

STARKE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING MINUTES: FEBRUARY 20, 2026

I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Starke County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on February 20, 2026, at the designated county meeting facility. Board President Michael VanDeMark called the meeting to order at the appointed hour. The proceedings commenced with the performance of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call

Present

- Commissioner Michael VanDeMark
- Commissioner Donald Binkley
- Commissioner Charles Chesak

Also Present

- Jim Garner, EMS Director
- Michaelene J. Houston, County Auditor
- Justin Schramm, County Attorney (via speakerphone)

Absent

- None

The session opened with a professional and urgent tone as the Board turned its attention to critical infrastructure needs and public safety logistics. The Commissioners immediately transitioned to the first item of business regarding the operational status of the County's Emergency Medical Services fleet.

II. EMS MONTHLY REPORT: AMBULANCE REPAIR AND FLEET STATUS

The Board recognizes that diligent fleet maintenance is a cornerstone of public safety. Fleet downtime not only compromises emergency response capabilities but also imposes a severe financial burden on the county through the cessation of patient transfer revenue. Director Jim Garner presented a critical update regarding a major mechanical failure impacting the fleet's operational capacity.

Ambulance 21 (2021 E-450) Engine Failure

- **Technical Failure:** The vehicle, which has 171,000 miles and is otherwise in excellent condition, suffered a catastrophic internal engine failure. Director Garner specified the unit is equipped with a 7.3 Gas Motor. While often compared to the "Godzilla" engine platform due to its size, the Director explicitly clarified that this unit is not the Godzilla variant. The failure involved a dropped lifter and a wiped-out

camshaft which became "oval-shaped," a known common issue with this specific motor.

- **Competitive Quote:** Curry Motors provided a repair estimate of \$14,463 for a complete new long block engine. This quote includes a three-year warranty.

- **Operational Impact:** The county currently has zero backup ambulances available. The mechanical failure has forced a suspension of patient transfers, resulting in an estimated revenue loss of \$15,000 in a single day (representing approximately 15 lost transfers).

Strategic Analysis ("So What?") The Board evaluated the merits of utilizing local "mom-and-pop" shops versus a certified Ford dealer. It was determined that the complexity of the 7.3 motor and the necessity of a Ford-backed warranty—along with the priority service status granted to the county—justify the dealer’s labor rates. Restoring the transfer revenue stream is the Board’s primary objective, as the revenue recovered in a single week of service will exceed the total cost of the repair.

Official Action

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Charles Chesak moved to approve the repair of for an amount not to exceed \$15,000 to be funded from the Cumulative Capital fund, contingent upon receiving a second quote from Oliver Ford in Plymouth. Seconded by Commissioner Donald Binkley.

- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously (3-0).

With the mechanical restoration of the fleet addressed, the Board shifted focus to the physical environmental health of the department's facilities.

III. EMS FACILITY MANAGEMENT: MOLD REMEDIATION PROJECT

The Board maintains a statutory duty to provide a safe and healthy working environment for all county employees. Environmental hazards such as mold represent a significant liability and a direct threat to personnel health and operational morale.

Grovertown EMS Base Status

- **Employee Health Concerns:** Director Garner reported that one employee is currently under medical care, with a physician confirming the illness is related to mold exposure at the Grovertown base. There are reports of at least two additional employees exhibiting symptoms.

- **Testing Procedures:** Immediate measures have included the deployment of air quality and radon testing kits by the Director. A formal professional environmental inspection is scheduled for the following Tuesday.

- **Timeline:** Results from the expert inspection are expected within 48 hours of the visit, likely by the following Thursday.

Decision on Special Meeting Recognizing the potential need for immediate remediation or the relocation of staff, the Board scheduled a tentative special meeting for the following Friday at 1:00 PM (Knox Time). This session will be dedicated to

reviewing the findings and authorizing emergency action if the environmental data warrants it.

IV. GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS: AUDIO/VISUAL AND INFRASTRUCTURE UPDATES

To ensure transparency and public accessibility, the Board addressed technical difficulties regarding the audibility of public proceedings.

Meeting Room Audio Upgrades Public feedback indicated that observers are frequently unable to hear the deliberations of the Board. The Board reviewed suggestions from Maintenance/IT (Stanley):

- **Audio Solutions:** Evaluation of "hanging microphones" priced at \$112 each versus table-top "flex" microphones. The Board expressed a strong preference for table-top microphones that can be directed toward the speaker to improve capture for both the public and the recording system.
- **Directive:** Stanley is instructed to provide digital quotes for the tabletop microphone options via email for a final decision at the next session.

Infrastructure and Roadway Assessment

- **County Facilities:** It was confirmed that the county fuel pumps have been restored to service. The Board also confirmed that the gate project at the facility will proceed using a boring/trenching method rather than traditional digging.
 - **Road Conditions:** Critical degradation was identified on 400 North (East of Highway 35). Additionally, Highway 30 toward the Marshall County line was identified as being in a state of severe disrepair, described as "turning to gravel."
 - **Directive:** The Board will consult with Highway Superintendent, Rachel Kinney, regarding the paving plan. If no state relief is scheduled for Highway 30, the Commissioners will send a formal letter to State Representative Jim Pressel and the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) requesting urgent repairs.
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V. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was moved toward conclusion.

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

SIGNATURES:

President, Mike VanDeMark

Vice-President, Charles Chesak

Member, Donald Binkley

Auditor, Michaelene J. Houston