WHITEWATER TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION
Whitewater Township Hall, 5777 Vinton Road, Williamsburg, MI 49690
231-267-5141 Phone

SPECIAL MEETING
APPROVED AMENDED MINUTES
Monday, April 20, 2026, 7:00 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER:
Chair Stratton called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.
The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.
A microphone check was done.

Public Attendance On-site: 11 (approximately)
Zoom Attendance: 6 (approximately)

ROLL CALL: Secretary Peltonen called Roll.

Present:
Rene Stratton, Chair
Sadie Merchant, Vice Chair
Denise Peltonen, Secretary
Scott Trumbull, Member
Michael Sherman, Member
Rod Rebant, Member
Randy Mielnik, Township Board Trustee

A quorum was established.

Absent: None.

ALSO PRESENT: Recording Secretary Kay Held

SET/ADJUST AGENDA: No changes.

Board Action: Ms. Merchant made a motion to approve the Agenda as presented. Mr. Trumbull seconded the motion.
VOTE: YEAS: All. NAYES: None. Motion carried.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ms. Kelly Jo Bowman: The STR survey appears biased against Short-term Rentals. Some complaints (STR and non-STR) can be managed with Ordinances already in place. She would like to know how phone numbers are randomly selected as she has blocks on her phone. Other concerns are related to boat usage and restricting people on public waters.

Mr. Randy Steelman: Some STR survey questions are duplicated, irrelevant to STRs or oddly worded. The public strongly supports STRs. It would be better to question how to regulate STRs. The lakes are public; questions about boat use are not pertinent.

Mr. Mike Jacobson: Disagreed with the phone survey option and several of the questions, particularly asking to speak to the youngest person in the household.

Note: A brief recess was taken at 7:10 p.m. as the Zoom connection was lost. The meeting resumed at 7:12 p.m. Mr. Jacobson was given a new 3-minute comment period.

Mr. Jacobson referenced numerous questions he believes are irrelevant; i.e., acres owned, entertainment, special events, boat use. A Noise Ordinance is in place for any noise complaints. Questions #26-31 are incomplete. Questions #46 and #10 are repetitive. There are problems with many of the questions. The DNR enforces laws on a public lake. He inquired whether the STR court case is still open.

Mr. Jacobson disagreed with the 3-minute comment time limitation as he has many more points to make.

Ms. Kim Mangus: This survey draft should be discarded. It is apparent it was not written by or for this community. The survey needs much work in the wording and approach (positive/negative). The majority of people are introduced to this area through rentals and vacations. The PC should start over on the survey.

Ms. Brenda Baker: The survey questions should be critiqued and do not represent the community. She would like to see what complaints have been reported and from where they originate. A Noise Ordinance is in place. Lake use is not an appropriate topic for the survey. There have been multiple meetings on STRs and people expressing their feelings that STRs should be allowed, with minimal complaints about a few properties. She hopes the people doing it right are not penalized for the few who are messing it up.

Mr. John Fitzgerald: He is an owner-occupied STR and lost numerous rentals last summer after receiving a Cease & Desist. Last October, the PC anticipated having an Ordinance in place by March. With 100 people in attendance at the Public Hearing, the PC should be able to develop an Ordinance based on the public comments and feedback received. No one is going to answer a 50-question survey, which appears to be very biased. The PC should grandfather existing STRs this summer so that responsible owners can legally operate.

REPORTS / PRESENTATIONS / ANNOUNCEMENTS / COMMENTS:

Township Board Representative – Mr. Mielnik: An enforcement action was taken against Ms. Denise Heidish for operating a Short-term Rental, which is still in the courts. A Friend of the Court brief was filed by Ms. Rachel Steelman in support of dismissing the case stating the Zoning Ordinance does not prohibit STRs.

The 86th District Court ~~supports~~ upheld the position the Township has taken, stating "It is hereby ordered that for the reasons stated on the record that the Whitewater Township Zoning Ordinance's validly prohibits short-term rentals."

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Giffels Webster Zoning Ordinance Update: Chair Stratton noted a Public Hearing on the Zoning Ordinance update will be held at the PC's Regular Meeting of May 6, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. on the first bundle already reviewed several times. There will be four total bundles in this process.

The next bundle will cover:
Developing Architectural Requirements for Non-residential Land Uses
C-1 District Development Standards
District Development Standards
Village District Development Standards

They may also be discussing a Fence Ordinance with Giffels Webster during the second bundle.

Mr. Mielnik stated if approved, the initial bundle will be forwarded to the Township Board for action or go back to the Planning Commission, depending on comments received at the Public Hearing. The COPUD District will also be discussed at May 6 meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

STR (Short-term Rental) Survey PC Draft #1 Review:
Chair Stratton noted correspondence received on the STR survey questions was distributed to Members of the PC. EPIC-MRA was also provided with ROWG feedback and the MSUE workshop report. Mr. Bernie Porn of EPIC-MRA joined the meeting by Zoom. He provided an overview of the company's history and survey services. He explained how a survey is developed and statistical comparisons between telephone and online survey data collection. The telephone survey will be followed with a postcard to ensure everyone in a household is able to participate and offer their opinions. Results of the telephone and online survey will be compared in analyzing the data.

Mr. Porn addressed several concerns shared by residents related to the initial survey draft. He is open to changing verbiage or omitting/adding questions on the suggestion of the Planning Commission. In response to Chair Stratton, he explained how a telephone list is determined and that it is proportionate to the population through each area of the community. He also verified that 100 completed surveys would be obtained, not simply 100 telephone calls made.

There was further discussion between PC Members and Mr. Porn.

The Planning Commission reviewed every question on the survey and discussed the purpose for each question, determined edits, deleted and retained some questions and added other subject matter. It was a detailed and lengthy conversation, taking into account many of the Public Comments received thus far. They also discussed with Mr. Porn the analytical process of reviewing survey data.

Mr. Porn remained accessible via Zoom to take direction from the PC on editing survey content. A revised draft from EPIC-MRA will be forwarded to the Planning Commission for next steps.

Joint Meeting Dates: Potential Joint Township/PC meeting dates will be discussed at the PC's May 6 meeting.

NEXT MEETING:
Planning Commission Regular Meeting with Public Hearing: **Wednesday, May 6, 2026, at 7:00 p.m., Township Hall**

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Mr. Rob Vermeer: Agrees with eliminating some of the questions. If the survey is too long, you will lose people. The question asking to speak to the "youngest male/female adult at home" should be rephrased.

Mr. Vern Gutknecht: He has worked with numerous surveys in his career. There are many leading questions on the survey; you can tailor it to achieve any answer you'd like. He questions the accuracy of the survey. Many people, including him, do not answer unknown numbers. He is not handing his phone to the "youngest person in the house." He liked what the Township did with a survey for the Master Plan.

People will be more likely to complete a paper survey that is produced by and for Whitewater Township, not responding to a 20-minute phone call from an unknown caller. It is too long with 50 questions, some of them are subjective, and he has privacy concerns.

Mr. Randy Steelman: Phone calls are not more reliable than using the internet. He thanked Mr. Porn as well as the PC for evaluating the questions so thoughtfully in their discussion. Many of the questions were leading. The most important positive aspect is how STRs impact local jobs. As a builder, there is no law specifically stating bedrooms are limited to two people. Rentals allow young families to live in the area. Few people live in the Village; he appreciated the PC addressing this in their discussion.

Mr. Mike Jacobson: He agrees with all comments, particularly Mr. Gutknecht comments. There is no way he is sharing personal information with someone randomly calling on the phone. The survey is skewed in one direction with leading questions. He reiterated several questions are not relevant to short-term rentals.

He was impressed with the conversation among the Planning Commission tonight. Many residents lost revenue last year and will again this year if nothing is determined. The Master Plan and the community support short-term rentals. STRs have had an impact in reducing blight and home owners in improving their properties. There is a small group of people creating a problem, not the majority.

Ms. Kim Mangus: She appreciated the PC looking at the pros and cons. The Master Plan survey included small group work to eliminate bias. The survey is too complicated. A phone generated survey is ridiculous. A random stranger would make her feel targeted, and she will not answer those questions. If it is a paper or online survey, the length is too long. It is currently written to form opinions, not gather them. It is also designed to create movement in people's opinions.

Ms. Julie Zenas: She agrees with many of the comments; however, has seen the other side and has lived by short-term rentals. The survey is too long, she agrees it is slanted, and researched response rates of telephone surveys. She wants this issue resolved for her and also wants what is best for the Township. There was great response during the winter

workshop. She had a difficulty participating online. Some people do not show up, and some are afraid to speak. She was the first to speak at the Public Hearing and felt fear when she left.

She stated 62% of property owners are non-homestead. The survey questions need to find a true residential opinion.

PC DISCUSSION / COMMENTS
PC Members further discussed adjustments to some questions and expect to review the second draft at the May 6 meeting.

Ms. Merchant stated the process has become very convoluted, and some questions are ambiguous. The PC and Township owe the public a timeline and clarity. She understands why people are upset. They have gathered at two large public events. It was not obvious to all residents STRs are illegal. The public is not aware there is also an online survey option rather than just a phone survey, which she believes is outdated. The PC needs to educate the public.

PC Members discussed that an announcement can be made in residents' tax bill mailing and the Township's newsletter to give them a road map of the survey process and encourage participation.

Mr. Mielnik stated there is a science to statistics and reaching a reliable cross-section of residents. EPIC-MRA has been a professional in the surveying industry since 1985, has conducted hundreds of projects and has been recognized in numerous professional publications statewide. He is confident these methods would garner a good reading of public attitude.

ADJOURNMENT:

Board Action: Mr. Sherman made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Peltonen seconded the motion.
VOTE: YEAS: All. NAYES: None. Motion carried.

The meeting adjourned at 9:57 p.m.

Submitted by: Kay Z. Held, Recording Secretary