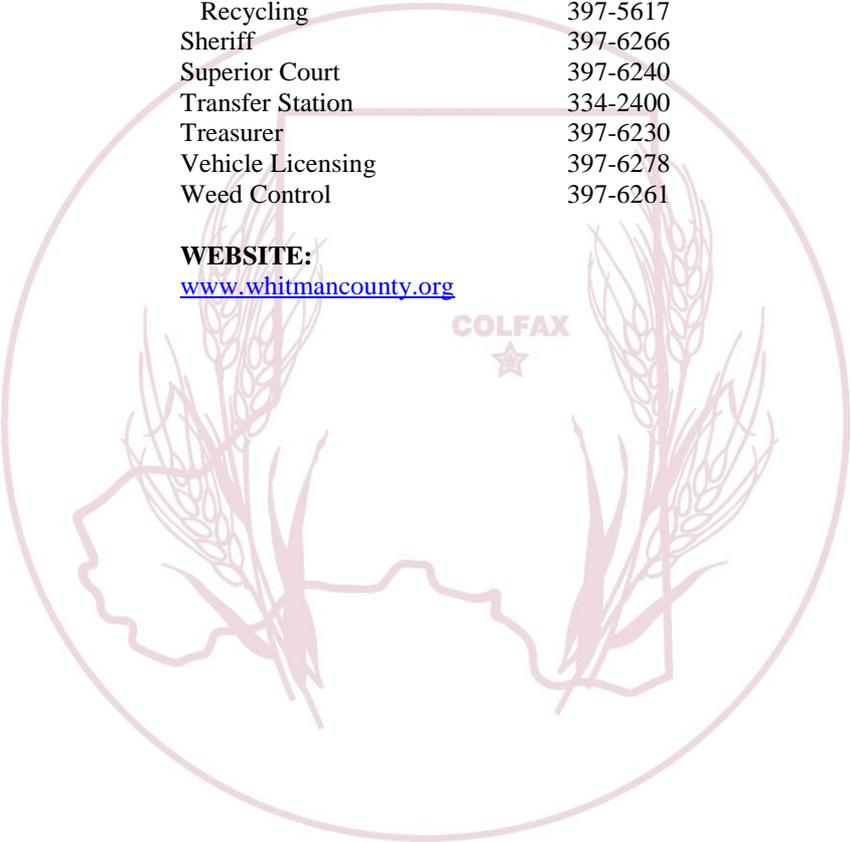


Administrative Services	397-6200
Assessor	397-6220
Auditor	397-6270
Elections	397-6353
Legal Filing	ext. 271
Building Department	397-6356
Clerk of Superior Court	397-6240
Commissioners	397-6200
Cooperative Extension, WSU	397-6290
Coroner-Tekoa	284-2423
Crime Victims	397-6250
Developmental Services-Colfax	397-6238
Developmental Services-Pullman	332-6561
District Court	397-6260
District Court-Pullman	332-2065
Environmental Health	397-6316
Facilities Management	397-6263
Hazardous Waste Facility	334-2400
Human Resources	397-6205
Information Services	397-6228
Juvenile Services	397-6246
Library	397-4366
Noxious Weed Control	397-6261
Palouse Empire Fair	397-6263
Parks & Recreation	397-6238
Planning & Zoning	397-6212
Probation Office	397-6265
Prosecutor	397-6250
Public Health	397-6280
Public Works/Engineering	397-4622
Public Works/Shops	
Automotive	397-2978
Bridge	397-2489
Colfax Shop	397-4733
Colton Shop	229-3427

Fleet Operations	397-4307
Lacrosse Shop	549-3946
Oakesdale Shop	285-4301
Palouse Shop	878-1451
Pullman Shop	332-2328
St. John Shop	648-3946
Sign Shop	397-3615
Recycling	397-5617
Sheriff	397-6266
Superior Court	397-6240
Transfer Station	334-2400
Treasurer	397-6230
Vehicle Licensing	397-6278
Weed Control	397-6261

**WEBSITE:**

[www.whitmancounty.org](http://www.whitmancounty.org)





“Photo Credit: Norm Willson, Shields Road”