

**Michael Rosenbaum, CPA
LaPorte County Auditor
555 Michigan Avenue, Suite 205
LaPorte, IN 46350**

**MEETING MINUTES
LAPORTE COUNTY COUNCIL & COMMISSIONERS JOINT WORKSHOP
August 24, 2026**

(Please Turn Off All Cell Phones)

The Joint Workshop of the LaPorte County Council & Commissioners to be held on Monday, August 24, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. CT in the Assembly Room of the LaPorte County Government Complex, 809 State Street, LaPorte, IN 46350.

CALL TO ORDER – Commissioner President Steve Holifield called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE – President Holifield asked those present to stand for the Pledge.

Councilman Pressel, Councilman Yagelski, Councilman Kessler, Council President Koronka, Councilman Kiel, Councilman Mollenhauer, Councilwoman Heath, Commissioner Haney and Commission President Holifield were all present.

President Holifield explained the purpose of the workshop is to update the Council on what's been happening since the derecho came through two weeks ago. There have been a lot of expenses and clean up, while Rob Sabie of EMA has been dealing with FEMA. Mr. Holifield wants the Council to be aware of upcoming expenses, even though it is hopeful insurance and FEMA will kick in.

Rob Sabie, Director LaPorte County Emergency Management: It has been super busy with FEMA coming in to do damage assessment of homes and private properties. Immediately after the storm, EMA set up a link on the County's website so people could report their damage. 211 was also activated statewide so people could call or log in to report their damage. It helps EMA to determine where to check, etc. After FEMA came in, a list was compiled of all the places EMA was aware of, however after spending the day, FEMA found a lot more. FEMA had a deadline of Friday at noon, so they did what they could. EMA also explored the public assistance side, which is what the government fills out for reimbursement for anything related to the storm. He requested that all of the departments give their status updates. The threshold of the County is \$550,000.00 and it is already at 5.9 million dollars of what was turned in and spent so far. The damage has to exceed 13 million dollars to declare a disaster and with 52 counties being affected, the State will be way over that. Once the declaration is secured, it will be possible to turn in for reimbursement. FEMA will reimburse 75% and the County 25%. The departments have been tasked to keep track of everything related to the storm because volunteer work, equipment use and many other circumstances can count toward the County's 25% reimbursement. There will be a lot of paperwork to complete when they are able apply for reimbursement, but the State has offered to return to LaPorte to assist. He does not believe the County emergency needs to be extended since there are significantly fewer people without power. **Councilman Kiel** asked for a breakdown of the 5.9 million dollars and **Mr. Sabie** said it was a guesstimate using numbers provided by the departments including Highway, Parks, EMS and other departments that were affected. **President Koronka** asked if 211 was strictly for County properties but **Mr. Sabie** replied it was for residents only. He also said residents can

still register but is unsure how long it will remain open. He explained that 211 is a database that helps EMA determine areas to inspect. When the declaration is approved, the residents will be able to apply for assistance through FEMA. **Councilman Yagelski** asked whether this is being advertised on the radio to be able to get an updated damage number, and **President Holifield** said he's been sending everything out to the full media. **Mr. Sabie** said Southern Baptist disaster services has been assisting residents who cannot afford to get the trees off of their properties. It is at no cost to the residents or the County, they are just a faith-based group that helps around the entire country. The City of LaPorte has hired a bunch of contractors but in order to be reimbursed through FEMA, specific processes and tracking systems must be used. **Commissioner Haney** stressed the importance of having 211 available to residents. As Rob said, there will be paperwork and other things on the back end. But the significance of doing things upfront helps the County reach its threshold. 211 will help residents connect with all types of resources including clothing, food, replacement for SNAP benefits and many other support systems. **Rob Sabie** added that his office gets daily reports so it can be determined if there is anything new or any needs that require urgent attention. His office will contact the appropriate entity if they cannot provide assistance. It is important to remember to dial 911 for actual emergencies.

Matt Deckard, Director E-911: He said as of Friday, all of the communication towers are back up and everything is back to normal. The big expenses are going to be overtime during the event. He forwarded the numbers from that day and **Mr. Holifield** said it was clear they were very busy but they did a wonderful job.

Charity Glaser, Superintendent LaPorte County Highway: All of the roads are open. As far as the debris, she's unsure of how all of it will be picked up in the County. As of now, if the debris is out they will get it. But if your road is missed and your debris wasn't out, it's doubtful they will come back and get it. She suggested that when people call to share the location of their debris, a schedule could be made using a map to determine the best route for pick up. They are starting chip seal next week and still have paving to complete, so the crews will be occupied. She can try to coordinate with Rob to possibly get some of the debris collected. As for expenses, it was basically overtime for the first week when they worked weekends. Some chains, chainsaws and other things were purchased. She completed her estimate which was \$750,000.00 and per instructions multiplied it by 5. She also added a brush chipper since the current one has taken a beating and is on its last leg. **Mr. Sabie** said the State is currently working on a plan for debris removal, so hopefully the County can get some resources to come in and help. But as Charity stated, it would be a one-time deal to go down the roadways to pick up debris.

Councilman Yagelski: IT is out \$100,000.00 in switching gear that they lost. Maintenance is out approximately \$20,000.00. It is not for a lot of overtime but for purchases of equipment that are not normally bought and used, such as backpacks, chainsaws and similar items.

Eric Fenstermaker, Administrator EMS: The EMS base in Michigan City was struck by lightning which fried every piece of electronic equipment including computers, radios and paging equipment. He wired in a base radio so something was available. The lightning strike was not enough to damage the building itself just the equipment in it. He also wired a small pager into an amplifier because he had to get something going. For the 800 MHz radios, he received a firm estimate of just over \$25,000.00. He is still waiting on the paging side but using estimates he received for the new EMS base, it will be approximately \$45,000.00. The total should be between 70 and 80 thousand to replace everything because they are replacing 1998 equipment with 2026 equipment. EMS is able to respond now but there have been some significant delays due to the damaged electronics.

Jeremy Sobecki, LaPorte County Parks: Bluhm County Park sustained the most damage with over 200 trees destroyed. The DNR restoration project was supposed begin there but the stream isn't even visible because the trees are so thick. He will be meeting with the DNR on Wednesday to devise a plan to move forward. Red Mill was back online at 1:00 a.m. on Saturday. Luckily, the office had a generator so it was able to keep running and rentals were still happening until a tree fell on power lines. NIPSCO wasn't able get there immediately, so some rentals had to be cancelled. They were able to remove the tree from the Environmental Education Center but when it started to rain the following day, the roof had to be covered. There is damage to the roof and siding and some water damage inside the facility from the initial rain. A claims adjuster is coming tomorrow and JB West will be submitting a quote for the roof damage. Bluhm had to be closed for a while but thanks to his staff and volunteers, a lot of the east side road is open. In fact, enough was cleared to have a cross country meet there last week. A group of volunteers brought equipment, many excavators and lifts to work with Mr. Sobecki to move things along and open more trails. There were hanging trees in the dog park at Luhr, so that was also cleared. He is still encouraging people to exercise caution and not go into areas that are taped off or closed. There are 6 or 7 miles of mountain bike trails and horse trails in the west wood section at Bluhm that are completely closed until it can be determined what can be done. He has been talking to some companies that harvest logs for lumber so he is trying to see if there is any value in that. Some of the trees were badly damaged by the way they fell, so he's unsure about those. He might end up burning it all in the fall. He has many volunteers who want to help but he wants to make sure he has safe things for them to do. He isn't even comfortable letting his staff work on some of the hanging trees, and a bucket truck can't go into the trails, so he's exploring other options. He estimates that it will cost \$500,000.00 to clear out the back woods.

Robin Havens, Executive Director, Solid Waste District: The site is about at 60% capacity. One of the biggest issues is that Homer (Tree Service) is still out there working on the fire and trying to get rid of all the fire material. Everything has been pretty manageable. An excavator was rented and they started grinding on Wednesday. As of Monday, the County Highway has been dropping off by the Sheriff's range, so things have been able to stay separated. The problem is going to be getting rid of the material that's ground. They are open until 6:00 p.m. this week and 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturday. Her estimate was just under 1.9 million if they had to pay a company to come in and get rid of the material. It has been nonstop since the storm. And even if the debris is ground, she estimates it would cost approximately \$300,000.00 to have it hauled away.

Mike Schultz, LaPorte County Assessor: He has good news on one side and maybe not so good on the other. His office is now using form 137R for residents who have any damage to their property, buildings or anything. The reassessment date would be the date of the storm and this form can be filed with his office. If changes are made to someone's assessment, it would affect him/her next year. If assessments are lowered, there is concern because these numbers have already been calculated for budgets next year. The form can be filed at any time, but within a year is recommended. Indiana doesn't really use the cost approach but most insurance companies do. His office uses the market value in use to see the marketability of what's there including vacant land and personal property. This is just starting but there is an Assessors' Conference in Fort Wayne where they will be updated on this. This form can only be used when a natural disaster has been declared. In previous storms where there was damage, it wouldn't qualify because a disaster wasn't declared. In that case form 134 Correction of Error would be used. NIPSCO may qualify through the State for relief since they lost some of their substations. NIPSCO is self-assessed and he isn't even able to see the amount because it's confidential. He encourages the public to call his office so someone can go out to determine if a reassessment needs to be done. He hopes to have more answers next week on what can be done if there is a significant effect on the budget due to the lowering of assessments.

Steve Holifield, President LaPorte County Commissioners: NIPSCO has been giving twice daily updates and some Teams meetings as to the status of power outages. If anyone is still out of power, continue to report it to NIPSCO. The numbers are dwindling down so if they missed someone, they want to go back and check. People also need to be patient because there may be a significant reason for their power outages that cannot be repaired quickly.

Joe Haney, LaPorte County Commissioner: He gave a shout out to the Governor's Office and Anthony Ferraro, one of the contact people in this area. It didn't even stop raining when the phone started ringing asking what was going on, what is needed and what help could they provide. They worked hard trying to divide the limited resources they had to deploy. He was glad to hear that Governor Braun announced today that he's requesting an official investigation into NIPSCO's policies in regards to both the response to the storm and their vegetative practices leading up to it, and how that may have impacted how many trees got mixed up in the lines. It is good to know that Indianapolis is listening and the Governor's Office employees are rolling up their sleeves and doing what they can for us up here. It's nice to feel we weren't alone in this.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn at 5:42 p.m. was made by Council President Koronka and supported by Councilman Kiel.

EXAMINED & APPROVED BY THE LAPORTE COUNTY COUNCIL this 28th day of September, 2026.



Councilman President Adam Koronka



Councilman Justin Kiel



Councilwoman Jennifer Heath



Councilman Brett Kessler



Councilman Mike Mollenhauer



Councilman Jimmy Pressel



Councilman Mark Yagelski

ATTEST:



Michael Rosenbaum, La Porte County Auditor