

# STARKE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING MINUTES

**Date:** March 16, 2026 **Location:** Starke County Government Building **Time:** Morning Session

## I. CALL TO ORDER

The Starke County Board of Commissioners convened in regular session on March 16, 2026, at the Starke County Government Building. The meeting was formally called to order by President Mike VanDeMark, who presided over the morning's deliberations. The proceedings commenced with the collective recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. President VanDeMark emphasized the Board's commitment to transparent governance before transitioning to the official recording of attendance, noting the necessity of a quorum to conduct the county's legal and financial business.

## II. ROLL CALL

A quorum was established with the following members and officials present:

- **Present:**
  - Mike VanDeMark, President
  - Charlie Chesak, Vice-President
  - Don Binkley, Member
- **Also Present:**
  - Michaelene J. Houston, Auditor/Secretary
  - Justin Schramm(Legal Counsel/Council Representative)
  - None.

Various department heads were also in attendance to provide reports and expert testimony on pending agenda items.

## III. APPROVAL OF CLAIMS AND MINUTES

The Board addressed its fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers by reviewing the proposed financial disbursements and the historical record of the previous session. The Board noted that the meticulous review of vendor and payroll claims is essential to maintaining the fiscal integrity of Starke County.

The Board evaluated Vendor Claims totaling **326,978.34\*\*** and Payroll Claims in the amount of **\*\*358,117.89**. Furthermore, the minutes from the meeting held on March 2, 2026, were presented for formal adoption.

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to approve the vendor and payroll claims as presented, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to approve the minutes from the March 2, 2026, meeting, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

#### **IV. APPOINTMENTS AND PERSONNEL**

The Board addressed several personnel matters essential to the continued efficiency of county administrative functions and the fulfillment of board vacancies.

1. **New Hire Building Key Approval:** The Board reviewed the credentials for a new employee, Kelsey Wright, and authorized her to receive keys for the building.
2. **CVC Board Resignation and Appointment:** The Board accepted the formal resignation of Erl Henry from the Convention and Visitors Commission (CVC) Board. To ensure the board remains fully staffed for its upcoming initiatives, the Board considered the appointment of Kathy Norem to fulfill the remainder of Mr. Henry's term.

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to approve keys for Kelsey, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to appoint Kathy Norem to the CVC Board to fulfill the remainder of the current term, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

#### **V. EMS MONTHLY REPORT**

The EMS Director provided a comprehensive update on emergency response operations and the strategic implementation of technology and community-based health programs.

- **Operational Volume:** The department handled 254 calls during the reporting period, a 15.78% decrease in volume.
- **Staffing:** Paramedic coverage on trucks increased by 13%, reaching 100% capacity.
- **Technological Implementation:** The Director highlighted the weekly utilization of the **Hand-Heavy App**, a specialized tool used for pediatric and full-arrest medical calculations, which provides age- and weight-based accuracy via mobile devices and truck computers.
- **Vehicle Maintenance:**
  - Medic 3308 returned to service following an engine replacement.
  - Medic 4725 is slated for retirement due to critical frame oxidation.
  - Old 514 (Chevy Diesel) has been stripped and placed for auction.
- **Base Maintenance:** Air quality testing at all bases returned inconclusive for black mold. However, remediation for surface mold in Medic Gray is underway following a window leak.

**Mobile Integrated Health (MIH) Update:** The Director announced the receipt of a \$25,000 grant from the Northern Indiana Community Foundation and a \$40,000 IDHS grant. The MIH program continues its partnership with Health Link for community paramedicine, focusing on chronic disease management and telehealth to support homebound patients.

## VI. OPIOID SETTLEMENT

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to authorize the county's participation in the Opioid Settlement funding program, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

## VII. STARKE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION (SCEDF)

The SCEDF presented an update on workforce development and business retention, highlighting the strategic impact of these initiatives on the local tax base.

- **Project Lindback Meat:** These 2.9 million investments are moving through the late initial permitting stages. It is expected to create 10–12 initial jobs, with high-skill meat processors earning up to **\*\*34.00 per hour\*\***—significantly above the county average.
- **Project Power On:** Currently in the preliminary phase, this project is scouting suitable operational and storage space.
- **Workforce & Child Care:** The SCEDF discussed micro-credential programs for early childhood education, noting that Starke County is currently designated a "**Child Care Desert.**" Expanding child care capacity is deemed critical for labor force participation.
- **Training Initiatives:** Collaboration continues with Ivy Tech for an HVAC boot camp and local CDL certification training to address the desperate need for drivers across all sectors.

## VIII. KNOX MIDDLE SCHOOL PTO FUNDRAISING REQUEST

Elizabeth Wallen and Jake McIntyre of the Knox Middle School PTO presented a request regarding a \$100,000 outdoor play and teaching space. The project is eligible for a \$50,000 matching grant, provided the PTO reaches a \$50,000 fundraising goal by April 1, 2026.

As of the meeting date, the PTO had raised approximately \$37,232, leaving a deficit of roughly \$12,768. The Board deliberated on the initial request of \$1,500. Recognizing the risk of the community losing the \$50,000 match so close to the deadline, the Board determined that a larger contribution was necessary to ensure the project's success.

**MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to approve a \$7,000 contribution from Cumulative Capital Development (Cum Cap) funds to ensure the PTO reaches the matching grant threshold, seconded by Don Binkley. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

## IX. CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

The Board discussed the strategic necessity of a long-term Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to protect county infrastructure.

1. **Old Jail Elevator:** The unit is out of commission due to circuit board failure caused by moisture and salt. Estimates range from \$3,000 to \$6,000. The Board discussed the need

to build a protective enclosure to prevent future failures but decided to wait for a firm quote.

2. **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to **TABLE** the decision on the elevator repair pending a hard quote and a detailed plan for a protective structure, seconded by Don Binkley. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).
3. **CIP Meeting:** A department head meeting will hopefully be scheduled for Friday afternoon to formalize the priorities of the Capital Improvement Plan.

## **X. 6 NORTH PEARL STREET – CERTIFICATE SALE**

Mayor Dennis Estok of the City of Knoxville addressed the Board regarding the blighted property at 6 North Pearl Street, which has been under code enforcement since 2017. The City requested the assignment of the tax sale certificate to facilitate the rehabilitation or demolition of the unsafe structure.

**MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to assign the tax sale certificate for 6 North Pearl Street to the City of Knoxville for the minimum bid of \$150, pending final legal review by Nathan (Plan Comm. Atty.), seconded by Don Binkley. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

## **XI. INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION GRANT**

The Board reviewed the annual grant application for community corrections as required by IC 11-12-2-3.

**Details:** The application requests **\$3,026,302** for Fiscal Year 2026. This funding supports local correctional operations at no cost to the county.

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to approve and sign the IDOC grant application letter, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

## **XII. LEGAL EXPENDITURES – DUNS BRIDGES**

The Board reviewed a request for legal fees incurred by Nathan Viz regarding the "Duns Bridges" solar project and the denial of related permits.

**Details:** The fees total **\$2,329.50**. It was noted that the Planning Commission's legal budget would be prematurely exhausted without supplemental funding. The Board identified the "Solar Expenditure and Receipts Fund" as the appropriate source for this disbursement.

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to approve the payment of \$2,329.50 to Nathan Viz from the Solar Expenditure and Receipts Fund, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

## **XIII. TREASURER'S RECONCILIATION UPDATE**

The Treasurer provided a progress report on bank reconciliations required for the State Board of Accounts (SBOA) audit.

- **Timeline:** The office is currently reconciling March 2024. The 2024 records are expected to be completed within 8 weeks, with a 5-month target to be fully caught up through 2025.
- **Resource Allocation:** The Board directed the Treasurer to expedite the process by utilizing part-time help, specifically mentioning Katie Hochman and Casey Clark as potential candidates.

#### **XIV. HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT REPORT**

The Highway Superintendent reported on infrastructure maintenance and the financial impact of environmental issues.

- **Paving Operations:** In 2025, 25.25 miles were completed. The 2026 plan includes 12 miles of county-funded paving and 9.75 miles under the Mammoth Grant.
- **Certifications:** The Superintendent and staff have maintained "Employee of Responsible Charge" (ERC) certifications, ensuring the county remains eligible for federal transportation funding.
- **Labor:** The department is currently utilizing two "Work One" employees through the Workplace Experience program.
- **Blight Impact:** The Superintendent warned that illegal dumping of campers and boats costs the county approximately 1.5 miles of paving annually in disposal fees.

#### **XV. BASS LAKE BEACH AND COMMUNITY BUSINESS**

1. **Bass Lake Beach Electric:** Safety concerns were raised regarding 50-amp breakers installed on 30-amp wiring. The Board directed a reversion to 30-amp breakers for the current season to mitigate fire risks. Council representatives suggested a **loan from the Solar Account** as a potential long-term funding solution for a full \$250,000 electrical overhaul.
2. **America 250th/Arbor Day:** The Board approved a request to close one lane of the road near the Starke County Forest on April 25th, from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM, for parking during the Arbor Day celebration.
3. **Courthouse Security:** The Board acknowledged the gift of an X-ray machine from Marshall County for use in the old courthouse.
4. **SCILL vs. CTE:** Clarification was provided that "SCILL" (Lifelong Education) is transitioning to an adult education program under the Foundation, while K-12 vocational training remains under the state-funded CTE program.
5. **Election Signs:** The Board directed legal counsel to draft an ordinance regarding the regulation of election signs on county-owned property.

#### **XVI. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 10:15 AM.

**MOTION:** Don Binkley moved to adjourn, seconded by Charlie Chesak. **RESULT:** Approved (3-0).

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Mike VanDeMark, President

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Charlie Chesak, Vice-President

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Don Binkley, Member

ATTEST:

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Michaelene J. Houston, Auditor