



**HELENA TOWNSHIP
ADVOCACY GROUP, NFP**
Email: HTAG@Groupmail.com
Website: www.HTAGroup.org

Helena Township Planning Commission
REGULAR MEETING
February 5, 2026 @ 5:00 pm

HTAG RECAP

(The content contained herein was extracted directly from recordings of the above-referenced event and prepared as accurately as possible based on the room's conditions including number of people simultaneously conversing. At such times, comments are unrecognizable, it is so noted as such as being "(inaudible)."

Present

David Hunstad
Jim Gurr - Chair
Fay VandenBerg - Secretary
Jim Schilling – Board Liaison
Mike Robinson – Vice-Chair
Darren Whipple
Butch Peeples - Supervisor
Bob Logee - Zoning

Absent

Gordy Schafer (Resigned)

CALL TO ORDER:

Gurr called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm.

AGENDA:

Gurr referred to an Agenda dated March 5, 2026 – instead of February 5, 2026, noting its need for correction.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

ROLL CALL:

All above listed Members were present

Gurr then announced the resignation of Gordy Schafer and asked Butch Peeples to introduce his replacement.

Peeples introduced Rachel Beswetherick who resides at 7947 Torch Lake Drive, Alden MI.

She was welcomed and joined the Planning Commission Members.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

Gurr then asked if any member of the Planning Commission had any conflict with anything reflected on the agenda. No one stated any.

INTERIM OFFICER APPOINTMENTS:

Gurr then announced Fay Vandenberg wishes to step down from the Secretary position but remain on the Planning Commission. He posed an option to the Planning Commission that he could fill the Secretary position and relinquish the Chair position to David Hunstad until the Planning Commission's 4/2/26 Organizational Meeting at which time officers will be appointed.

Whipple: "I'm in favor of Dave."

Vandenberg: "I second."

Whipple: "And...you're Secretary if you're stepping up."

Gurr: "Does that satisfy you guys?"

PC Member: "Yep."

Gurr: "Okay, so we need a motion to amend the bylaws in the first place. An amendment to the Bylaws. And I'm still the chair, so I can't make this motion. The motion should run along the lines of making a motion to amend the bylaws, making interim appointments until the next organizational meeting. Um..Dave Hunstad will become the chair, and Jim Gurr will become the secretary."

Vandenberg: "I motion."

Gurr: "The motion has been made by Fay."

Schilling: "And I'll second it."

Motion to Amend the Bylaws passed.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Hunstad asked if there were any Communications.

Gurr mentioned a request received from Paul (Fire Chief) and Supervisor Butch Peebles to be put under NEW BUSINESS and will be making a motion to amend the agenda and add consideration of an ordinance with respect to driveways and fire access. A recent occurrence regarding the Township having to notify the owner of a new construction project (home) that the Fire Department or Emergency vehicles would be unable to provide services to their location due to the width and steepness of their driveway. They were sent a Certified Letter but chose not to respond.

Another communication item came through our zoning administrator – A request for a re-zone. **A relatively large parcel of property is for sale. The proposition was that they would like it in the AG zone. Commercial activities that are unrelated to agriculture as such are only defined by MSU and the state of Michigan and MDARD. "If a commercial activity doesn't fit under agriculture or natural resources, it's a commercial activity that's not permitted in the AG zone."** The Zoning Administrator has already notified the person who wrote the letter that it wouldn't be approved in Helena Township as it currently stands."

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Whipple stated the need for attendees to provide a note with their names, address, etc.
Gurr corrected him indicating that only applied to Public Hearings.

Gurr mentioned the need to amend the agenda to add the interim transfer of authority to occur right after Public Comment.

Gurr requested a motion to approve the agenda with that addition made.
Hunstad made a motion; seconded by Whipple.

Gurr reminded everyone that the Planning Commission is on a BI-MONTHLY schedule and that they had a Public Hearing on 1/15/26 which was held as the Planning Commission failed to provide proper notice.

***Note*: It seems the new Boats & Docks Ordinance still may not have been approved by the County Planning Commission based on it, once again, being provided in improper format.**

APPROVAL OF 1/15/26 Minutes (Public Hearing):

Whipple made a motion to approve the Minutes.
VandenBerg seconded.
Motion passed.

OLD BUSINESS:

Gurr indicated there “was NO OLD BUSINESS.”
Gurr: “So at 5:21 pm, I’m going to officially become strictly advisory.”

NEW BUSINESS:

Hunstad introduced the topic of “RVs and Trailers” stating **“we currently don't have any specific wording with definitions of recreational vehicles and trailers or the ordinance pertaining to that.”**

Whipple discussed the need to properly DEFINE the term “recreational vehicle” and shared the research conducted by the Commission of other Townships and the language they use. Whipple indicated there was a concern that a 4-wheeler could be considered a “RV”. Also mentioned need to consider “Motor Coach,” “Motor Home,” Temporary Dwelling with wheels.

Gurr referred to the Township’s current ordinance and how an RV is allowed to be lived in while a home is being built and its specific restrictions and limitations.

Whipple indicated the number one concern with the current ordinance is that it is too vague. The second issue is the verbiage used – especially defining “temporary basis.”

Whipple then discussed the need to clarify the number of RVs allowed, where it is stored (e.g., front yard, backyard, etc.)

Logee asked if the PC had reviewed his thoughts on the matter previously provided to them.
No Comment

Gurr then asked if anyone else had conducted additional research from adjacent communities and if anything useful was realized.

***Note*: Helena Township Advocacy Group (“HTAG”) had provided the Planning Commission well in advance of this meeting, a listing of the ordinances in surrounding Townships including Clearwater Township (A copy of this correspondence is listed on www.HTAGroup.org. The Planning Commission made no mention of this information being received/reviewed.**

Hunstad provided an overview of his research of surrounding Townships which included terminology, difference between RVs and Park Models which may or may not be necessary.

Gurr: “Okay, take information. Be prepared to advance further at next regular scheduled meeting. We might find ourselves saying that often this evening.”

Gurr moved the Topic of “RVs and Trailers under OLD Business at the next regularly scheduled meeting.

Hunstad asked about forming sub-committees to help develop ordinance language.

Gurr indicated if a sub-committee were to be formed, the meetings would have to be “regularly scheduled and would have to be available to the public – “if it’s just two members working together, they could do it at their convenience and on their own time...in their own manner.”

Temporary Basis Definition:

Whipple once again mentioned the need to DEFINE “Temporary Basis.”

Logee indicated “no more than 30 days during a 12-month period is standard.

Gurr stated the PC would move away from the topic of RVs and towards a new item.

Resident P. Sak asked the following questions:

1. What is the quantity of units to be allowed – Is that anywhere in the ordinance? That was an issue three years ago where there was no indication. All it was was just RVs, plural, with no specific definition.
2. Second question is, will there be grandfathering of current units? If so, who specifically will be grandfathered? And I know, Darren, you're very familiar with that issue.
3. Third question is, what is the length allowed? And I know you were talking about that. You know, temporary is an unknown figure.
4. Will there be an absolute part of the ordinance that will say no rentals allowed, i.e., VRBO, Airbnb, etc.?

Hunstad thanked P. Sak for his questions and indicated these are some of the issues on this morass of discussion already taking place to some degree. “But obviously, those are all good points that we will include in the discussions going forward.”

Resident L. Mayes asked for clarification if the Planning Commission would be working from the current ordinance or starting from scratch?

Hunstad stated the feeling is that the current ordinance is very loose and may require a new one to be developed. Logee agreed the ordinance should be amended to provide clarity.

J. Willbee (11282 SETLD, Alden, MI 49612) shared he has an RV parked on one of his lake (vacant) lot, which he lives in for 12 weeks, during the summer, while he runs an Airbnb business out of his house (on a separate but contiguous lot) for income to pay property taxes. He was very concerned the Planning Commission is looking to limit the time someone could stay in an RV to no more than 30 days. He also stores it on the vacant lot the other 9-10 months of the year.

He also mentioned, although he could put it FIVE feet from the water, he has parked his RV FIFTY plus feet off the high watermark to be good to his neighbors.

NEW BUSINESS – DATA CENTERS:

Gurr voiced his concern and a sense of urgency for the Township to implement Ordinance language regarding Data Centers. "...We can gain all of those advantages, special use permits, conditions for going forward, the possibility of third party intervention with the hearing involved, necessary public hearings for special use permits, **provisions made for the removal of an expired facility afterwards**, and the responsibility of being on the person holding the license, any number of things that we secured for renewable energies, we can also fold into a, **and do this quickly**, the same types of protections when it applies to data centers." **"All we have to do is come up with a definition for what a data center is and add data centers to our existing renewable energy bullet.** So, it would be renewable energy, data centers, and battery storage. Whatever section it is.

He suggested the Commission consider this matter **to get ahead of the state; indicated the Township attorney (Bzdok) has made sure none of the language we've created steps outside of those allow securities that the township could have going forward**, and suggested at the next occasion, the Commission sits down and thinks about moving Data Centers into the same protection.

Whipple agreed but questioned whether it should be called a "Data Center" or something else. He then asked "Mr. Google" and read the following definition:

"A Data Center is a centralized physical facility or building that hosts IT infrastructures, servers, storage systems, and networking equipment to process, store, and distribute massive volumes of data."

Gurr mentioned the importance of talking about **environmental protection**...water quality.

Whipple suggested simply adding the Data Center verbiage to the existing Renewable Energy Ordinance language 5.09.09 and didn't feel the need to develop a new (separate) ordinance.

NEW BUSINESS - DATA CENTERS (Cont'd):

Gurr indicated simply coming up with a good Definition is all that's necessary which is pretty easy to do.

Schilling made a motion to just add the Definition.

Gurr suggested **initiating an amendment to the zoning ordinance which includes a definition (of Data Centers) in the definitions of Battery Storage Units and adds to the renewable energy section of the ordinance in every description that Data Centers also be included in the description.**

Whipple offered to email Gurr a screenshot of the Definition he found on Google.

Schilling stated he thought the Commission did not have to rewrite every ordinance....unless the language changes..."

Gurr: "Well, that's a rewrite anyway..."

Schilling: "...so we should just be able to map that language, ya know..."

Gurr: "and add data centers."

Schilling: "Yeah."

Gurr asked if the Commission was comfortable taking this step and laid out the process of scheduling a Public Hearing "where a discussion will be held more broadly and the issue discussed to get the public's feel and then determine if the Commission was ready to recommend it to the Township Board. "It would then be sent off to all required advisory agencies and get the whole process going the way it's supposed to be done."

Whipple: "I agree...if it's not something we amend right this very minute, I would like to have productive discussion and move...you know, I don't want three meetings to get it done."

Boats & Docks Ordinance RE-DO (3X):

Gurr: "Just for information's sake, we have pending motion to go to the County Planning Commission standing. They did not meet to act on our most recent suggestion to the Board, because we, once again, became cross-threaded about what purpose, how they want to get it, how they want to see it. You know, this is at the County level. ***Note*: Although not specifically stated, Gurr was referring to the Boats & Docks Ordinance which was rejected once again due to being submitted in improper format.**

Gurr: "Another reason why I tell you it's a good idea to get people to go to these citizen planner meetings. So, we will be sending notice of our public hearing, our January public hearing, to the Antrim County Planning Commission at their next meeting (March 3, 2026). It may be feasible for us to include this data center entry into the agenda if the commission decides tonight that we're at that point where we can make that amendment."

NEW BUSINESS – DATA CENTERS (Cont'd).

Robinson then shared his many well-founded concerns regarding Data Centers including **the amount of ground water, fresh ground water Data Centers require, is tremendous. It's millions of gallons of water.** They pull it out of the ground, they run it through their systems, it gets contaminated, and they pump it right back into the ground. There would be a lot of concern surrounding how a Data Center would affect Torch Lake, Clam Lake – “all our other lakes around here.”

There was an overall sense of urgency shared by Planning Commission members, to develop ordinance language regarding Data Centers.”

Gurr stated “...we've got enough time...if we actively move...we've got time to get all the proper notifications done, get it on their schedule, and do it in the proper form that they are preparing to see things done. We submitted things to the Antrim County Planning Commission as collections of information for years and years and years. We have a new member who's an attorney. He wants to see it in the form that is going to be enacted as an ordinance so...”

Schilling: “Can I make that motion again that we proceed with this?”

Hunstad: “Let's restate the Motion.”

Hunstad: “Motion is to take into consideration and add to our ordinance the definition that Darren just pulled up. I can't read it...”

Whipple then re-read the proposed Definition of Data Centers:

“A Data Center is a secure, centralized, physical facility or building that houses IT infrastructure, servers, storage systems, and networking equipment to process, store, and distribute massive volumes of data.”

Schilling then suggested adding “including but not limited to” to the above definition.

Schilling made a motion to accept the Definition language; Whipple seconded.

Motion passed.

Robinson then asked how Helena Township could get surrounding Townships to follow suit on developing a Data Centers Ordinance?

Hunstad shared he had assembled a list of all the surrounding Planning Township's Chairpersons and plans to contact them to meet and find out what is on their agenda...what's important to their community and bring up the topic of Data Centers.

Robinson emphasized the importance of a Data Center NOT BEING AROUND FRESH WATER!

NEW BUSINESS – DATA CENTERS (Cont'd).

Joe Willbee mentioned the power draw of Data Centers, how some have their own power plants which pollute the atmosphere as well.

Schilling mentioned contacting Torch Lake Protection Alliance (TLPA) as well.

Gurr made a motion to add Data Centers to the current Renewable Energy sections (5.09) at every point where it furthers the goal of including the same conditions that we've expected of Renewable Energies and Battery Storage to also apply to Data Centers, and that, you know, absent being able to see all of the text, then we all understand that it's simply going to be adding "data centers" to the existing private ordinance section that I can give you here in a minute..."

VandenBerg seconded the motion.

PC Members: "Aye."

Hunstad: "All opposed? Hearing none, the motion passes."

Gurr: "I'll make sure that notification goes out to all of the agencies that we report to, and especially to the Antrim County Planning Commission so that we get their advice before we take it to the board. The Public Hearing will have to take place beforehand. We'll get that in the pipeline...post-case. Alright."

P. Sak recommended the Planning Commission contact ERCOL (Elk River Chain of Lakes) and WPIT regarding Data Centers.

NEW BUSINESS:

Complaint Form

A discussion took place about developing a "Complaint Form" to allow residents to submit information to the Township for their attention. It was determined the Form would also be used to submit ideas, helpful info about the community or inquiries – not just complaints.

Note: Each submission would require the submitter's signature and identification. Gurr thought it important that all submissions are subject to the Open Meetings Act (OMA); Hunstad indicated it would be included under Michigan Freedom of Information Act (FOI).

Leffew suggested a different name – "Complaint" seemed negative. Wilcox suggested "Community Feedback Form"

Hunstad will meet with Logee to merge information with existing form and create a new "Community Feedback Form" which will then be available on the Township's Website.

The idea of tracking the topics/categories of information being submitted was discussed. Leffew indicated she could develop a system to track the issues being presented. Leffew stated the attorney should approve whatever is being put online.

CLARIFYING DEFINITIONS:

Hunstad introduced next order of NEW BUSINESS was Clarifying Definitions. He has been reviewing the current Ordinances and indicated many are outdated or old. He provided an example of “Garage (Private) which is as follows:

“A detached accessory building, or portion of a building, main building, used only for the parking or storage of not more than three passenger vehicles of which one may be light delivery or pickup vehicle used by occupants of the premises....”

So obviously that definition is a bit, could use a bit of improvement. That's one example.”

VandenBerg indicated she had already started updating the Definitions in the Ordinance Manual.

(***Note***: This had not been previously discussed, authorized or should be done by (1) PC member)

Another example of a Definition needing attention is where an RV may be stored (e.g., “backyard...front yard...”). It was agreed for a waterfront property, the “front yard” is the lakeside of the property.

Hunstad asked Fay to continue working on the document, frame them up next meeting and the PC will continue to work on it.

“Grandfathering” Definition:

Whipple asked about a Definition for “Grandfathered.”

VandenBerg stated “That needs to go to the attorney so that’s clear.”

Whipple: “Yep.”

Hunstad: “Okay.”

Leffew: “Wasn’t there a process for the grandfathering of the boat language”?

VandenBerg: “We identified properties that were not conforming.”

Leffew: “Okay.”

Gurr: “Which we typically don't do.”

Leffew: “Right.”

Gurr: “We typically don't single out, you know, special attention to conditions of one type or another.

Um...that was an attempt to make sure that, you know, grandfathering...it’s a good thing that we're going to have citizen planner sessions.”

CLARIFYING DEFINITIONS (Cont'd):

“Temporary Basis” Definition:

Resident Wilcox suggested instead of trying to develop a Definition of “Temporary Basis” which was being discussed for the RVs & Trailers Ordinance, that the Planning Commission simply define what it is in the text of the Ordinance itself. For example, how the ordinance used to read was follows:

“Property Owners with a permanent residence in Helena Township may use recreational vehicles or trailers for camping purposes **on a temporary basis, not to exceed 30 days** provided such recreational vehicle or trailer is maintained in a sanitary, moveable and legally registered condition. Such vehicles cannot be used as a rental.”

Hunstad suggested this would prevent the Definition from being “over-reaching” in nature.

Gurr: “That's the thinking that's led to us not coming up with one.”

FIRE LANE ACCESS

The Planning Commission asked Butch Peeples to provide an overview of the matter.

Peeples initially mentioned the public accesses which the Township as not currently maintaining. He was then redirected to the topic of fire lane access or private driveway access on private property.

Peeples: The Fire Department brought the matter up during a Board Meeting regarding a property owner who built a home on top of a hill. The Fire Department sent them a Letter advising them the fire engine or EMS vehicle would be unable to access their property and address an emergency (Fire or Medical) situation based on the width and steepness of their driveway.

After a brief discussion, Hunstad asked Peeples to communicate with the attorney (Bzdok) and figure out what the next step would be to protect the Township from the ultimate liability.

Whipple asked if it would be appropriate if, when someone came to him for a Building Permit, that he suggests the Fire Department review the property to determine if it is accessible and confirm before a Permit is issued?

Logee referred to Section 5.01.07 which addresses the width but not sure if it mentions the Fire Department.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Citizen Planner Program (facilitated by MSU):

A Citizen Planner Program is being offered at the Helena Township Community Center

Date: Starts Tues., April 14th.

Time: Each session is from 6:00-9:00 pm.

Duration: There is total of (6) Sessions – (4) of which are IN PERSON (2) of which are via Zoom.

Cost: \$250

Anyone may register to attend on the Helena Township Website.

Data Center mention:

Dan Packer, Clearwater Township Planning Commission Chairman mentioned there is a proposal underway in Lansing, MI to put a 12-month moratorium on statewide licensing of data centers. Whether it goes anywhere or not is anybody's guess, but it is in the works. Hopefully, it will come to fruition.” He stated, “it would give everybody a chance in the state, too, to have a little bit of room to figure out what we're going to do with these things.”

Meeting Adjourned:

Hunstad asked for any more comments and adjourned the meeting at 6:31 pm.

Next Regular Meeting:

April 2, 2026, at 5:00 pm

Provided by,
Helena Township Advocacy Group (HTAG)
HTAG@Groupmail.com
www.HTAGroup.org

