

Wells County Commissioners

Regular Session January 5, 2026

The Wells County Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, January 5, 2026, at 5:00 PM in the Commissioner's Room of the Wells County Carnegie Annex, Bluffton, IN. Those in attendance were Commissioners, Jeff Stringer, Michael Vanover, Blake Gerber, Attorney Ted Storer and County Auditor Lisa McCormick.

Re-organization of Board: A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to re-appoint Commissioner Jeff Stringer as Commissioner President and Michael Vanover as Commissioner Vice President for 2026. Motion carried 3-0

Minutes: A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve the minutes from December 15, 2025, regular session. Motion carried 3-0.

Payroll and Claims: A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve Payroll #26 in the amount of \$332,097.53, Payroll #1 in the amount of \$341,689.29 and 229 claims totaling \$1,076,547.26. Motion carried 3-0.

Wells County Sheriff: Sheriff Holliday reported 58 inmates, 17 pretrial Superior, 31 pretrial Circuit, 0 F6 DOC and 1 DOC. There is an outstanding insurance claim for damage to a light pole in the parking lot. Chief Deputy Campbell is serving on the Animal Shelter board for Wells County.

Highway Supervisor: Supervisor Matt Witt updated the Commissioners on projects. The highway employees are placing stone and grading the Meridian Road conversion to build up the base in the winter months. Winter operations were needed on December 19th and January 2nd to treat roads for slick conditions. Heavy wind has damaged the fence at the highway. Hoosier fence will follow up with the highway for possible solutions. Witt presented a uniform and PPE policy draft for Commissioner input. The draft is for the highway department only. Witt stated that his department has different uniform needs versus other departments. Commissioner Stringer suggested a standard of who needs what and what do you need to do the job. Witt discussed taxable and non-taxable apparel, Witt stated that he would be the gatekeeper for compliance for his department. The Commissioners suggested finding a supplier the employees would be able to purchase recommended and approved items. Interviews for a mechanic are ongoing. Five rights-of-way were presented for approval from Area Plan. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve the five rights-of-way. Motion carried 3-0.

Highway Engineer: Engineer Nate Whitacre presented an LPA consulting contract for engineering services for Bridge 72 with Engineering Resources. The contract has a not to exceed payable amount of \$317,958. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve the LPA consulting contract with Engineering Resources for Bridge 72. Motion carried 3-0. Whitacre presented an Ordinance amending service charges for Wells County highway road and right-of-way work permits. The fees have been amended from Ordinance 2022-29. A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve Ordinance 2026-01 which amends service charges for Wells County Highway road & right-of-way work permits. Motion carried 3-0. Bridge 54 is in process, removing concrete from the old structure. Whitacre is hopeful to start foundation excavation and pile driving in a couple of weeks.

Opioid Settlement Fund Update: Stephen Pastore, representing the Opioid Settlement Committee, gave an update regarding the settlement funds. The Committee has received 11 submissions to date. An error was discovered with the email address that was on the website, so additional time is being given for more submissions.

Community Corrections Update: Community Corrections Director Madison Hake updated the Commissioners on the Community Corrections department. Currently 19 offenders are on home detention. Hake has been Director since mid-August and has updated some user fees and is implementing more goal-oriented programs. The ending balance in the Project Income fund for 2025 is \$78,991, which is up from 2024. Hake mentioned that they have a good working relationship with the Probation department.

Wells County Zoning Ordinance Amendment: Michael Lautzenheiser Jr. presented a 6-4 vote, do pass recommendation for an amendment to the Wells County Zoning Ordinance regarding solar development. The proposed amendment(s) were to create new general regulation for small & structure-mounted solar energy facilities, remove medium solar energy facilities, amend non-participating pre-existing residence and non-participating property setbacks for large solar energy facilities, amend the visual buffer requirement for large solar energy facilities, and update solar energy facility definitions to use acreage instead of nameplate power rating which differs between classifications. The Commissioners had taken the amendment under advisement from the December 15th meeting. The Commissioners requested more time to process the amendment and possibly explore modifications. Attorney Storer suggested the Commissioners have written modifications prepared prior to the meeting which will have the vote on those modifications. Lautzenheiser said the Commissioners have until March 5th to make recommendations to the proposed amendment.

Convention and Visitor Commission Agreements: Two agreements were presented to the Commissioners for review. A sublease agreement for office space between the Wells County Chamber of Commerce, the Wells County Board of Commissioners and the Wells County Convention and Visitors Commission was presented for review. The lease term is for a period of one year from January 1, 2026, through December 31, 2026, rental of \$600 due by the 1st day of the month. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve and allow the President to sign the sublease agreement for office space. Motion carried 3-0. An independent contractor agreement for a Tourism Coordinator was presented to the Commissioners for review. The agreement is entered into between the Wells County Commissioners, the Wells County Convention and Visitor Commission and Audry Dudley, Independent Contractor. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to approve and allow the President to sign the Independent Contractor Agreement. Motion carried 3-0.

2026 Board Appointments: A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to re-appoint Jeff Stringer to the Economic Development board, Michael Vanover to the E-911 Advisory Board and EMA board, and Blake Gerber to the EMS board. Motion carried 3-0. A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to appoint Dr. Alec Arturi to the Health Department board for a four-year term of January 1, 2026, through December 31, 2029, and to appoint Scott Gilliam to the Cemetery board to complete an existing term ending on December 31, 2029. Motion carried 3-0.

Annual Disclosure Certification: A motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover to sign the annual certification regarding disclosure of county contracts with the business interests of relatives. Motion carried 3-0.

2026 Solid Waste Salary Contract: A motion was made by Michael Vanover, seconded by Blake Gerber to approve the 2026 Solid Waste Contract on wages (Misc. 2026-01). Motion carried 3-0.

Custodian Retirement: Custodian Bobbie Studebaker is retiring; the Commissioners would like the opening to be posted on the Wells County website as well as advertised in the local News-Banner. Studebaker is also the ADA Coordinator for Wells County. The Commissioners would like to post that internally for employee feedback.

Public Comment: Chaplain Neil Ainslie and Nancy Bonham addressed the Commissioners regarding office space that is occupied in the Wells County Annex by the Wells County Behavior and Resource Center. Wells County has let the organization utilize that space free of charge for many years and recently expressed the need for that space for Wells County personnel. Ainslie and Bonham both expressed the need for the space for underinsured Wells County residents for mental health references. Ainslie is trying to rebuild the program utilizing training provided by Mental Health America of Northeast Indiana. Ainslie would like to continue the Behavior and Recovery Resource Center page on the Wells County website, as well as continued utilization of the phone number. The Commissioners tabled the discussion until the January 20th meeting. Fred Wymer, Peggy Wymer, Michelle Bowman, and Nancy Bonham spoke in favor of the proposed Wells County Zoning Ordinance amendment.

Adjourned: Wells County Commissioners adjourned at 6:37 PM, the motion was made by Blake Gerber, seconded by Michael Vanover. Motion carried 3-0.

Wells County Commissioners

President, Jeff Stringer

Vice President, Michael Vanover

Member, Blake Gerber

Attest: _____
Lisa McCormick, Wells County Auditor