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Environment Committee
Lake Michigan Room
February 5, 2026

Minutes

Chair, Bill Emerson called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance.

In attendance were:

George Topoll, Union Township; David Phelps, Beverly Shores; Tom Black, Highland; Nancy Moldenhauer; Ryan Lisek, Drive Clean Indiana; Joe Exl, DNR; Katherine Balkema, DNR; Reggie Korthals, MS4; Susan MiHalo, The Nature Conservancy; Jacob Nieto, Save the Dunes; Katie Hobgood, Save the Dunes; Ellen Kapitan, City of Valparaiso; Jenny Dimitroff, Porter Sustainability Commission; Lori Hunt, NWI Forum; Julia Carillo, BF&S; Sarah Tubbs, Recycling and Waste Reduction District of Porter County; Michelle Murday, IDEM; Jean Bernius, Lake County Cooperative Invasive Species Management; Jack Weinburg, Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD); Caroline McCrady, GARD; Allen Lee, GARD; Doreen Carey, GARD; Terry Steagall, GARD; Valerie Denney, GARD

NIRPC staff present were Kathy Luther, Jen Birchfield, Meredith Stillwell, and Tom Van der Wood.

On motion by Reggie Korthals, seconded by George Topoll, the November 6, 2025 meeting minutes were approved.

Public Comments

Jean Bernius, Lake County Cooperative Invasive Species Management

- Lake County Cooperative Invasive Species Management manages and informs about invasive species in Lake County. They can provide free homeowner surveys of invasive species.

Terry Steagall, GARD

- Terry is a Highland resident and retired steel worker. Everyone in NWI is impacted by steel industry and technology must be upgraded to reduce pollution and redevelop Gary. Need the community to come together to make a viable sustainable plan for the steel industry for the economy and cleaner communities.

Caroline McCrady, GARD

- Caroline is a Gary resident and founding member of GARD. She cited a Gary Crusader article in which Representative MrVan noted that Indiana accounts for over a quarter of production and employs thousands. The article describes industry as lifeblood of region. Industry representatives refer to ongoing investments in new mills, modernization, and advanced manufacturing technologies. The blast furnace is inefficient and polluting. We need to modernize to stay competitive.

Doreen Carey, GARD

- Doreen is a Gary resident who is retired with an environmental background. She saw GARD to promote economic development that prioritizes environmental justice, community health, and protection of neighborhoods and natural resources. We need to continue our industrial base with less pollution.

Allen Lee, GARD

- Allen is a retired physician in Ogden Dunes. He co-authored an adverse health impacts report that is available on the [GARD website](#). Steel mills release hundreds of tons of pollutants that increase health risks. Recent studies suggest levels previously thought safe aren't.

The Future of Steelmaking in Northwest Indiana

Jack Weinberg – Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD)

Mr. Weinburg detailed the report *The Future of Steelmaking in NW Indiana* is available on [Gard's website](#). presentation is available at [2/5/2026 Environment Committee Meeting](#).

Questions and Discussion

Bill Emmerson asked the cost per ton change of using coal vs. natural gas.

Cleveland Cliffs was given a grant under the Biden administration for a plant in Ohio. Cliffs said the cost savings in replacing the blast furnaces would reduce costs by 150\$/ton. The transition would take years. If you exclude capital costs, direct reduction is less costly with natural gas. As more renewables and green hydrogen come online it will become less costly. Blast furnace steel in wealthy countries will end as the global trend away from carbon dioxide continues.

Susan MiHalo asked if regulatory burdens would be reduced.

Yes. There is a huge regulatory burden currently, and cleaner technology would lower the regulatory burden. Natural gas is a first step and easily convertible to hydrogen and renewables as they become available.

Lake Michigan Coastal Program BIL projects

Jen Birchfield presented the Natural Resources Grant Readiness Assistance program funded by DNR Lake Michigan Coastal Program.

Comment: The old state line generating plant was torn down. There may be an opportunity to put green space and public access along the lakefront.

NIRPC Environmental Program 2025 Annual Report

Kathy Luther overviewed the annual report (provided in packet) and asked for feedback on performance measures. The group discussed the layout, and a storymap was suggested.

Question: Does INDOT have mapping of projects? Yes, NIRPC has GIS for TIP projects for the region.

Metropolitan Transportation Plan update.

Tom Van der Wood presented on the update to NIRPC's 2050+, currently underway.

Questions and Discussion

Reggie asked where the Environment Committee is on the timeline. The update will be brought to the Committee regularly.

Can we bring in Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission? Yes, as well as sustainability committees.

Hammond needs a new wastewater treatment plant on the Little Calumet that ties to Highland and Griffith. They need over \$300 million.

Planning Partner Updates

Drive Clean Indiana

Ryan Lisek reported and provided a handout.

Lake Michigan Coastal Program

- Reggie Korthols reported that the Coastal Board reviewed 13 applications last month. All were invited to submit a full proposal.
- Katherine Balkema said they are no longer accepting proposals and the 13 pre-proposals are moving toward full proposals.

Announcements

- Nancy Noldenhauer announced that NWI Green Drinks is tonight at 6:30 on Zoom or via Save the Dunes' Facebook. The topic is becoming an environmental champion. Michigan City's Earth Month Extravaganza is April 25 and tables are free. NIPSCO residents are very concerned about huge price increases. Activists are encouraging people to send a comment to the Indiana Regulatory Commission. There is a petition online about rate gouging.
 - Can we look at Community Development Block Grants grants to help residents?
 - George Topoll said shut off notices are a big issue, and they try to help people get over the hump.
 - Nancy said HB 1002 is at the state house. Legislators are trying to get things in there to help, but they never pass the committee.
 - Union Township is supporting SB270. George said NIRPC Economy and Place committee meets next week and many topics overlap with the environment.
 - NIPSCO is under investigation due to the way they are figuring bills. New technology is causing this huge spike.
 - George suggested we ask NIPSCO to come and present their side.
 - Katie Hobgood said Save the Dunes has SD 277 information on Facebook and a call to action. It is a bad environmental bill that redefines IDEM requirements. Save the Dunes just completed their third landscaping in the Dunes guide focused on bird populations.
- Reggie Korthols said registration is open for a NISWAG contractor workshop. The theme is "What's in Your Watershed?". NISWAG is looking at an EPA regional grant. May 11-12 is the state annual MS4 meeting in Hendricks County.
- Sarah Tubbs said the NWI Earth Day Celebration will be Saturday April 18 at the Porter County Expo Center. The theme is "Our Power, Our Planet" Non-profit booths are \$50.
- The Next EMPC Meeting is scheduled for May 9, at 10:00 am at PNW Hammond.

Reggie Korthols moved to adjourn the meeting. Suan MiHalo seconded. The meeting was adjourned.

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