

STARKE COUNTY PLAN COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

Date: August 12, 2026

Location: Starke County Government Building, Knox, Indiana

Time: 5:30 PM

These minutes constitute the official record of the Starke County Plan Commission regarding its legislative deliberations, administrative decisions, and public proceedings. This document is prepared to ensure legal transparency, historical accuracy, and adherence to Indiana jurisdictional standards for local government record-keeping.

I. CALL TO ORDER The meeting was called to order by Chair Mike VanDeMark, presiding in the absence of the Chair. The proceedings commenced with the formal leading of the Pledge of Allegiance by those in attendance.

Upon the conclusion of the opening ceremony, the Vice-Chair directed the Commission to the verification of attendance.

II. ROLL CALL A formal roll call was conducted to establish a quorum for the transaction of official business.

Members Present:

- **Mike VanDeMark**
- **Todd Leinbach**
- **Kenny Eagle**
- **Crystal Keller**
- **Dale Turner**
- **Therese Pugh**
- **Gwen Rentz**
- **Mark Allen**

Also Present:

- **John McCurrie**, Director of Planning and Building
- **Kassandra Speicher**, Deputy Administrative Assistant
- **Robbie Blodgett**, BZA Secretary / Code Enforcement
- **Nathan Vis**, Legal Counsel

Following the establishment of a quorum, the Vice-Chair transitioned the board to the review of the meeting's roadmap.

III. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA The Vice-Chair called for a motion to approve the agenda as presented.

- **MOTION:** Gwen Rentz moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Crystal Keller.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried unanimously.

With the agenda approved, the Commission turned its attention to the review of historical records.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES The minutes of the July 8, 2026, meeting were submitted for Commission review.

- **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to approve the minutes as presented, seconded by Mark Allen.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried unanimously.

Having finalized administrative approvals, the Commission opened the first of two scheduled public hearings.

V. PUBLIC HEARING: RESOLUTION 2026-PC-14 (CONTRACTOR REGISTRATION)

The Commission addressed a necessary clerical and administrative correction to the existing contractor registration requirements. Director John McCurrie clarified that the resolution was drafted to rectify a significant typographical error in the bonding requirements—which had erroneously listed a "billion-dollar" bond—to the intended one-million-dollar requirement. Additionally, the resolution aligns the registration cycle to a 365-day calendar rather than a fixed annual date.

- **PROCEDURAL ACTION:** Mark Allen moved to open the public hearing, seconded by Crystal Keller. (Passed).
- **DISCUSSION:** No public testimony was offered.
- **PROCEDURAL ACTION:** Kenny Eagle moved to close the public hearing, seconded by Dale Turner. (Passed).
- **MOTION:** Gwen Rentz moved to approve **Resolution 2026-PC-14** as written, seconded by Crystal Keller.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried unanimously.

With the bonding requirements corrected, the Vice-Chair transitioned the Commission to the next legislative item regarding agricultural fees.

VI. PUBLIC HEARING: RESOLUTION 2026-PC-13 (AGRICULTURAL STRUCTURE PERMIT FEES) The Commission evaluated a resolution designed to repeal disparate charging structures and standardize agricultural permit fees. The analysis focused on aligning structures such as pole barns with standard permit fees (20 cents per square foot) while maintaining exemptions for production-essential structures like silos and grain storage.

- **PROCEDURAL ACTION:** Mark Allen moved to open the public hearing, seconded by Todd Leinbach. (Passed).
- **DISCUSSION:** The board discussed the distinction between equipment housing (pole barns) and production structures (silos). Members noted that many local farmers were already paying these fees, and the resolution formalizes the process for consistency.
- **PROCEDURAL ACTION:** Gwen Rentz moved to close the public hearing, seconded by Therese Pugh. (Passed).
- **MOTION:** Todd Leinbach moved to approve **Resolution 2026-PC-13** as written and forward it to the County Commissioners for final approval, seconded by Mark Allen.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried unanimously.

Following the resolution of agricultural fee structures, the Commission began a high-priority deliberation on commercial data center regulations.

VII. RESOLUTION 2026-PC-15: COMMERCIAL DATA CENTER REGULATION The Commission engaged in a comprehensive "Findings of Fact" discussion regarding the regulation and prohibition of commercial-scale data centers. Legal Counsel and Director McCurrie presented evidence across five statutory categories:

1. **Comprehensive Plan:** The prohibition aligns with the County's Master Plan, which prioritizes agricultural character, tourism, and natural resource preservation.
2. **Current Conditions:** The board determined that massive industrial cooling hubs are inconsistent with the current character of the County.
3. **Desirable Use:** Deliberation confirmed that commercial-scale data centers do not represent the most desirable use of the County's land resources.
4. **Property Values:** The board cited significant concerns regarding noise and light pollution from cooling systems and their negative impact on adjacent property values.
5. **Responsible Growth:** Concerns were raised regarding safety constraints, specifically whether local fire departments possess the specialized infrastructure to handle data center emergencies.

Key Deliberations:

- **Water Volume:** A "red line" was established regarding the use of high-volume water for evaporative cooling systems.
- **Thresholds:** The board focused on the "500 square feet and 50 kilowatt" threshold, which is specifically designed to allow local medical facilities or AI advancements for internal use while prohibiting commercial-scale centers.
- **MOTION:** Gwen Rentz moved to forward **Resolution 2026-PC-15** and the associated findings to a public hearing in October 2026, seconded by Todd Leinbach.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried.

Legislative deliberations having concluded, the Vice-Chair invited the Director of Planning and Building to present the monthly departmental report.

VIII. DEPARTMENTAL REPORT: PLANNING & BUILDING DIRECTOR Director John McCurrie provided the fiscal and performance metrics for July 2026:

- **Personnel:** Introduction of Kassandra Speicher as the new Deputy Administrative Assistant.
- **Permit Activity:** 85 total permits issued, primarily consisting of electrical reconnects following storms and contractor registrations.
- **Inspection Metrics:** 124 total inspections were performed (119 passed, 5 failed). The Director noted that he personally conducted all site visits to ensure code compliance.
- **Fiscal Report:** Revenue for July totaled \$10,013, representing the second-highest month of the year.
- **Expenditures:** The Director reported improved budget tracking. He noted a projected increase in scanner and blueprinting costs for the Planning/Building and Recorder departments due to the Surveyor's office withdrawing from the shared contract.

Upon the conclusion of the departmental report, the Commission moved to the review of active code enforcement and unsafe building cases.

IX. CODE ENFORCEMENT & UNSAFE BUILDINGS Robbie Blodgett and John McCurrie provided status updates on active enforcement actions:

- **Case 686 (Angela Drive):** Ongoing violation regarding RV habitation. Owners are pursuing a garage conversion; staff continues to monitor for occupancy compliance.
- **Case 683 (Bass Lake):** An administrative error was identified regarding a permit issued in August 2025 for a non-conforming structure. The owner must now seek a BZA variance to rectify the status.
- **Case 357 (Septic Violation):** The property owner failed to respond to court proceedings regarding an illegal septic system. A court hearing is scheduled for August 18 for potential abatement.
- **Hamlet Hotel/Store:** Counsel for the property owner indicated a lack of definitive intent regarding the site's development (convenience store vs. hotel). The Commission granted a 30-day window for the owner to provide a firm plan for demolition or re-establishment.

The Commission then transitioned into new business and future operational directives.

X. OLD & NEW BUSINESS

- **Amateur (Ham) Radio Towers:** The Commission identified a conflict between the current 25-foot accessory structure height restriction and the 40-75 foot requirements for functional Ham Radio towers. The Director was instructed to draft an exemption for towers up to 75 feet to ensure alignment with FCC and state guidelines.
- **County-wide Re-zoning:** The board recognized significant county-wide zoning inconsistencies (e.g., R1 vs. R3 conflicts). Director McCurrie was directed to research the process and requirements for a comprehensive county-wide re-zoning initiative.

Following the conclusion of new business, the meeting was opened for final public input.

XI. PUBLIC COMMENT & ADJOURNMENT **Public Comment:** A local resident, Tom, inquired regarding the technical definition of data centers and the impact on water resources. Director McCurrie clarified that the ordinance specifically targets "consumptive evaporative cooling systems." Commissioner Dale Turner, speaking from his professional background as a journeyman in commercial and industrial HVAC, provided technical clarification on the environmental risks associated with refrigerant leaks in high-capacity chiller systems, emphasizing the potential for soil and water contamination.

Adjournment: The Vice-Chair called for a motion to adjourn.

- **MOTION:** Mark Allen moved to adjourn, seconded by Crystal Keller.
- **RESULT:** The motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 6:50 PM.

SIGNATURE BLOCK


Mike VanDeMark, Chair


John McCurrie, Secretary

