OWEN COUNTY COUNCIL REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
September 14, 2026 @ 6:00 P.M.
COURTHOUSE 2ND FLOOR

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Call To Order

- Council President Polly Chesser called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. the opening prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Members present: Daniel Browning, Steve Carrell, Polly Chesser, Joe Frye, Anton Neff, and Nick Robertson. Member Verl Keith was absent.
- Auditor Sheila Reeves was present.
- Members of the public were reminded to sign in.

Approval of Minutes Postponed

- Council members had several sets of minutes before them, including a separate record containing only the motions from the budget proceedings:
  - 07/27/2026 - Joint Jail Meeting
  - 08/03/2026 - Regular Meeting
  - 08/26/2026 - Regular Meeting (Before Budget Workshop)
  - 08/26 & 27/2026 – Budget Workshop Meeting Motions.
- Due to the number and length of the minutes, Council discussed allowing additional time for review. Motion by Neff to postpone consideration of all submitted minutes until the next meeting. Robertson seconded the motion 6/0 approved.

Monthly Financial Reports

- The Auditor presented two financial report sets: a year-to-date report and a report covering August only. At Neff's prior request, month-by-month reports had also been prepared to distinguish miscellaneous revenue from settlement receipts. The Auditor advised that this format would be used for future meetings.
- Council noted that the monthly detail made it easier to identify funds, spending more than they were receiving and emphasizing the need for continued monitoring.
- The Auditor reported concern that certain funds might finish the calendar year but lack sufficient cash to operate until the June 2027 settlement. Specific concerns included the Building Department, certain Health Department funds, EMS, and a Probation-related fund.
- The Building Department's seasonal permit revenue was discussed. Even if the department completed 2026, it could experience cash-flow difficulty during January through March before construction activity and permit revenue increased.
- Council discussed limiting future additional appropriations by first requiring departments to use available balances in other line items when legally permissible. Members also noted the need to preserve sufficient operating funds while planning for jail-related financial obligations.
- Concerns regarding portions of the proposed 2027 budget were deferred to the later budget workshop review.

Public Hearing on Additional Appropriations

- President Chesser opened the public hearing concerning the additional appropriations advertised following the August meeting. The Auditor provided the required resolution and explained that the appropriations could be considered together or individually, but formal action was required for Gateway submission.

Veterans Service Officer appropriation

- The advertised amount for the Veterans Service Officer was up to $10,000. Council reviewed the remaining months of 2026, including FICA and PERF, and determined the amount needed was closer to $4,000.
- The proposed appropriation was therefore revised from $10,000 to $4,000 before Council acted on the advertised appropriations.

Highway appropriations and road program

- Council reviewed the Highway Department's detailed report concerning three highway funds, Lane Miles funding, Community Crossings funding, Planned Road Work, and the manner in which the various balances would be combined and tracked.
- The Community Crossings project list was discussed in relation to the State funding limitation of approximately $800,000, including the County match and grant award. Council noted that approximately $250,000 had already been budgeted for the match based on a larger projected award, while the actual match appeared to be approximately $159,000. Any remaining amount could be available for eligible highway needs.
- Lane Miles Fund 1452 was discussed as a possible source for culvert and ditching work. Highway representatives explained that more than 200 culverts and extensive ditching work were needed countywide, both for Community Crossings preparation and for other roads.
- An urgent box-culvert project on Rattlesnake Road was estimated at $59,000 for the structure, with an additional estimated $30,000 to $40,000 for installation and reconstruction of the approaches.
- Commissioner Hobbs stated that the Commissioners and Highway Department were carefully tracking expenditures and would not permit overspending. He said the appropriations would allow the County to complete significantly more work while sufficient cash was available.
- Because available personnel and equipment were insufficient for the volume of work, contractors were being used for selected projects. A contractor had been hired for urgent work on Braysville Road, where motorists had been leaving the roadway and driving through adjoining yards to pass damaged areas.
- The Highway Department's priority was to complete ditches and culverts before paving or chip-and-seal work. Work referenced during the discussion included Braysville Road, Macville Road, Sherfield Road, and a portion of Hyden Road. Work on Hyden Road was expected to account for contractor availability and an active logging operation.
- Commissioner Hobbs reported that INDOT had been notified of potential damage to Freedom Road and Pottersville Road from a State detour and had indicated that documented damage would be addressed. Council also discussed identifying other roads affected by the detour and seeking reimbursement in the same manner previously used for Little Flock Road.

- A broad road list had been distributed for paving, chip-and-seal, and related work. Quotes were requested so projects could later be selected according to remaining funds. It was repeatedly clarified that the list was a working wish list and could change because of pricing, emergencies, preparation needs, or available funding.
- The proposed 2027 Community Crossings list was estimated at more than $2 million and would have to be reduced. Certain roads also require ditching, culvert work, or bridge replacement before paving.
- Council members commended the Highway Department for improvements accomplished during the preceding 60 days and acknowledged the substantial backlog of work.
- Commissioner Hobbs reported that only one payment remained on the Evergreen obligation and that the Highway Department would then be out of that debt. He referred to an approximate $3 million balance reported to the State at the end of June and credited Highway staff, the other Commissioners, and the Auditor's Office for the financial progress.
- Council and the Commissioners emphasized that road priorities may be adjusted and that Highway staff should not be criticized when emergency work, pricing, or available resources require changes. Updated information was expected to be provided to Council as the plan evolved.
- No member of the public offered comments specifically on the advertised additional appropriations.
- Robertson moved to approve the additional appropriations advertised following the August meeting, with the Veterans Service Officer amount reduced from $10,000 to $4,000. Second by Browning, after confirmation that the Highway funds had sufficient cash balances and continuing revenue, 6/0 approved.
- President Chesser closed the public hearing on the additional appropriations.

Jennings Township 2027 Budget Public Hearing

- President Chesser opened the public hearing for the Jennings Township 2027 budget. Gandy Paris appeared on behalf of Trustee Sue Nichols, who was absent due to an extended illness following a tick bite.
- The proposed budget was reported to be unchanged from the prior year.
- No public questions or comments were offered concerning the Jennings Township budget.
- Robertson moved to accept the Jennings Township budget as presented. Browning seconded the motion 6/0 approved.
- The Auditor explained that final paperwork would be presented for signature at the October 13, 2026 meeting with the other County budgets.
- President Chesser closed the Jennings Township public hearing.

2027 Budget Workshop Review

Building Department financial condition and permitting software

- Council first reviewed the Building Department's financial condition and a proposed digital permitting and inspection-management system estimated at approximately $17,000.

- The Commissioners confirmed that building permit fees had recently been increased. Because the new fees had not been in effect long enough to establish a reliable trend, Council discussed comparing 2026 permits at the new fee schedule to estimate future revenue.
- The Building Department was created by a 1992 ordinance requiring it to be self-supporting or be discontinued. Council questioned why this necessary department was treated differently from other County departments and discussed the Commissioners' authority to revise the ordinance if needed.
- The financial report showed an approximate $41,000 cash balance against approximately $59,000 in remaining obligations, leaving the department about $18,000 short if the entire 2026 budget were spent. The Auditor advised that the department might generate enough revenue to complete the year, especially during the busy fall construction season, but could begin January with little or no cash.
- August permit receipts were reported at more than $12,000, compared with a previous monthly average of approximately $7,000 to $8,000. Council agreed that the effect of the new fee schedule should be monitored into early 2027.
- Possible options included temporary support from County General, transferring the health-insurance expense to EDIT/LIT if necessary, funding only part of the annual budget and reviewing it after six months, or revising the ordinance. The Auditor cautioned that payroll was not an appropriate line to allow to run in the red.
- Council discussed whether the proposed software could also manage driveway permits. Driveway permitting had previously been moved from the Building Department to the Highway Department because of concerns about culvert sizing and unsafe locations. Highway and Building representatives indicated they could coordinate inspections if a shared system were practical.
- The software was treated as a one-time purchase rather than an item in the published operating budget. Council requested a complete proposal identifying upfront and recurring costs, possible Highway participation, and the Commissioners' recommendation.
- Council agreed to leave the Building Department's proposed 2027 budget of approximately $150,000 unchanged and monitor revenue and cash flow. No motion was required because the previously approved budget figure was not changed.

Courthouse custodian position

- Council reviewed the request to convert the Courthouse Custodian from a part-time contractual schedule of approximately 1,400 hours per year to a full-time schedule of 1,820 hours per year, or 35 hours per week, with eligibility for County benefits.
- The additional estimated cost was $27,141, including added hours, FICA, PERF, and the benefit package. With the amount already budgeted, the total annual cost of the position was described as just under $50,000.
- The custodian's duties included cleaning the courthouse, restrooms, floors, and public areas; removing trash; waxing and mopping; assisting with landscaping and outdoor work; helping the maintenance employee; and providing assistance at other County buildings. Some work would need to occur after hours or on weekends.

- Council compared retaining a County employee with contracting for cleaning services. Commissioner Hobbs recommended keeping the employee because the County knew the quality of her work and because she also assisted the maintenance employee, effectively providing limited maintenance support.
- The projected 2027 wage-study rate was approximately $17.439 per hour, while the current contract equated to approximately $19.03 per hour without benefits. Council members and employees praised her work and stated that compensation should be addressed separately so that the conversion did not unfairly reduce her pay.
- A revised full-time job description would be required. The motion before Council concerned conversion of the position and addition of full-time benefits; it did not establish the final hourly rate.
- Robertson moved to convert the courthouse custodian position from part-time to full-time at 1,820 hours per year and add the estimated $27,141 required for the additional hours and benefits. Frye seconded the motion 6/0 approved. The final rate of pay and acceptance of the benefit package were to be addressed separately.

Veterans Service Officer 2027 schedule

- Council reviewed whether the expanded Veterans Service Officer schedule already authorized for the remainder of 2026 should continue in 2027.
- The full-time schedule was 1,820 hours per year. The estimated additional wage cost was approximately $10,000 to $12,000. The current officer did not require County medical insurance because coverage was available through the Veterans Administration; dental and vision coverage were discussed separately.
- Members reported favorable feedback from veterans who could now obtain assistance during afternoon hours and emphasized the importance of helping veterans secure earned benefits.
- Robertson moved to continue the Veterans Service Officer as a full-time position at 1,820 hours for the 2027 budget second by Carrell, 6/0 approved.

Human resources payroll and administrative functions

- Council considered proposals involving human resources, a County administrative position, and Grant-writing responsibilities. The Commissioners initially favored combining Human Resources and Administrative duties in an existing funded position located near the Assessor’s Office. The position could also provide a place for employees and the public to leave information for the Commissioners and could help organize the Commissioners’ correspondence and requests.
- Concerns were raised about combining confidential employee matters with general administrative traffic, placing Human Resources directly under the Commissioners, and protecting employees from influence or retaliation under future officeholders.
- Possible oversight structures included a joint ordinance and a small oversight group involving the Auditor, a Commissioner, and the Council President, with procedures for resolving disputes. It was noted that Indiana law does not uniformly place County human resources under either the executive or fiscal body; counties structure the function differently.

- The Auditor explained that her office already handled payroll, benefits questions, employee files, scheduling and advertising duties required by statute, and many day-to-day human-resource functions. The current payroll deputy, had effectively been performing the HR work for approximately a year and a half.
- The Auditor stressed that outdated personnel policies were a central problem. Wagner, Irwin and Scheele had been retained to assist with policy revisions, and chapters five through twelve had recently been returned for review. The Commissioners intended to review the draft and later meet with Council; department heads could also participate.
- The Treasurer reluctantly reported possessing a Hendricks County policy prepared by the same consulting firm that closely resembled early chapters received by Owen County. The document was copyrighted and could not simply be copied, but it could assist the Commissioners in evaluating and tailoring Owen County's Policy. Commissioner Hobbs requested the material for review.
- Council distinguished the immediate HR need from the longer-term administrative position. The Auditor recommended formally assigning HR to the employee already doing the work, updating the job description, obtaining appropriate wage targets, and revisiting the arrangement if the Commissioners' Administrative structure later changed.
- Robertson moved to update the existing payroll deputy position to formally include Human-Resources responsibilities, revise the job description, and obtain appropriate wage targets, with the position remaining under the Auditor. Frye seconded the motion 6/0 approved. Council and the Auditor agreed that the structure could be reviewed and adjusted later in cooperation with the Commissioners.
- The separate County Administrator and Grant-writer concepts were postponed. Council requested that the Commissioners further evaluate the remaining administrative workload, possible grant responsibilities, overlap with the Auditor's statutory duties, and an appropriate job description before returning with a recommendation.
- Council discussed the potential value of a dedicated grant function to locate opportunities, coordinate applications, manage compliance, and reduce fragmented work across departments. No action was taken on an Administrator or Grant-writer position.

Election and voter registration part-time position

- Council reviewed whether the existing part-time election employee should continue into 2027, a non-election year. The proposed schedule was 1,092 hours, approximately 21 hours or three days per week, at an estimated wage and FICA cost of $23,592 plus $4,857, as stated during the meeting.
- Councilman Robertson opposed continuing the position in a year without an election, noting that a full-time employee with benefits was already assigned to the office. Other members noted that State requirements and the volume of election-maintenance work had increased substantially.
- Clerk Stutsman reported that substantial voter-record maintenance had not previously been completed, including more than 13,000 records requiring review. Changes involving BMV registrations and other new legal requirements created daily and monthly duties even in a non-election year. The part-time employee was currently focused on one major maintenance project, and the office was still addressing work left incomplete after prior staffing changes.

- Stutsman stated that without the part-time position the work would fall to her, in addition to her regular Clerk duties. The employee would also provide office coverage during leave and permit comp-time balances to be reduced during the non-election year. The Clerk requested only three days per week rather than a 28- or 35-hour schedule.
- Council also reviewed the legal-services line. The prior budget contained approximately $14,000 for legal expenses. Reducing legal services to $2,000 would offset part of the proposed part-time expense. With the part-time position and revised legal line, the total fund budget was calculated at approximately $121,413, compared with approximately $108,016 before those changes.
- Frye moved to include the 21-hour-per-week part-time election position in the 2027 budget and reduce the legal-services line to $2,000. Neff seconded the motion. 3/3 Browning Frye & Neff in favor – Carrell Robertson & Chesser opposed, the vote resulted in a tie. Because the motion did not receive a majority, it failed and the existing budget status remained: no 2027 part-time election position and the original legal-services amount remained pending further action.
- Neff then moved to reduce the election and voter registration legal-services line to $2,000. Robertson seconded the motion; 5/1 approved (Frye opposed). The resulting fund budget was stated as $96,016.

Elected Officials' compensation

- Council reviewed a suggestion to provide a separate 5% increase for the Assessor, Auditor, Clerk, Coroner, Recorder, Surveyor, and Treasurer, excluding Commissioners and Council members. Because chief deputies are paid at 85% of the elected official's salary, the estimated combined cost for wages, FICA, and PERF was $31,310.
- Alternatives included a one-time 2027 payment, a larger cost-of-living adjustment for positions not otherwise receiving an increase, changing the wage-study progression percentage, or making no further adjustment. A one-time payment was described as more complicated for payroll and tax purposes and would not permanently change the base wage.
- Council discussed the previously approved one-half-percent COLA for employees who would not otherwise receive an increase, along with larger recent adjustments for Highway employees and jail officers. Eliminating the additional one-half-percent for groups already receiving increases was estimated to save approximately $12,600 to $12,700, but members expressed reluctance to change a commitment already made for the 2027 budget.
- Members discussed the need to update wage targets more frequently than every five years so employees would not fall substantially behind market rates between studies. Council could also revisit the previously selected 20% movement toward the wage target after considering the total budget impact.
- Current pay was compared with wage-study midpoints and AIC data. Council compensation was stated at $10,000 compared with a midpoint of approximately $9,143. Commissioner pay was stated at $23,760 compared with a midpoint of approximately $24,750. Several full-time elected officials were already above the wage-study midpoint, including the Clerk, Treasurer, and Recorder.

- Members expressed differing views regarding additional compensation and the County's ability to sustain further increases. No motion was made. The matter was left for additional calculation and review before the October budget hearing and the final adoption deadline.

Jail compensation review

- Council reported that the jail compensation issue remained in process. Neff had met with Sheriff White, and a revised job description was being developed for the Matron and Cook positions. No action was taken.

Rural Transit Area 10 funding request

- Council considered a request from Rural Transit Area 10. Federal changes had reportedly affected reimbursement for trips between Ellettsville and Bloomington, although trips originating in Spencer and continuing through Ellettsville to Bloomington could still qualify.
- Members were concerned that funding one nonprofit without a formal process would lead to repeated requests from many organizations. Options included providing no funding, creating a competitive grant fund with defined limits and criteria, or adding a specific Rural Transit line item.
- The current proposed budget contained no funding for the request. Council agreed to leave the budget unchanged, so no motion was necessary.

Old Business

Local Income Tax Municipal Unit Strategic Task Force

- Council reviewed scheduling for the local income tax municipal-unit discussions. Previously considered dates of September 17 and September 29 were being adjusted while coordination continued with the Spencer and Gosport town councils.
- A report had been discussed as due October 1, but the immediate focus was reaching agreement with the towns and having information available for the October 13 Council meeting. A daytime meeting was being considered.
- No allocation percentages or other substantive decisions have been made. Council needed information from both towns concerning their needs and anticipated budgets. If a unanimous agreement could not be reached, the matter could be returned to the County Council for determination. No formal action was taken.

Public Comments

- A member of the public Jill Hudson asked whether County funding shown for the Economic Development Corporation and Chamber came from Council appropriations. Council explained that the organizations had contracts with the Commissioners and had been appropriated $75,000, the same amount as the prior year.
- Council clarified that "Economic Development LIT" is a statutory name for a local income tax category that may be used for any legal purpose and does not mean that the full amount shown is funding for the EDC.
- The speaker objected to taxpayer money supporting an organization involved in a proposal presented to the Town of Spencer under a nondisclosure agreement. She referred to Town proceedings on February 17, 2026 she expressed opposition to a data-center project, offered to provide public records, and urged officials to scrutinize County funding and data-center activity.

New Business

Advertisement of additional appropriations

Neff moved to advertise the three additional appropriations listed for Fund 1170 for consideration at the next meeting. Robertson seconded the motion. 6/0 approved.

Salary ordinance confirmation summaries

Neff moved to authorize the Council President to sign the salary ordinance confirmation summaries. Browning seconded the motion 6/0 approved.

Elected Official and Department Head Comments

- The AIC conference was scheduled for the following week. Other County representatives planned to attend and report back. The Clerk was also expected to receive a certificate of continuing education at the conference.
- The Auditor reiterated that she was willing to work with the Commissioners and Council on any mutually acceptable combination of HR and Administrative functions. She appreciated that immediate action had been taken on HR and stated that the arrangement could be revised if experience showed that a different structure would work better.

Council Comments and Follow Up Actions

Health insurance line items

- Council reviewed an earlier idea to consolidate all group-health-benefit line items into a single Commissioners or EDIT line. Preliminary calculations showed that consolidation would be difficult because of the financial limits and revenue sources of the affected funds.
- A department head had also noted that retaining health insurance in each department budget provided a more accurate statement of the department's actual cost. Levied funds such as EMS and election were required to include appropriate dollar amounts in their own line items.
- The Auditor confirmed that transfers from health-benefit lines would still require Council approval, providing oversight if funds were not used for their original purpose. Council agreed that the existing fund-by-fund structure could remain. No motion was made.

Fuel reimbursement fund and amendment to advertisement

- Council noted that Fuel Reimbursement Fund 4913 had an approximate $30,000 balance that could be used for qualifying fuel expenses rather than drawing those expenses from Fund 1170.
- Neff moved to amend the earlier action advertising additional appropriations by removing the $7,000 gas, oil, and lubricant request from Fund 1170 and advertising it from Fuel Reimbursement Fund 4913 instead. Robertson seconded the motion 6/0 approved

Detective evidence room pay add-on

- Council reviewed the detective sergeant/evidence-room-manager position. A separate full-time evidence room manager had been added, and the Sheriff had indicated that the detective's evidence-room responsibilities had been phased out.
- The detective position was still receiving an additional $1.03 per hour for evidence-room work. Council agreed that the add-on should end with the next complete payroll period because the duties had transferred to the new position.

A motion was made by Neff to discontinue the $1.03-per-hour evidence-room add-on for the detective position effective with the next full payroll period. Robertson seconded the motion 6/0 approved.

Building and Planning part-time work

- Council discussed a small amount of part-time Building and Planning work performed in April 2026 to cover the office. Although a part-time line had been considered for future use, the 2026 salary ordinance and appropriation had not formally documented this work.
- The amount was believed to be less than $200 for approximately five hours. Council determined that the record should be corrected before an audit.
- Neff moved to authorize the Auditor to transfer up to $200 from an available line within the Building Department budget to cover the part-time work already performed. Browning seconded the motion. 6/0 approved.

Motion to adjourn by Robertson, second by Browning 6/0 approved.

Dated this 10th Day of October, 2026

Owen County Council

Polly Chesser

Anton Neff

Daniel Browning

Steve Carrell

Joe Frye

Verl Keith

Nick Robertson

Attest: Sheila Reeves