**STARKE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS: MEETING MINUTES**
**Date:** July 28, 2026 **Location:** Starke County Government Building / Meeting Room **Time:** 9:00 AM

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I. CALL TO ORDER
The Starke County Council convened for a Budget Workshop of critical strategic importance. Council President Bill Crase formally opened the session, stating the primary objective was to align departmental spending with the fiscal constraints mandated by state legislation, specifically House Bill 01. The Board noted the current lack of definitive data from the state regarding tax levies and caps, necessitating a conservative approach to the 2027 fiscal year. Following the Call to Order and the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, an administrative note was entered into the record regarding a county-wide phone system outage. It was reported that while lines appear to ring, incoming calls cannot be answered, requiring departmental staff to utilize personal mobile devices for urgent county business. A quorum was established to proceed with the workshop.

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II. ROLL CALL
A formal roll call was conducted to establish a legal quorum for the transaction of official business and the evaluation of departmental budget proposals.

- **Present:** Bill Crase (Council President), Kay Gudeman (Council Member), Todd Leinbach (Council Member), Bruce Bennett (Council Member), Howard Bailey (Council Member),and Dave Pearman (Council Vice-President, attending remotely via teleconference from California).
- **Also Present:** Michaelene J. Houston (Secretary/Auditor), and various department heads.
- **Absent:** Council members Cassandra Hine and Howard Bailey were not present at the time of the initial roll call but Howard was there just a few minutes late.

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III. OPENING ADMINISTRATIVE COMMENTS & FISCAL DIRECTIVES
Council President Bill Crase provided the strategic framework for the workshop, citing the uncertainty regarding state-level tax figures. President Crase issued a strict "3% Raise Guidance" for all departments. He observed that several departments submitted inflated budgets in the previous year that did not correspond with actual expenditures. A formal directive was issued: departments failing to comply with fiscal parameters or failing to provide adequate justification for increases will face mandatory cuts during final budget hearings.

The Board conducted a review of the "CEDIT" and "Jail CEDIT" reserves, noting that the current balances are excessively high. Per State Board of Accounts (SBOA) requirements, the Board emphasized that a formal Capital Improvement Plan must be established for the utilization of these funds to ensure statutory compliance and prevent unnecessary over-taxation.

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## IV. CORONER’S BUDGET REVIEW

The Coroner’s budget was presented as the primary model for departmental compliance with the Council’s fiscal directives.

- **MOTION:** Kay Gudeman moved to adjust the agenda to review the Coroner's budget first. Seconded by Bruce Bennett.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously (5-0).

**Budgetary Synthesis:**

- The Coroner successfully reduced the departmental budget by exactly $4,596.
- The Board noted savings achieved through more selective autopsy testing and the total elimination of redundant office phone lines.
- The proposal is fully compliant with the 3% raise suggestion.

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## V. SHERIFF & JAIL BUDGETARY EVALUATIONS

The Board conducted a line-item review of the Sheriff and Jail budgets, addressing the intersection of the 3% raise guidance and the established law enforcement "Pay Matrix."

- **Salary Review:** A 3.9% salary increase for the Patrol Corporal was identified; the department explained this as a mandatory movement within the matrix based on longevity (transitioning from the 0-4 year bracket to the 5-9 year bracket).
- **Confiscated Equipment:** The Board queried the Sheriff regarding the current practice of trading confiscated firearms for ammunition. Following a discussion on the potential revenue benefits of auctioning evidence guns to the public—as practiced in neighboring counties—the Board directed the Sheriff to provide a formal report on this matter.
- **Jail Expenditures:** The Jail budget reflected a total reduction of 12.6%.
- **Fiscal Guidance:** The Board directed the Auditor to obtain written guidance from the SBOA regarding the use of "Jail CEDIT" funds, specifically regarding their flexibility for broader operational uses versus restricted capital uses.

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## VI. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) REPORT

IT Director Stanley provided an evaluation of the county's technological infrastructure and the rising costs of cybersecurity.

- **Grant Status:** The SLCGP grant, which currently funds county-wide antivirus software, is scheduled to expire next year, necessitating the absorption of these costs into the General Fund.
- **Manufacturer Pricing:** The department reported that certain hardware and software manufacturer pricing has increased by over 700% since October of the previous year.
- **Operational Consolidation:** Through the elimination of antiquated copper lines, the department is reducing total county-wide faxing costs from over $300 per line to a consolidated $130 per month.

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## VII. PLANNING, ZONING, AND BZA BUDGETARY DEBATE

The Board engaged in a detailed debate regarding the Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) budgets, specifically a proposed $10,000 (18.5%) salary increase for the Executive Director.

- **Efficiency Measures:** The Director proposed combining the Planning Commission and BZA budgets into a single office fund to streamline administrative tracking.
- **Return on Investment (ROI):** The Board evaluated the "dual-hat" nature of the role (Building Commissioner and Executive Director). It was noted the Director drafted 15 ordinances in-house this year, resulting in significant savings in legal fees.
- **Action:** While acknowledging the department's high performance, the Board expressed concern regarding the magnitude of the increase for a Director with less than one year of tenure. The Board tabled the final decision on the salary increase until the August 17th meeting for a review of the implementation timetable.

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## VIII. DEPARTMENTAL SUMMARY UPDATES (SURVEYOR, RECORDER, ASSESSOR, TREASURER, EMA)

The Board reviewed several departments regarding statutory compliance and creative fund utilization to protect the General Fund.

- **Surveyor:** The Board discussed the statutory pay rate for surveyors. Per Indiana Code, the registered surveyor's salary must be one and a half times (1.5x) the salary of the non-registered surveyor. The current non-registered rate is set at 70% of the base. The Board directed a formal calculation based on the 1.5x licensed requirement to ensure compliance.

- **Recorder:** The Board noted shared plotter costs with the Surveyor’s office ($1,052 annually). The Recorder requested to utilize Perpetuation Funds for postage and mileage to alleviate General Fund pressure.
- **Assessor:** The Assessor identified a Sales Disclosure Fee fund with a $52,000 balance that has remained untouched for 20 years. These funds will be used to purchase office computers, keeping the Assessor’s General Fund increase at 1.79% and avoiding a projected 4.8% increase.
- **Treasurer and EMA:** These departments were released from the workshop as their budgets were found to be fully compliant or reflected voluntary reductions.

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IX. PURDUE EXTENSION & 911/EMS

The Board conducted a review of the most significant budget increases and public safety expenditures.

- **Purdue Extension:** The Board queried the proposed $46,000 increase, which would raise the contractual agreement from $54,000 to $100,000. Discussion focused on the "H Category" population classification used by Purdue. The Board found the jump disproportionate to Stark County's size compared to larger counties like Porter and demanded a comprehensive list comparing Stark's services and costs to neighboring counties.
- **911 & Public Safety (Fund 4919):** The Board noted that the 911 training budget remains largely underutilized, with less than $2,000 spent to date. Additionally, the Board expressed concern regarding the "Therapeutic Community" fund, which is currently in a negative balance.
- **EMS Equipment:** The Board issued a directive to transition the purchase of ambulance monitors and related high-cost equipment from the operational budget to the Cumulative Capital Development (CUM CAP) funds.

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X. ADJOURNMENT

Upon completion of the scheduled departmental reviews and acknowledging the impending loss of a quorum.

- **MOTION:** Kay Gudeman moved to adjourn the budget workshop. Seconded by Bruce Bennett.
- **RESULT:** Passed unanimously.
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**SIGNATURES:**

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**Bill Crase** *President, Starke County Council*

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**Dave Pearman (via Zoom)** *Vice-President, Starke County Council*

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**Kay Gudeman** *Member, Starke County Council*

ABSENT

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**Cassandra Hine** *Member, Starke County Council*

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**Howard Bailey** *Member, Starke County Council*

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**Todd Leinbach** *Member, Starke County Council*

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**Bruce Bennett** *Member, Starke County Council*

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**Michaelene J. Houston** *Auditor/Secretary*