

PROCEEDINGS OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Date: February 3, 2026

9:00 a.m.

Place: Commissioners Room, Courthouse, Caledonia, MN

Members Present: Cindy Wright, Eric Johnson, Kurt Zehnder, Robert Schuldt and Greg Myhre

Others Present: Interim Auditor/Treasurer Polly Heberlein, Fillmore County Journal Reporter Charlene Selbee, The Caledonia Argus Associate Editor Katia Gorsuch, Finance Director Carol Lapham, Coordinator Brent Parker, EDA Director & Coordinator Support Allison Wagner, Interim Attorney Suzanne Bublitz, Environmental Services Director Amelia Meiners, OneEnergy Renewables Associate Director Development Beth Esser, OneEnergy Renewables Associate Development Braeden DuMond, Dayva Goetzinger, Tammy Diersen, Kristina Hauser, Sheila Schroeder, Franklin Hahn, Larry Gaustad, Kelly Meyer, Tim Meyer, Sandie Lord, Lavern Weichert, George Johnston, Clint Von Arx, Tom Hammell, Rick Frank, Rebeckah Marschall, Dennis Myhre, Donise Becker, Bev Bauer, Larry Bauer, Kevin Schuldt, Bruce Bulman, Mark Klinski, Sheri Allen, Andy Allen, City of Caledonia Administrator Jake Dickson, Yvonne Krogstad, and Dan Schansberg

Presiding: Chairperson Myhre

Call to order.

Pledge of Allegiance.

Motion was made by Commissioner Wright, seconded by Commissioner Schuldt, motion unanimously carried to approve the agenda.

Motion was made by Commissioner Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Zehnder, motion carried to approve the meeting minutes from January 27, 2026. All Commissioners voted yes, except for Commissioner Schuldt who abstained due to being absent from the meeting.

Motion was made by Commissioner Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Zehnder, motion unanimously carried to make a correction to a misspelled word in the January 20, 2026 meeting minutes on page 15.

Public Comment:

Dayva Goetzinger from Houston County thanked the Commissioners for their service to the County. She said she had heard about another development that may impact the character of

Houston County and was there as a concerned citizen. She said in addition to the discussion surrounding the MariBell transmission line project, there was a proposal for a 25 acre solar farm on prime agricultural land. She said the proposal raised several concerns including health implications for neighboring properties, unsustainable use of agricultural land for commercial purposes, potential decrease in property values in the surrounding area, and disregard for the guidelines outlined in the Houston County Comprehensive Land Use Plan. She said the Comp plan was created by the people for the people. She referred to the plan stating that on page 2 it said “Houston County’s Comprehensive Plan will serve as an expression of the County’s future vision and a strategic map to reach that vision. The plan will be an important tool for the County to articulate desired land use patterns to ensure a safe, pleasant, and thriving environment... it will also provide the overall foundation for all land use regulation in Houston County”. She quoted the plan saying additionally on page 4 the plan stated, “Protecting the natural environment was a top priority, while future infrastructure improvements were ranked lower in priority”. She said on page 6 the plan recognized that “Houston County understands the cultural and economic significance of agriculture to the community. Local decisions should support maintaining and sustaining the vitality of family farms and locally owned agricultural operations, while promoting practices that balance soil and water conservation with economic sustainability”. She said these were just a few key points in the Comp Plan and they highlighted the guiding principals that should be used in the situation. Goetzinger shared a story from a friend who was traveling west for a sporting event and remarked on the numerous fields of solar panels and expressed her disappointment noting how unappealing they were and how fortunate she feels to live in Houston County. Goetzinger urged the Commissioners to vote for what was best for the people.

Clint Von Arx from Caledonia thanked the Commissioners for their service. He said he had no issues with regenerative energy. He said what he did have an issue with was the development of large commercial solar “on our wide open spaces and productive ag lands”. He said he had heard arguments “it’s my land I can do what I want with it” and “we are going to pasture sheep on it thus keeping the land in ag” but Von Arx said what it boiled down to was a structure that would span 25 acres. He said he grew up in Houston County and loved the County and its beauty, which was why he chose to support the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and maintain the County’s wide open spaces and productive ag lands. Von Arx said allowing the commercial solar project, or the MariBell, and similar commercial scale projects would directly affect the moral compass of the County’s land use plan. He said he along with other concerned citizens had went out over the weekend to get a petition signed asking the board to up hold the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. As of that morning they had 692 signatures and counting between the online and paper petitions. He said “we the people want our wide open spaces”. He said additionally there was not enough research on the long-term effects of the projects on soil health, water quality, and overall quality of life of wildlife and/or people who resided near the projects. He said “as recommended by your own planning commission, I strongly urge the board to uphold the values of our comp plan that we the people of the County took part in setting the standard for”. He said he appreciated the board’s time and efforts on the matter.

Mark Klinski from Union Township said he did not understand why zoning had not submitted a rewritten proposal after the Commissions voted down the first proposal. He said it had been two months. He said the Planning Commission did not want to add interpretation to the Comprehensive Land Use Plan to include commercial solar. He said the comp plan currently did not address commercial solar. He said in his opinion that part should be addressed before the conditional use permit was discussed unless each conditional use permit was considered on a case by case basis.

George Johnston from the La Crescent area said he had called MiEnergy and they had told him they were maybe in favor of the solar project, but only if the people of the township and Houston County were for it and if it followed all the zoning, planning, and Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Johnston said if you have a rule it should be followed. He said allowing the solar project to go through would go against the Comprehensive Land Use Plan that everyone needed to follow. He said we needed rules and regulations.

Dan Schansberg said he suspected Houston County wasn't using more power currently than in 1980. He said the only time the power was out at his farm was due to a storm of some kind. He said he had asked someone from MiEnergy once if the cost of electricity would continue to rise no matter how energy efficient they got and Schansberg said the MiEnergy representative had said yes and that the rise in cost was mostly due to the cost of employees and equipment like new trucks. He said more commercial solar was coming to Fillmore County. He said Fillmore County would soon have around 1500 acres of solar. Schansberg said the City of Caledonia was about 1800 acres so Fillmore County's solar would nearly cover the entire City of Caledonia for comparison. Schansberg said the City of Harmony was considering a data center being built. He said in his opinion Houston County should just sit back and see "how messed up Fillmore County gets". He said he thought the data center in Harmony would use all Fillmore County's solar so there would not be a benefit to the people of Fillmore County.

Kelly Meyer from Houston County thanked the Commissioners for their service to Houston County. She said she was there to respectfully express her concerns in regards to the commercial solar project being proposed. Meyer said the proposal was inconsistent with Houston County's Comprehensive Plan. She said the plan was created to protect the County's agricultural land, wide open spaces, and rural character, "assets that define us today as a County". She said allowing the project would conflict with those protections and set a precedent for similar large-scale commercial developments in areas intended to remain agricultural and wide open. It would take prime farmland out of production and permanently alter the surrounding landscape. Meyer said there were real concerns for neighboring property owners. "I believe this type of development affects property values, land use compatibility, and the quiet rural environment that all of our families have invested in and depend on" she said. Additionally, she said there were unanswered questions about long term health and environmental impacts of the systems. She said these were important decisions that would affect "our land for generations". She said Houston County's natural beauty, productive farmland, and rural identity were among the County's greatest assets. She said this was why people chose to live in the County, work in the County, and visit the County. She said once the landscape was altered, it could not easily be restored.

Finally, she said while not directly related to the agenda item on the agenda for the day she believed it was important to view the current proposal in the broader context of the ongoing infrastructure pressures in Houston County including the MariBell transmission line. She said taken together the projects raised serious concerns about cumulative impacts on “our land, our landscape, and our rural way of life”. Meyer respectfully urged the Board to consider the long-term consequences of the proposal that had already been denied by the Zoning department and Planning Commission and to uphold the values and protections outlined in the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. She thanked the board for their time and consideration.

Rebeckah Marschall said she was speaking on behalf of the Houston County Farm Bureau. She said the Houston County Farm Bureau would like to address the policies regarding solar facilities on high quality production farmland in Houston County. On September 26, 2023 at their annual meeting the Houston County Farm Bureau unanimously passed the following policy: “We oppose wind and solar facilities being put on production farmland that has a CER a Crop Equivalent Rating of 70 or higher.” She said the members believed that agricultural land and soil “are irreplaceable resources that we should protect for future generations”. She said while they supported property rights and diversified energy they encouraged the Board to consider the long term impact of agricultural land when reviewing future land use ordinances or conditional use permits. She also spoke about the 2026 Minnesota State Farm Bureau official policies on solar energy as a resource to provide further information on how the issues were viewed across the State. Marschall said the Houston County Farm Bureau opposed article 1 and article 2 of the official policies including opposing solar areas being called farms. She thanked the board on behalf of the board and members for taking their views into account.

Sheila Schroeder from Wilmington Township said she was back again because she felt that her issue with the MariBell transmission line also had a correlation with the solar panel discussion. She said she was all about preserving ag land, all tillable ag land. She said it was the way they made their living, and she wanted to see that land protected. Schroeder said from 2001 to 2016 in Minnesota 180,000 acres of land were lost, and from 2017 to 2022 Minnesota lost another 74,000 acres, and it was predicted Minnesota was on track to lose another 300,000 acres of Minnesota farm land. She said she had issues with that and asked where food would come from in the future. She said she was afraid of the land loss to solar farms and that the County would just get more and more and more loss to solar farms if they were allowed. She said her farm had been approached to build a solar farm, as had other farmers and it was a personal decision not to do so to preserve the land. Schroeder said she did not want to see Houston County developed like other Counties to the North. She said the whole country was losing prime ag land at an alarming rate. She said she wanted to protect what Houston County had. She said “The people have told you this that the beauty and the landscape is their primary focus for living here...if those are the priorities of our County I think that that’s the way we need to vote”. She said a fear about the MariBell transmission line was that they would be taking a large crane on the 250 foot proposed easement and go from pole to pole, to pole. She said she was afraid the soil would be so compacted it would not be able to be used again. She said they planned to ask them to take the topsoil off if the project went that far so it could be preserved, but she was not sure if that would help. She said they were going to try to oppose the transmission line, but that they needed help.

Tom Hammell from Jefferson Township said he was there to express his concern about the proposed 765 kV MariBell transmission project. He said both the needs and benefits had been poorly explained by the power company. Hammell said according to a statement on the project's own website "Together, this team is committed to working closely with communities and citizens to maintain transparent communication and thoughtful planning throughout every stage of this project." Hammell said the real process had been anything but that. He said the company had been less than forthright with landowners about the process and the right-of-way accusation. He said the needs have been poorly explained. He said they have been told the growth is good and the risks are not that bad, but Hammell said they needed to know more than that. He asked how the County's infrastructure will be affected and the real risks and benefits. He said "we are asked to accept a project that will move power over our heads with no real benefit to those of us in the County". He asked that the County put a moratorium in place on further development on untested technology until the risks and benefits could be figured out". He said at the very least he wanted to know more concrete detail about both the risks and benefits both to County government and its individual residents.

Dennis Myhre from Eitzen said he did not agree with wind and solar. He said they say solar is clean and green energy, but a lot of mining goes into making up solar panels. He asked if they would be recyclable when they were done being used or if they would go into a land fill. He did not believe that solar actually needed to be close to substations as lines could be buried. He said there were only two people that came out good with solar panels and that was the people that own the panels and the people that own the land the panels sit on. He suggested looking at something more reliable like nuclear energy. He said solar energy was unreliable. He said we need something that is going to allow energy 24/7. He asked who would like to look at solar panels. He said houses would decrease in value in the country if solar panels were allowed. He said he wanted to keep the County's wide open spaces and that it was pretty in the countryside.

APPOINTMENTS

At 9:05 a.m. Commissioner Johnson moved, Commissioner Zehnder seconded, motion unanimously carried open a public hearing, pursuant to Minnesota Statutes § 375A.1205, Subdivision 1 for the purpose of considering making the positions of Auditor / Treasurer and Recorder positions appointed.

Coordinator Parker said the Commissioners had the authority to make the positions appointed and traditionally the positions had been difficult and the skills required to perform the job had continued to advance. Being able to appoint people in positions based on their experience, skills, and abilities rather than being elected was something the County was considering. As background information he shared that of Minnesota's 87 counties 60 had an appointed recorder and 56 had an appointed auditor and treasurer. This was a common trend in Minnesota due to the complexity of the positions.

Commissioner Johnson said multiple public hearings had been held to get feedback from the public on the matter as they knew the matter was important. Commissioner Wright said they also received individual feedback on the matter in addition to the public hearings.

Bruce Bulman from Caledonia said his aunt would have never gotten the position if she had needed to prove she was eligible to do it and yet she ended up being one of the best in the State. He said one of the supreme court justices had spoke at her funeral. He said he thought it was a tragedy if people were appointed and local people didn't have the opportunity for the job. He said people could learn on the job. He said his aunt was a good example of this.

Bev Bauer said she was the Houston County Recorder for 20 years. She had been elected. She said she knew sometimes people said running for office was a popularity contest, but she did not think that was the correct wording. Bauer said running for election was a lot of work and those running for the offices ran for the whole County. She said people lost rights all the time. She said there was not a school to go to, to know how to do the Recorder's office. She said people learned to do the job through experience. Bauer had worked in the office prior to being elected. She said she liked that the elected officials answered to the taxpayer. She spoke in favor of keeping the potions elected.

Yvonne Krogstad from Spring Grove said candidates who applied for the position would state their experience in their ads. She said that didn't mean someone was good at that job, but she said that was also true of an appointed person. She said elected officials were directly responsible to the voters. She said elected officials also applied more checks and balances as they were more independent of the County board. She asked if the appointed system was working well for other counites. She asked if the County needed to follow suit even if it was working well for other counties.

Commissioner Wright moved, Commissioner Johnson seconded, motion unanimously carried to come out of closed session and return to the regular session.

CONSENT AGENDA

Commissioner Johnson moved, Commissioner Wright seconded, motion unanimously carried to approve the consent agenda. Approved items are below.

- 1) Change the employment status of Jessica Kraus, Assistant County Attorney, from probationary to regular, effective Feb 13th, 2026.

ACTION ITEMS

File No. 1 – Prior to any motions being made Environmental Services Director Amelia Meiners said the proposed commercial solar project was being proposed ¼ mile West of the Caledonia substation. She said there were three parties involved in the application and that these included: the landowners Andy and Sheri Allen, the solar company OneEnergy Develoment LLC,

and MiEnergy who was the distribution provider. Meiners said she wanted to clarify that the commercial solar project being considered was independent of the MariBell transmission line. Meiners said her office had brought forward a recommendation of denial based on incompatibility with the Comprehensive Land Use Plan and that the Planning Commission had recommended the County board deny the request and had also cited concerns including water quality, pollution, and impacts on neighboring property owners. Meiners said land use decisions were based on two guiding documents: the County’s Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Zoning Ordinance. Commissioner Johnson moved, Commissioner Wright seconded, motion unanimously carried to deny a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for OneEnergy Development LLC on behalf of AC4 Farms LLC to construct a 5MW ground mounted solar distribution commercial solar project in an Agricultural Protection District in Caledonia Township. (The Planning Commission recommended the Board of Commissioners deny the CUP request.) The Commissioners voted by roll and all Commissioners vote to deny the request. Commissioner Myhre said he only voted to deny the request because the County needed to redo the Comp Plan and amend it.

File No. 5 – Commissioner Zehnder moved, Commissioner Schuldt seconded, motion unanimously carried to review and approve payments. Payments are below.

REQUEST APPROVAL FOR PAYMENTS

2026/02/03 COMMISSIONER WARRANTS:

VENDOR NAME	AMOUNT
US BANK VOYAGER FLEET SYS	2,157.45
TOIT TRAINING LLC	2,250.00
VERIZON WIRELESS	2,708.47
LIBERTY TIRE RECYCLING LLC	3,197.75
TOWMASTER LLC	102,000.00
OLYMPIC BUILDERS GENERAL CONTRACTORS	319,696.85
	<u>432,010.52</u>
16 VENDORS PAID LESS THAN \$2000.00	6,204.91
	<u>438,215.43</u>
PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES	23,452.72
	<u>461,668.15</u>

REVIEW LICENSE CENTER PAYMENTS

2026/01/23 AUDITOR WARRANT:

VENDOR NAME	AMOUNT
TREASURER CITY OF LA CRESCENT	19,113.07
	<u>19,113.07</u>

2026/01/22 AUDITOR WARRANTS:

<u>VENDOR NAME</u>	<u>AMOUNT</u>
HOUSTON COUNTY TREASURER	2,848.23
ISD 300 TREASURER	64,541.31
TREASURER CITY OF BROWNSVILLE	2,278.28
TREASURER CITY OF CALEDONIA	17,982.41
TREASURER CITY OF HOKAH	6,844.61
TREASURER CITY OF HOUSTON	2,554.29
TREASURER CITY OF LA CRESCENT	51,343.26
TREASURER CITY OF SPRING GROVE	17,552.72
TREASURER SCHOOL DISTRICT 238	2,642.23
TREASURER SCHOOL DISTRICT 239	3,562.86
TREASURER SCHOOL DISTRICT 294	34,649.09
TREASURER SCHOOL DISTRICT 297	30,297.95
TREASURER SCHOOL DISTRICT 299	42,867.05
TREASURER TWP OF BLACKHAMMER	5,935.73
TREASURER TWP OF BROWNSVILLE	3,512.48
TREASURER TWP OF CALEDONIA	3,804.46
TREASURER TWP OF CROOKED CREEK	2,803.04
TREASURER TWP OF HOUSTON	5,633.36
TREASURER TWP OF LA CRESCENT	5,994.01
TREASURER TWP OF MAYVILLE	3,274.27
TREASURER TWP OF MONEY CREEK	12,549.07
TREASURER TWP OF MOUND PRAIRIE	11,139.70
TREASURER TWP OF SHELDON	3,375.24
TREASURER TWP OF SPRING GROVE	7,699.08
TREASURER TWP OF UNION	4,591.04
TREASURER TWP OF WILMINGTON	3,226.39
	<u>353,502.16</u>
7 VENDORS PAID LESS THAN \$2000.00	5,846.98
	<u><u>359,349.14</u></u>

DISCUSSION ITEMS

Coordinator Parker reminded the Commissioners of two upcoming public hearings on the use of rifles for deer hunting in Houston County would take place in the basement of the Houston County Justice Center, Caledonia, MN. These would be Special County Board Meetings with the only business being the public hearings. They would take place on February 4, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. and March 3, 2026 at 6:00 p.m.

The Annual Bluff Country Collaborative (BCC) Career Fair/Hiring Event would take place at the La Crescent Area Event Center on March 11th, 2026 from 9 a.m. to Noon. The event would be free for Houston County businesses and job seekers in the area to attend. Businesses were asked to sign up by February 11th, 2026.

Commissioner Myhre said the Board needed to do something about the MariBell transmission line. He said the board was not allowing solar panels so why would the board allow the transmission line. He said the line would take up more ag land than solar panels. He said the Board needed to try to stop the line.

The Commissioners discussed recent and upcoming meetings including an Economic Development Authority (EDA), E911, Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Bringing Light Into Darkness Program, SELCO, and upcoming Department Head meeting.

The Commissioners said they had received numerous calls and emails from residents and that they appreciated the feedback.

Closing Public Comment:

Sheri Allen, landowner, said she had a few comments. First of all, she said she wanted to thank everyone for their respectful comments on both sides both from the Commissioners and those in the board room. She said when they had started out the process people were not always very respectful. She said their project did not have anything to do with MariBell. She said her and Andy didn't even support the MariBell project themselves. She said her understanding was that the reason the ordinance was voted down was because the wording was set to only affect people with prime land. Allen said in her opinion if the County was going to make a Comp Plan or an ordinance she thought it should affect people across the board "and you shouldn't attack people with prime ag land". She said it should be consistent for all landowners. She said there was still work that needed to be done. She suggested looking at personal solar and commercial solar.

Andy Allen said he was a proud resident of Caledonia and Houston County. He said he thought for everyone it was a little bit of relief. He said Sheri and him loved the community and loved getting to live in Houston County and to farm. He said there had been a lot of hard work on all parts. He said he wanted to commend the people that opposed the solar project as they had put a lot of time into it. He said he wanted to give them credit where credit was due. He said he could also see that coming for the MariBell project which him and Sheri also opposed. He said "everyone here has had a hard job". He said he wanted to thank everyone including the people in the audience and the board. He said they thought what they were doing was going to help the community, and they still did. He said they didn't realize the project was going to upset people and said they had meant no harm, no foul by any of it. He said they appreciated the support, the comments, and the conversation. He said after the process he felt he had been educated significantly. He said Sheri had also put a lot of work into it.

Franklin Hahn said the comments made that the Planning Commission was opposed to the applicants were not true. He said when they as a board made decisions, they went by three things including The Comprehensive Land Use Plan, Shoreland, and Zoning Ordinance. He said when an application came in no matter what it was they went by those three things, and if a flag came up it was hard for the board to approve one project if it didn't qualify based on those three things. He said it was important for the board to be consistent. He thanked the County board for taking time and studying the matter. He said as far as changing the Zoning Ordinance or Comp Plan they could not be changing it every month with each application that came in. They had to stick with what they had.

Yvonne Krogstad asked about the Comp Plan and asked if something was not addressed in the plan if it was not allowed.

Mark Klinski clarified he misspoke earlier in the meeting and was referring to an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance and not the Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

There being no further business, a motion was made by Commissioner Zehnder, seconded by Commissioner Johnson, motion unanimously carried to adjourn the meeting at 10:29 a.m. The next meeting would be a special meeting on February 4, 2026 at 6:00 p.m.

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

HOUSTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA

By: _____
Greg Myhre, Chairperson

Attest: _____
Brent Parker, Coordinator