

NIRPC Full Commission Meeting

6100 Southport Road, Portage, IN

April 18, 2024 Minutes

Call to Order

Chair Tom Dermody called the meeting to order at 9:01 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance. The meeting was streamed live on YouTube.

New Appointments to the Commission

Ty Warner announced the appointments to the Commission of Jon Costas (Valparaiso), Dwayne Halliburton (Gary), Linda Pompeii (Pottawattomie Park), and Warren Schacht (Trail Creek).

Roll call - Taken by Candice Eklund

Present

The 33 Commissioners present at the meeting included Jenny Beier (Schneider), Thomas Black (Highland), Austin Bonta (Portage), Kevin Breitzke (Porter County Surveyor), Bob Carnahan (Cedar Lake), Jon Costas (Valparaiso), Tom Dermody (La Porte), Daina Dumbrys (Michiana Shores), Denise Ebert (Wanatah), J.D. Haley (Long Beach), Dwayne Halliburton (Gary), Keesha Hardaway (Merrillville), Vanessa Hernandez-Orange (East Chicago), Josh Huddlestun (Hobart), Justin Kiel (LaPorte County Council), Scott Kingan (Ogden Dunes), Wendy Mis (Munster), Edward Morales (Porter Township), Angie Nelson Deutch (Michigan City), David Phelps (Beverly Shores), Barb Regnitz (Porter County Commissioner), Lisa Rosenkranz (La Crosse), Rick Ryfa (Griffith), Warren Schacht (Trail Creek), Tom Schmitt (Schererville), Steve Spebar (Whiting), Gerald Swets (St. John), Sharon Szwedo (New Chicago), Mary Tanis (Dyer), Jim Ton (Chesterton), George Topoll (Union Township), Andy Vasquez (Porter County Council), and CJ Wittmer (Kouts). Matt Deitchley, representing INDOT, was also present.

The 17 Commissioners absent included Kyle Allen (Lake County Commissioner), Duane Arndt (Kingsford Heights), James Burge (Porter), Bill Carroll (Lake Station), Tim Clayton (Winfield), Bill Emerson (Lake County Surveyor), Connie Gramarossa (LaPorte County Council), Bonnie Hawksworth (Dune Acres), Tony Hendricks (LaPorte County Surveyor), Lori Hunt (Westville), Kurt Jordan (Burns Harbor), Peter Land (Crown Point), Tom McDermott (Hammond), Randall Niemeyer (Lake County Council), Linda Pompeii (Pottawattomie Park), Jim Pressel (Governor Appointee), and John Yelkich (Lowell).

Hebron, Kingsbury, and The Pines have appointed no representatives to NIRPC.

Staff present included Ty Warner, Tom Vander Woude, Denarie Kane, Kevin Polette, and Candice Eklund.

Public Comment – There were no public comments.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the March 18, 2024 Executive Board meeting were approved on motion by Kevin Breitzke and seconded by Jim Ton.

Report of the Chair – Tom Dermody

At the Commission meeting last month, Tom Dermody stated he would like to form a relationship with the rail companies and work together to improve the relationship from both the railway's and the local counties' perspectives. Due to Mayor Dermody's efforts, Will Miller and Derek Sublette, who are with Norfolk Southern Railway, attended the meeting today and will speak with the group later in the meeting.

Report of the Executive Director – Ty Warner

Ty Warner presented on the Committee Restructuring agenda item requiring a vote of the Full Commission. Ty provided a full presentation on this topic at the Executive Board meeting last month. Restructuring NIRPC committees was last discussed in 2021, with the prior restructuring being developed in 2015. There are currently 12 committees, and attendance at all of the committees has been challenging, with dwindling attendance. Many attendees are the same people at each meeting, calling into question the value of multiple

subcommittees. The new proposed focused committee structure follows NIRPC's statute: Transportation, Environment, Economy & Place, and an additional committee to address issues of overall Leadership of the organization, much of which is currently handled at the Finance & Personnel Committee. On motion by Kevin Breitzke and seconded by Wendy Mis, the Full Commission approved the new committee structure, realizing there were important details not worked out, such as composition of who will be on these committees and how they function. This motion also includes giving authorization to the Executive Board to approve the details of how those committees would function when they meet on June 20.

Ty Warner welcomed Anne Massie and Virginia Pleasant, Co-Executive Directors of the NWI Food Council. Ty stated the NWI Food Council held a summit at the Design Barn in Hebron, and one of the takeaways was how much is being done in NWI to improve our food systems.

Anne Massie and Virginia Pleasant presented on what the NWI Food Council does in Northwest Indiana, adding NIRPC has been a partner with them since 2008, when over 500 people attended the NIRPC meeting with them. In 2012, NIRPC funded and supported a food study to look at what assets we had in our region, where the farms are, and how we feed ourselves. By 2015, it was determined that our region needed a food council; today, there are over 400 in the United States and Canada. Indiana is in the top 10% of agricultural production nationally, yet they import 98% of fruits and vegetables despite having farmland all around us. The Indiana Food Vision aims to cultivate a robust, nourishing, and equitable food system where all communities across our state can thrive via recommended policy and programming action. A survey has been created to help with this initiative. A notification will be sent to the Commissioners with the link to the survey. For additional information, please visit [NWI Food Council](#).

Ty introduced Celena Green, the Fellow selected through the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), who will work with NIRPC and the NWI Forum. NIRPC was one of 65 recipients nationwide to get a Fellow. (Another Fellow was assigned jointly to Gary & Michigan City, so Northwest Indiana received two of the 65.). Ms. Green reported she began her fellowship in February and will work on this initiative for two and a half years. The project is about supporting four cities in Lake County to transform some of their Brownfields into places that could be ready for sites that could be part of the Quantum Computing Corridor to attract Quantum businesses into the region. Celena has met with the redevelopment staff and teams in the cities of Hammond, Gary, and East Chicago and will meet with the City of Lake Station today.

Finance & Personnel Committee (F & P) – Wendy

Wendy Mis reported the F & P Committee met this morning to review the financial reports, bank reconciliations, and claims registers for February and March 2023. The next meeting will be held on June 20, 2024.

Technical Planning Committee (TPC) – Kevin Breitzke

Kevin Breitzke reported the TPC met on April 9, 2024, and heard a presentation on the Transit chapter of NWI 2050+. The TPC brought the action item below to the Full Commission for consideration with a favorable recommendation. The next TPC meeting is scheduled for May 7, 2024.

Resolution #24-05: Tom Vander Woude presented the highlights from the FY 2025 and FY 2026 document stating the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) is a core planning document required by the U.S. Department of Transportation for all Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO). The UPWP contains the work plan for the MPO staff, a program of planning tasks, and the budget used to allocate resources to those individual tasks. Tom provided a brief explanation of each of the seven funding chapters. This resolution allows minor technical changes to be made to the document based on comments received from INDOT, FHWA, and FTA. On motion by Tom Schmitt and seconded by Jim Ton, the Full Commission approved Resolution #24-05.

Economic Development District Report – Denarie Kane

Ms. Kane reported on two items from the Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA). First, the OCRA planning grants are open and due May 17. Communities in La Porte and Porter Counties are eligible but must communicate in advance with Gerry White of OCRA. A minimum local match of 10% is required. Secondly, OCRA's Main Street 202 training will be held at various locations across Indiana, the closest being in Monticello on May 14.

Ms. Kane reported that the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) has launched the Legend loan program using \$29 million in federal funds. It is designed to help entrepreneurs and small businesses, focusing on historically underserved businesses. The Community Investment Fund of Indiana has a Hammond-based business development officer and is one of the nine selected lenders. Ms. Kane also noted that Darrin Fleener, the Economic Development Representative recently assigned by the Economic Development Administration (EDA), will serve Minnesota and Indiana. Community representatives with potential EDA grant applications will be invited to attend. Communities intending to submit an EDA grant application in the near future are encouraged to contact Ms. Kane at dkane@nirpc.org.

INDOT – Matt Deitchley

Matt Deitchley reported that 252 communities received a record \$207 million in matching funds for Community Crossings. Northwest Indiana received over \$20 million, with 24 communities receiving the maximum amount of \$1.5 million. The next call for Community Crossings applications will be July 1, 2024.

INDOT Commissioner Mike Smith aims to reduce serious injury or fatal accidents on Indiana roads by 25% over the next 10 years. The La Porte District Safety Summit will be held at the Healthcare Foundation in La Porte on May 29 from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Invitations will be mailed soon. Matt also shared that it is National Work Zone Awareness Week. For additional information, visit their website at [INDOT: Home](#).

Other Business

Tom Dermody introduced Derek Sublette (from Indianapolis) and Will Miller (from Atlanta), both with Norfolk Southern (NS) Railway, and thanked them for attending the meeting today. Will Miller, the Director of Public Engagement, said that attending this meeting was a great honor and that NS is here to work with the communities. Mr. Miller's job focuses on reducing blocked crossing issues and taking care of public nuisance issues that are important to communities that NS may not be aware of. Over 125 trains go in and out of Chicago daily, the biggest freight railroad city in the world, and is a vital part of their network that expands over 22 states and 14,000 public crossings. The railroad could not do all its work by itself, and it values its partnerships with state agencies such as INDOT. The Local Trax project program has been a revolutionary state-run program because it also involves state partners, federal assistance, and the local government. When Mayor Dermody asked why trains stop at the crossings, Miller said some of the reasons include signals, traffic, hours of service, something on the rail, mechanical issues, or an incident, to name a few. Will Miller and Derek Sublette offered to meet and field additional questions after the meeting and give the Commissioners their business cards.

Announcements

In an ongoing effort to support small businesses in NWI, Ty Warner recognized Yaggy Road Roasting Co. in Valparaiso for again graciously providing coffee at the meeting today.

Various announcements were made by George Topoll, Bob Carnahan, and Kevin Breitzke.

Hearing no other business, Tom Dermody adjourned the meeting at 10:35 a.m. The next meeting on June 20 will be an Executive Board meeting.

The livestream video recording for this meeting is available on NIRPC's YouTube Channel at [Full Commission Meeting 4-18-24 \(youtube.com\)](#)