

BENTON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
JANUARY 6, 2026

The Benton County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on January 6, 2026, in the Benton County Board Room in Foley, MN with Commissioners Pam Benoit, Steve Heinen, Ed Popp, Jared Gapinski, and Scott Johnson present. Call to order by County Administrator Montgomery Headley was at 9:00 AM followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag.

Johnson nominated Heinen for 2026 Chair of the Board. Nominations were closed and a unanimous ballot was cast for Heinen for Board Chair for 2026. Chair Heinen called for nominations for a 2026 Board Vice-Chair. Gapinski nominated Johnson for 2026 Vice-Chair of the Board. Nominations were closed and a unanimous ballot was cast for Johnson for Board Vice-Chair for 2026.

County Administrator Montgomery Headley requested the following amendments to the agenda: 1) to remove Consent Item # 11 regarding the consideration of the contract with Midco for cable television services because the contract was not finalized and therefore not ready for consideration; 2) to add the request to re-designate Auditor-Treasurer the authority to designate depository banks for Benton County funds as the first item under Auditor Treasurer at 9:30 AM; 3) add a discussion regarding Lobbyist services from Larkin Hoffman as the last item under County Administrator at 9:05 AM. Motion by Johnson and seconded by Benoit to approve the amended agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

There was one person to speak during the Open Forum. Tom Haaf, a Sauk Rapids resident who addressed the County Board with several concerns regarding seven mortgage foreclosures in Benton County that are reducing tax revenue, dissatisfaction with recent county employee raises without the consideration of taxpayers, and frustration with high taxes. Haaf urged the County Board to address fraud more aggressively, particularly in Human Services, and to involve law enforcement.

Motion by Johnson and seconded by Gapinski to approve Consent Agenda items 1 -10: 1) approve the Regular Meeting Minutes of December 16, 2025 and authorize the Chair to sign; 2) approve the Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes of December 3, 2025 and authorize the Chair to sign; 3) approve the Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes of December 16, 2025 (AM) and authorize the Chair to sign; 4) approve the Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes of December 16, 2025 (PM) and authorize the Chair to sign; 5) designate the official newspaper for Benton County for 2026; 6) approve the minimum salaries for the County Attorney, Sheriff and Auditor-Treasurer for terms of office beginning in 2027 and authorize the Chair to sign; 7) approve the contract for outside Labor Attorney Services and authorize the Chair to sign; 8) approve the application for 2025 Local Option Disaster Credit and 2026 Local Option Abatement for Parcel 09.01086.00; 9) approve the 2026-2027 IV-D Cooperative Agreement between Benton County Human Services and the Department of Children Youth and Family (DCYF) and authorize the Chair to sign; 10) approve an alternative method to disseminate bids and requests for proposals and authorize the Chair to sign. Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Headley requested the County Board to appoint an Interim County Engineer. Former Morrison County Engineer Steven C. Backowski has agreed to serve as Interim County Engineer while the County seeks a permanent County Engineer. Mr. Backowski has agreed to the employment agreement and hourly rate. Per the agreement, Mr. Backowski has waived County benefits, including PTO accrual. Headley requested County Board action to approve an employment agreement to serve as Interim County Engineer, and to approve the Resolution appointing Steven C. Backowski as Interim Benton County Engineer. Motion by Gapinski and seconded by Popp to approve the employment agreement with Steven C. Backowski to serve as Interim Benton County Engineer. Motion carried unanimously. Next, Motion by Johnson and seconded by Benoit to approve a Resolution appointing Steven C. Backowski as Interim Benton County Engineer. Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Headley explained that the draft listing of the 2026 County Board meeting dates and times reflects the traditional meeting dates of the “first and third” Tuesday of each month at 9:00 AM; with the exception of the December 1, 2026 meeting commencing at 6:00 PM for the “Truth in Taxation Meeting”. Following discussion, Johnson/Benoit to set the 2026 County Board meeting dates and times: “first and third” Tuesday of each month at 9:00 AM with the exception of the first meeting in December which will be on Tuesday, December 1, 2026 at 6:00 PM (to combine with the Truth in Taxation Meeting). Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Finance Supervisor Jackie Traut requested County Board consideration of the software project agreement with Information Systems Corporation (ISC). Implementing ISC’s automated AP solution would significantly improve efficiency by digitizing the entire workflow, reducing manual data entry, and storing all documentation electronically. It would also allow departments to independently access invoice history and payment details without needing to route their inquiries through Finance, saving time for both departments and finance team. Motion by Gapinski and seconded by Popp to approve the software project agreement with Information Systems Corporation (ISC). Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Headley reported that the new Government Center Project Building Committee visited two furniture, fixtures and equipment (FFE) vendors, but one did not have pricing available. As a result, the committee cannot make a recommendation yet. They expect to receive the missing estimates within a few days, reconvene early next week, and bring a recommendation to the January 20th Regular Board Meeting.

Next, Headley requested review of the County Board Policy Manual, which outlines board responsibilities, meeting procedures, and other governance rules. Particular attention is given to the policy on remote participation, including limits on how often members may attend meetings remotely, visibility and audio requirements, roll-call voting, and notice requirements. There was a consensus of the County Board that the current provisions are working with a question raised about whether participation from outside the country is allowed, which Headley will confirm with the State. Headley also highlighted a section explaining when closed sessions are legally permitted and asked Board members to review it later. Headley received direction from the County Board to post the County Board Policy Manual on the County website.

Next, Headley requested discussion and possible direction regarding the St. Cloud Regional Airport Authority options. The County Administrators for Benton, Sherburne and Stearns, along with the St. Cloud City Administrator were tasked with identifying potential options for how the St. Cloud Regional Airport Authority operates (e.g., its membership, how it levies a property tax, etc.). This led to several considerations which include: 1) Communication, 2) Governance Structure (Authority membership), 3) Support from the City of St. Cloud, 4) regional sales tax and 5) regional airport authority levy authority, noting that changes to representation or levy limits would require unanimous approval of all four entities and amendments to the enabling resolution. Discussion centered primarily on two priorities: establishing clearer representation – potentially including elected officials from each entity, and limiting levy exposure, particularly in light of future funding shifts when the City of St. Cloud's current exemption ends. There was a general consensus of the County Board that the Airport Authority Board should include one elected official from each participating county and city, and that levy limits should be established for the Airport Authority. Headley will communicate with the respective county and city administrators to coordinate a meeting of all participating entities to discuss these matters.

Next, Headley requested County Board consideration of the 2026 per diem rate for Boards and Commissions which has historically been set at the first meeting in January. Boards and Commissions affected by this action include the Park Commission, Planning Commission, Board of Adjustment, Solid Waste Advisory Committee, and the Extension Committee. The current per diem paid to members of Boards and Commissions is \$70 per meeting. For 2026, the County Board retained the current \$70 per diem rate but added a new \$100 per diem for meetings or a series of meetings exceeding four hours (same day). The \$100 per diem is not in addition to the basic \$70 per diem. Also, there was clarification that the Board of Adjustment members receive a \$10 per site visit, plus mileage in addition to the \$70 per diem. Motion by Johnson and seconded by Popp to set the 2026 per diem rate to \$70 per meeting, and to revisit the \$10 site visit compensation for the Board of Adjustment. Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Gapinski requested County Board discussion and possible direction of the Lobbyist services with Larkin Hoffman. Gapinski suggested supporting an additional \$23,000 to \$24,000 contribution through the APO to retain Larkin Hoffman for enhanced federal lobbying, focused primarily on advancing the County Road 1 project. County Board members emphasized the timing and strategic importance of this effort, noting strong alignment from Minnesota's congressional delegation, increased availability of federal RAISE grant funding this year, and the potential to significantly reduce local taxpayer costs on a \$23 million project. There was a general consensus of the County Board that the investment is justified given past success, including securing a \$5 million grant, the safety concerns along County Road 1, and the need for coordinated state and federal advocacy. There was a general consensus of the County Board to move forward with the additional lobbying support, with details on funding sources to be finalized and formal action to follow at a subsequent meeting.

Next, Auditor-Treasurer Christine Scherbing requested County Board consideration of the sale of parcel 09.00541.03 to Thelen Estates, LLC. Thelen Estates, LLC was the winning bidder of the auction held on the Public Surplus website for parcel 09.00541.03, and remitted payment in full of \$672.40 on the

parcel. Scherbing requested County Board approval of the sale and to authorize the County Board Chair to sign the deed to convey the property. Scherbing added that the deed was fully vetted by the Benton County Attorney's Office. Motion by Johnson and seconded by Benoit to approve the sale of parcel 09.00541.03 to Thelen Estates, LLC and authorize the Board Chair to sign the deed to convey the property. Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Scherbing requested County Board consideration to re-designate the Auditor-Treasurer the authority to designate depository banks, and to designate depository banks for Benton County funds. These include Frandsen Bank & Trust, Falcon National Bank, First National Bank of Milaca, US Bank, Wells Fargo, the MAGIC Fund, and banks used by the County's brokerage firms. During discussion, it was noted that use of large national banks has been significantly reduced in favor of local banks, with the MAGIC Fund having the highest interest rate. Motion by Johnson and seconded by Popp to redesignate the Auditor-Treasurer the authority to designate depository banks and to designate depository banks for Benton County funds. Motion carried unanimously.

Next, Human Services Director Sandi Shoberg, along with Application Services Data Manager Brenton Marshik shared an update regarding the Benton County Service Survey results for Human Services, that services are rated on a 5-point scale, with 5 being the highest rating. Overall, the average approval rating for each area has been very positive and ranged from 4.7 to 4.9. This item was for informational purposes only.

Next, Shoberg, along with Fiscal Services Supervisor Janel Sczublewski and Eligibility Specialist Lead Nina Wegman provided a Child Care Assistance Program update. They briefed the County Board on how the Child Care Assistance Program operates locally in response to recent media coverage about alleged childcare fraud. They clarified that Benton County investigates individual eligibility fraud, while provider fraud and licensing issues are primarily investigated and overseen by the state. Staff outlined program statistics, eligibility requirements, verification processes, and how authorized childcare hours are determined based on work, education, and activity requirements. They also explained that, as of April 2025, the state has assumed responsibility for registering and monitoring all childcare providers, including licensed, center-based, and legal non-licensed providers. Staff reported minimal fraud identified in applications due to strict verification requirements and noted that the state has begun immediate on-site inspections through DCYF's Office of Inspector General with assistance from the BCA. This item was for informational purposes only.

Next, Land services Director Roxanne Achman requested County Board consideration of the DNR Notice of Preliminary Map and list of Public Waters Inventory Corrections within Benton County. Achman shared that the DNR is proposing four changes: the removal of three public waters wetland basins totaling approximately 24 acres in Langola, Alberta, and Minden Townships, and the addition of a roughly half-mile public waterway segment in Graham Township near Highway 25. The public comment period runs from December 27, 2025, through February 25, 2026, with a county public meeting scheduled for January 26, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. at the Foley High School. These changes are intended to correct mapping errors from the 1970s and 1980s, and Achman noted the scope of proposed corrections

in Benton County is relatively limited compared to other counties. Benton County resident Mike Deppa requested a copy of the information Achman shared. This item was for informational purposes only.

Next County Engineer Chris Byrd requested County Board consideration of the resolution to reauthorize Local Sales Tax for Transportation. Byrd shared that Benton County first adopted a Local Sales Tax for Transportation in 2019. At that time, it was estimated to generate about \$1.9 million per year to fund road and bridge projects. The County Board considered a list of projects to be funded with the proceeds and that list totaled and estimated \$34.4 million and included 36 different projects. Revenues came in higher than anticipated, and to date 22 projects have been completed costing approximately \$19.6 million. There are 14 projects to complete at an estimate of \$15 million. It has been proposed to add projects to the current list so that they are eligible to be funded with sales tax proceeds. A Public Hearing was conducted on December 16, 2025, with all positive comments. Byrd noted that the proposal does not increase the tax rate but expands and clarifies the list of eligible road projects, including extensions to County Roads 82 and 65, and adding projects such as Mayhew Lake Road, County Road 25, CSAH 9, and a gravel segment of County Road 72. Byrd also acknowledged a typo on the resolution for item #21, noting that it should say CR 82 and not CR 84. Motion by Johnson and seconded by Benoit to adopt the resolution re-authorizing a Local Sales Tax for Transportation, noting the correction on item # 21 to be changed to CR 82. Motion carried unanimously.

The County Board recessed at 10:22 AM to conduct a Community Health Board Meeting.

The County Board reconvened at 10:55 AM.

Next, Board members reported on recent meetings they attended on behalf of Benton County.

There were no additional Comments by Commissioners.

Johnson/Gapinski to set the Committee of the Whole Meetings: Monday, January 12, 2026, Annual Goal Setting Session at Jack & Jim's, 11025 Duelm Rd NE, Foley, MN 56329, 11:00 AM; Monday, January 12, 2026 updates on Sauk Rapids-Rice School building projects, Sauk Rapids-Rice High School, 1835 Osauka Rd NE, Sauk Rapids, MN 56379, 6:00 PM; Tuesday, January 20, 2026, discussion on Auditor-Treasurer appointment request, County Boardroom, Foley, 8:00 AM; Monday, January 26, 2026, DNR Public Waters Inventory Meeting, Foley High School, 621 Penn St, Foley, MN 56329, 6:00 PM; Thursday, January 22, 2026 Benton Economic Development Annual Meeting, Harvester Square 539 E St. Germain St., St. Cloud, MN 56304, 7:30 AM. Motion carried unanimously.

Chair Heinen adjourned the Regular Board Meeting at 11:04 AM.

ATTEST:

Steven J. Heinen, Chair
Benton County Board of Commissioners

Montgomery Headley
Benton County Administrator