

**BERRIEN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes**  
**February 19, 2026**

**CALL TO ORDER:**

Chairperson R. McKinley Elliott called the regular Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting to order at 8:35 a.m. in the Board of Commissioners' Room at the Berrien County Administration Center, 701 Main Street, in St. Joseph, Michigan.

**ROLL CALL:**

The Chairperson instructed the Clerk to take a roll call with the following results:

12 PRESENT: Rayonte Bell (*arrived at 8:39 a.m.*), Jim Curran, Teri Sue Freehling, Robert Harrison, Jon Hinkelman, Alex Ott, Chokwe Pitchford, Sharon Tyler, David Vollrath, Julie Wuerfel, Mamie Yarbrough (*arrived at 9:06 am*) and R. McKinley Elliott.

0 ABSENT: None.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF THE FEBRUARY 12, 2026, MEETING:**

Commissioner Pitchford moved and was seconded by Commissioner Vollrath, to approve the Committee of the Whole minutes from February 12, 2026. Motion carried, no nays.

**REQUISITION REVIEW - Annette Christie:**

**Executive Administrative Assistant Annette Christie presented the requisitions to the Board for their review and discussion.**

**SCHEDULED DISCUSSION: LIFE SAVING AWARDS, SHERIFF CHUCK HEIT:**

Sheriff Chuck Heit and Undersheriff Greg Sanders presented the following Life Saving Awards:

- Deputy Cameron Neubecker, Certificate of Commendation. This Certificate of Commendation was presented with Honor and Gratitude in recognition of his actions on November 7, 2025. He responded to a disturbance call in Watervliet Township involving an individual experiencing a mental health crisis who fled and ended up waist deep in the Paw Paw River. Despite the cold, muddy conditions, he entered the water to assist in securing the individual and safely bringing him to the river's edge. His quick response and decisive actions were instrumental during this critical situation.
- Deputy Sam Whittaker, Certificate of Commendation. This Certificate of Commendation was presented with Honor and Gratitude for his assistance on August 23rd, 2025, where there was a critical incident involving a cyclist who had taken a bad fall in the middle of a one lane road. She was seriously injured and there was oncoming traffic. His ability to act quickly while maintaining composure and keeping the cyclist calm were instrumental in saving her life.
- Deputy Sabrina LaRatta, Certificate of Commendation. This Certificate of Commendation is presented with Honor and Gratitude for her actions on June 28, 2025, where the Berrien County Dive Team was requested and activated to respond to New Buffalo for a subject that jumped off the bridge and did not resurface. Upon arrival, it was determined that the dive would be exceptionally challenging due to nightfall. Without hesitation, she was able to successfully carry out this mission with bravery, skill and determination. Her selfless actions and commitment to doing what was best for the family of this individual is highly commendable.

Sheriff Chuck Heit and Undersheriff Greg Sanders recognized Ken Jewell for his 30 years as a Berrien County Sheriff's Reserves and presented him with his retirement badge.

**TRANSPORTATION UPDATE, DAN FETTE, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR:**

Community Development Director, Dan Fette, presented information that was presented to the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission on February 19, 2026, which highlighted the 150,000 rides currently provided at risk if there is a loss of transit. Items highlighted included:

- MDOT notified Berrien County that beginning October 1, 2026, Benton Harbor Dial-a-Ride (TCATA) will no longer be eligible to receive state and federal transit funding and requested that the Berrien County Board of Commissioners incorporate a unified Transit Authority under Michigan Act 196.
- Both TCATA and Berrien Bus are currently operating at annual deficits; without intervention, rural operations, in addition to urban service, will cease due to lack of local funding.
- Failure to meet MDOT's request will result in the loss of federal and state urban operating assistance, eliminating 63% of the county's total current annual rides.
- Combined operating deficits of Berrien Bus and TCATA are over \$250k per year. Without intervention, rural operations will cease, eliminating another 14% of the county's total annual rides.
- By fiscal year 2027, TCATA will be ineligible to receive transit funding and will no longer be able to directly provide transit services within the St. Joe/Benton Harbor/Lake Michigan Coast urban area. Berrien Bus is spending down reserves at an unsustainable rate and will cease operations in the rural area without intervention.

He explained there is an opportunity for a new era of regional mobility. The objective would be to preserve existing transit services and transform Berrien County's public transit from a structural liability into a cohesive engine for social and economic opportunity, connecting Urban Centers proposed a hybrid model, with six high-demand fixed routes: Benton Harbor – Niles; Niles – South Bend; St. Joseph – Watervliet; Benton Harbor – New Buffalo; New Buffalo – Michigan City; New Buffalo – Niles.

MDOT has committed to provide additional funding through the "Service Initiative fund". MDOT would provide the new local share at 100% year 1, 80% year 2 and 60% year 3.

There was discussion concerning current transportation millages that are in effect in some jurisdictions, insurance coverage and what the development and structure would like to look for this type of service program.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS – Per the Berrien County Board of Commissioners' Bylaws, those speaking during public comments may do so no longer than two minutes and shall identify themselves by name and city, township, or village. (Article III, 3.9 B-C): None.**

**ADJOURNMENT:**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:35 A.M.

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R. McKinley Elliott, Chairperson

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Stacy Loar-Porter, County Clerk

***Minutes are to be approved at the next Committee of the Whole meeting.***