

NIRPC Full Commission Meeting
6100 Southport Road, Portage, IN
Minutes of the July 16, 2026 Full Commission Meeting

Call to Order

Chair Austin Bonta called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance. The meeting was streamed live on YouTube.

New Appointments to the Commission

Dave Hollenbeck announced there were no new appointments to the Commission.

Roll Call—Taken by Candice Eklund

Present

The 30 Commissioners present at the meeting are listed below:

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| • Justin Albright, Town of Hebron | • Justin Kiel, La Porte County Council |
| • Kyle Allen, Lake County Commissioner | • Scott Kingan, Town of Ogden Dunes |
| • Jenny Beier, Town of Schneider | • Lori Latham, City of Gary |
| • Austin Bonta, City of Portage | • John Matwyszyn, La Porte County Surveyor |
| • Kevin Breitzke, Porter County Surveyor | • Tom McDermott, City of Hammond |
| • Robert Carnahan, Town of Cedar Lake | • Jack McGraw, Town of Burns Harbor |
| • Jon Costas, City of Valparaiso | • Angie Nelson Deutch, City of Michigan City |
| • Daina Dumbrys, Town of Michiana Shores | • Randell Niemeyer, Lake County Council |
| • Denise Ebert, Town of Wanatah | • David Phelps, Town of Beverly Shores |
| • Bill Emerson, Lake County Surveyor | • Warren Schacht, Town of Trail Creek |
| • Anthony Ferraro, Governor's Appointee | • Tom Schmitt, Town of Schererville |
| • Joe Haney, La Porte County Commissioner | • John Schoon, Town of Kouts |
| • Keesha Hardaway, Town of Merrillville | • Jim Ton, Town of Chesterton |
| • Christian Hendron, Porter Township Trustee | • George Topoll, Union Township |
| • Vanessa Hernandez Orange, City of East Chicago | • Andy Vasquez, Porter County Council |

Absent

The 21 Commissioners absent from the meeting are listed below:

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| • Duane Arndt, Town of Kingsford Heights * | • Peter Land, City of Crown Point |
| • Jim Biggs, Porter County Commissioner | • Colleen Lane, Town of Long Beach |
| • Thomas Black, Town of Highland | • Annette Ludwig, Town of Dyer |
| • James Burge, Town of Porter | • Wendy Mis, Town of Munster |
| • Bill Carroll, City of Lake Station * | • Courtney Parthun, City of La Porte |
| • Larry Colley, Town of Pottawattomie Park | • Lisa Rosenkranz, Town of LaCrosse * |
| • Jon Derwinski, Town of Winfield * | • Rick Ryfa, Town of Griffith |
| • Bonnie Hawksworth, Town of Dune Acres * | • Steve Spebar, City of Whiting |
| • Josh Huddlestun, City of Hobart | • Gerald Swets, Town of St. John |
| • Lori Hunt, Town of Westville | • Sharon Szwedo, Town of New Chicago |
| • Phillip Kuiper, Town of Lowell | |

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

Matt Deitchley, representing INDOT, was also present.

Kingsbury and The Pines have appointed no representatives to NIRPC.

Staff present included Ty Warner, Talaya Jones, Tom Vander Woude, Kathy Luther, Eman Ibrahim, Meredith Stilwell, and Candice Eklund.

Public Comment

There were no public comments.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the June 18, 2026, Executive Board meeting were approved on motion by Bob Carnahan and seconded by Kevin Breitzke.

Leadership – Austin Bonta, Portage Mayor

Austin Bonta reported that the Leadership Committee met this morning to review the financial reports, bank reconciliations, and claims registers for March, April, and May 2026. The two items below were recommended to the Full Commission for approval.

Resolution #26-09: Amend the MissionSquare 457(b) Retirement Plan: Meredith Stilwell reported that the provisions of the SECURE 2.0 Act of 2022 have created new compliance requirements affecting NIRPC's MissionSquare 457(b) Retirement Plan. Specifically, Section 603 of the Act requires participants aged 60-63, and certain participants aged 50 and older whose annual compensation exceeds \$150,000, to make eligible catch-up contributions to a Roth IRA, should they elect to make catch-up contributions. The resolution adds a Roth option to the Commission's deferred compensation plan.

- On motion by Kevin Breitzke and seconded by Joe Haney, the Full Commission approved Resolution #26-09.
- **Contract: Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grant Program.** Tom Vander Woude presented the contract for approval with Lochmueller Group, in the amount not to exceed \$499,600, to develop a regional safety action plan. The project will be funded through a \$400,000 USDOT Safe Streets and Roads for ALL (SS4A) grant awarded to NIRPC, with the required local match provided through a partnership between Lake, La Porte, and Porter Counties and NIRPC. The plan will be developed in coordination with the three counties and will focus on unincorporated areas while maintaining a region-wide scope. Completion of this regional plan will help ensure that all communities and counties are eligible to apply for SS4A implementation funding for specific safety improvement projects. The project is expected to begin in late summer and be completed by the end of 2027. On motion by Kevin Breitzke and seconded by Angie Nelson Deutch, the Full Commission approved the contract with Lochmueller Group, pending legal review.

Ty Warner and Austin Bonta recognized Eman Ibrahim, Planning Manager, for her 20-year milestone service at NIRPC.

Transportation – Kevin Breitzke, Porter County Surveyor

Kevin Breitzke reported that the Transportation Committee had not met since the last Commission meeting. Their next meeting is scheduled for August 4, 2026.

INDOT – Matt Deitchley

Matt Deitchley discussed the torrential rains over the last several weeks, which resulted in significant flooding and high water on I-94. Tom McDermott noted that when the two lanes near the Kennedy Avenue substation flood from heavy rain, cars end up entering the Hammond and Highland neighborhoods, creating hours of gridlock and impacting residents' quality of life. Mr. Deitchley said that INDOT is meeting to address these issues.

Economy & Place – George Topoll

George Topoll reported that the committee met on July 8, 2026, where they heard presentations, including an update from Celena Green on brownfield redevelopment efforts. Celena Green, an Economic Recovery Core Fellow, is one of 65 fellows nationwide. She has worked at NIRPC for 2 ½ years, and will complete her fellowship in October. Her project's primary focus is on Northern Lake County, particularly Hammond, East Chicago, and Lake Station, and its integration with the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

Ms. Green highlighted three key findings from her research: (1) brownfields should be viewed as assets rather than liabilities; (2) Northwest Indiana contains some of the most infrastructure-rich brownfield acreage in the Midwest, but lacks a managed inventory and a coordinated pipeline; and (3) communities need greater capacity, trust, and collaboration before major development opportunities arise. Her project deliverables

include brownfield site profiles for up to eight priority sites, identification of redevelopment barriers and strategies, an ecosystem, gap analysis, and a regional policy brief. With the research phase complete, Ms. Green will focus on these deliverables. For additional information, please contact her at cgreen@economicrecoverycorps.org.

Commissioners engaged in discussion following the presentation. Austin Bonta shared observations from the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) conference last month, where data center development was a major topic, and asked whether MPOs are in the best position to evaluate data center opportunities. Ms. Green noted the importance of having an Economic Recovery Core Fellow because they can serve as neutral, trusted regional partners who help facilitate conversations among stakeholders, understand local capacity, and use practical frameworks to help communities evaluate projects and communicate decisions effectively to the public. Ty Warner added that Ms. Green's work focuses on the nuts and bolts of evaluating development opportunities, including data centers, and the practical aspects that communities can benefit from. Austin Bonta clarified that discussions at the NARC conference were not intended to place responsibility on MPOs such as NIRPC, but rather to encourage additional support from the federal government to support and provide funding for MPOs to assist with these efforts. He noted that Portage is creating a new zoning classification for technology campuses. In the absence of consistent local standards, zoning classifications, and policies, he expressed concern that data center regulations vary significantly across communities and asked whether NIRPC might be a good facilitator for regional discussions on standards. Jim Ton added that communities facing data center discussions would benefit from having standards and guidelines established before projects become public.

Randell Niemeyer said that Lake County recently approved zoning for a data center with robust regulations and asked how the study can help make brownfields more attractive than farmland. Ms. Green responded that the project's goal is to reduce risks associated with brownfield redevelopment by prioritizing sites, identifying financing opportunities, and developing practical criteria and policies. He asked whether the study is geared toward land acquisitions, the regulatory environment, and financing. Ms. Green responded that the goal was to make brownfield sites a priority, to examine financing options, and to develop an actionable set of criteria.

The next Economy & Place Committee meeting is scheduled for October 14, 2026.

Environment – Bill Emerson

Bill Emerson reported that the Environment Committee had not met since the last Commission meeting. The next meeting is scheduled for August 6 and will include a presentation and workshop on the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative project call. Applications need to be submitted by September 4.

Other Business

Ty Warner recognized and thanked Justin Kiel for his service as president of the National Association of Regional Councils, as his term ended at NARC's annual conference in Tulsa in June, which Mayor Bonta also attended.

Austin Bonta encouraged commissioners to visit the NIRPC booth at local county fairs. NIRPC is currently updating its regional plan and has found that going to where residents gather has been more effective at obtaining public input than scheduling meetings.

Announcements

George Topoll announced that Partners for Clean Air was offering free tickets to the Gary Railcats game on August 2, 2026, for Clean Air Day and that people could stop by to see him or Kathy Luther after the meeting to pick them up.

Tom McDermott reported that two weeks after he raised an issue at the April 16 Full Commission meeting regarding a decision made by the Town of Highland, the matter was successfully resolved through collaboration among the Town of Highland, the City of Hammond, and the Little Calumet Region.

Hearing no further business, Austin Bonta adjourned the meeting at 10:22 a.m. The next meeting will be an Executive Board meeting on September 17, 2026.