

CLINTON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Chairperson
Bruce DeLong
Vice-Chairperson
Zach Rudat

Members
Nicole Fickes
Brian Hurtekant
Robert Showers
John Andrews
Dwight Washington

COURTHOUSE
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Administrator/Controller
John F. Fuentes
Clerk of the Board
Debra A. Sutherland

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DATE 02/05/2026 The Clinton County Board of Commissioners met on Thursday, February 5, 2026 at 9:00 a.m. with Chairperson Bruce DeLong presiding.

MOMENT OF SILENCE AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE Chairperson DeLong called for a moment of silence. The pledge of allegiance was given to the flag of the United States of America.

ROLL CALL Roll was called with a quorum of the members in attendance: Nicole Fickes, Zach Rudat, Bruce DeLong, Brian Hurtekant, Robert Showers, John Andrews and Dwight Washington.

COUNTY PERSONNEL Todd Campbell and Eric Harger

VISITORS Kurt Wolf, Dan Smith, Greg Armbrustmacher, Jon Thelen, Jennings West, Lee Thelen, John Weber, Louis Faivor, Kevin Garvey, Dan Hufnagel, Joe Thelen, Maggie Sayles, Ramona Smith, Peggy Lidgard, Bob Ladiski, Donna Graham, Larry Kindel, Tanner White, Bruce Levey, Tyler Malkin, Pat Feldpausch, Nancy Hughson, Kathy George, Melany Mack, Nick McDonald, Tamra Ashley, Harmony Gmazel, Claudia Plugger, Jan Motz, Jennifer Tubbs and Amanda McClanahan

APPROVAL OF MINUTES The following minutes were presented for review and approval:

- January 27, 2026 Board of Commissioners Meeting
- January 27, 2026 Board of Commissioners Meeting Closed Session #1
- January 27, 2026 Board of Commissioners Meeting Closed Session #2

Chairperson DeLong noted a correction to the January 27, 2026 Board of Commissioners' meeting minutes on page 11, item 5 should reference "Grade 3 position" rather than "Grade 4 position".

BOARD ACTION: Commissioner Showers moved, seconded by Commissioner Fickes to approve the minutes as corrected. Motion carried.

AGENDA The agenda was presented for review and approval.

BOARD ACTION: Commissioner Hurtekant moved, seconded by Commissioner Washington to approve the agenda as printed. Motion carried.

INTRODUCTIONS Chairperson DeLong invited the panel of township representatives to introduce themselves, noting their name and the township represented.

INPUT FROM TOWNSHIP
REPRESENTATIVES
REGARDING
PLANNING & ZONING
SERVICES

Chairperson DeLong introduced MSU Extension Facilitators, Harmony Fierke-Gmazel, Outreach Specialist and Eric Walcott, Senior Specialist and provided an overview of the plan for today.

Representatives from townships utilizing county Planning & Zoning services offered the following comments:

- **Lebanon Township (Greg Armbrustmacher):**
 - Lacks the financial resources, staffing, and legal capacity to manage zoning and enforcement independently.
 - Already struggling to maintain other services.
 - Would need to seek voter approval of a millage to fund zoning locally.
- **Essex Township (Kathy George):**
 - Supports continuing countywide Planning & Zoning services for the remaining 10 townships.
 - Services are funded by county taxpayers and include liability insurance coverage.
 - Eliminating services would force townships to divert funds from essential services like parks and roads.
 - Cutting Planning & Zoning would undermine efforts to position the county as a regional leader.
- **Greenbush Township (Lee Thelen):**
 - Supervisor meeting included 13 townships (4 with their own zoning) and 3 zoning board members.
 - Broad agreement that county Planning & Zoning ensures uniformity and consistency.
 - Zoned townships did not object to taxpayer support for non-zoned townships.
 - Greenbush cannot afford to operate zoning independently and may not be able to offer it at all.
 - Raised concerns about losing countywide consistency, insurance coverage, and the rationale for eliminating services.
- **Duplain Township (Bruce Levey):**
 - Expressed appreciation for county Zoning services and emphasized countywide consistency.
 - Questioned whether other county offices generate revenue to offset costs.
 - Suggested the county could fund a full-time employee instead of a part-time consultant.
 - Cited an example of a township without zoning and expressed concern about that occurring in Clinton County.
- **Bingham Township (John Weber):**
 - Addressed concerns that the southern part of the county subsidizes services in the north.
 - Advocated for unity and maintaining county Planning & Zoning services.
 - Stated Bingham Township could not support zoning independently.
 - Emphasized continuity and the link between Planning & Zoning and community development.
 - Suggested exploring cuts in other areas if necessary and encouraged working together as a county.
- **Ovid Township (Jennings West):**
 - Cannot afford to operate its own zoning services.
 - Reported no prior issues with zoning services until a recent incident.
 - Emphasized the need for qualified personnel in the Zoning Department.
 - Expressed willingness for everyone to pay their fair share, if necessary.

- **Westphalia Township (John Thelen):**
 - Expressed agreement with the other supervisors.
 - Stated a preference for keeping zoning services at the county level.
- **Riley Township (Kevin Garvey):**
 - Supports standing together and maintaining Planning & Zoning responsibilities at the county level.
 - Expressed concern about the financial burden if townships were required to manage zoning independently.
 - Highlighted existing township expenses and revenue limitations.
 - Advocated for continuing centralized zoning services.
- **Olive Township (Lewis Faivor):**
 - Advocates for consistent, high quality zoning services across all communities.
 - Supports continued reciprocal support between the Township and the County.
 - Expressed concerns regarding additional financial obligations and expenses.

Representatives from townships offering their own services offered the following comments/statements:

- **Victor Township (Maggie Sayles):**
 - Noted that Victor Township has a Planning Commission but is not ordinance-driven.
 - Stated that the County Planning & Zoning budget represents less than 1% of the overall county budget.
 - Voiced concern about turnover in the Planning & Zoning Office Director position.
 - Emphasized the need to fill vacancies on the Planning & Zoning Board.
 - Reiterated the importance of unity, working together and the need for solutions.
- **Bengal Township (Nick McDonald):**
 - Noted that Bengal Township operates its own Planning & Zoning and that it is expensive.
 - Stated the township does not carry the liability coverage previously discussed.
 - Asked whether the County would assist townships in collaborating if County Planning & Zoning were dissolved.
 - Commented that administering Planning & Zoning is very time-consuming.
- **Dallas Township (Pat Feldpausch):**
 - Noted that Dallas Township has operated its own Planning & Zoning for seven years and expressed concern about not having umbrella insurance coverage, acknowledging that while things have been fine so far, one incident could create significant liability.
 - Asked whether townships with their own zoning could fall under the County's insurance umbrella.
 - Described the township as very rural and explained why the community chose to establish its own Planning & Zoning.
 - Questioned why it has taken at least three months to fill the Planning Commission positions and requested they be filled immediately.
 - Advocated for geographically equal representation on the Planning Commission.

- **DeWitt Township (Amanda McClanahan):**
 - Operates its own Planning & Zoning services, covering a wide range of needs from dense industrial in the SE tier to rural property in the northern tier.
 - Noted that providing these services requires significant work and funding.
 - Stated that DeWitt Township is experiencing growth.
 - Carries a \$2 million liability policy at a cost of \$200,000/year.
 - Expressed appreciation for and recognition of the importance of continuity in Planning & Zoning services.
 - Rely on the fact that neighboring units have Planning & Zoning services as it makes a difference.
- **Bath Township (Beth Botke):**
 - Echoed comments made by DeWitt Township.
 - Noted that Bath Township also carries its own insurance policy.
 - Operates its own Planning & Zoning, serving areas ranging from very complex to very rural.
 - Expressed appreciation that neighboring communities have Planning & Zoning services.
 - Highlighted the economic impact and potential effect on land values in communities without Planning & Zoning.
 - Stated a desire for county tax dollars to be used appropriately in a way that benefits all communities harmoniously, even those with their own Planning & Zoning.
- **Watertown Township (Jennifer Tubbs):**
 - Has maintained its own Planning & Zoning since 1986.
 - Experience different challenges than the northern part of the county and faces development pressure from expanding cities.
 - Partnered with DeWitt and Bath to create a sewer plant as a strategy to prevent annexation.
 - Referenced the presence of I-96 running through Watertown, creating unique challenges and needs.
 - Stated no direct stake in the issue other than supporting continuity, emphasizing that consistency benefits everyone.

FACILITATORS' RECAP

Questions were captured by facilitators:

- Why is zoning being targeted in this way?
- Could insurance policy apply across the county?
- Turnover in Planning Director role?
- If Planning Department dissolves, could the county continue insurance for townships?
- Why aren't positions being filled?

Recap of comments:

- In favor of keeping Planning & Zoning at the county level;
- Affordability issues at the township level;
- Uniformity;
- Continuity of services;
- Sustainable funding;
- Liability concerns;
- General cost;
- Southern tier been providing their own services and support continuity to the rest of the townships at the county level for their services;
- Concerns about costs and inability to absorb costs.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chairperson DeLong called for public comments. The following individuals offered public comments:

- Lee Thelen, Greenbush Township;
- Kurt Wolf, Ovid Township;
- Tammy Ashley, Victor Township;
- Donna Graham, Greenbush Township.

COMMISSIONERS' COMMENTS

Chairperson DeLong called for Commissioners' comments.

- Commissioner Washington expressed appreciation for the feedback and looks forward to the proposed solutions. He acknowledged the recent turbulence and emphasized the county's need to establish a clear, firm path forward. He noted that sustainability was a recurring theme in discussions about future decisions.
- Commissioner Andrews raised several questions regarding the Planning Commission issues, asking when they began. He noted ongoing conflicts, particularly around renewable energy, and observed that the situation seems to have escalated, resulting in staff turnover, threats, and other problems. He highlighted that most townships reported the lack of funds to manage their own Planning & Zoning, although Eagle Township does. He suggested that townships could collaborate to share responsibilities as a potential solution. Commissioner Andrews emphasized the need to understand why the county is struggling to hire and retain employees and expressed a strong desire to get to the root of the issues.
- Commissioner Fickes noted her experience serving on the Victor Township Planning Commission and as a township trustee, giving her insight into the pressures and rising costs involved. She emphasized that the most effective way to provide services is at the county level. She feels the question is not whether to continue to offer the services, but how to do so. She stressed the need to define the services structure before hiring a director and suggested determining how to restructure the department and its decision making body. She also noted the importance of making liability coverage available to all. Positions have not yet been filled because she believed this discussion needed to occur first.
- Commissioner Hurtekant expressed appreciation for everyone's input, noting the importance of hearing all perspectives. Noted the importance of the board to carefully review the matter, acknowledging that while Planning & Zoning is not required by law, but a service provided to make Clinton County a good county. Vacancies on the Planning Commission have not yet been filled as its important to address the current process first. Financial impact and overhead are primary concerns, and understanding the root causes of staff turnover—based on feedback from two departing employees—is a priority to help build a strong foundation in the office. Discussion also touched on the 10-acre rule and its role in land preservation. County finances were highlighted adding that these are factors the board should keep in mind.
- Commissioner Showers noted that staffing had not been an issue for the past 15 years, but the county was forced to address matters outside its core responsibilities, such as the chip plant and solar and wind energy projects. He expressed concern about solar projects, feeling they were rushed, and emphasized the need to ensure sufficient tax revenue to meet legal obligations; otherwise, a millage—borne by homeowners rather than businesses, factories, or farms—would be necessary. He highlighted that growth is occurring primarily in the five southern-tier municipalities comprising 55% of the population. He stressed that the county's responsibility is to increase tax revenue without harming the agricultural sector and that while further discussion amongst the commissioners is needed, all commissioners should carefully consider these issues.

- Commissioner Rudat, who lives in the county's smallest township, stated he does not have budget concerns but believes the Planning Commission applicant interest demonstrates value in maintaining the department. Echoed the comments about continuity and uniformity. He said the issue warrants further board discussion and raised questions about turnover and the possibility of shared insurance. His primary concern is ensuring decisions are made with a countywide perspective, noting that only two board members live in county zoned townships. He highlighted ongoing growth trends and the likelihood that the board's makeup will change in the future. Only 19 counties offer county managed planning and zoning services and most of them are very rural. Clinton County is in a unique position as a rural area experiencing rapid suburban growth, he said rural communities need to recognize "the writing on the wall", prepare for the future and maintain communication. He also shared a personal concern that many families his age would like to remain in a rural community but suitable housing is not available.
- Chairperson DeLong thanked everyone for their input, stated that all perspectives have been expressed, and indicated the discussion will continue at the next Ways & Means Committee meeting on Thursday, February 19.

ADJOURNMENT

BOARD ACTION: With no further business to come before the Board, Chairperson DeLong declared the meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.



Debra A. Sutherland, Clerk of the Board

NOTE: These minutes are subject to approval on February 24, 2026.