

# STARKE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING MINUTES: JULY 8, 2026

**Date:** July 8, 2026 **Location:** Starke County Government Building **Time:** 5:30PM

## I. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Starke County Board of Commissioners was called to formal session by Chair Mike VanDeMark. The proceedings commenced with the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Chair VanDeMark emphasized the strategic necessity of establishing a formal quorum to ensure that all deliberations and subsequent votes taken during the session remain legally binding and valid under the administrative protocols of Starke County.

### Roll Call:

- **Present:**
  - Mike VanDeMark, Chair
  - Mark Allen, Vice-Chair
  - Todd Leinbach
  - Kenny Eagle
  - Crystal Keller
  - Dale Turner
  - Therese Pugh
- **Also Present:**
  - John McCurrie, Director of Planning and Building
  - Robbie Blodgett, County Commissioners Assistant
  - Legal Counsel Nathan
- **Absent:**
  - Gwen Rentz, Surveyor

A quorum was officially established, and the Board proceeded to the consideration of the agenda and previous records.

## II. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

The Board reviewed the minutes of the preceding sessions. The approval of these documents is a critical procedural requirement to ensure the official history of the Commission's actions is verified, accurate, and legally defensible.

**June 10, 2026, Meeting Minutes** It was noted for the record that Mike VanDeMark and Mark Allen were not in attendance at the June 10 meeting and therefore abstained from the vote.

- **MOTION:** Dale Turner moved to approve the June 10, 2026, meeting minutes, seconded by Kenny Eagle.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

#### **June 30, 2026, Meeting Minutes**

- **MOTION:** Crystal Keller moved to approve the June 30, 2026, meeting minutes, seconded by Todd Leinbach.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

The approved minutes were submitted for official signature. The Chair then transitioned the meeting to the scheduled public hearing regarding county fee schedules.

### **III. PUBLIC HEARING: RESOLUTION 2026 PC 06 (PERMANENT FEE SCHEDULE)**

The Board addressed the fiscal strategy of updating the county's permanent fee schedule. The objective of this resolution is to repeal the outdated 2016 schedule and adopt a structure that aligns with current administrative costs and future fiscal projections.

#### **Hearing Opening**

- **MOTION:** Mark Allen moved to open the public hearing, seconded by Crystal Keller.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

**Topic Summary** Chair Mike VanDeMark provided an overview of the recommendation, noting a proposed 10% increase across the board for all permit fees.

- **ADMINISTRATIVE MILESTONE:** The new fee schedule is officially scheduled to take effect on **January 21, 2027**, allowing industry stakeholders a transition period.

**Public Comment & Closure** The Chair called for public comment; however, no members of the public came forward to speak on the matter.

- **MOTION:** Therese Pugh moved to close the public hearing, seconded by Dale Turner.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

#### **Official Action**

- **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to adopt Resolution 2026 PC 06, seconded by Mark Allen.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

The new fee schedule was officially adopted, and the Board transitioned to items of Old Business.

### **IV. OLD BUSINESS: RESOLUTION 2026 PC 14 (CONTRACTOR REGISTRATION)**

The Board deliberated on necessary amendments to Ordinance 2006-22 regarding contractor registration. These amendments serve to clarify legal language and streamline administrative timelines for local contractors to improve regulatory compliance.

**Amendments Overview** Two primary changes were detailed to ensure technical accuracy and administrative efficiency:

1. **Section 4:** Correction of insurance language to reflect "million" with proper decimals, correcting a legacy clerical error that previously stated "billion."
2. **Section 5:** Revision of the renewal timeline to an annual basis determined by the contractor's initial registration date. This represents a significant shift from the previous fixed deadline of February 15, allowing for a balanced administrative workload throughout the calendar year.

### **Official Action**

- **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to move Resolution 2026 PC 14 to public hearing status for the August meeting, seconded by Crystal Keller.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

### **V. NEW BUSINESS: RESOLUTION 2026 PC 15 (DATA CENTERS)**

The Board entered into a significant deliberation regarding the potential regulation or prohibition of High-Density Compute Facilities (Data Centers). The discussion highlighted the strategic tension between industrial economic development and the preservation of the county's rural and agricultural character.

**Gwen Rentz Correspondence** A letter from Surveyor Gwen Rentz was read into the record recommending a complete countywide prohibition based on five core findings:

1. **Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan:** Data centers are fundamentally inconsistent with the rural vision of the 2019 plan.
2. **Agricultural Protection:** These facilities permanently convert finite, productive farmland into industrial zones.
3. **Water Resource Protection:** High water consumption for cooling poses an existential risk to local groundwater and watersheds.
4. **Infrastructure Demands:** Operations place extraordinary demands on electrical capacity and utility infrastructure.
5. **Community Character:** The industrial nature (noise, lighting, security fencing) diminishes the quality of life and rural character.

### **Public Comment Summary**

- **John Wallace:** Expressed concerns regarding long-term environmental ramifications and the lack of local job creation for agricultural workers.

- **Shannon Thompson:** Argued that data centers would ruin the "Mayberry" character of the community.
- **Eric Kager:** Raised concerns regarding privacy and the potential for data centers to drain water from Bass Lake and the Yellow River.
- **Mark Barlog:** Suggested following the precedent of Marshall County to enact a total ban, criticizing corporate tax breaks.

**Legal Counsel Guidance** Legal Counsel Nathan advised that while Cass and Marshall counties have passed outright bans, such actions must be grounded in the County's Comprehensive Plan to withstand judicial scrutiny. He suggested that any ban must be explicitly linked to findings of fact regarding rural character and resource management.

**Board Deliberation & Workshop** The Board reached a consensus to investigate a ban further. John McCurrie confirmed that the 2019 Comprehensive Plan already provides a strong foundation for agricultural preservation.

### **Official Action**

- **MOTION:** Mike VanDeMark moved to schedule a 30-minute workshop at the next meeting to review the 2019 Comprehensive Plan and draft a "crude version" of a ban to buttress the findings of fact against the Plan to ensure any proposed ban survives judicial scrutiny, seconded by Todd Leinbach.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

## **VI. STAFF REPORTS (PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT)**

Director John McCurrie presented the monthly activity report. Tracking permit volume and inspections serves as a barometer for county growth and provides the data necessary for regulatory oversight.

### **Activity Statistics (June 2026)**

- **Permits Issued:** 87 total.
  - 25% categorized as carports/mechanical/gas.
  - 20% categorized as electrical (including reconnects and new builds).
- **Inspections Completed:** 99 total.
  - The majority consisted of footing and foundation inspections for pole barns, dwellings, and garages.

### **Revenue Analysis**

- **June Revenue:** \$8,203 (driven primarily by pole barns, sheds, and single-family dwellings).
- **Year-to-Date Total:** \$56,686.

## **VII. EXPENDITURE AND BUDGETARY REVIEW**

The Commission conducted a rigorous expenditure analysis to identify line-item volatility and ensure continued operational solvency amid legal service demands.

**Planning Commission Budget** The Planning Commission office supplies line item is at a critical balance of \$24. To maintain operations, the Director intends to transfer funds from the equipment repair and fuel line items. Legal services reflect significant budgetary stress, with \$14,154 of the \$15,000 budget already expended.

- **Internal Transfer:** The Director successfully transferred \$345 from Dues and Subscriptions to Legal Notices to cover recent public hearing advertisement costs.

**BZA Budget** The BZA budget is facing a critical shortage in office supplies, with a remaining balance of only 2.73. Funds from postage and travel (400 and \$300 respectively) were redirected to legal notices to accommodate certified mailing requirements and rescheduled hearings.

## VIII. CODE ENFORCEMENT & LITIGATION UPDATE

The Planning Department continues to maintain zoning integrity through active legal enforcement and injunctive relief in the Starke County Court system.

| Case Number | Address             | Current Status                                                                                            |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 681         | 3915 E Toto Road    | Pending notice response.                                                                                  |
| 680         | [Address Protected] | Stop work order lifted; \$2,850 fine paid; Case Closed.                                                   |
| 679         | 2033 N 700 E        | Fence lowered to 4ft; Case Closed.                                                                        |
| 677         | 8620 E 400          | Trailers plated; Case Closed.                                                                             |
| 676         | 8355 S Spruce St    | Waiting on citation response.                                                                             |
| 675         | 5365 E 200 S        | Multiple dwellings fine paid; Case Closed.                                                                |
| 658         | Hotel (General)     | Ongoing injunctive relief; interior must remain vacant until cleaned.                                     |
| 653         | 2340 E US 30        | <b>Highlight:</b> \$2,850 unpaid balance. Owners intend to demolish and apply for new development permit. |
| 357         | 97 E 500 N          | Injunctive relief ongoing (\$2,500 balance); pending hearing for removal from premises.                   |

## IX. UPCOMING MILESTONES & ADJOURNMENT

The Board established an administrative roadmap for the next 90 days to ensure organizational alignment and legislative progress.

### Action Plan

- **30-Day Outlook:** Foundation for data center ban/regulation, signing of contractor registration amendments, and start date for the new Deputy Administrative Assistant.
- **60-Day Outlook:** Budget working groups with the County Council and Commissioners for fiscal year 2027.
- **90-Day Outlook:** Finalization of pending administrative adjustments and ordinance reviews.

#### **Adjournment Action**

- **MOTION:** Mark Allen moved to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Kenny Eagle.
- **RESULT:** Motion passed.

#### **SIGNATURE BLOCK**

  
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Mike VanDeMark, Chair  
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John McCurrie, Secretary