

MINUTES of the special public meeting of the Uintah County Commission held **August 8, 2026** in the Commission Chambers at 147 East Main, Vernal, Utah. The meeting commenced at 10:00 am.

PARTICIPANTS: Commissioners John Laursen and Willis LeFevre. Sonja Norton was excused.

ATTENDANCE: Tai Duncan, Angela Hawkins, Keith Campbell, Leon Hoyt, Anna Billings, Jo Gardner, Dan Dilsaver, Cindy Dilsaver, Dan Mortensen, JC Brewer, Dan Goddard, Brian Borum, Kelly Laursen, Tammie Mecham, Danny Harrell, Michael Cook, Matt Wilber, Georgene Cook, Wendi Long, Mike McKee, Terri Jorgensen, Shaun A, Loren Anderson, Corey Foley, Robin O'Driscoll, Brad Horrocks, Ryan Cook, Gerry Dongensin, Georgenna Cook, Leon Hoyt, Ryan Mattson, and Nolan Jackson
Minutes by Leasha Williams

WELCOME: Commissioner Laursen, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Commissioner Laursen apologized for starting the meeting late, there were media issues.

PRAYER by Mike McKee.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE by Angela Hawkins.

PUBLIC HEARING: Proposed Optional Plan to change County form of government

Commissioner Laursen opened the public hearing regarding the proposed change to the county form of government. He clarified that this is a legally required public hearing for information sharing rather than a commission work meeting or a vote. Participants were instructed to remain respectful, with the warning that interruptions would result in removal from the chambers. Speakers were asked to state their full names, focus on factual information, and limit comments to five minutes, with an additional three minutes allowed if time permitted. Groups were encouraged to designate a single representative to speak on their behalf.

Anna Billings clarified that Cache, Grand, Summit, Tooele, Morgan, Wasatch, and Salt Lake counties do not use the proposed form of government. She noted that while Wasatch and Summit counties were cited for cost comparisons, she argued these comparisons are inaccurate due to significant differences in property values (Wasatch: \$772k–\$1M; Summit: \$1.1M–\$1.4M). Commissioner Laursen confirmed that the council determines wages.

Joe Gardner stated that his primary objective is a return to "common sense" in government. He noted that recent discussions, particularly following the Ballard meeting, have provided him with a deeper understanding of county issues after a five-year hiatus from commission meetings. He expressed concern that common sense has been sidelined, leading to a need for a change in government structure to ensure better representation and to address current issues facing the county. He believes a change would offer new perspectives and improve overall government effectiveness.

Dan Dilsaver presented a response to a GRAMA request regarding the Via Ferrata project. The report detailed three primary grants: a \$200,000 Utah Outdoor Recreation Grant (UORG), a \$200,000 Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant requiring an Environmental Assessment (EA), and a pending \$241,000 Access Utah matching grant. Regarding project status, it was noted that construction began April 1, 2024, and was 80% complete at the time of the report. Process concerns were highlighted, specifically that the contract was awarded to Via Ferrata Solutions without a formal bidding process via Access Utah. Furthermore, no hydrology reports were conducted, and while the county did not perform an EA, it cited no immediate fire concerns, noting that rules—including a potential fire ban in the gorge—would be implemented. Project oversight was managed by a small group of county employees and interested community members rather than a formal committee.

JC Brewer expressed concerns regarding the proposed change in government structure. He questioned whether a five-member council might lead to a concentration of power similar to large urban areas, potentially marginalizing rural residents. JC advocated for the establishment of geographic voting districts to ensure equitable representation across the county. Additionally, he stated a strong preference for full-time rather than part-time roles, arguing that full-time commitment is essential for effective county governance and business stability.

Brian Gorum stated that the petition for a change in government resulted from a lack of response to public inquiries over the past several years. He explained that the group recommended establishing five geographic voting districts—potentially aligning with current school district boundaries—to ensure equitable representation and prevent concentrated control, noting that final implementation details would rest with the Commission. JC questioned the legality of such districts and emphasized the need for a comprehensive presentation of the proposal to facilitate informed public discussion and feedback.

Tammie Mecham expressed skepticism regarding the motives of the group advocating for a change in government. She noted that the group has maintained a critical stance toward the current commission for several years regarding various issues, such as salaries and the Via Ferrata project. She argued that the group displayed inconsistency by not raising similar challenges toward the previous commission, other political candidates, or local utility entities facing similar issues. Tammie stated her opposition to the proposed change, asserting that the current government structure provides sufficient representation and transparency.

Danny Harrell emphasized the importance of public engagement and education regarding the proposed change in county government. He encouraged productive discourse, urging citizens to become better informed about the process to ensure an educated decision. He noted the significant time commitment required of full-time commissioners and advocated for greater community involvement in determining the future of Uintah County governance.

Mike Cook, a long-time county resident, expressed strong opposition to the proposed change in government structure. He challenged the accuracy of information disseminated by the proponents, specifically regarding comparative salary data, noting that recruiting a qualified city manager would far exceed the cited figures. Cook emphasized that the current full-time commission structure demands significant weekly hours that part-time members would struggle to match. Furthermore, he argued that moving to a five-member district system would reduce voter representation, as residents would be limited to voting for only one representative rather than the current commission. Cook concluded by urging the public to conduct thorough research, warning that the proposed change could increase costs and decrease effective representation.

Wendy Long read a statement on behalf of Brenda McDonald and expressed her own agreement with its contents. Both voiced significant concerns regarding the proposed change to the county's form of government, arguing that a transition to a five-member part-time council would diminish legislative representation and the capacity to manage comprehensive county responsibilities, such as housing and public safety. Wendy emphasized that the current commission role demands continuous, full-time commitment, which a part-time structure could not adequately replace. Furthermore, she talked about the use of inaccurate salary data in the proposal and cautioned against the council-manager model, citing concerns about accountability. Finally, she suggested that the proposed change should not be driven by narrow grievances regarding specific projects like the Via Ferrata.

Mike McKee expressed opposition to the proposed change in government structure, though he acknowledged the proponents' intent to improve local government. He raised concerns regarding the transition to a council-manager model, noting that a five-member council would be limited to legislative functions, leaving executive authority to an appointed manager with no direct accountability to voters. Drawing on his past experience as a commissioner, he emphasized the significant time and labor required for the role, particularly in handling federal and legislative issues. He argued that the current

commission structure ensures accountability to all citizens and cautioned that a manager-led system would diminish legislative authority and representation. He concluded by stating that while individual commissioners should be held accountable through elections, the fundamental form of government should remain unchanged.

Brad Horrocks expressed support for the proposed council-manager model, citing his prior experience as a commissioner. He argued that a professional manager could provide essential oversight to prevent the operational inefficiencies and financial mismanagement he encountered during his tenure. Specifically, he noted past issues such as unauthorized bonus payments, inventory losses, and significant unapproved expenditures on road projects. He also highlighted problems regarding underutilized county facilities, lack of control over utility expenses, poor vehicle maintenance, and continued insurance coverage for former employees, suggesting that a manager would ensure greater accountability and fiscal responsibility.

Teri Jorgensen noted that while she has historically disagreed with the Commission on various issues, she remains undecided regarding the proposed change in government structure. She expressed concerns regarding communication, specifically citing a lack of responsiveness to public emails and vague GRAMA responses. Teri also questioned the process for determining pay scales and raised concerns about the accessibility of commissioners, noting the difficulty of engaging with the current five-member body. Furthermore, she expressed reservations regarding the transition to part-time roles, arguing that maintaining representation on necessary committees is already challenging for full-time commissioners. She concluded by stating that she would have preferred a more comprehensive overview of the proposal earlier in the process.

Ryan Cook, a concerned citizen with experience in local government, including Uintah County, Vernal City, and Naples City, responded to Brad Horrocks' comments. He expressed skepticism regarding the council-manager model, arguing that such a structure often results in council members approving items without a comprehensive understanding of the details, as they may rely heavily on a city manager who is not directly accountable to the public. Drawing on his experience with the Uintah Transportation Special Service District, Ryan emphasized that board members cannot effectively manage complex county operations on a part-time basis. He concluded that a transition to a part-time commission structure would be insufficient to provide the necessary oversight and representation required to effectively manage county business.

Matthew Wilbur, a candidate for office, emphasized the importance of civic engagement and urged the public to consider all viewpoints regarding the proposed change in government. He stressed that the decision should be based on a thorough understanding of the information presented by both sides. Acknowledging the challenges of public service, he advocated for unity and respectful discourse, noting that the community's future depends on informed decision-making rather than division. He expressed appreciation for the turnout and encouraged continued community involvement in the process.

Mike McKee provided an analysis of potential costs associated with a change in government, referencing data compiled by Mike Wilkins. He acknowledged that while actual costs would be determined by a future council, comparative data from other counties indicates significant potential increases. Mike noted that the average cost for the seven counties using similar forms of government is approximately \$569,398 (excluding benefits). Excluding Salt Lake County as an outlier, the average cost for the remaining six counties is \$554,174, which would represent an 89% increase. Including Salt Lake County would result in a 94% increase. He emphasized that these figures warrant consideration when evaluating the financial impact of a potential transition.

Cindy Dilsaver expressed her support for the proposed change in government, noting that her perspective was informed by independent research and conversations with officials in Wasatch County, which utilizes a similar council-manager structure. She highlighted the responsiveness of Wasatch County officials as a positive indicator of civic engagement. Cindy argued that a council-manager model

could provide essential continuity and long-term strategic planning for the county, particularly during commission transitions. She concluded by emphasizing the value of dedicated public service over compensation, asserting that the change would help attract committed individuals focused on the long-term well-being of the county.

Georgine Cook pushed back against labeling citizens into groups, emphasizing that Uintah County consists of a diverse citizenry and advocating for unity. She expressed agreement with Matt Wilbur's call for unified, respectful discourse. Regarding the debate on part-time versus full-time roles, she drew on her 26 years of experience as an office manager to argue that part-time positions can be just as effective as full-time ones. She noted that many tasks can be completed efficiently and suggested that qualified, willing individuals in the county could capably serve in a part-time commissioner capacity.

J.C. Brewer advocated for re-establishing volunteer committees to assist the commission, citing the effectiveness of the Public Lands and Roads committees during Mike McKee's tenure. He noted that these committees previously saved the county thousands of volunteer hours by handling complex issues such as RS 2477, wilderness designations, the Book Cliffs initiative, and the Ute tribe lawsuit. Brewer suggested that utilizing similar volunteer committees would reduce the administrative burden on commissioners, allowing them more time to prioritize state legislative and other critical duties.

Corey Foley, speaking as a county resident and Vernal City Mayor, expressed appreciation for the commission's efforts to ensure accessible public engagement. He noted that several cities within the county successfully operate under a five-member council structure and highlighted that co-shared committees between the county and local service districts are an effective, proven model. Corey supported the idea of closer representation through districts, acknowledging the significant administrative workload currently placed on three commissioners. Finally, he shared that Vernal City has successfully utilized a city manager model for 40 years, suggesting it provides effective leadership, though he noted that cost savings may vary.

Dan Dilsaver expressed support for re-establishing the county's advisory committees, emphasizing their value in assisting the commission with complex administrative tasks. He advocated for the proposed county manager model, suggesting that such a position could focus on optimizing operational efficiencies, such as reducing subsidies for county facilities, which the commission may not have the capacity to address. Regarding his earlier GRAMA disclosure concerning the Via Ferrata project, Dilsaver clarified that his concerns centered on the project's location within a watershed and the lack of public transparency during its approval, rather than opposition to the project itself. He concluded by reiterating his primary goal: fostering improved public communication and greater civic engagement in county government.

Leon Hoyt shared his perspective as a long-time resident, noting that despite having lived in Uintah County for 50 years, public perception of residency status can vary. He explained that he arrived at the meeting with limited information beyond social media posts but found the discussion helpful in clarifying the issues. Drawing on his experience serving on various government committees, Leon observed that while committees can be valuable, they often operate with narrow, specific interests that can lead to conflicting public viewpoints. He concluded by thanking the commission for the opportunity to hear both sides of the issue, stating that the meeting successfully provided him with a clearer understanding of the proposed government structure.

Wendy Long offered a clarification regarding county facilities, emphasizing that amenities like convention centers, recreation centers, and parks are designed to stimulate the local economy and improve community well-being rather than to generate direct profit. She argued that these facilities provide essential support for local businesses and contribute to the overall stability and desirability of Uintah County as a place to live.

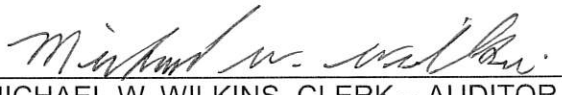
Ryan Mattson expressed concerns regarding the potential for the proposed county manager position to lead to long-term bureaucratic growth and increased staffing costs. He noted that transitions to a council-manager form of government can be complex and time-consuming, citing the experience in Wasatch County as an example of the challenges in stabilizing such a system. Furthermore, he questioned the sustainability of replacing the current three-commissioner structure with a single manager role, suggesting that the significant workload could ultimately lead to higher operational expenses for taxpayers.

Commissioner Laursen concluded the meeting by thanking attendees for their participation. He emphasized the importance of community collaboration and encouraged citizens to conduct thorough research on the proposed government change, advising them to verify information rather than accepting comments at face value. Commissioner Laursen affirmed his commitment to neutrality throughout the process. He announced that a recording of the meeting would be available on the county website by the following Monday and noted that additional public meetings are scheduled to continue the discussion, before officially adjourning the session.

ADJOURN: Meeting adjourned at approximately 11:25 am.



JOHN LAURSEN, CHAIR



MICHAEL W. WILKINS, CLERK – AUDITOR