

STARKE COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES: MARCH 16, 2026

Date: March 16, 2026 **Location:** Starke County Government Building **Time:** 4:30 PM (Approximate)

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting of the Starke County Council was formally called to order by President Bill Crase. The proceedings commenced with the Council and assembled public standing for the collective recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, signaling the commencement of official county business.

ATTENDANCE

Present:

- Bill Crase (President)
- Dave Pearman (Vice-President)
- Howard Bailey
- Todd Leinbach
- Bruce Bennett

Also Present:

- Michaelene J. Houston (Auditor/Secretary)
- Jack Rosa (Sheriff)
- Kelly Graham (Treasurer)
- April Wilhelm (Coroner)

Absent:

- Cassandra Hine
- Kay Gudeman

It was noted for the record that a quorum was established to conduct official county business.

I. SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT BUSINESS

The Sheriff maintains a fundamental responsibility for fiduciary accuracy within the department's internal accounts. The commissary fund often serves as a necessary discretionary and corrective tool for addressing minor banking or historical discrepancies, ensuring that general fund tax dollars remain untouched for such rectifications. Beyond financial oversight, the department is tasked with the long-term maintenance of the county's transport fleet to ensure the safe and efficient movement of offenders.

Sheriff Jack Rosa presented a request to resolve a persistent \$244.57 banking discrepancy that has existed since the beginning of his administration. To balance the

department's books, the Sheriff requested authorization to transfer this amount from the commissary account. Following this request, the Sheriff provided an update on the newly acquired transport van, noting the following specifications:

- **Operational Lifespan:** The vehicle is expected to provide 15 to 20 years of service.
- **Safety and Separation:** The interior features a divider and bench seating on both sides, allowing for the simultaneous and safe separation of male and female offenders, or offenders who must remain separated for safety reasons.
- **Inspection:** The Sheriff invited the Council to view the vehicle parked outside following the session.

MOTION: Dave Pearman moved to allow the Sheriff to take \$244.57 from the commissary to resolve the banking discrepancy, seconded by Bruce Bennett. **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Having addressed the Sheriff's immediate fiduciary and equipment needs, the Council turned its attention to internal personnel payroll adjustments.

II. SALARY ORDINANCE & PAYROLL ADJUSTMENTS

Legislative adjustments to the county salary ordinance require a "Super Majority" vote to ensure fiscal consensus and the accurate correction of clerical errors.

Maintaining the integrity of the payroll system is vital to ensuring all county employees are compensated according to the approved budgetary framework.

Coroner April Wilhelm addressed the Council regarding a self-identified error in her compensation. While her approved salary was \$14,704, an error on the initial budget worksheet had incorrectly set it at \$16,418.

- **Repayment and Guidance:** To rectify the \$1,714 difference, Deputy April has already initiated a payroll deduction of \$131.82 to correct the error which was taken care of on the 3rd payroll. The Council provided guidance that any remaining funds resulting from this correction should be saved for a "rainy day" or returned to the County General Fund at the end of the year.
- **Ordinance Correction:** The Council identified a secondary error where Deputy pay was mistakenly recorded as \$108 in recent paperwork. The Council acted to restore the pay to the previously approved \$111 which reflects the standard 3% increase.

MOTION: Dave Pearman moved to approve the corrected Salary Ordinance, seconded by Howard Bailey. **RESULT:** Passed (5-0 via Roll Call: Pearman—Yes; Bailey—Yes; Leinbach—Yes; Bennett—Yes; Crase--Yes).

With personnel costs and ordinance corrections finalized, the Council shifted its focus to community-based funding requests.

III. CARNIVAL EVENT FUNDING (DEFERRED)

The Council occasionally evaluates requests for backup funding for local community events to support the social and cultural interests of the county. Such deliberations require a clearly defined financial "ask" and the presence of event representatives to ensure transparent use of public resources.

A request regarding backup funding for a local carnival event was formally deferred. The Council noted that because no representative was present to define the specific financial requirements or the nature of the support requested, the item could not be addressed.

Shifting from community event support, the Council moved to address the administrative calendar of the Auditor's office.

IV. AUDITOR'S BUSINESS: MEETING SCHEDULE AMENDMENT

Professional development and state-mandated training for county officials are essential for maintaining governance standards. The upcoming mandatory State Auditor's Conference presents a direct conflict with the regularly scheduled May session, necessitating a one-time adjustment to the public meeting calendar.

MOTION: Bruce Bennett moved to move the May meeting to Friday, May 22, 2026, at 4:30 PM, seconded by Todd Leinbach. **RESULT:** Passed.

Following the adjustment of the meeting calendar, the Council entered into a review of the county's financial reconciliation status and State Board of Accounts compliance.

V. TREASURER'S REPORT: RECONCILIATION STATUS

Bringing the county's ledgers into full compliance with State Board of Accounts (SBOA) requirements is a critical administrative priority. The SBOA has mandated that this reconciliation be completed as soon as possible to ensure the accuracy of historical and current accounts.

Treasurer Kelly provided a progress report on the reconciliation efforts:

- **Current Status:** Reconciliation has reached March 2024.
- **Resolution of Discrepancies:** A \$1.3 million discrepancy was identified as a clerical error involving a "wrong column" entry and has since been corrected.
- **Future Timeline:** The Treasurer projects an additional six weeks to finalize the 2024 reconciliation.
- **Personnel:** Collaboration continues between Kelly, Rhonda, and Casey to maintain daily entries alongside the reconciliation of past months.

To ensure oversight and adherence to the SBOA mandate, Todd Leinbach, Bruce Bennett, and Bill Crase scheduled an office visit for Tuesday, March 17, 2026, at 5:00

PM to observe the process (ensuring no quorum is present to prevent an open-door violation).

Having reviewed the status of past accounts, the Council proceeded to deliberate on future revenue challenges and long-term budgetary projections.

VI. FINANCIAL STRATEGY & BUDGETARY OUTLOOK

Projected state-level levy reductions are expected to create a significant shortfall in the county's general fund over the next three fiscal years. Proactive financial planning is required to balance essential county services against a declining tax revenue base. Vice-President Dave Pearman reported estimated levy reductions of \$354,000 for 2026, \$422,000 for 2027, and \$524,000 for 2028. The Council debated the following strategic options:

- **Revenue Generation:** Implementation of a Local Income Tax (LIT) for Public Safety or EMS.
- **Budgetary Cuts:** Requiring department heads to reduce budgets by 6% to 7%.
- **Fund Utilization:** Utilizing Solar or CEDIT (County Economic Development Income Tax) funds to bridge the shortfall.

Member Todd Leinbach expressed a firm opposition to any tax increase, proposing a "2-2-2" strategy that splits the burden between budget cuts, solar funds, and CEDIT funds to ensure no net tax increase for residents.

The Council concluded the strategy session by committing to provide specific guidance to office holders by the April meeting, leading into a discussion on maximizing interest from existing fund investments.

VII. INVESTMENT POLICY DISCUSSION

The strategic investment of county funds is necessary to maximize interest income and alleviate budgetary pressures on the general fund. The Council recognizes the need to revitalize investment practices, such as Certificates of Deposit (CDs), which became stagnant during the COVID-19 pandemic due to unfavorable interest rates. The Council discussed the \$800,000 in interest currently held in the hospital fund and various solar funds. Members questioned the lack of recent investment activity and reached a consensus that current market rates justify a return to active investment management to ensure county funds are generating appropriate returns. From the discussion of future investment gains, the Council turned to the approval of legal records from previous sessions.

VIII. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

Accurate minutes serve as the official legal record of county governance and must reflect compliance with established protocols, such as the Electronic Meeting Policy 20-21-015. Ensuring these records are precise is a fundamental duty of the Council. Todd Leinbach requested a correction to the February 18th minutes. He noted that a formal roll-call was not taken at the start of that meeting or during votes, which is a requirement under the county's electronic meeting resolution when members participate remotely.

MOTION: Dave Pearman moved to approve the February 18th minutes with Todd Leinbach's corrections, seconded by Howard Bailey. **RESULT:** Passed (Abstentions: Bruce Bennett and Todd Leinbach).

With the records approved, the Council moved to its final business item regarding the transition of economic development programs.

IX. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & "SKILL" PROGRAM TRANSITION

The evolution of the "SCILL" program marks a transition from a private committee model to a school-based Career and Technical Education (CTE) framework. This shift is designed to align adult workforce training with modern industrial needs, including high-tech certifications like drone piloting.

The Council reviewed the transition, noting that instructors will become school employees effective August 1. Members emphasized the importance of financial transparency for organizations receiving public funding.

MOTION: Todd Leinbach moved to exercise the Council's contract right to request the previous year's financial audits and documents from the Starke County Economic Development Foundation (SCEDF), seconded by Bruce Bennett. **RESULT:** Passed. Having concluded all scheduled business, the Council moved toward adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned. Members and the public were again invited to view the Sheriff's new transport vehicle following the close of the session.

SIGNATURE BLOCKS:

Bill Crase, President

Dave Pearman, Vice-President

Howard Bailey, Member

Todd Leinbach, Member

Bruce Bennett, Member

Kay Gudeman, Member

Michaelene J. Houston, Auditor