

Meeting Minutes – Starke County Plan Commission

Date: September 10, 2025

Location: County Government (with Zoom access)

Time: 5:30 p.m.

Attendee List

- Mark – Present
- Howard – Present
- Mike – Present
- Roberta – Present
- Gwen – Absent
- Lydia – Absent
- Dale – Present
- Amber – Present
- Robbie – Present
- Eugene – Present

Agenda Overview

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance
2. Roll Call
3. Approval of Minutes (July 9, August 13)
4. Permit Reports and Inspections
5. Code Enforcement Updates
6. Permit Fees Review (2016 schedule update discussion)
7. Certified Letters for Violations (short-term rental, unsafe structure, covenants issue)
8. Solar Ordinance and Public Letter (John Wickman)
9. Carbon Capture and Data Centers (moratorium discussion)
10. New Business (motions regarding IC Code, building commissioner candidates, utility contractor concerns, landscaping issues)
11. Public Comments
12. Adjournment

Approval of Minutes

- July 9, 2025 minutes were tabled due to recording issues.
 - Motion by: Roberta 2nd Dale - Approved

- August 13, 2025 minutes approved unanimously.
 - Motion by :Roberta 2nd: Dale - Approved

Permits and Inspections

- July 2025: 62 inspections completed, 80 permits issued.
- August 2025: 70 inspections, 67 permits issued.
- Discussion: Contractor registrations should be reported separately from permits to avoid skewing numbers.
- Fees collected in August: **\$8,878**.
- Plan to track code violations and associated fines beginning September.
- Amber presented permit tracking and reports via **iWorQ software**; members praised new data transparency.

Inspector's Report (Eugene)

- Contractors increasingly compliant; red tag enforcement effective.
- Only two major violations unresolved, with fines imposed.
- Overall sentiment in field: positive community relationships, increased awareness of compliance.

Code Enforcement

- Over **\$10,000 in fines** pending from unclosed cases, including abandoned structures.
- Clarification that county currently enforces code based on complaints received, not proactive patrol.
- Staff working with attorney to ensure proper certified letters and liens where applicable.
- Noted three properties with multiple complaints requiring further board review.

Permit Fee Review

- Current fee schedule unchanged since 2016.
- Compared with surrounding counties (Marshall, Pulaski, LaPorte):
 - Starke County: \$0.20 per sq. ft.
 - LaPorte: \$0.43–0.50 per sq. ft.
- Board agreed to review fee structure at next meeting (October 8, 2025), allowing ~20 minutes for discussion.

Certified Letters of Violation

1. **Short-term rental (Copper Top Rentals):** Unauthorized rental property operating without permits. Board approved motion to send certified letter drafted with attorney assistance.
 1. Motioned by Roberta, 2nd by Howard
2. **Unsafe structure (300 East):** Burned residential dwelling. Certified letter with fees sent September 10, 2025.

3. **White Pines Meadow subdivision:** Violation of subdivision covenants (commercial activity). Board confirmed county cannot enforce private covenants; issue must be resolved among homeowners. Motion passed to notify neighbor accordingly.
 1. Motioned by Mike, 2nd by Roberta

Solar Ordinance

- Letter read into record from John Wikman, supporting Doral/Mammoth Solar projects.
- Board agreed to collect bullet points from members by Friday, Sept. 12, 2025 and forward to attorney Nathan for drafting a base ordinance. Motion carried.
 - Motioned by Roberta, 2nd by Howard

Carbon Capture and Data Centers

- Concern raised about lack of ordinances for carbon capture projects and data centers (noted high water usage).
- Motion passed (4–1) to propose a **moratorium** on both until research and ordinances are developed. Attorney to be consulted immediately on process.
 - Motioned by Howard, 2nd by Roberta

New Business

- Motion passed to rescind a prior motion under **IC 36-1-4-14** (Sept. 3 meeting).
 - Motioned by Roberta, 2nd by Mark
- Motion passed to **reopen evaluation of candidates** for Building Commissioner position.
 - Motioned by Roberta, 2nd by Dale
- Concerns raised about utility contractors (fiber optic, phone lines) leaving wires exposed across yards. Motion passed to have office draft letters to utility companies addressing safety and registration requirements.
 - Motion by Mark, 2nd by Howard
- Landscaping issues discussed: boulders and heavy equipment damaging roads; confirmed setbacks apply and county ordinances limit roadway encroachment. Future coordination with Highway Department and attorney planned.

Public Comments

- Support expressed for solar development by John Wickman's family.
- Citizen emphasized property owner rights regarding land use.
- Questions raised about solar ordinance process and role of attorney.

Adjournment

- Next regular meeting scheduled for **October 8, 2025 at 5:30 p.m.**
- Meeting adjourned by motion and second, passed unanimously.

Decisions Made

1. Approved August 13 minutes; July 9 minutes tabled.
2. Adopted motion to track permit fees and code violations more thoroughly.
3. Authorized certified letters for Copper Top Rentals and unsafe dwelling on 300 East.
4. Confirmed White Pines Meadow covenant enforcement is a homeowner issue.
5. Established deadline for solar ordinance input; attorney drafting authorized.
6. Approved moratorium on carbon capture and data centers (pending attorney guidance).
7. Rescinded prior motion under IC 36-1-4-14.
8. Reopened Building Commissioner candidate evaluations.
9. Directed staff to draft letters to utility companies about safety/contractor issues.

Action Items

1. **Prepare variance decision letters and certified letters** (short-term rental, unsafe dwelling).
 - *Responsible:* Amber & Attorney
 - *Deadline:* Immediate
2. **Compile solar ordinance input** from members.
 - *Responsible:* Board Members → Amber → Attorney Nathan
 - *Deadline:* Sept. 12, 2025
3. **Consult attorney** on carbon capture/data center moratorium.
 - *Responsible:* Chair & Attorney
 - *Deadline:* Sept. 11, 2025
4. **Prepare detailed code enforcement report** on outstanding violations.
 - *Responsible:* Code Enforcement Officer
 - *Deadline:* Oct. 8, 2025
5. **Review and update permit fee schedule.**
 - *Responsible:* Plan Commission
 - *Deadline:* Oct. 8, 2025
6. **Draft letters to utility companies** about contractor and safety concerns.
 - *Responsible:* Planning Office
 - *Deadline:* Before Oct. 8, 2025