

## **Wells County Commissioners**

### **Regular Session March 18, 2024**

The Wells County Commissioners met in regular session at 5:00PM at the Wells County Extension, 1240 4-H Park Road, Bluffton, IN. Those in attendance were Commissioners, Jeff Stringer, Michael Vanover, and Blake Gerber, County Attorney, Ted Storer and County Auditor, Lisa McCormick.

**Minutes:** A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve the minutes from the March 4, 2024, regular session. Motion carried 3-0.

**Payroll and Claims:** A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve Payroll #6 in the amount of \$298,143.55 and 145 claims totaling \$394,285.73. Motion carried 3-0.

**Wells County Sheriff:** Sheriff Holliday reported 74 inmates, 22 pretrial Superior, 42 pretrial Circuit, 2 F6 DOC and 8 DOC. Repairs are in process for the pipe replacement in the administrative area of the jail. Sheriff Holliday requested use of any remaining ARPA funds for the purchase of new police vehicles. Commissioner Stringer stated that the Health Department was also considering making a request for the purchase of a vehicle.

**Wells County Highway Supervisor:** Shawn Bonar updated the Commissioners on current projects. The highway department is still moving dirt, asphalt, and lumber from the old location. Pipe storage racks are being assembled; organization is ongoing. Crews are hauling base stone to road conversion sites. A new VAC trailer has been delivered, and training has been completed for the staff. The first job is complete with excellent results. Bonar presented an unofficial detour for Commissioner review. The unofficial detour is for a bridge replacement for SR 218, the detour will be 100E to 700S to 200E returning to SR 218. A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve the unofficial detour for SR 218. Motion carried 3-0. Road conversion updates included drainage and field entrances are being finalized for 450S and 450E, while drainage prep work is ongoing for 100N. The highway garage updates included the fuel tank has been moved and is operational, 20 punch list items are remaining and will be discussed at a meeting on Tuesday with completion deadlines established. Commissioner Stringer requested a list of road conversions for 2024 at the April meeting.

**Wells County Master Plan Funding Request:** Economic Development Director Chad Kline presented a Master Plan proposal for Wells County Economic Development. The proposal identified tasks to be completed prior to the project team compiling a Wells County Master Plan. The project team will consist of members from the Veridus group who are professionals in the industry. The Veridus group has been working with government entities throughout Indiana. The project team will present the final Wells County Master Plan during a County Commissioner meeting to facilitate adoption of the document as an amendment into the Wells County Comprehensive Plan. Kline stated that the total project fee is \$87,000, of which grant funding would facilitate \$50,000 of the fee. The remainder of the funding, \$37,000, would be distributed amongst the county entities that approve of the funding request based on population. Kline stated that Wells County Revitalization will bill Wells County for the expense, if approved. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve the Wells County Master Plan funding request. Motion carried 3-0.

**Economic Development Advisory Assistance Proposal:** A proposal for Economic Development Advisory Assistance was presented to the Commissioners for review. This proposal calls for the consultant

providing services to Wells County and the City of Bluffton. CR Morphew Consulting, Cheryl Morphew, estimated that most of the proposal could be completed in three months. Each entity would be eligible to use 10 hours of worked time per month, at an hourly rate of \$150. The agreement has an option to renew at the end of three months if deemed necessary. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve the proposal with CR Morphew Consulting. Motion carried 3-0.

**Public Health Officer Appointment:** The Health Department Board President, Chris Esterling, presented a record of appointment of a County Local Health Officer. The appointment had been unanimously approved by the Wells County Board of Health at the March 11, 2024, meeting. Brandon Huggins, MD is the Health Board recommended appointment for a four-year term. A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve, and allow the Commissioner President to sign the appointment of Brandon Huggins, MD as the Local Health Officer. Motion carried 3-0.

**Amending Ordinance for Wells County Zoning and Zone Maps:** Area Plan Director Michael Lautzenheiser Jr. presented an Ordinance that would amend the Wells County zoning ordinance and zone maps. The petition listed a change to 49 parcels in Liberty and Chester Townships from Agriculture-1 Zones District to add a P-1 Overlay District. The Wells County Area Plan Commission has issued a do not pass recommendation on the proposed amendment. Lautzenheiser listed findings of fact that lead to the do not pass recommendation. The overlay district request does not pay reasonable regard to the Wells County Vision 2035 Comprehensive Plan, it does not pay reasonable regard to the agricultural conditions and character present in the project area, it does not pay reasonable regards to the desired agricultural use as stated in the Wells County Vision Comprehensive Plan 2035, and the petition does not pay reasonable regards to responsible development and growth of the existing rural agricultural area of Liberty and Chester Townships. This recommendation was unanimously approved by the Area Plan Commission Board on March 8, 2024. Lautzenheiser explained that the Commissioners have ninety days from the date of recommendation, June 6, 2024, to act on the amending Ordinance. If no action is taken by June 6, 2024, the proposal will be considered rejected. Commissioner Stringer felt more time was needed to research the proposal. Commissioner Gerber asked about ordinance requirements for setbacks. Lautzenheiser referenced recent amendments by the Commissioners in the zoning ordinance, which were removal of the participating property setbacks and the allowance for collection systems to be both overhead and underground with approval from the Highway Department or Drainage Board. Commissioner Vanover felt more time to consider the proposal was needed. Attorney Storer reiterated that attention should be paid to the 2035 Comprehensive Plan, the current conditions and character of structures in the district, the most desirable uses of the land and the land values. All those issues would need to be considered regarding a vote on this ordinance. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to table the issue for a future meeting that would be determined later. Motion carried 3-0.

**Right-of-Way:** Two rights-of-way were presented to the Commissioners for approval, the motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve, and sign the two rights-of-way. Motion carried 3-0.

**Community Corrections Board Appointment:** A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to reappoint Michael Vanover to the Community Corrections Advisory Board for a four-year term ending on 12/31/2027. Motion carried 3-0.

**County Farm:** An agreement has been reached regarding the Gaiser Farms litigation. Wells County will pay \$60,000 to Gaiser Farms, \$45,000 will be reimbursed to Wells County from an insurance claim.

**Public Comment:** Commissioner Stringer opened the meeting for public comments with a time limit of three minutes per person.

Jesse Laniak, Development Manager Paddlefish Solar, spoke in favor of the project and the betterment of Wells County.

Ken Jones, Poneto, spoke in favor of the project regarding landowner rights.

Claudia Mounsey, Mounsey Family Farms, spoke in favor of the project, future growth of Wells County and economic stability.

Chris Furnish, Southern Wells bus driver, was opposed to the project and cited decreasing property values.

Susan Poper, Paddlefish local representative, stated that Paddlefish Solar goes above and beyond regarding service and public support.

Brad Poper spoke in favor of the project and likened this to any new industry, which is, in his opinion, usually met with resistance from residents.

Jody Baker, Baker & Grover Farms, Liberty Township spoke in favor of the Paddlefish project and are participants in the project. Baker spoke of enhanced quality of life for residents and Southern Wells School System.

Mike Jackson, Local 103 Operating Engineers, spoke in favor of the project and stated that jobs would come out of local union halls.

Skip Howard, Local 305 Electricians, spoke in favor of the project and stated that jobs would come out of local union halls.

Steve Eberly, Hoosiers for Renewables, said residents want power on when they want it on and was in favor of the project.

Tabby Fate, 30-year bus driver, spoke against the project and does not want panels around her house.

John Schuhmacher, Area Plan Commission member, spoke against the project.

Robert Craig, Indiana Laborers Union, spoke in favor of the project stating that Wells County would have increased jobs and a local workforce.

Judy Craig, Liberty Center, spoke against the project stated that the power does not stay local and is aesthetically poor.

Daniel Straka, field representative for the Land and Liberty Coalition, does advocacy work and advocates for property rights. He spoke in favor of the project and believes more education is needed for residents.

Larry Burrow, IBEW Local 305, spoke about using local union workers and was in favor of the project.

Kathie Mounsey spoke against the project.

Ted Smith spoke in favor of the project; his church has 138 panels on their roof for renewable energy.

Tim Hartigan spoke in favor of the project and wanted to know if Wells County was against all progress or just renewable energy progress.

Kyle James spoke of the future for our children and against the project.

Paul Commings spoke in favor of the project and likened it to growing corn for fuel.

Rich Kirkland, a licensed appraiser, disputed that property values would decrease, based on his work in Indiana as a licensed appraiser.

Mark Moore spoke against the project; he has land in Huntington County as well. He works for a food-based company and wonders how we will continue to feed the world.

Brandon Harnish spoke against the project, cited all or nothing, friend or enemy, it is about principal not power, we need to defend our people.

Vicki Andrews is not against solar, solar should be placed in non-residential areas; the decision should not be based on money.

Tara Frauhiger is a Huntington/Wells County resident and is opposed to the project.

Jody Holloway is not against solar but spoke against the project stating that this is not the ground for a project like this. Holloway disputed the fact that property values would not go down as stated earlier. Allison Alma spoke against the project and in support of residents.

Logan Mynatt spoke against the project and the direct impact on area residents and environment.

Bruce Monce spoke against the project; his property will be surrounded by panels.

Todd Feichter, Southern Wells School Board President, was worried about student population decreasing.

Trina Roudebush, Paddlefish Solar, dispersed a handout from the Solar Survey from the Vision 2035 Comprehensive Plan. Roudebush referenced supportive comments in the survey from area residents.

Zane Gearhart spoke in opposition to the project, in his estimation, there was more local opposition than local support for the project.

Connie Leininger, National Policy Director for the Center for Infrastructure and Economic Development, spoke in favor of the project and on various ways to co-crop around the panels, such as bee keeping, spearmint, and sheep.

Commissioner Stringer asked Jesse Laniak if the project would come to fruition without subsidies that are being granted for the project. Jesse said that it could not.

**Adjourned:** Wells County Commissioners adjourned at 7:15 PM. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to adjourn. Motion carried 3-0.

#### Wells County Commissioners

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President, Jeff Stringer

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Vice President, Michael K Vanover

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Member, Blake Gerber

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_  
Lisa McCormick, Wells County Auditor