



**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE
MICHIGAN CITY TREE BOARD**

February 4, 2026

Respectfully submitted by Laura Henderson

Confirmed by Board President Jen Birchfield

JM WL _____ Date: 2/4/26

The Michigan City Tree Board met in a regular meeting at ALCO TV, 301 E 8th St #101, Michigan City, IN 46360, on Wednesday 02/04/26, at 5:30 p.m. local time; the date, hour, and place duly established for the holding of said meeting.

Members Present:

Jen Birchfield, Dennis Brittain, Betsy Elsaesser, Laura Henderson, Denise Blau, Harshini Ratnayaka. Quorum of four satisfied. City Forester Phil Graf and Council Liaison Nancy Moldenhauer also present. Jen noted that Dr. Kora has stepped down from the Tree Board since the board already has a council liaison.

Members Not Present

Mary Nell Murphy (with prior notice)

Public Present:

none

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Betsy moved and Dennis seconded approval of the agenda; motion passed.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Dennis moved and Denise seconded approving the January minutes; all voted in favor; January minutes are approved.

COMMENTS - Public

none

TREASURER'S REPORT

The City Controller's Office provided the monthly reports; Mary Nell emailed these to the Board prior to the meeting.

Betsy asked for a ballpark figure of how much of the IRA grant money remained. Phil replied that after outstanding invoices are settled, there would probably be around \$130,000 left. Laura noted that we would not be able to plant as many trees as originally planned. Phil agreed, saying far less, in part due to greatly increased cost of trees since the original application, and Jen noted that we now have to contract out the labor costs of planting and watering the trees, which originally was to be handled by SCA, whose grant was rescinded. Betsy also asked Phil if Michigan City has a budget for tree planting aside from the grant. Phil responded no. Jen noted that the creation of an urban forestry fund is part of the discussion about a new Tree Protection Ordinance, with this fund receiving the payments to be made by developers when they clear healthy trees. Phil proposes to call this a Canopy Restoration Bank, noting that such funding has been used for years when wetlands are damaged by development, and that we have many more tree planting spots that we can afford to fill with the grant. Jen invited submission of claims by board members for vote to allow reimbursement. None were brought forward.

COMMUNICATIONS

Emails:

- Emails: The City Clerk has sent an email asking for our meeting dates; Jen will check if this has been already done by Mary Nell and will do it if she has not. Jen mentioned that Dr. Kora has sent an email to the city stepping down from the Tree Board since we already have a council liaison.
- Facebook: Friends of Michigan City Tree Board. Posts on DNR 5th grade Poster contest; CommuniTree planting program; MLK Jr quotes on trees; Arbor Day Foundation podcast called "Unearthing Optimism"; online opportunities on tree planting training, pear removal. Jen will post about NIRPC invasive replacement program.
- Jen noted an email she received today from a city resident regarding the timely grinding of stumps and removal of debris resulting from the removal of unsafe trees. She responded to the email noting that current weather conditions interfered and that when feasible these would be accomplished. Phil added that he had discussed the matter with the city attorney who is not concerned, and that an additional difficulty is the backlog with locator requests (811), which must be done again for stump grinding.
- Laura mentioned the Facebook post by a city resident about wanting to use removed trees to make benches, etc. Jen explained that she, Phil, and the resident have met, he has been invited to present a proposal re taking wood

from city property addressing issues of liability, which would need to be approved by the Board of Works.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Outreach & Engagement:

- **Communitree:** Jen mentioned her email re spring Communitree grants closing February 16, and Betsy's response that no spring Communitree grant proposal was planned for this spring. Betsy added that she plans this spring to check on the Communitree trees planted at schools this past year, to see if any need replacement. She does plan to apply this fall for Communitrees, possibly to be planted in parks which do not get the needed trees through the federal grant. Jen noted that the City itself can apply for Communitrees, but that the capacity to water the trees is the limiting factor. Betsy noted that watering is much easier with trees near each other at a place such as a park where water is available.
- **Earth Month Extravaganza:** Betsy and Dennis plan to be there for the tree giveaway. Some volunteers may also be recruited to help. Betsy is working on a handout for those picking up trees, which will have planting instructions from Arbor Day Foundation on one side and a brief description of the Tree Board on the other side. Jen offered to add a QR code to the handout. Betsy suggested having the QR code on a small sign as there would only be room for a very small QR code on the handout.
- **Farmer's Market tree giveaway on May 2:** Jen, Dennis, and Laura will be there, and possibly Betsy. These will be the trees left from the Earth Month Extravaganza.
- **Proclamation:** The mayor has signed a proclamation for Arbor Day and we have received copies.

CITY FORESTER REPORT

Jen had sent Phil's monthly report to the board prior to the meeting.

Jen congratulated Phil for receiving the Meritorious Service Award from the Indiana Arborist Association. Phil expressed his appreciation. He was encouraged to provide a photo of him holding the plaque he received for posting on Facebook.

On the City Forester's report, Phil noted these highlights:

- **IRA grant progress: Tree planting:** The 51 trees to be planted this spring are all native species, heavy on oaks. The number is limited by funds and the higher cost of trees, planting, and watering. The tulip trees may need to be replaced as there is currently a shortage of tulip trees in Indiana. This will bring us to 551 new trees in 28 different species, greatly increasing the

biodiversity of trees in Michigan City. When snow melts, Phil will select the most impactful sites for the 51 trees to be planted, he will be able to move the Request For Proposals forward. The RFP will be sent to every Tree Care Service registered with the city of Michigan City.

- **IRA grant progress: Tree removals:** After trees leaf out, Phil will be able to assess the viability of our trees and evaluate which will need to be removed. Three trees could not be removed in the winter because of NIPSCO regulations, and these will be done with the other trees in the summer.
- **City's online list of Tree Care Services:** Phil will reach out to those Services that were registered last year to encourage them to register before the price goes up. He appreciates the opportunity to make contact with these contractors.
- **Tree protection ordinance:** Phil continues to work with Public Works Director Wendy Vachet on a new tree protection ordinance, which will hopefully be in place this spring. Wendy will attend the March meeting of the Tree Board. She asks that questions be submitted in advance so she can prepare to properly answer them. Betsy asked about a formula for determining how a developer must compensate for removed trees (noting that young trees do not provide the ecosystem services that a mature tree does, and where the new trees should be planted. Phil responded by mentioning the value of a Canopy Restoration Fund, which would allow trees to be replaced where they are most needed in Michigan City. Nancy mentioned that the replacement cost for removed trees should include the cost of watering and caring for the replacement trees. Phil mentioned that he would like to get rid of the Protected Species List and the previously accepted idea that developers need not provide compensation for trees within the building area, as neither of these ideas takes account of the ecosystem services provided by the involved trees, and that diameter of a tree is a better measure of ecosystem services. Phil added that the ordinance must have a trigger mechanism that will alert him to evaluate the trees on a development site before they are cut and the stumps ground! Jen and Nancy discussed MS4 permitting process as the probable point at which a tree survey should be triggered. Jen asked board members to submit other questions to her within the week.
- Phil noted that he will not be able to attend the March meeting of the Tree Board.
- Betsy asked about the Data Center site where trees are being cleared. She asked if trees will be planted along the road for better view and sound absorption. Phil recounted how he was called out to do a tree survey and

arrived to find the trees had already been cut and the stumps ground out. The only trees left were 1 cottonwood in the corner and 15 trees along the road which they have since removed. Nancy responded to this with surprise, saying that at the presentation to the city the developers, in their presentation to the City Council, had agreed to keep those trees and plant more there. Phil noted that trees would need to be planted there. He discussed the need to have him do the tree surveys before anything is cut. Thereafter he was called to document 4 more acres of trees that they needed to cut. He was able to document those trees. He is meeting with Wendy to run the data through the calculator, as well as extrapolate that data to the other area which was cleared before he could survey it. Nancy and Jen discussed holding the developers accountable for destroying some trees before Phil could assess them. Phil is working on that but notes it will be at the discretion of the Director of Public Works and the City Attorney. Laura asked if there is any requirement about what kind of trees they plant. Phil responded that there is really no place on the site appropriate for trees, except for along the road. He notes that at present there is a 20 ft tall wall of dirt along the road.

OLD BUSINESS

- Arbor Day Tree City application has been approved by State Forester 12/15; we are awaiting Foundation approval (last year we were notified in March). We have received the Arbor Day proclamation signed by the Mayor. Jen will read it at the City Council, and Nancy advised her on getting on the agenda.

NEW BUSINESS

- Clarification of seven-member board: City clerk verified that the City Council liaison is a voting member of the Tree Board. We noted that that currently makes 8 voting members, while we believe the intent was to have 7 voting members, and Nancy states she was originally a non-voting member. Jen moved and Betsy seconded that the ordinance be amended by inserting the text that the City Council liaison is a non-voting member. The motion passed unanimously.

COMMENTS Council Liaison: Nancy expressed her sorrow and

disappointment about the clear cutting at Moore Road, and about what is happening at the Data Center where she thought they had an agreement which is not what is happening. She pointed out the importance of having a tree board and other people who care about trees who bring to light when these things happen. She noted that, while LEEDS certification is difficult and expensive, energy star ratings for new buildings are available. She expressed her thanks for the tree board members and all who are working to improve our environment in Michigan City and improve our quality of life. Denise added the importance of leaving trees to future generations. Jen thanked Nancy for her involvement and contributions to the tree board, noting that she learned at the Mayor's board workshop that City Council liaisons are not required to be as active as Nancy has been.

- **Comments—Board Members:** Jen reported from the Mayor's board workshop. She will share with this board (via email) handouts received on Robert's Rules of Order and when to call a point of order. She will also share with the board about the Vegetation section of Municipal Code, which is very pertinent to the Tree Board. Nancy added that this part of the code was updated last year. Nancy and Denise also attended the workshop.
- Betsy reported that she received a text from Leslie Shad who is interested in the ordinance that Phil and Wendy are working on. Betsy will get back to Leslie that Wendy will attend our March meeting.
- Laura announced that she will not renew her membership on the board which expires on February 15. She plans to continue working with the Tree Board as a volunteer.
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Next Meeting Date and Adjournment

Jen reminded us that the next regular meeting is scheduled for 03/04/26 at 5:30 pm, at ALCO TV location 301 E 8th St. Dennis moved and Laura seconded adjournment; motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 6:40 pm.

Member Name	Type	Term start	End	Role
Jennifer Birchfield	Mayoral Appointment	7/1/2024	8/01/28	President
Mary Nell Murphy	Mayoral Appointment	1/1/2024	12/31/27	Secretary
Denise Blau	Mayoral Appointment	08/01/25	8/1/28	
Dennis Brittain	Mayoral Appointment	7/1/2024	7/1/2027	
Betsy Elsaesser	Mayoral Appointment	7/1/2024	07/01/27	Vice President
Laura Henderson	Council Appointment representing Elston Grove Neighborhood Association	02/15/25	02/16/26	
Harshini Ratnayaka	Mayoral Appointment	7/1/24	07/01/27	