

**COMMON COUNCIL
TUESDAY, JANUARY 13, 2026
6:00 P.M.**

Mayor Ryan Daniel – Present
Clerk Treasurer Leslee Robinson – Present
Attorney Marcia McNagny – Present

Council Members

Ryan Adamson – Present
Brent Bockelman – Present
Jennifer Romano – Present
Tad Varga – Present
Daniel Weigold – Present

The Columbia City Common Council met in regular session with all members present. Mayor Daniel called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. All stood to say the Pledge of Allegiance.

MINUTES Jennifer Romano noted that Russell Gilliam’s name was spelled incorrectly. Jennifer Romano made a motion to approve the December 30, 2025 meeting minutes as corrected. Tad Varga seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously.

ELECTION OF COUNCIL PRESIDENT Mayor Daniel requested nominations for Council President.

Jennifer Romano nominated Dan Weigold for Council President. Tad Varga second the nomination.

Hearing no other nominations, Mayor Daniel called for a motion to close nominations.

Brent Bockelman made a motion to close nominations. Jennifer Romano seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously.

CHRISTMAS LIGHTING AWARDS Jennifer Romano introduced and presented Christmas lighting awards to Northeast District winner Erica Smallwood of 134 Hilltop Drive; Northwest District winner Luz Fuentes of 524 North Elm Street; Southeast District winner Jeff Michael of 809 East Business 30; Southwest District winner Amanda Pratt of 702 South Line Street and then the overall winner was Kathy and Tony Johnson of 1422 Glenwood Drive.

ORDINANCE 2025-27 – VACATION OF PUBLIC WAY – 2ND READING Jennifer Romano made a motion to read Ordinance 2025-27 by title only. Dan Weigold seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously. Clerk Treasurer Leslee Robinson read Ordinance 2025-27, Vacation of Public Way.

Mayor Daniel stated that this was requested by the Ballard’s, who were in the audience. He noted that Council had talked about this at the last meeting pretty in-depth regarding the vacation of the triangle parcel.

Ryan Adamson made a motion to approve Ordinance 2025-27 on 2nd and final reading. Jennifer Romano seconded the motion. Ryan Adamson, Tad Varga, Jennifer Romano and Dan Weigold approved, Brent Bockelman opposed.

ORDINANCE 2026-1 – REZONE – HODGES PROPERTY MANAGEMENT Nathan Bilger, Planning Director, was present to discuss the zoning map amendment for 875 North SR 109.

Nathan Bilger reported that this was a request for rezoning from R1 to GB from Thor and Landon Hodges for the Hodges Property Management property. He explained the overall property was just over 11 acres with a portion of it already zoned GB that dates back to the 1990's. He shared that this would rezone the rest of the property that has been added over the years. He advised that the Hodges recently bought some extra acreage that triggered the need for rezoning the entire thing. He reported this was at the Planning Commission for their public hearing last week and received a unanimous favorable recommendation.

Thor and Landon Hodges of 875 North SR 109 were present to explain their plans for the property. Thor Hodges shared that they want to expand the area they have to grow their business. He explained when they originally bought the land, it was for a landscape company, but they have started to diversify a little bit more by adding some things to it. He advised with the current zoning they were still able to put up the greenhouse, but they would like to put up an operations barn which is what is requiring the rezoning. He felt it just made sense, not only in listening to Nathan's staff report, but in looking at the comprehensive plan, how it was designed and the overlay that was given to show that land was originally designed and planned for GB growth. He added that they were somewhat in a valley right there and a lot of times people coming into their business are stopped at the bottom of that hill for southbound traffic. He shared that they were hoping as part of the rezone they could establish a second egress that allows for line of sight up and down SR 109, which would make things a lot safer for his employees as well as for people that come to their business. He advised they have already been in conversations with the Special Project Manager with INDOT as far as the curb cut that is already there to make sure they do everything that is required to have that driveway access. He felt as their business grows it was important to make things safer.

Tad Varga questioned if they were just going to put a single building in the larger area of the property. Thor Hodges explained it would be right on the border of where the two plats meet.

Jennifer Romano questioned if they were hoping to have the greenhouse up and running in time for spring. Thor Hodges explained they were way behind the power curve as far as having things ordered for it, but they were hoping to still do a lot of plug raising yet this year to have some things available. He reiterated that they could still have the greenhouse there under the current zoning, but they just could not use the land to its full potential of what they hope to do.

Tad Varga questioned in reference to full potential were they thinking retail where people could come in. Thor Hodges advised that was correct, they would like to have all kinds of variety of plants, vegetables, and of course flowers. He felt a lot of it would still come down to the storefront, but GB zoning would give them the flexibility of making it into a place where people

could come to look at what they have without having to move everything.

Leslee Robinson asked Thor to talk about the barriers that would be put up for the neighbors. Thor Hodges explained that as part of the land agreement purchase, to the West they would build a 10-12 foot privacy mound and then plant Arborvitae's or Green Giants along the top of the mound to provide a barrier. He mentioned to the south, the tree line that is there, even with the new development, he hoped would continue to be there. He advised the only other real close neighbor in proximity to them they have a pretty good relationship with and try to do things that are not intrusive to what their plans are. He did note that those people recently purchased a new property and thought they would be moving.

Mayor Daniel questioned their timeline for the drive. He assumed it was going to be right across from Cambridge Crossing entrance. Thor Hodges explained it was going to be somewhat across from there. He shared that INDOT told him they would need a maximum of 45 days for them to do everything they need to do, plus there was some tile work he needed to do. He thought they would start working on that as soon as the weather breaks and hoped by early summer it would be done.

Isaac Renninger of 1001 North SR 109 was present to express his opposition to the rezone and shared that his property was just north of the subject property. He advised he had previously submitted written objections and exhibits regarding the petition and respectfully asked the Council to evaluate the petition based on the city's currently adopted comprehensive plan and future land use map. He stated that was the only land use policy that is officially published and reasonably relied upon by both residents and businesses. He advised that at the Planning Commission hearing, it was stated that a future revision of the future land use map should be updated in response to the commission's decision on this petition and respectfully emphasized that the rezoning should be evaluated against the adopted plan as it exists today, not used to shape future plan revisions retroactively. He felt that until a formal amendment was proposed and adopted through the public process, the current future land use map was the policy the public and private sectors were entitled to rely upon. He advised that his objection was to any commercial expansion beyond what the future land use map intends.

Jennifer Romano made a motion to read Ordinance 2026-01 by title only. Brent Bockelman seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously. Clerk Treasurer Leslee Robinson read Ordinance 2026-01 an ordinance amending the zoning classification of certain property from the R1 single-family residential district to the GB general business district.

Dan Weigold advised that they had a lengthy discussion at the Plan Commission about this situation. He shared that he respected Mr. Renninger's professional approach and advised that they did look at business growth, the surrounding area as well as the comprehensive plan. He stated that in his opinion, a plan is a plan, but plans can change. He felt that in a situation where a business is starting to grow, and we can help that business grow and be productive, and that it was not going to be a nuisance to the neighbors was a positive thing and believed that is why they gave a unanimous decision. He mentioned Mr. Renninger's belief that they were breaking the comprehensive plan lines so to speak but it is right on the edge and in his opinion, it was kind of a change order to make something happen that produces expansion of an existing business. He advised he was very supportive of what the Hodges are trying to do with their business and felt

they were going to be very successful with it.

Jennifer Romano agreed and felt the opportunity to be able to shop for the services and products that will be provided at Hodges is something that will be really good for our community. She added to be able to get plants and landscaping needs for your property without having to go outside of our community will be really nice, and especially really important since it is locally owned.

Tad Varga agreed and noted because it is sandwiched in between GB, he felt like it was kind of a natural progression in that area, and as Dan said, there was some flexibility with the plan. He appreciated Mr. Renninger's presentation but stated that they have to look at the community as a whole.

Ryan Adamson appreciated Mr. Renninger coming in but agreed with the other council members. He explained that he looked at that plan as a fluid document and fluid documents change. He felt it was naive to take a document like that as being in concrete because circumstances change so for him personally it was more of a guideline. He shared that he had a soft spot for small businesses, especially locally owned, so he was in favor of the rezone.

Ryan Adamson made a motion to approve Ordinance 2026-1 on first reading. Brent Bockelman seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously.

UTILITY RATE PRESENTATION – BAKER TILLY Ian Stahl and Brent Duncan of Baker Tilly were present to do a presentation and discuss the rate plan packet. He advised there were 40 pages to the plan but would save some time and just give a summary of everything that went into preparing it. He shared that they have been working for over six months on developing this plan; looking holistically at all four of the utilities, as well as working with utility management and understanding the capital needs and the operating costs of running the utilities. He noted that two of the biggest costs of operating utilities were the operating expenses and capital improvements, which infrastructure needs are always out there and never slowing down. He reported that they have been working very closely with Leslee Robinson and Mayor Daniel in developing a rate plan that is going to hopefully minimize rate shock, as well as gradually improve utility balances to get in compliance with minimum required reserves as part of bond covenants and things along those lines.

Ian Stahl, in reviewing the summary of key changes, explained they looked at how they could create a sustainable approach to the utility rates while minimizing rate shock; really looking out for those residential, commercial and industrial bills and making those impacts as meaningful, but with the least amount of impact as possible while still operating our utilities. He stated that they devised a three phase-in plan approach to begin in 2026 and go through 2028, similar to what was looked at back in 2022. He advised this approach between all the utilities would be about a 3.51% average increase per year, which in terms of dollars would be about \$10 per month per year, so about \$120 in total for the average residential user of an increase in 2026, same increase in 2027 and 2028.

Mayor Daniel confirmed that was for the entirety of the year. Mr. Stahl advised that was correct. He went on to explain the break down using the state standard for water and sewer based on

4,000 gallons of usage for a 5/8 inch meter and 1000 kilowatt hours of usage for electric.

Mr. Stahl went on to discuss capital expenditures and noted that those were certainly a huge part of our utilities. He explained they took a comprehensive look at the four utilities and there was about \$13.6 million of capital needs that this increase would fund. He noted the break out by utility in the packet and reviewed those with the Council.

Mr. Stahl continued on to discuss the primary drivers for the rate adjustments. He noted that capital expenditures was a big piece of it and noted SEA1 as being a hot topic, but advised they were still assuming pilot payments were being made, which stands for payment in lieu of taxes. So being able to support the city in that measure of things, as well as still being able to pay our required debt service that we have through the sewage works bonds and the water works bonds. He noted that stormwater does pay a portion of those too. He stated that, arguably, our largest cost every single year was paying for salaries and wages, repairs and maintenance, chemicals at the sewage works facility, things along those lines but were all built into this comprehensive rate plan.

Mr. Stahl stated, as mentioned earlier, that part of the rate plan was making sure we were building up in a sustainable way to meet minimum required reserves and work towards recommended reserves. He explained that when he mentions required reserves for each of the utilities', that means making sure the required reserves were two months of budgeted operation and maintenance costs in the fund balances, making sure our bond and interest account and debt service reserve account were funded, which is mandated by bond covenants. He noted their typical recommendation in industry practice is about one year's worth of capital. He advised that we were falling below the required reserves as of the end of 2025 estimated and as of the end of 2024. He stated by the end of 2028 with this three-phase approach, we will be meeting required reserve balances in all the utilities. He advised electric was already above all of those reserves, but in each of the other utilities we found ourselves below those required reserves.

Mr. Stahl provided and reviewed information on what the increases would look like as well as a perspective as to where we would stack up against other communities.

Leslee Robinson noted that she has REMC for electric and the city was \$20 less than REMC. Mr. Stahl reported that a lot of the electric utilities they work with, it was a common trend of those municipally owned to have quite a bit less than maybe a for-profit situation.

Mayor Daniel explained that a fair amount of things were cut out of the original plan after having consultations with our department heads to help keep numbers down. He advised that the things cut out were not absolutely critical and have made sure to keep everything critical in the plan. He noted there was also a fair amount of anticipatory dollars included for a downtown plan. He advised we do not have the preliminary engineering back for that yet, so do not know exact costs but took estimates based on what we know of materials and projects.

Jennifer Romano shared that it was nice to see how we stack up against other communities. She noted that there tends to be a lot of online complaining about the amounts that people pay but if you have never lived anywhere else, you really do not have an idea. Mayor Daniel shared that he asked Baker Tilly to look at some of our neighboring communities as well as similar sized

communities. He noted it was a little bit of a mixed bag but agreed it was good to see where we are compared to others.

Tad Varga mentioned the \$2 million we just paid for the Dystor project and being able to pay for that in house as opposed to having to bond for it. He felt that essentially, this would be like putting money in the bank as a rainy-day fund.

Jennifer Romano pointed out that something she has noticed in the past 10 years is the cost of, really everything, that just keeps going up, especially in the electric department and all the different infrastructure.

Mayor Daniel requested the department heads share price increases that they have been experiencing. Shawn Lickey, Mike Cook, Kelly Cearbaugh and Mike Shoda provided examples of increases.

Laura Richcreek was present representing the Utility Rate Advisory Board. She explained that the Utility Rate Advisory Board meets about once a year to review the information Baker Tilly has prepared; they review the needs of the city and the mandates of the state against the budget and then carefully consider if the rate increase should be implemented. She shared that because members of the Board live here, this affects them the same way it is going to affect every resident out there. She felt it was good to hear the different perspectives of what equipment costs and how the prices can go up. She reported that the Board met on December 3rd to review this plan; the Mayor was in attendance to talk about what the department heads had done to trim their budgets and their coordinating efforts to keep expenses low. She advised the Board is recommending the proposed increase of \$10 per month per year for the next three years.

Tad Varga confirmed the \$10 increase was on average. Laura Richcreek advised that was correct.

Dan Weigold shared that he thought the increase was going to be a lot higher and although \$10 a month is still a lot for some people he was in favor of moving forward to create an ordinance for this rate increase. Council was in agreement to move forward.

POLICY UPDATE – PUBLIC SAFETY PERSONAL DAYS Gary Parrett explained with the Police Department moving to the 12-hour shifts, the current policy of 32 hours does not equate to 4 personal days for them. He explained that most of the city workers, other than the Fire Department, were based on 32 hours. He explained the proposed policy was to go by days based upon the employees' established work schedule rather than specific hours. He noted another proposed amendment would state that personal days are earned on January 1 and have to be used by December 31 of each year, and any unused hours would be unpaid and lost. He stated that was always the understanding but nothing really in the policy stating that.

Mayor Daniel confirmed this was basically taking practice and ensuring that it is in the policy manual. Gary Parrett advised that was correct.

Leslee Robinson advised that Attorney McNagny had reviewed all of the proposed policy changes except for the overtime policy.

Brent Bockelman made a motion to approve policy 5.9 personal days for the public safety manual. Jennifer Romano seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously.

POLICY UPDATE – IMMIGRATION REFORM CONTROL ACT AND INDIANA NEW HIRE REPORTING Mayor Daniel thought this was just incorporating what state law mandates us to do. Leslee Robinson advised that was correct.

Ryan Adamson made a motion to approve Policy 3.13 and Policy 3.14. Brent Bockelman seconded the motion, motion passed unanimously.

POLICY UPDATE – OVERTIME/FLEX This issue was tabled.

DEPARTMENT REPORTS **Tom LaRue** – update on Truck 101, delivery of their new truck has been pushed back to June or July, they are still looking at options for 800 radios, update on repairs to the west side of the fire house, taking quotes for hose testing for this year. **Mike Shoda** - waiting for the PLC to come in for the booster station, storm drain on South Whitley Street has been completed and just need to seed/straw and do some sidewalk work. **Kelly Cearbaugh** - pulled the leaf machines back out and were able to get a couple rounds in, waiting on quote for leaf grinding, going to try to get a round of limb pickup in, repaired damaged manhole, been working with CUES and M-Tech on their camera truck files. **Chip Hill** - did final interviews for the amphitheater for Eagle Park with the company that will be doing the building and financing of it, working with the mayor on a couple other projects. **Mike Cook** – met with insurance regarding their office building roof that sustained damage in the storm right before Thanksgiving. He advised our deductible was \$10,000 and the quote came in just over \$9,800 so will move ahead with quotes to try and move to a metal roof rather than shingle. He reported they met with Ferguson regarding replacing the decant valves on the sludge storage tank, they started working on the annual SDI report. **Matt Heiden** – working on baseball and softball schedules, Father/Daughter tickets for Saturday are sold out and very few left for Friday. **Gary Parrett** – update on new officers, update on tornado sirens, police and dispatch have a lot of great training coming up in 2026, build Legos with the local police community event coming up at Eagle Glen on February 22nd between 2 and 4 p.m. **Shawn Lickey** - new intern Grant Sievers started in his department and is a senior at Churubusco High School, continuing with pole changes on Brown Road by Noble County, working on finalizing a job description that was created a few years ago, will have a job posting very soon as they are still short one person, Board of Works approved the North substation testing for the year.

YOUTH COUNCIL Delaney Dee was present representing the Youth Council and reported that they helped with the Christmas party at Mary Raber Elementary School, then took a tour of the courthouse and met some of the staff.

MAYOR REPORT Mayor Daniel reported that there was some legislation going through right now that would free up an additional \$75 million for the Community Crossings grant and will be applying for that with Westgate as the focus. He advised he would be meeting with Lori Shipman, our grant writer, as well as OCRA, to figure out what the downtown revitalization grant looks like and how we may be able to finagle that with Community Crossings dollars in the future. He reminded Council that he would be gone all of next week and the city retreat was at

the end of January.

REDEVELOPMENT COMMISSION Tad Varga reported they have a lot of things they are working on but most importantly was the jail project. He shared that they were going to regroup, cancel the current RFP and work with another organization that will cast a wider net so we can have a higher likelihood of getting other investors and developers involved.

Mayor Daniel reported to the Council that the Board of Works did a quitclaim deed for the jail property over to the Redevelopment Commission. He advised that they have a lot more flexibility in negotiating for those requests for proposals.

Having no further business to discuss, Mayor Daniel called the meeting adjourned.

Mayor Ryan Daniel

Attest:

Clerk Treasurer Leslee Robinson