

Starke County Board of Commissioners MEETING MINUTES

March 2, 2026

I. CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

The Starke County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on March 2, 2026. These minutes constitute the official legal record of county governance, capturing the Board's exercise of its legislative and executive powers, the authorization of fiscal obligations, and the strategic management of public assets.

Call to Order: President Mike VanDeMark called the meeting to order and led the assembly in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call:

- **Commissioners Present:** Mike VanDeMark (President), Charlie Chesak (Vice-President), and Donny Binkley.
- **Also Present:** Michaelene Houston (Auditor), Justin Schramm (Legal Counsel), Kelly Graham (Treasurer's Office), Michelle Schouten (Assessor), John McCurrie (Planning/Building), Carrie Block (Insurance Representative), Stanley Budd (IT Director), Mikie Stodgill (Economic Development), Bernadette Manual (Clerk), Leslie Baker (Prosecutor), Frank Lynch (Health Nurse) and Roberta Lee, along with other members of the public.
- **Absent:** None.

The Board took the following matters under advisement, beginning with a procedural adjustment to the order of financial business.

II. CLAIMS AND MINUTES APPROVAL

To optimize the legislative flow and ensure that administrative prerequisites are settled prior to departmental deliberations, the Board addressed financial claims and meeting records at the commencement of the session.

Vendor Claims: The Board reviewed vendor claims in the total amount of **\$956,989.25**.

- **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to approve the vendor claims; seconded by Charlie Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Payroll Claims: The Board reviewed payroll claims in the amount of **\$348,315.47**.

- **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to approve the payroll claims; seconded by Charlie Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Minutes Approval: The minutes for the meetings held on **February 17, 2026**, and **February 20, 2026**, were presented for approval.

- **February 17, 2026, Minutes:**
 - **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to approve; seconded by Charlie Chesak.
 - **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.
- **February 20, 2026, Minutes:**
 - **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to approve; seconded by Charles Chesak.
 - **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.
- **Key for new Deputy Prosecutor:**
 - **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to approve a key for the new Deputy Prosecutor, Ryan Washburn, seconded by Charlie Chesak.
 - **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

The Board concluded routine administrative approvals and transitioned to economic development business.

III. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: LAND SWAP AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The Board reviewed initiatives aimed at optimizing the Hamlet Industrial Park and fostering local entrepreneurship. The strategic focus remains the conversion of landlocked, unmarketable parcels into viable economic assets.

Hamlet Industrial Park Land Swap (IC 36-1-11): Mikie Stodsgill (Economic Development) presented a proposal for a 1-acre for 1-acre swap with a 501(c)(6) non-profit to provide essential road access to a currently landlocked parcel. During the discussion, the Board identified that the initial proposal left an "oddball strip" or "sliver" of land. To ensure the strategic management of county property, the Board proposed adjusting the swap location to ensure the remaining county parcel maintains a "**full square**" geometry, maximizing future marketability.

The non-profit is required to provide a professional survey and legal description at their expense.

MOTION: Donny Binkley moved to open the public hearing seconded by Charlie Chesak.

RESULT: Passed Unanimously.

Roberta Lee asked if this would impact our land and the commissioners stated that it would also be to our benefit. She then asked would pay for the survey and was told Economic Development.

MOTION: Donny Binkley moved to close the public hearing seconded by Charlie Chesak.

RESULT: Passed Unanimously.

- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to approve the land swap and Resolution 5-2026 with the "full square" adjustment; seconded by Donald J. Burton.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Starke Tank Donation/Sponsorship: Mikie requested continued support for the "Starke Tank" entrepreneurship program, noting that previous winners (ages 18 and 19) have successfully established thriving local businesses, including Smart Choice Disposal and Tubby Buddies.

- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to approve a **Gold Sponsorship of \$1,000**; seconded by Donny Binkley.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

The Board took the following matter under advisement regarding county office requirements and technology.

IV. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND ASSESSOR BUSINESS

The Board addressed logistical challenges regarding workspace security and the technical parameters of vendor hardware integration.

Office Space & Privacy Concerns: Kelly Graham (Treasurer) testified regarding the lack of dedicated office space for elected officials and the security risks posed by the current open-counter layout for the Treasurer's Office. Public visibility of cash handling during tax season was noted as a primary concern. The Board discussed potential solutions, including utilizing the Auditor's kitchen space or relocating EMS offices to a new building to free up annex space.

- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to table the matter until a comprehensive logistical solution is determined; seconded by Donny Binkley.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Assessor's Office Laptop & Vendor Access: Assessor Michelle and IT Director Stanley discussed a proposal for a vendor to purchase a laptop for county data entry. Stanley Budd (IT) stipulated that the vendor will pay all upfront costs and the **initial software license**, while the county will only absorb the **yearly maintenance fee** added to the existing contract. The IT Department will maintain full administrative control and the authority to wipe the device to ensure network security.

- **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to allow the vendor to purchase the laptop for use under IT supervision; seconded by Charlie Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

V. PUBLIC RECORDS AND ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES

The Board addressed the legal requirements of the Indiana Access to Public Records Act (APRA) and established expectations for the expenditure of tax dollars on consumables.

FOIA Procedure Training: Legal Counsel Justin Schramm clarified the distinction between the federal FOIA and the Indiana FOIA. He emphasized that the **7-day statutory window** is a requirement for a response (acknowledgment and timeline) rather than the final delivery of documents. Requests must describe records with "**reasonable particularity.**" Bernadette Manual and Leslie Baker provided input regarding the tracking and date-stamping of requests. Justin will coordinate Zoom training sessions to ensure all department heads are educated on best practices for documenting and responding to requests.

Expenditure Policy – Consumables/Creature Comforts: The Board debated the use of tax dollars for "creature comforts" (coffee, snacks, soda).

- **General Policy:** Employees are expected to provide their own discretionary food and beverages. Standard supplies (Kleenex, hand sanitizer, cleaning wipes) remain authorized as office consumables for hygiene.
- **Specific Exceptions:** The **Prosecutor's Office** is a verified exception for food/beverages provided to witnesses and law enforcement during trial preparation, as these are funded through **Pre-Trial Diversion (Fund 2502)** rather than County General. Election Day meals also remain an authorized exception.

Mike VanDeMark asked about holding a special session to update the handbook and wants Department Head input.

VI. INSURANCE AND PLANNING/BUILDING ORDINANCES

The Board reviewed liability renewals and conducted legislative readings for Planning and Building department regulations.

Cyber Liability Renewal: Carrie Block (Insurance Agent) presented the renewal for Cyber Liability insurance through Great American.

- **Premium: \$24,087.50** (increased from \$19,218).

- **Coverage Terms:** Due to Director Stanley’s commitment to phasing out unsupported systems in Q1 2026, the carrier agreed to remove the "unsupported software" exclusion.
- **MOTION:** Donny Binkley moved to accept the Great American quote; seconded by Charles Chesak.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Planning and Building Amendments: The Board held the **Third Reading** of the Surveyor’s Section Corners ordinance, noting it had been previously signed but was presented for procedural finality.

John McCurrie (Planning) presented title and reporting changes for the department.

- **Resolution PC-03 (Ord 2026-06):** Renaming Planning Administrator to Director of Planning and Building.
- **Resolution PC-04 (Ord 2026-07):** Amending the building code to reflect the new title.
- **Resolution PC-05 (Ord 2026-08):** Clarifying that the department secretary reports to the Director.
- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to approve PC-03, PC-04, and PC-05 (Resolutions 06, 07 and 08 of 2026); seconded by Donny Binkley.
- **RESULT:** All passed unanimously.

VII. COMMISSIONER REPORTS AND PUBLIC COMMENT

The Board discussed infrastructure funding, township mergers, and capital planning.

Departmental Revenue & Equipment: A proposal was discussed to reallocate a portion of EMS and Sheriff transport revenue into a "kitty" for equipment maintenance to handle major repairs. It was reported that the **CCMG project** for Toto Road and 900 has received state funding.

- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to set a **\$15,000 reserve** for the John Deere tractor auction; seconded by Donny Binkley.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Township Realignment & Fire Protection: The Board reviewed a report on state-mandated township mergers based on a "**point value**" system. Any township with **four points or less** is mandated to merge by December. The Board noted that North Bend faces critical siren failures, while the Hamlin/Davis fire protection setup remains a successful model for future consolidations.

Health Department MOUs:

- **MOTION:** Charlie Chesak moved to approve MOUs with Bella Vita Pregnancy Center and Breathe Easy Marshall County Alliance; seconded by Donny Binkley.
- **RESULT:** Passed Unanimously.

Public Comment: Discussion was held regarding the necessity of a **Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)** to track LIT and seated funds. The Board agreed to schedule a 10-minute slot at the next meeting to review a draft CIP.

VIII. ADJOURNMENT

With no further business, the Board adjourned the meeting.

Signatures:

Mike VanDeMark *President*

Charlie Chesak *Vice-President*

Donny Binkley *Member*

Michaelene J. Houston *Auditor*