

Port appoints Paul Gerola as interim director

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The Port of Walla Walla's longtime economic development director will take the administrative helm of the agency during a search for a new executive director.

Paul Gerola was unanimously appointed by the three Port commissioners Thursday to serve as interim director until a new one is hired to succeed Jim Kuntz.

The commission meeting was Kuntz's last — believed to be his 312th over the last 26-plus years — before his departure at the end of today.

Kuntz has said he's been in negotiations on a new executive director position at an economic development agency in a larger Washington county. His farewell meeting offered no other details on his next step.

Two representatives of engineering firm Anderson Perry attended the meeting to present Kuntz with a photo collage of some of the major projects that have been a hallmark of the Port's work during Kuntz's tenure.

"Jim, you're leaving some long shadows not only for Paul, but also for whoever replaces you," Commissioner Mike Fredrickson said.

On his watch, the Port has laid the foundation for a Burbank Business Park that offers the community a needed clean water system and now a sewer system; the innovation of Railex and its sister wine warehouse; the opening of private label juice manufacturer Cott; the retention of Walla Walla's veterans health care facility and jobs at the Washington State Penitentiary; and funding for and construction of the widening of U.S. Highway 12 between Walla Walla and the Tri-Cities.

"It's been a good run," Kuntz said. "I'll look back very fondly on the 26-plus years here."

One change in which he's particularly proud is the burgeoning business culture at the Airport District. Seventy-eight businesses now operate in and around the airport, he marveled.

"When a lot of us got here it was the last place any business wanted to lease," he said.

But the work on the properties, recruitment of startups and an environment of entrepreneurship is the perfect example of how the Port can foster economic development.

“I think helping small businesses prosper is something the Port needs to continue to focus on.”

Kuntz’s salary at the Port is \$157,620, plus a deferred compensation match in his retirement plan.

While Gerola is at the helm, his monthly salary will increase from \$8,555.50 to \$12,000. It will return to the smaller figure when a new executive director is on board, likely in June.

In his regular role as economic development director, a position he’s held nearly 20 years, Gerola is responsible for implementing the economic development plan for the Valley. The 2016 plan has been drafted and presented to participants in the Economic Development Advisory Commission, which will meet next week.

The Port has contracted with Northwest firm Prothman to lead the search for the Port’s full-time executive director. A request for applicants is expected to be issued in the next couple of weeks.