

Transportation Committee
NIRPC Lake Michigan Room
March 3, 2026
Minutes

Kevin Breitzke called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance. The voting members in attendance were Kevin Breitzke, Dean Button (Hammond), Bob Thompson (Valparaiso Transit), Mark O'Dell (Chesterton), David Wright (GPTC), Jeff Huet (Schererville), and Max Rehlander (Valparaiso).

Also in attendance were Ryan Lisek (DCI), Kelly Wenger (NICTD), Michele Murday Pariso (NWI Forum), Jake Dammarell (BF&S), Alex Olesker (BF&S), Scott Pruitt (First Group), Melody Shreves (INDOT), Noelle Bayer (INDOT), Greg Falkowski (Crown Point), and Beth Shrader (SEH).

NIRPC staff present: Tom Vander Woude, Meredith Stilwell, Candice Eklund, Grace Benninger, Mitch Barloga, Stephen Hughes, Ishan Parekh, Kathy Luther, and Scott Weber.

1.1. Call to Order

Chair Kevin Breitzke called the meeting to order and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

1.2. Approval of Minutes

Minutes from February 3, 2026, were reviewed.

Motion to approve: Dean Button

Second: Max Rehlander

Motion carried unanimously.

2. Public Comment

No public comment submitted.

3. Planning

3.1. Presentation: Gary Elevated Trail

Presenter: Mitch Barloga

Mitch Barloga presented an overview of the proposed Gary Elevated Trail project. The project would convert an abandoned elevated rail corridor in Gary into a multi-use trail for bicyclists and pedestrians. Mr. Barloga noted that the project is envisioned as part of the Marquette Greenway, a regional trail corridor connecting communities along Lake Michigan.

Mr. Barloga provided background on the project, including recent site visits, existing corridor conditions, and potential benefits of trail development, such as improved connectivity, recreation opportunities, and economic development. He discussed the possibility of repurposing existing rail bridges and elevated structures along the corridor and noted that some infrastructure may be suitable for reuse, while other sections may require rehabilitation or replacement.

Mr. Barloga also described ongoing planning efforts, including collaboration with Purdue University through a student capstone project, which assists with planning concepts and

analysis. The project team is currently evaluating the corridor and identifying potential project deliverables.

During the discussion, Jeff Huet asked about the estimated cost of the project, and Mr. Barloga stated that the preliminary estimate is approximately \$50 million. Questions were also raised regarding property ownership and coordination with relevant agencies. Mr. Barloga provided clarification regarding ownership and ongoing coordination efforts. Kevin Breitzke commented on potential coordination with the National Park Service and other partners as the project moves forward.

3.2 Public Comment Report for Resolution #26-04: Amending Engage NWI

Presenter: Stephen Hughes

Stephen Hughes reported that a 45-day public comment period was conducted regarding proposed amendments to Engage NWI, NIRPC's Public Participation Plan. One public comment was received and included in the meeting packet, which was concerned about ease of access to information. Staff replied to the comment, stating that moving the definitions and thresholds to the TIP will be more accessible to the public than before. Staff determined that the comment did not raise substantial issues requiring an additional comment period.

Mr. Hughes noted that the proposed amendment primarily involves relocating certain definitions and thresholds (that determine if a change is an amendment to the TIP which requires public comment, air quality consultation, and commission approval, or an Administrative Modification, that can be completed by staff without public comment or air quality consultation) from the Engage NWI document to the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) documentation.

Mr. Hughes clarified that he combined the agenda items 3.2 and 3.3 as they are related. Mr. Vander Woude elaborated that this and the following resolution are linked, as moving the definitions requires amending the public participation plan to remove the definitions, and amending the TIP to add those definitions there.

Mr. Breitzke emphasizes that this is necessary and is recommended by the regulators.

3.3 Resolution #26-04: Amending Engage NWI

Presenter: Stephen Hughes

Motion to recommend approval: Jeff Huet

Second: Bob Thompson

Motion carried.

4. Programming

4.1 Public Comment Report for the FY 2026-2030 Transportation Improvement Program Amendment 26-05– Charles Bradsky (Presented by Tom Vander Woude)

Tom Vander Woude presented the public comment report for TIP Amendment 26-05 that will add the previously mentioned definitions and thresholds from the public participation plan to the TIP. A public comment period was held from February 4 through February 25, 2026. One public comment was received and was included in the meeting packet. The comment was related to pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure that she would like to see in Munster.

Staff responded to the comment, saying it is not related to this amendment, and forwarded the comment to the town of Munster. Staff also sent this amendment to the interagency consultation group to ensure there is no effect on air quality conformity, and it was determined that this is an administrative modification.

4.2 Resolution #26-05: FY 2026-2030 Transportation Improvement Program Amendment 26-05 – Charles Bradsky (Presented by Tom Vander Woude)

Tom Vander Woude reiterated that this two-fold process of moving some definitions and thresholds (that determine if a change is considered a TIP amendment or an administrative modification) from Engage NWI (public participation plan) to Invest NWI (TIP) was recommended during NIRPC's federal certification review by USDOT. Another recommendation from USDOT specified that NIRPC's definitions and thresholds should be identical for both local and state-level projects, as different definitions can create inefficiencies and delays, as the amendment process is much lengthier than an administrative modification. In addition, staff plans to update the region's cost change thresholds to reflect current pricing and correct some ambiguity in the definitions. The main element of the definition that will change is the \$100,000 cost threshold. The normal amendment will now be called a Formal Amendment, with the main changes regarding cost threshold defined in the Cost Change Threshold Table (same as INDOT) and a change of years for air quality analysis. This will reduce ambiguity in distinguishing between TIP amendments and administrative modifications and improve consistency with federal and state agency guidance.

Motion to recommend approval: Jeff Huet

Second: Mark O'Dell

Motion carried unanimously.

During the discussion, Kelley Wenger asked a question about whether these new cost change thresholds are the same as INDOT's that are used in the STIP to determine if a change is an administrative modification or an amendment, and Mr. Vander Woude confirmed that this is correct.

4.3 FY 2026-2030 Transportation Improvement Program Administrative Modification #26-20 and #26-21 – Charles Bradsky (Presented by Tom Vander Woude)

During the last TROC meeting, it was recommended that staff provide a report of all the administrative modifications that were completed over the last month. Therefore, going forward, this report will be included in the agenda packet of future meetings. The electronic version of the agenda will have the detailed report.

5. Reports from Planning Partners

5.1 Drive Clean Indiana

Ryan Lisek announced that there is a funding opportunity (total \$1 million, and a maximum of \$200,000 per application) from the Indiana Office of Energy Development (as shown in handouts), and the applications are due April 5th. This funding can be used for energy planning, energy efficiency audits, building updates, electric transportation infrastructure, and workforce development. Drive Clean Indiana has their annual conference coming up on March 11th.

6. Other Business, Staff Announcements, and Upcoming Meetings

6.1. Acceptance of Committee Appointments

6.2. Staff Updates and Announcements

Kathy Luther announced that NIRPC and some other partners (funded by the Lake Michigan Coastal Program) are offering technical assistance to local governments for grant writing/proposals for projects that improve natural resources and resiliency in Northwest Indiana. An interest form can be filled out on the [website](#) to participate.

6.3. Upcoming NIRPC Meetings:

- NIRPC Executive Board – March 19, 2026, at 9:00 a.m.

7. Next Meeting

The next Transportation Committee meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, April 7, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at NIRPC offices.

During the discussion, Dean Button expressed frustration that a local rail project had not yet been included in the Transportation Improvement Program, noting that the delay in the amendment process has prevented progress on the project. Mr. Vander Woude explained that a discrepancy in a state project led Federal Highway to return the STIP to INDOT for correction, and due to staff shortage at both INDOT and Federal Highway, there is a delay. Mr. Vander Woude emphasized that the amendment in the current TIP thresholds and definitions to have more flexibility with administrative modifications would greatly help with similar issues, as administrative modifications move significantly faster than amendments.

Adjournment

Motion to adjourn: David Wright

Second: Dean Button

Meeting adjourned at 11:09 a.m.