STARKE COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

Date: July 20, 2026 **Location:** Starke County Government Center **Time:** 4:30 PM

The following minutes constitute the official administrative record of the Starke County Council. Memorializing these proceedings is a legal and administrative necessity, serving to ensure the highest standards of government transparency and providing a permanent record of legislative intent for the citizens of Starke County. These records document the deliberation, fiscal management, and policy decisions enacted by the Council to facilitate the efficient governance of the county.

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was officially called to order by Council President Bill Crase. Following the call to order, the President led the assembly in the Pledge of Allegiance, reaffirming the commitment of the Council to the foundational principles of the nation.

Before proceeding to official business, the President emphasized the necessity of verifying attendance to ensure that all proceedings were conducted under a legally established quorum.

II. ROLL CALL

Present:

- Bill Crase, Council President
- Dave Pearman, Council Vice-President
- Kay Gudeman, Council Member
- Howard Bailey, Council Member
- Todd Leinbach, Council Member
- Bruce Bennett, Council Member

Also Present:

- Michaelene J. Houston, Council Secretary/Auditor
- Justin Schramm, County Attorney
- Nan, Mae Engineering Representative
- Kelly Graham, County Treasurer
- John McCurrie, Plan Commission Representative
- Various department representatives and members of the public.

Quorum Verification: Following the roll call, it was officially confirmed that a quorum of members was present, thereby authorizing the Council to proceed with the transaction of official county business.

III. PUBLIC HEARING: TERMINATION OF TAX ABATEMENT

Strategic Importance of Compliance: The Council recognizes the importance of rigorous monitoring regarding tax abatement compliance. Such incentives are granted with the expectation of ongoing economic contribution; therefore, public hearings are necessary to resolve the status of inactive or non-compliant businesses to protect the county’s fiscal interests.

Procedural Record:

- **Motion to Open Hearing:**
  - **MOTION:** Dave Pearman moved to open the public hearing.
  - **SECOND:** Kay Gudeman.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Fact-Finding:

- Nan, representing the Mae Engineering and property interests, testified regarding a Compliance with Statement of Benefits (CF-1).
- It was established that the business is no longer operational at the site.
- Nan confirmed that the building is currently in the process of being sold and that all personal property associated with the abatement has been removed from the location.

Official Action:

- **Motion to Terminate:**
  - **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to terminate the tax abatement on the grounds that the building is being sold and the personal property is no longer present.
  - **SECOND:** Bruce Bennett.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

Hearing Closure:

- **Motion to Close:**
  - **MOTION:** Dave Pearman moved to close the public hearing.
  - **SECOND:** Bruce Bennett.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

With the status of this property abatement resolved, the Council transitioned to matters of fiscal appropriation for the current year.

IV. PUBLIC HEARING: ADDITIONAL APPROPRIATION (ORDINANCE 18 of 2026)

Contextual Introduction: The Council maintains the responsibility to adjust fiscal allocations to address unexpected legal and operational requirements. These additional appropriations ensure that county departments remain functional and legally compliant throughout the 2026 fiscal year.

Itemized Appropriations:

- **Motion to Open Hearing:**
  - **MOTION:** Kay Gudeman moved to open the public hearing.
  - **SECOND:** Todd Leinbach.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

- **BZA Professional Services:** The Council reviewed a request for attorney fees for the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA). While the initial figure presented was $117,000, it was reduced $17,000. Planning Administrator, John McCurrie, noted the funds are necessary for ongoing code enforcement litigation.
  - **Motion (BZA):**
    - **MOTION:** Bruce Bennett moved to approve $17,000 out of the General Fund for the BZA.
    - **SECOND:** Todd Leinbach.
    - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.
- **Election Equipment Upgrade:** The Council addressed the second of three scheduled annual payments for the voting system upgrade, totaling $39,500.
  - **Motion (Election):**
    - **MOTION:** Bruce Bennett moved to approve the voting system payment.
    - **SECOND:** Kay Gudeman.
    - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.
- **Skill Center Rent:** An appropriation of $42,000 was requested from CEDIT (Economic Development) funds.
  - **Motion (Rent):**
    - **MOTION:** Dave Pearman moved to approve the rent payment.
    - **SECOND:** Bruce Bennett.
    - **RESULT:** Passed with one nay (Todd Leinbach).
    - **Note:** Bruce Bennett explicitly stated his support for this motion was based on a prior compromise with Dave Pearman.

Hearing Closure:

- **Motion to Close:**
  - **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to close the public hearing.

- **SECOND:** Dave Pearman.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

V. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

Contextual Introduction: Accurate record-keeping is fundamental to governance. The verification of the June 15 meeting minutes ensures that all past decisions and discussions are correctly memorialized for future reference.
Official Action:

- **Motion to Approve:**
  - **MOTION:** Bruce Bennett moved to approve the June 15 minutes as presented.
  - **SECOND:** Kay Gudeman.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

VI. 2027 BUDGET PLANNING AND SCHEDULING

Contextual Introduction: Anticipating a 10% reduction in state funding, the Council discussed the strategic necessity for all departments to prioritize essential services. The focus remains on maintaining a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for employees while navigating significant fiscal constraints.
Budget Strategy:

- **Funding Ratios:** The Council proposed a "one-third" solution to the shortfall: 1/3 from Solar Money, 1/3 from CEDIT/LIT funds, and 1/3 from departmental cuts.
- **Departmental Reductions:** Departments are requested to aim for a minimum of 5% in cuts, with a 10% goal where feasible.
- **Raise Strategy:** A "3-2-1" raise strategy was discussed, contingent upon departmental ability to find internal offsets.
- **LIT (Local Income Tax) Policy:** The Council deliberated a potential shift from CEDIT to LIT. This would be a tax-neutral shift (no net increase for taxpayers) designed to give the county more flexibility in using funds for the General Fund and emergency services, while also assisting townships in offsetting their own budget shortfalls.

Scheduled Dates:

- **Budget Workshop:** July 28, 2026, at 9:00 AM.
- **Budget Hearing:** August 17, 2026, at 4:30 PM.
- **Budget Adoption:** September 14, 2026, at 4:30 PM.

Official Action:

- **Motion to Schedule:**
  - **MOTION:** Bruce Bennett moved to set the hearing and adoption dates as listed.
  - **SECOND:** Todd Leinbach.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.

VII. HUMANE SOCIETY AND ANIMAL CONTROL

Contextual Introduction: The Council evaluated the growing need for a structured Animal Control partnership. Currently, the Humane Society performs essential services for the county and Sheriff's Department despite a lack of formal government funding for operations.

Committee Formation: A working group was established to develop a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

- **Todd Leinbach** will represent the Council.
- The committee will include a representative from the Commissioners and the Humane Society.
- The Council discussed adopting the **Pulaski County model**, which utilizes a full-time Animal Control officer funded 50/50 by the Sheriff’s Department and MOUs with local towns.

VIII. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION OVERSIGHT

Contextual Introduction: The Council maintains a fiduciary duty to ensure that tax-funded organizations remain transparent and accountable. Oversight is essential to ensure that public funds are utilized effectively.

Discussion Points:

- **Reporting Deficiencies:** Todd Leinbach raised significant concerns regarding the lack of regular reports from the Economic Development Foundation, noting a seven-month period without a formal update.
- **Financial Scrutiny:** The Council questioned the $130,000 annual appropriation in light of reports that the Foundation holds approximately 2 million in Certificates of Deposit (CDs).
- **Self-Funding Goals:** The Council reaffirmed the goal for the Foundation to move toward self-sufficiency and expressed a need for greater transparency regarding their financial reserves.

IX. ADJOURNMENT
Closing Remarks: The Council concluded the session by reaffirming its commitment to fiscal responsibility and administrative transparency, particularly regarding upcoming budget challenges and organizational oversight.
Official Action:

- **Motion to Adjourn:**
  - **MOTION:** Bruce Bennett moved to adjourn.
  - **SECOND:** Howard Bailey.
  - **RESULT:** Passed unanimously (Time: 5:45 PM approx).

SIGNATURES:

Bill Crase *President, Starke County Council*

Dave Pearman *Vice-President, Starke County Council*

Kay Gudeman *Member, Starke County Council*

ABSENT

Cassandra Hine *Member, Starke County Council*

Howard Bailey *Member, Starke County Council*

Todd Leinbach *Member, Starke County Council*

Bruce Bennett *Member, Starke County Council*

Michaelene J. Houston *Auditor/Secretary*