WHITEWATER TOWNSHIP BOARD AND
WHITEWATER TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION
JOINT MEETING
Whitewater Township Hall, 5177 Vinton Road, Williamsburg, MI 49690
231-267-5141 Phone

SPECIAL MEETING
APPROVED MINUTES
Thursday, May 14, 2026, 6:30 p.m.

CALL TO ORDER:
Supervisor Slopsema called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. for the Township Board.
Chair Stratton called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. for the Planning Commission.
The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

ROLL CALL – TOWNSHIP BOARD: Clerk Hoeksema called Roll for the Township Board.

Present:
Supervisor Linda Slopsema
Clerk Wendy Hoeksema
Treasurer Jill Koester
Trustee Tim Arends
Trustee Randy Mielnik

A quorum was established.

Absent: None.

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ROLL CALL – PLANNING COMMISSION: Clerk Hoeksema called Roll for the Planning Commission.

Present:
Chair Rene Stratton
Vice Chair Sadie Merchant
Member Scott Trumbull
Member Michael Sherman
Member Rod Rebant

A quorum was established.

Absent: Secretary Denise Peltonen

ALSO PRESENT: Recording Secretary Kay Held

SET/ADJUST/APPROVE AGENDA: No amendments.

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

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ms. C. Hymore: Ms. Hymore referenced a letter authored by her husband, Mr. Frank Hymore, which was sent to PC Chair Stratton and Township Board Trustee Randy Mielnik regarding land division parcel size and Public Act 58 of 2025 which introduced the "10-for-10 Rule," which will become the state default on March 24, 2027.

Currently, the minimum lot size in Agriculture is 40,000 sq. ft., just less than one acre. The Master Plan emphasized the importance of maintaining rural character. The Hymores would like to see the minimum A-1 District lot size changed to five acres. Nearby townships have this requirement. Keeping one-acre minimums in Whitewater Township invite development, burden roads, schools and groundwater, and leave Whitewater as a high-density target.

For farms to be viable, space is required for planning and setbacks. With the State changes, they hope Whitewater Township will opt in for a stricter five-acre local standard for agricultural parcels. Ms. Hymore asked for this correspondence to be on the record with the Minutes.

Ms. J. Zenas: The STR survey should reflect the views of actual residents and property owners. The process should be designed transparently. There are concerns that organized groups with an STR financial interest may influence the survey results for personal gain, particularly individuals who push for expanded STR activity despite long-standing zoning restrictions and community concerns.

The survey can be manipulated through duplicated responses, outside participation or coordinated campaigns. This would not provide reliable data and will further divide the community. The Township should verify residency or property ownership, limit responses to one per household/parcel and disclose the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. The public should know how responses will be validated and whether raw data will be available for public view. This impacts neighborhoods, housing availability, property values, infrastructure and other characteristics of the Township.

JOINT MEETING TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

STR Survey Question Review:

Mr. Bernie Porn of EPIC – MRA joined the meeting via Zoom and was asked by PC Chair Stratton to respond to Ms. Zenas' comment about verifying residency, raw data, ensuring single responses and how to avoid influence.

Mr. Porn explained a phone survey will be conducted, pulling names and addresses from a Whitewater Township database. An online survey will also be conducted. Individuals' Township address will be verified, and data expert Kelly Sullivan will verify no outside individuals will be responding to the survey.

Mr. Arends inquired how cell phone numbers are procured or whether cell phone holders are excluded from the survey. Mr. Porn responded cell phones are not excluded and that recent statewide or local municipal surveys have been experiencing 75-80% cell phone participation. The same can be said for landline surveys. This is stratified in the Township by area and other demographic features. There will be no duplication of surveys.

Mr. Mielnik stated landline and cell phone surveys get a random sample of residents versus self-selection and separate data sets. This model has been proven in a broad range of surveys statewide. Mr. Porn further explained the importance of a broad sample of participants and that telephone survey results are closely compared to online results. He stated EPIC - MRA was the most accurate in its surveys in the 2022 gubernatorial, attorney general and secretary of state elections as well as two of three ballot questions statewide.

Mr. Arends acknowledged the community has strong feelings both in favor of and opposed to short-term rentals. He inquired about verification of who is completing an online/mail in survey. Verification codes will be part of the survey with which to log into the survey.

Mr. Rebant noted some residents do not wish to participate online and inquired whether there is a provision for a mail-in survey. Mr. Porn indicated this would be an alternative, and the verification code from the postcard would be required.

Ms. Koester inquired about tracking of results and whether that data can be mapped. Mr. Porn stated this is an option and is anonymous.

Mr. Arends and Supervisor Slopsema discussed the administrative expenses related to STRs within the Township, and the potential for a millage related to it.

Members discussed the differences between short-term rentals and bed and breakfasts, which are allowed by Special Use, concentration of STRs, properties owned by corporations versus a private owner who has formed an LLC, and STR caps in different districts.

Board and PC Members discussed in detail the context and verbiage of survey questions as well as changes to be made.

PC Chair Stratton provided a timeline for completion of the STR survey. She anticipates approval of the survey by the end of May, survey distribution by the end of June with a two-week open run and survey results 3-4 weeks after it closes. A second workshop may be held prior to the end of summer.

Clerk Hoeksema stated the PC has conducted its due diligence in the creation of the survey, and there has been much consideration. There was group discussion, and it was the consensus of the Township Board to send the survey back to the Planning Commission for additional changes and to finalize the survey.

March, 2027, State Land Division:
PC Chair Stratton asked for clarification of the PC's role regarding this matter. She understands the Zoning Administrator and Tax Assessor will also be working on this.

Mr. Mielnik explained the Land Division Act was recently changed. The current Land Division Ordinance is a General Ordinance. A Township decision regarding parcel splits is required before March, 2027. It is a complex matter with a sense of urgency.

Mr. Arends would defer to the Planning Commission on opting in or out and make a recommendation to the Board. Supervisor Slopsema noted minimum lot size was heavily discussed during the Master Plan sessions and there were several issues for consideration.

The Board asked for input from Zoning Administrator Graber. She read aloud an email from Tax Assessor Dawn Kuhns who asked for clarity on several items in preparation for a Board presentation. These included the date for determining parent parcels, the number of allowable parcels for the first 10 acres, and whether the Township will need to update Zoning Ordinances or the Master Plan to accommodate any changes.

The Supervisor stated the Board and Planning Commission need to become familiar with this information and how the Land Division Ordinance and General Ordinance interact with the Zoning Ordinance. There has been an increase in land divisions in the Township.

Mr. Mielnik noted there are minimum lot sizes in each of the Township districts. Ms. Slopsema will follow-up with both the Zoning Administrator and Tax Assessor.

Winery and Cidery Ordinance:
Mr. Mielnik provided an overview of the development of this Draft Ordinance to date. It has been forwarded to a Planning Consultant and legal counsel for review. It is complex and allows limited commercial activities in an agricultural area. It would enable farmers to add value to agricultural operations and agritourism. A tiered approach was discussed with regard to safety and restrictions in operations. The PC considered multiple factors as outlined in the draft which is in the meeting packet.

The PC held a Public Hearing on the matter. The Board may choose to have a Public Hearing as well. Giffels Webster will submit a revised draft for the PC's June meeting. Mr. Trumbull and Ms. Merchant indicated multiple letters of support have been received by residents and farmers.

Mr. Rebant noted there is a lot of change underway in the Township; i.e., STRs, land division, winery/ag farming, etc. The Township needs to get in front of the issues and be more visible to the community about short- and long-term activity.

Ms. Merchant and Ms. Stratton attended a conference, and the takeaway was the importance of agritourism, supporting diversification of farms and maintaining agriculture in the community. Without change, many farms may be forced to sell by the younger generation who cannot continue the farm operation. Ms. Merchant emphasized the Township is behind the curve and this community needs to be supported.

Mr. Sherman stated there have been constructive workshops, public comments and input from consultants. Agritourism was the top supported item during the Master Plan process. This must be relied upon through the Special Use Permit process.

There was extensive group discussion among the Township Board and Planning Commission about agritourism, the Special Use process, Noise Ordinance language of the draft and the existing Noise Ordinance.

5-Year Capital Plan:
Mr. Rebant reported the ROWG (Resident Outreach Work Group) held its first meeting addressing the Capital Improvement Plan. He noted the ROWG is a diverse group, with many returning STR project members. The group would like to be more hands-on with the project with access to individuals who manage the assets.

The plan is to build a combined asset ledger, conduct a physical inventory and refer to the Master Plan. They may need professional valuations of assets. Mr. Mielnik noted there was Board-level discussion about an RFP for architectural consultation to evaluate buildings and facilities. Clerk Hoeksema stated an asset and depreciation list exists. She would also like to see the ROWG discuss capital asset needs of the Township over a five-year period. The Treasurer will forward a current asset list to Mr. Rebant. Each department in the Township has asset information and resources to provide the ROWG.

The Board would like to receive regular ROWG meeting updates. The ROWG's goal is to deliver the project for the 2027/28 budget in December of 2026.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ms. J. Zenas: She appreciated additional clarity on the STR survey process; however, remains uncertain how personal cell phone numbers will be accessed for the survey and would like to know how current and accurate information will be pulled. STR clustering is a problem in her neighborhood, which is an R1 District. At a 12/25 ROWG meeting, Chair Stratton stated 130 STRs were in operation in 10/25; this is significantly increased in the summer. She cautioned against taking AirBnB's national data on STRs; we need Whitewater Township's data from which to make decisions.

Ms. H. Vollmuth: She clarified that when she prepared the ROWG STR white papers she asked the Assessor about parcels; there are 1,348 homestead parcels and 2,238 non-homestead parcels. She cautioned on the use of language in an Ordinance; the difference between 40,000 sq. ft. and an actual acre of 43,560 sq. ft. is the difference between another lot. There is much confusion in the community; therefore, the accurate use of terminology is important.

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An article was left on her car regarding "winery wars" as published in The Good Fruit Grower regarding a dispute about the value of land once utilized for wedding venues, etc. She stated it is important to moderate the concept of agritourism. She supports Ag and would like to see parcel sizes of 3.5-10 or 5-10 acres.

An Elk Rapids News Letter to the Editor was also left on her car regarding 20 houses and a 2.5 acre lot allowance. People are paying attention. She would like to see the Beautification Fund and increased communication from the Township. She wondered where individuals with STR issues were this evening.

Ms. C. Hymore: She appreciated the discussion regarding lot size in the Ag District and that the PC will be prioritizing this matter. This is not a personal benefit to her. Her 9.5 acre tree farm in Ag would be allowed 8-9 splits (at 40k sq. ft.). If the minimum lot size is changed to five acres she would have no splits available. Her focus is solely to protect the rural character of Whitewater Township.

BOARD COMMENTS / DISCUSSION: None.

ADJOURNMENT: Ms. Slopsema made a motion to adjourn the Township Board meeting. Mr. Arends seconded the motion.
VOTE: YEAS: All. NAYES: None. Motion carried.
The meeting adjourned at 8:38 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT: Ms. Stratton made a motion to adjourn the Planning Commission meeting. Mr. Sherman seconded the motion.
VOTE: YEAS: All. NAYES: None. Motion carried.
The meeting adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

Submitted by Kay Z. Held, Recording Secretary