

**NIRPC Full Commission Meeting**  
6100 Southport Road, Portage, IN  
Minutes of the February 19, 2026 Full Commission Meeting

**Call to Order**

Vice Chair Austin Bonta called the meeting to order at 9:23 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance. The meeting was streamed live on YouTube.

**Roll Call—Taken by Meredith Stilwell**

**Present**

The 23 Commissioners present at the meeting are listed below:

- Jim Biggs, Porter County Commissioner
- Austin Bonta, City of Portage
- Kevin Breitzke, Porter County Surveyor
- Robert Carnahan, Town of Cedar Lake
- Daina Dumbrys, Town of Michiana Shores
- Bill Emerson, Lake County Surveyor
- Joe Haney, La Porte County Commissioner
- Christian Hendron, Porter Township Trustee
- Vanessa Hernandez-Orange, City of East Chicago
- Scott Kingan, Town of Ogden Dunes
- Peter Land, City of Crown Point
- Colleen Lane, Town of Long Beach
- Annette Ludwig, Town of Dyer
- John Matwyszyn, La Porte County Surveyor
- Jack McGraw, Town of Burns Harbor
- Eddie Melton, City of Gary
- Angie Nelson Deutch, City of Michigan City
- David Phelps, Town of Beverly Shores
- Warren Schacht, Town of Trail Creek
- Tom Schmitt, Town of Schererville
- Steve Spebar, City of Whiting
- James Ton, Town of Chesterton
- George Topoll, Union Township

**Absent**

The 26 Commissioners absent from the meeting are listed below:

- Kyle Allen, Lake County Commissioner
- Duane Arndt, Town of Kingsford Heights \*
- Jenny Beier, Town of Schneider
- Thomas Black, Town of Highland
- James Burge, Town of Porter
- Bill Carroll, City of Lake Station \*
- Larry Colley, Town of Pottawattomie Park
- Jon Costas, City of Valparaiso
- Jon Derwinski, Town of Winfield
- Daina Dumbrys, Town of Michiana Shores
- Denise Ebert, Town of Wanatah
- Keesha Hardaway, Town of Merrillville
- Bonnie Hawksworth, Town of Dune Acres \*
- Josh Huddlestun, City of Hobart
- Lori Hunt, Town of Westville
- Justin Kiel, La Porte County Council
- Tom McDermott, City of Hammond \*
- Wendy Mis, Town of Munster
- Randall Niemeyer, Lake County Council
- Robert Ordway, Indiana Federal Affairs
- Courtney Parthun, City of La Porte
- Lisa Rosenkranz, Town of LaCrosse
- Rick Ryfa, Town of Griffith \*
- John Schoon, Town of Kouts
- Gerald Swets, Town of St. John
- Sharon Szwedo, Town of New Chicago

\* Absent for 3 or more consecutive Commission meetings: see Indiana Code 36-7-7.6-5 (h).

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

Staff present included Tom Vander Woude, Eman Ibrahim, Charles Bradsky, Meredith Stilwell, and Grace Benninger.

A quorum of the Full Commission was not present, and a quorum for the Executive Board was also believed not to be present.

**Public Comment** – There were no sign-ups for public comment.

A temporary recess was called by Vice-Chair Bonta to try to resolve the quorum issue at 9:28 a.m.

The meeting was resumed at 9:45 a.m. with a quorum and convened as an Executive Board meeting. Attorney Hollenbeck noted that no action could be taken on the agenda item for the election of Officers.

### **Approval of Minutes**

The minutes of the December 18, 2025, Full Commission meeting were approved on motion by Kevin Breitzke and seconded by James Ton.

### **Leadership** – Tom Vander Woude, NIRPC Director of Transportation

Tom Vander Woude presented Resolution 26-03, supporting the *Bridges and Safety Infrastructure for Community Success (BASICS) Act*. He noted that the Leadership Committee reviewed the legislation at its previous meeting. The bill, recently introduced by Representatives Kristen McDonald Rivet and Rob Bresnahan, is intended for inclusion in the upcoming reauthorization of federal transportation legislation. It was developed by the Local Officials and Transportation Coalition (LOTC), whose membership includes organizations such as the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) and the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO), both of which NIRPC belongs to. The Leadership Committee recommended the resolution for Commission support.

Tom explained that the BASICS Act aims to address longstanding funding disparities between state and local governments. Local governments own approximately 75% of the nation's street network and 43% of the federal-aid highway system, yet receive only 16% of federal transportation funding. Consequently, half of locally owned principal roads and many locally owned bridges are in poor condition, and roughly 85% of traffic fatalities occur on local roads and non-interstate state highways. The bill seeks to correct these inequities.

Tom highlighted provisions of particular relevance to NIRPC as a metropolitan planning organization (MPO):

- **Shifts funding** from the National Highway Performance Program into the Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) and Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP), moving dollars from a rigid program to more flexible programs used frequently by MPOs. STBG is NIRPC's primary source of road project funding.
- **Increases formula bridge funding** and requires 25% to be suballocated for local bridge projects selected by MPOs or equivalent rural entities.
- **Increases HSIP funding** and requires states to suballocate 25% of HSIP funds to MPO-selected safety projects.
- **Restricts state transfers of HSIP funds**, ensuring states must offer unused HSIP funds to local governments via MPOs before transferring them elsewhere. Tom noted INDOT already follows a similar practice, but the bill would formalize it in statute.
- **Raises metropolitan planning (PL) funding** from the current fixed annual share—about 0.8% of federal-aid highway funds—to a consistent 2.5% per fiscal year. The 20% local match requirement would be eliminated, making the funds fully federally supported.
- **Creates a voluntary option** allowing MPOs to receive PL funds directly from the federal government rather than through INDOT, streamlining the contracting process.

Resolution 26-03 in support of the Bridges and Safety Infrastructure for Community Success (BASICS) was approved on motion by Tom Schmitt and seconded by Kevin Breitzke.

### **Perfect attendance recognition** – Austin Bonta, NIRPC Vice-Chair

Commissioners recognized for attendance at all NIRPC Full Commission meetings in 2025: Wendy Mis, Warren Schacht, Mary Tanis, and Andy Vasquez.

Commissioners recognized for perfect attendance at all NIRPC Full Commission and Executive Board meetings in 2025: Robert Carnahan, Bill Emerson, John Matwyshyn, David Phelps, Tom Schmitt, James Ton, and George Topoll.

Certificates formally recognizing the attendance award will be distributed after being signed by the current chair, Wendy Mis.

### **Transportation** – Kevin Breitzke, Porter County Surveyor

Kevin Breitzke reported that the Transportation Committee met on February 3, 2026. The committee received an update from Corradino on the second year of NIRPC's Road Safety Audit Program, which completed audits at

seven sites across the three counties. The resulting reports identify short- and long-term safety improvements and will support local applications for HSIP funding. The program will continue in 2027, with new applications opening this spring.

Kevin also noted that NIRPC has begun updating its long-range metropolitan transportation plan, building on *NWI 2050 and NWI 2050+*. The update will incorporate new data, forecasts, and public input, with completion expected by July.

The Transportation Committee recommended the resolutions below to the Full Commission.

- **Resolution #26-01: Adopting safety performance measure targets for 2026, amending the targets into NWI 2050+ and the FY 2026-2030 TIP.** Grace Benninger reported that the six safety performance targets covering fatalities, serious injuries, their respective rates, and non-motorized fatalities and serious injuries presented reflect statewide data. MPOs and State DOTs have jointly set federally required safety targets since 2012, and NIRPC develops these in coordination with INDOT, IDOT, CMAP, and regional transit agencies. The targets must be included in NIRPC's Metropolitan Transportation Plan and TIP.

Since 2024, INDOT has set statewide targets using a 2% straight-line reduction from the 2021 five-year average. NIRPC adopts the INDOT targets to maintain consistency with the state-led performance framework and ensure uniform data methods and baselines. Grace noted that the serious injury rate and non-motorized fatalities & serious injury rate targets appear to have increased from 2025 to 2026. She explained this was due to a change from an automated reporting program used by the Indiana State Police for crash data to the Federal Highway Administration's required system for classifying the nature of serious injuries, which led to inconsistent data from 2019 to 2022, requiring recalculating and verifying the 5-year trendlines using data from the new classification system. While none of the safety performance targets are currently being met, the 2% reduction is aspirational, aiming to reverse the trend toward zero deaths as part of Vision Zero. Indiana is not alone in this, and there are a lot of other states that have seen increased fatalities and injuries in recent years. The safety targets are not enforced as thresholds but are used as planning tools, with compliance based on MPOs demonstrating that their planning and programming decisions support the State's target and an agreement that regional investments will support INDOT's safety goals. If adopted, the new targets will be amended into the *NWI 2050+* and FY 2026-2030 TIP. Staff will continue to monitor and report.

On motion by James Ton and seconded by Bill Emerson, the Executive Board approved resolution #26-01.

- **Resolution #26-02: Amending the FY 2026-2030 Transportation Improvement Program for Lake, Porter, and La Porte Counties, Indiana Amendments NO. 26-04.1.**

Charles Bradsky reported that a 21-day public comment period was held, and no comments were received. The amendment was also sent to the Interagency Consultation Group (ICG) on December 22, 2025, and no comments were received. Concurrence was given by the ICG for these projects on January 2, 2026. The amendment consists of ten projects, four of which are INDOT projects. A question was raised about an administrative modification, to which Charles explained that a recommendation was made at the January Transportation Resource Oversight Committee Meeting to begin reporting all changes, including administrative modifications. Administrative modifications are minor changes to projects that only require an email from NIRPC to INDOT. The bridge removal project modification in question was due to new estimates.

On motion by James Ton and seconded by Tom Schmitt, the Executive Board approved resolution #26-02.

Commissioner Breitzke continued his Transportation Committee report, noting that Charles also presented administrative modifications, which are included in the Board packet. He reminded communities to check with their road departments about frost laws.

The next Transportation Committee meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, March 3, 2026. The TROC meetings for February 24 have been cancelled.

#### **INDOT Report –**

Matt Dietchley reported to Commissioners during the recess and had nothing further to report.

#### **Economy & Place – George Topoll**

George Topoll reported that the committee met on February 11, during which the October 8, 2025 minutes were approved. Three presentations were given during the meeting. Gerry White, Northwest Senior Community Liaison for the Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA), presented on their site certification program; Tom Vander Wouder presented on the 2050+ update; and Eman Ibrahim provided an update on land use and housing, and the corridor urbanism concept, which was adopted in the *NWI 2050+* to help revitalize urban corridors.

The next Economy & Place meeting is scheduled for April 8, 2026.

### **Environment – Bill Emerson**

Bill Emerson reported that the committee met on February 5, 2026 where a presentation was made by Jack Weinberg from the Gary Advocates for Responsible Development on the future of steelmaking in Northwest Indiana. There are current steelworkers advocating for the steel mills not only to get greener, but also to be more sustainable in the long term by transitioning from blast furnaces to electric arc furnaces over time. Bill noted their offer to present to the Commission. Ryan Lisek from Drive Clean Indiana also gave a presentation on electric vehicles, green vehicle grants, and opportunities. Kathy Luther gave the annual update on completed programs and projects.

The next meeting of the Environment Committee is May 7, 2026 at 10:00 a.m.

Kevin Breitzke reminded the commissioners that committee meetings are on the NIRPC YouTube channel and can be watched in their spare time.

### **Other Business**

Austin Bonta urged the Mayors in the room to imagine what would happen if their City Council routinely lacked a quorum, and Tom Vander Woude stated that, given that the officers do need to be elected, it is likely that the March meeting will be a Full Commission instead of an Executive Board meeting.

Commissioner Ton asked to circle back to Bill Emerson's report regarding the presenters' offer at the Environment Committee meeting to present to the Commission, to express his interest in hearing the presentation. Mayor Melton advised inviting the steel producers to present as well.

Bob Carnahan commended the City of Hammond, the City of Gary, and the City of Portage for their efforts to attract the Chicago Bears and expressed his hope that at least one of them will be able to bring the Bears to Northwest Indiana.

Attendance concerns were discussed. When asked about the consequences of missing meetings, Attorney Hollenbeck stated that state statute requires notifying the appointing authority if a Commissioner misses more than 3 consecutive meetings. He noted the intent behind NIRPC's structure as a Council of Governments—that elected officials participate directly in decision-making. Mayor Bonta emphasized that NIRPC decisions affect all communities and that inconsistent attendance limits communities' awareness and influence. Hollenbeck added that four communities have not made an appointment.

Members discussed proxy options, the need for onboarding for newly elected officials, and the value of an entire meeting as an informational session on NIRPC's role, processes, and requirements. Suggestions included staff developing onboarding materials and presenting directly to local governments.

Tom Vander Woude noted that NIRPC committee meetings are where detailed project and funding discussions take place, encouraging participation by elected officials or their staff. A request was made for a report showing community funding over the past 10–15 years.

Mayor Bonta committed to contacting the four municipalities without appointments and reminding others of the importance of attendance.

Hearing no further business, Austin Bonta adjourned the meeting at 10:53 a.m.

*The livestream video recording for this meeting is available on NIRPC's YouTube Channel at [Executive Board Meeting 2-19-26 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-19-26)*