

**Environment Committee**  
Lake Michigan Room  
August 7, 2025  
**Minutes**

Chairman Bill Emerson called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance.

In attendance were Bill Emerson, Lori Hunt (Westville), Kathy Sipple (ECI), Thomas Black (Highland), Reggie Korthals (MS4), Jeni Orsburn (DNR), Ryan Lisek (DCI), Brenda Scott-Henry (Gary), Jenny Beier (Schneider), and Nancy Moldenhauer.

Katherine Balkema (DNR), John Matwyshyn (LPCS), Michele Munday Pariso (IDEM), Nicole Messacar (IDEM), George Topoll (Union Township), and Rahim Evans (IDEM) were also in attendance.

NIRPC staff were Jennifer Birchfield, Flor Baum, and Candice Eklund.

On motion by Reggie Korthals, seconded by Brenda Scott-Henry, the May 1 meeting minutes were approved.

Kathy Sipple (Earth Charter Indiana) spoke on the proposed structure and communication improvements for the NWI Region Resilience. Highlighted is the importance of staff support and sustainability commissions for environmental initiatives, citing Gary as a successful example, and proposes hosting more frequent regional events and mini climate leadership summits to foster collaboration and communication among stakeholders. The website [nwiregionresilience.org](http://nwiregionresilience.org) lists local groups dedicated to sustainability, encouraging viewers to suggest additions. The aim is to create a platform to connect people with local environmental groups and facilitate involvement by providing administrative support and gathering information on needs and gaps in various communities.

Local communities in rural areas are working together to address invasive species and sustainability initiatives through education, collaboration, and shared best practices. Rural areas face an increasing problem with invasive species due to newcomers' lack of understanding, and local support and expertise are needed to address this issue.

The Northwest Indiana storm water advisory group is working to educate municipalities on water quality attainment on a watershed basis, and efforts are being made to make resources and meeting information more accessible and regularly updated. The goal is to document and facilitate connections between cities, such as Highland and Valparaiso, to share best practices and solutions on sustainability initiatives. Kathy emphasized the importance of sharing existing work and collaborating with community members to efficiently complete tasks, such as mapping and obtaining letters of support, to address issues like greenhouse gas emissions and air quality. Kathy concluded by proposing a collaborative approach to sustainability initiatives, suggesting an overlay structure with community representation. She expressed openness to discussions about ensuring active participation and potential voting rights for sustainability commissions.

Jen Birchfield led the Discussion of Community Climate Impacts and Priorities for the Climate Action Plan for the Chicago Metropolitan Area. The climate action plan for the Chicago metropolitan area focuses on community climate impacts, priorities, and co-benefits, and input is sought from all participants. Northwest Indiana aims to reach net zero emissions by 2050 through a plan developed by CAP, Metropolitan Mayor's Caucus, and NIPRC, outlining necessary actions for public, private, and

nonprofit sectors. The greenhouse gas inventory analyzed energy consumption at both community-wide and municipal levels, considering factors such as building types, including residential, institutional, and municipal buildings. The Chicago region is developing a new climate action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, focusing on strategies such as electric vehicles, renewable energy, and clean industry practices, and seeking public input on community impacts, barriers, and priorities. The committee shared personal experiences and observations of climate change effects, including increased extreme heat, flooding, air quality alerts, and changes in seasonal patterns affecting daily life and local ecosystems. Climate change impacts in local communities include reduced food access, increased health problems, financial burdens from flood repairs and energy costs, and changes in daily life, such as reduced outdoor activities and worsening allergies. It was discussed that climate change is causing severe weather events, straining city resources, and increasing electricity demands, leading to power outages and surging energy bills that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Severe wet weather events and climate change are increasing costs for city cleanups and affecting leisure activities, such as travel and outdoor recreation, due to factors like tree maintenance and extreme weather conditions. Jen noted an increase in severe weather events and powerful winds causing property damage and disruptions, which were not adequately accounted for in their initial climate resilience planning. The grid has struggled to keep up with increasing electricity demands due to population growth, new technologies, and extreme weather events, causing frequent power outages and affecting various organizations and individuals. To address increasing electricity demand, particularly from data centers and emerging technologies, it's crucial to reduce energy load and demand at individual facilities and communities through on-site renewable energy solutions. Forced transition to green energy without a balanced approach, including natural gas and other sources, is causing substantial energy bill increases that disproportionately affect low-income individuals, such as senior citizens. It was also discussed that many Hoosiers struggle to pay bills, especially after sudden significant increases in economic plans, leading to an expected surge in requests for assistance.

The committee discussed upgrading to renewable energy, creating walkable cities, and addressing nuclear waste as crucial for combating climate change, but it requires careful planning and investment. Upgrading electric appliances and renewable energy sources can be a significant financial burden, especially for older homes with outdated electrical infrastructure. A research report found that going solar was cheaper for a corporation than any other scenario, including coal, even with environmental regulations factored out. Due to limited storage capacity, natural gas is necessary to supplement renewables during peak times. Still, as battery technology improves, a 100% renewable track may be possible, making a renewed focus on nuclear power plants a concerning development. Nuclear power has the potential to solve climate change, but it requires a safe and effective plan for managing nuclear waste, which is a significant concern. To create a walking and biking culture in cities, opportunities such as secure bike paths and interconnecting trails need to be maximized, and relatively cost-effective solutions like crossings at major highways should be considered. Biking paths may not be a practical solution to climate change impacts on transportation, as people may not want to ride bikes in hot weather and must deal with being sweaty and uncomfortable.

There were discussions on local initiatives focused on promoting sustainability, improving recycling, and increasing environmental awareness to address climate change and community challenges. Promoting native plant gardening and improving recycling systems, potentially through grants and community-wide initiatives, can help address climate change and sustainability issues at the local level. Lake County lacks a recycling program, but community grants and programs, such as the Clean Community Program and Partners for Clean Air, offer resources and recognition for environmental initiatives. The committee discussed ways to increase financial incentives for homeowners to go solar, including private entity-sponsored low-interest loans, and discussed the

potential impact of a Senate bill eliminating vehicle emissions testing. Through a workshop exercise, the organization engaged in small initiatives to promote environmental awareness and sought public feedback on priority areas, including health, quality of life, and transportation options.

Ryan Lisek reported from Drive Clean Indiana. Ryan shared news on climate change, stating the US government officials acknowledged climate change is real and man-made, but are reconsidering emission requirements, prompting a call to voice opinions at an upcoming public hearing. Indiana announced over \$3.3 million in funding for publicly accessible electric vehicle charging projects and awarded grants for alternative fuel projects, including propane garbage trucks and clean diesel replacements. Electric vehicle awareness efforts are underway in Indiana, with events and education initiatives promoting cost savings and accurate information about EVs. A National Drive Electric Week event will be held on September 18th, featuring a presentation and ride-and-drive to discuss electric vehicle costs and showcase the new level three DC fast chargers. Indiana has \$10 million in clean diesel funding available, and public charging stations have measures to prevent users from blocking ports for extended periods, with fees for idling and limited ports available at most locations. Porter County residents can participate in countywide comprehensive planning processes by visiting [elevateportercounty.com](http://elevateportercounty.com) and taking a survey.

Announcements were made.

Hearing no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m. The next Environment Committee meeting is slated for November 6, 2025, at the NIPRC offices.