

Date: February 17, 2026 Location: Starke County Courthouse, Meeting Room Time: Morning Session

STARKE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING MINUTES

I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Starke County Board of Commissioners met in regular session to execute essential governance, ensure the fiscal integrity of county operations, and uphold the strategic mandate of public safety and infrastructure maintenance for the residents of Starke County.

Call to Order President Mike VanDeMark called the meeting to order. The assembly stood for the recital of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call

Position	Name	Status
Commissioner, President	Mike VanDeMark	Present
Commissioner, Vice President	Charles Chesak	Present
Commissioner, Member	Don Binkley	Present
County Auditor	Michaelene J. Houston	Present
County Attorney	Justin Schramm	Present

Also Present: Councilman Dave Pearman and Councilman Todd Leinbach, Department heads including Jim (EMS Director), John (Planning Commission), Amie Flora (Parks Director), Shawn Mattraw and Kolleen Woods (Community Corrections), Roberta Lee (Public Records), Gwen Rentz (Surveyor), Bernadette Manuel (Clerk), Rachel Kinney (Highway Superintendent), and Mikie Stogsdill (Economic Development Director).

Proceeding to the first order of business, the Board received the monthly operational and equipment report from the Emergency Medical Services department.

II. EMS MONTHLY REPORT

The Board recognizes that the strategic monitoring of EMS staffing, equipment maintenance, and facility safety is a critical component of county-wide emergency response readiness and serves to mitigate potential municipal liability.

Operations & Staffing Updates

- **Staffing:** January experienced a 7% decrease in overall staffing following one retirement.
- **Paramedic Coverage:** Despite staffing fluctuations, the department maintained a minimum of one paramedic at all times, achieving dual-paramedic coverage for 94% of the month.
- **Openings:** Currently, there are no full-time EMT openings. One full-time paramedic resigned due to family issues; however, the department successfully hired three part-time employees and one part-time paramedic.

Equipment & Vehicle Status The Board reviewed the critical status of the fleet, noting significant outages that impact service reliability:

- **Medic 1 (Unit 3308):** Out of service for charging and lighting issues; recently suffered a dropped valve and remains in the shop (170,000 miles).
- **Medic 3 (Unit 514):** Currently undergoing a total DEF system replacement.
- **Unit 0084 (Retired):** Deemed unfit for service after four mechanical failures while in transit, three of which occurred with patients on board.
- **New Acquisitions:** A new "84" truck was delivered and is undergoing radio installation. The Board noted that a new 4x4 unit (\$379,000.00) currently carries a lead time into late 2028 or 2029.

Facility Concerns (Grovertown/Medic 1) & Liability Director Jim reported severe black mold and moisture issues at the Grovertown base, noting that blankets were found frozen to walls. The Board identified a high liability risk, as four crew members have refused to work at the facility and one has formally warned of legal action should they fall ill. A 2015 travel trailer was proposed as temporary housing for \$19,000.00 (including warranty). The Board prioritized immediate environmental testing before authorizing a housing purchase.

Action Records

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to authorize \$2,100.00 for professional air quality and mold testing at three EMS facilities to determine the extent of the hazard.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charlie Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

The Board then transitioned to matters of land use and renewable energy infrastructure.

III. PLANNING COMMISSION: MORATORIUM EXTENSIONS

The Board emphasized the strategic necessity of extending existing moratoriums to permit the Planning Commission to finalize comprehensive regulatory drafts for battery storage and commercial solar infrastructure without the interference of active applications.

Resolution Summaries

- **Resolution 2026-PC-01:** Extension of the moratorium on Battery Energy Storage Systems.
- **Resolution 2026-PC-02:** Extension of the moratorium on Commercial Solar Energy Systems.

Official Actions

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Charlie Chesak moved to extend the moratoriums for both Battery Energy Storage and Commercial Solar to July 25, 2026.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Donnie Binkley.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Shifting focus to the Parks Department, the Board reviewed fiscal and operational reports.

IV. STARKE COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT

The Board continues to support the Parks Department's transition toward financial independence, emphasizing the strategic value of self-sustaining recreational assets.

Clearing Account Authorization Director Amy Henderson requested the establishment of a clearing account to facilitate online reservations and gate efficiency, serving as a pass-through to the Treasurer.

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to authorize the establishment of the clearing account, contingent on Board of Finance approval.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed.

Annual Fiscal Report Highlights (2025)

- **Revenue Growth:** Total receipts reached \$417,000.00, a \$100,000.00 year-over-year increase.
- **Bass Lake Assets:** The Campground generated \$172,000.00, while the Beach/Piers generated \$86,000.00.
- **Self-Sufficiency:** As of 2023, the department no longer utilizes the \$20,000.00 annual tax-supported stipend, achieving full operational independence.

Capital Projects and Accountability The Board discussed the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant for the beach house. President Binkley issued a directive to hold construction partners "to the fire" regarding project specifications and delays. Specifically, the Board noted that the partner failed to meet commitments regarding concrete thickness and the construction schedule, and is investigating potential "payback" or credits for these deficiencies.

The Board then addressed judicial cost-containment and pretrial supervision.

V. STARKE COUNTY COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

The Board recognizes pretrial GPS monitoring as a vital cost-saving alternative to traditional incarceration. The daily cost of housing an inmate at the Starke County Justice Center is approximately \$35.00, whereas GPS monitoring significantly reduces this burden on the general fund.

Funding Request Director Sean requested continued subsidization for the GPS-monitored pretrial population (currently 5-7 individuals). Statutory caps prevent the department from charging these defendants more than \$30.00 per month, necessitating county support.

Official Action

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Donny Binkley moved to fund the pretrial GPS monitoring program up to a \$35,000.00 annual cap, with funds to be utilized from the CEDIT fund.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed.

The meeting proceeded to personnel introductions and public records oversight.

VI. PURDUE EXTENSION OFFICE & PUBLIC RECORDS INQUIRY

Personnel Introduction The Board welcomed Mindy Duckett (Regional Health and Human Sciences Educator) and Anna Lenig (Part-time Program Assistant) to the Starke County Purdue Extension office.

Public Records / FOIA Internal Controls Roberta Lee presented a report on deficiencies in the county's public records (FOIA) process. Key concerns included:

- FOIA forms lacking dates, signatures, and contact information.
- A form attributed to an individual who denies making the request.
- The dissemination of digital photographs of the Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) rather than official printouts.

Board Directive The Board determined that a comprehensive review of the county-wide FOIA process is required to ensure audit readiness and internal control. This matter is directed to be placed on the agenda for the next meeting for a formal 10-minute review.

The Board then reviewed Surveyor operations and election logistics.

VII. SURVEYOR'S OFFICE & ELECTION EQUIPMENT

Section Corner Ordinance The Board conducted the second reading of the ordinance establishing procedures and penalties (minimum \$3,000.00) for the removal or alteration of section corners and benchmarks.

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to approve the second reading of the Section Corner Ordinance.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed. A third reading is required for final adoption unless rules are suspended.

Election Equipment Logistics Clerk Bernadette Manuel presented machine allocation data for the 2024 and 2026 cycles. She noted that while she has historically managed delivery, the legal responsibility for the delivery of election equipment (shifting from "suitcase" to "coffin" size) rests with the Commissioners per Indiana Code (IC).

- **Executive Session:** The Board scheduled an executive session for Friday at 12:30 PM to discuss election security and logistics.

Personnel Action

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to approve courthouse keys for Anita (Election Clerk) to facilitate early voting preparations.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed.

The Board then addressed IT security and Highway Department fiscal optimization.

VIII. IT / ASSESSOR VPN ACCESS & HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT

IT Security Policy IT Director Stanley reported a security conflict regarding the Assessor's vendor (Nexus) requesting VPN access for non-county-managed tablets. Stanley maintained that county-managed equipment is a prerequisite for VPN access. The Board directed IT to collaborate with the vendor to reach a secure middle-ground compromise.

Highway Department Consolidation To address negative balances in the MVH (1176) fund and optimize the budget, Superintendent Rachel Oesterreich proposed a staff consolidation. This move is projected to save the county approximately **\$80,000.00 per year**.

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Charlie Chesak moved to combine the Office Manager and Asset Manager positions into a single "Administrative Services Manager" position for financial reasons, effective immediately.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Donnie Binkley.

- **RESULT:** Passed.

The department also noted the acquisition of a new plow for Truck 7 (compatible with Truck 4).

IX. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

Operational Summary Director Mikie Stogsdill reported that the Foundation has relocated to 15 South Main in Knoxville. This move reduced the office footprint from 3,000 to a more efficient size, significantly lowering overhead costs.

Key Achievements

- **Contract:** A two-year county contract for \$110,000.00 was finalized.
 - **Programming:** The "Building Your Business" workshop was a success.
 - **Stark Tank:** The upcoming competition has expanded to include local high school participants.
 - **Adult Education:** Collaboration with Ivy Tech is underway to address local workforce needs.
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X. AUDITOR: CLAIMS, PAYROLL, MINUTES AND ADA TITLE VI

The Board reviewed and authorized expenditures as part of its core fiduciary duty to ensure the responsible management of public funds.

Claims & Payroll

- **Vendor Claims:** \$180,272.26. The Board noted a specific department's Amazon purchase of coffee pods. A directive was issued for department heads to attend the next public meeting to establish a formal "Office Comfort vs. Office Need" policy.
- **Payroll:** \$370,095.00.
- **MOTION:** Commissioner Donnie Binkley moved to approve both claims and payroll.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed.

Minutes

MOTION: Charles Chesak moved to approve the 2-2-26 meeting minutes.

SECOND: Don Binkley

RESULT: Passed

Title VI ADA Plan The Board reviewed the 2026 Title VI/ADA plan, required for INDOT compliance.

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to approve the 2026 Title VI plan.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed.

XI. PUBLIC COMMENT & ADJOURNMENT

Boa Shores Roads Residents Bob Galen, Bonita Beck, Karen Frizelis, Jim Lee, and Ed Frizelis inquired regarding the 2026 resurfacing schedule for their neighborhood, citing multiple postponements. The Board committed to following up with Superintendent Oesterreich to confirm the current paving status.

XII. BUILDING KEY REQUESTS

There were 3 key requests—Rebekah Wagner for the Recorder’s Office, Robby Blodget for the Planning Commission and Maria Booth for the Veteran’s Service Office.

MOTION: Charles Chesak moved to approve all 3 requests.

SECOND: Don Binkley .

RESULT: Passed

ADJOURNMENT

- **MOTION:** Commissioner Don Binkley moved to adjourn.
- **SECOND:** Commissioner Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Mike VanDeMark, President

Charles Chesak, Vice-President

Don Binkley, Member

ATTEST:

Michaelene J. Houston, Auditor