



Gerlach/Empire Citizens Advisory Board
Minutes of the regular meeting of the Gerlach/Empire Citizens Advisory Board held on May 14, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. at the Gerlach Community Center.

1. CALL TO ORDER/ DETERMINATION QUORUM

Present: Chair Russell Bierle, Brandy Wilbur, Schatzi Gambrell, and Carl Copek

Absent: Vice Chair Kristin Evans

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

3. GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

Katherine Yriarte said she was a candidate for the District 5 seat on the Board of County Commissioners. She offered to provide livestock handling training to any local business owners who were not familiar with moving large or stressed animals in an emergency. She encouraged people to vote for her in the primary election.

4. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES FOR THE MEETING OF April 9, 2026

There was no response to the call for public comment.

Member Gambrell moved to approve the April 9, 2026, Gerlach/Empire Citizens Advisory Board minutes as written. Member Wilbur seconded the motion, and the minutes were approved on a 4-0 vote, with Vice Chair Evans absent.

5. PUBLIC SAFETY UPDATES

Washoe County Sheriff's Office

Deputy Jackson Crews with the Washoe County Sheriff's Office stated they received two calls for service for rollover accidents, one of which resulted in a fatality, and he worked an assault with a deadly weapon case, though that was outside the Citizens Advisory Board's jurisdiction. He said the Sheriff's Office was aware of speeding along Main Street and planned to get a radar trailer in the area soon.

Royal Ambulance

Via Zoom, John Ray Hassan indicated there were 20 incidents last month, resulting in six ground transports, one air transport, nine treat-and-releases, and four unable-to-locate. He talked about the success of operating out of the new Medic 83 station, adding that operations are going well.

Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department

Greg Nielsen with the Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department said the volunteers were working to obtain certification for wildlands safety and general firefighter responses, freeing up himself

and Chair Bierle to utilize their firefighter training. He noted the Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District (TMFPD) was present for wildland training. The TMFPD had special riders for firefighters who were not completely under employee coverage. He looked forward to having many people able to respond to incidents.

In response to Board member questions about a possible burn of a large brush pile, Firefighter Nielsen opined he did not see it happening, especially since it was fire season and the TMFPD had other priorities. The pile is expected to be handled through chipping and other legal methods. He saw getting permission from regulators as the biggest hurdle to the process. He opined that there were many ways to safely burn that material, and Gerlach never burned down previously when brush piles were burned. He recognized the danger of the pile accidentally igniting and throwing embers. Member Copek hoped the TMFPD and other agencies would assist Gerlach.

Chair Bierle felt that nobody wanted to take responsibility for the decision to approve the burn in case something went wrong. He said the Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department cannot burn the pile without the TMFPD's permission or else it would be completely liable. Member Copek hoped that the TMFPD would help quickly so the pile could be burned within two months. He believed that a strong El Niño season could bring historically strong rainfall to the region.

6. WASHOE COUNTY/BURNING MAN ENHANCEMENTS TO ACTION PLANS

Assistant County Manager Dave Solaro noted that the Gerlach/Empire Citizens Advisory Board submitted a letter with concerns about impacts to the town when Burning Man has a closure on the playa during the event. Suggestions to address these concerns included: an adequate plan for sanitation facilities; a traffic mitigation plan and identification of who would implement it; a County point of contact who can address residents' safety concerns; a requirement that Burning Man has a team of people in Gerlach in case of closures, including someone with the authority to address sanitation and traffic issues; and dissemination of the plan to relevant agencies.

Manager Solaro emphasized that there is a plan in place, and Burning Man prepares after-action reports for each of its events, much like the County does for theirs. He brought up the evacuation planning done by the County, which will identify zones across their jurisdiction as well as the responsibilities of first responders in emergencies. The Evacuation Plan will not be shared with the community to prevent the plans from being subverted. He assured the Board that the right people will have access to the Burning Man Action Plan, including law enforcement and first responders, though that plan will also not be widely distributed.

Manager Solaro pointed out that County communication resources will be available on top of those offered by Burning Man itself. He provided his cell phone number. He anticipated that Burning Man would provide contact information for people to call in certain situations. He felt that the plan addressed everything brought up in the community, even if it would not cover every possible emergency event.

Director of Event Operations Charlie Dolman stated that Burning Man has a plan for better sanitation response during closure or weather events, allowing for faster deployment of assets and more assets in reserve. Existing banks will be augmented, and there also is the potential for an additional bank. Senior Director of Government Affairs Marnee Benson clarified that

there is the potential to deploy up to 30 more sanitation devices in addition to the regular ones if necessary, and one more location was identified.

Director Benson stated representatives from Burning Man met with partner agencies, including the Nevada Department of Transportation, Nevada State Police, the Washoe County Sheriff's Office, County departments, Pyramid Lake first responder agencies, and the Bureau of Land Management, to evaluate the organization's operational priorities and the impacts from weather and gate closures. They focused on scenarios involving repeat storms over a number of days. As such, the organization's extended weather and gate closure protocol was updated in response to prior events and community input gathered from September's Citizens Advisory Board meeting.

Mike Theiss stated he was a certified traffic engineer, and he spoke about his experience working with Burning Man. He described the organization's traffic management and communications plans for extended weather incidents as well thought out, adding they were based on previous Burning Man events and industry best practices. He was confident the plans would be effective, adding that these contingency plans were in addition to existing traffic control plans.

Director Dolman stressed that the new plans established a multi-agency framework for weather-related traffic management and communications, and their goal was to minimize impacts to local communities and support safe roadway operations during significant weather events. Input was gathered from multiple departments and agencies, and the plan was designed to adjust operational responses as conditions worsen, beginning with early public awareness and going all the way to full closure operations and reopening strategies.

Director Benson described the different levels created in the plan. The first advisory level focuses on early awareness, preparation, and proactive coordination before significant impacts occur. The next level is for low-impact, two- to three-hour weather events where the organization would prepare for traffic control operations. She remarked that different weather patterns and the timing of weather events are treated differently in the plan. The focus on this level switches from awareness to operational readiness, early traffic reduction, and increased messaging. The third level is for moderate impacts and road closure preparations, and it focuses on actively reducing inbound traffic, preparing coordinated roadway control operations, and increased public communication. The implementation of this level can vary based on when during the event it takes place. The intent of this level is to reduce vehicle traffic getting to Gerlach.

The next level in the plan, Director Benson continued, targets events that could take between 8 and 24 hours, and it includes extended closures and full traffic deployment from I-80 to Gerlach. The next level is for events that last between 24 and 96 hours, though none have ever lasted that long, and in this level, the focus is on maintaining roadway controls, minimizing community impacts, and supporting coordinated regional response efforts. The plan also contains protocols for a reopening phase. She summarized that the goals of the plan are minimizing unnecessary travel, preventing traffic congestion from reaching Gerlach, and managing and clearing traffic. It was designed for faster response and the ability to adapt to conditions on the ground.

Director Dolman indicated that updated plans include two different turnaround points, one of which is still being explored. Temporary staging areas have also been considered, including one at The 360 north of Gerlach. He stressed the importance of communicating to people

outside the area that they need to stay away. Director Benson provided an example of moving the turnaround point from Wadsworth to Nixon as an adaptation made based on past experience. She spoke about the coordination between Burning Man and local agencies regarding road closures, noting that the organization acts in an advisory capacity. Another element in the plan is the faster deployment of resources during longer events.

Crow, the Ranger Operations Manager, opined that the gaps identified in the process will result in faster response times. Through the plan, departments should communicate better, and there will be more coordination. He provided contact numbers for members of staff. Director Benson brought up that a new position that will be added to act as a liaison between Gerlach and Burning Man and support operations and communications during the event, particularly during instances where faster communication is needed.

Director Dolman stated Burning Man is vested in the community's success, and he was confident that the new policies will improve Gerlach's experience.

Chair Bierle requested a summary of the specific changes made to the existing plans. Manager Solaro replied that the biggest change is the assignment of a single point of contact, the position mentioned by Director Benson. Additionally, the different levels of emergency response in the new plan should help, including being able to update signs on the road to Gerlach earlier, warning people not to come. Different properties were also identified for parking during emergencies, which should help, as would the identification of different roadway closure points. He recognized that there will always be some impacts to the community from the event, but he felt the safety of the community during emergency situations was addressed.

Chair Bierle inquired about the ability to stop traffic coming from Cedarville. Director Benson noted that turnaround points were previously identified in the moment, but now they are included in the plan. The turnaround points are at Nixon, at a Y in the road to the north, and one directly north of town. The Chair expressed concern that people who reach Gerlach from the north and are told to turn around will not go 86 miles north back to Cedartown. Manager Solaro recognized that some people will get through road closures, but the organization has people in place to deal with those situations. This plan will result in greater success during major events like the one that occurred in 2025.

Member Gambrell believed that drivers would ignore calls to turn around at the Y. She was informed that the cut-across by the transfer station would also be closed in that situation. She asked about deployment of emergency porta potties. Director Benson said that HazMatt will be the person on the playa responsible for deploying them, though the resources will be in town. Member Gambrell expressed appreciation that Gerlach was added as a partner with respect to traffic mitigation.

Member Gambrell asked about how far away the organization will monitor weather. Director Nelson responded that because government agencies have access to better, more frequent forecasts, Burning Man established a weather tracking and forecast group, which includes a meteorologist. They will track weather hundreds of miles away, and information from the federal government and the emergency manager of Pershing County will get to the organization quickly. She added that the roadside message boards are remotely controlled, helping broadcast road closure decisions.

Member Gambrell inquired about the extent of the new liaison's authority. Director Benson pointed out that no single person in the Burning Man organization makes all decisions. The liaison position will provide greater access to people who can more quickly solve problems. While the individual will have the authority to fix some things, they will more likely refer concerns to the appropriate person or agency. That type of liaison has never existed before. Member Gambrell clarified that she wanted to know if the liaison will have a list of specific things they are authorized to do directly. Director Benson replied that a quick chain of reaction will occur. It was conveyed that the liaison will be very familiar with the emergency action plans.

Member Wilbur asked whether Empire was considered for additional sanitation. Director Benson replied that the units available in Gerlach could be deployed if necessary. Member Copek disclosed that he works for Burning Man. He appreciated that concrete action was taken to address the five points raised during the September Board meeting, particularly the concerns related to stopped traffic. He thought the new plan showed good progress.

Chair Bierle expressed appreciation for improvements in the sanitation plan and for Manager Solaro providing his contact information. He wished there was already a dedicated staging area and that the Gerlach General Improvement District and the Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department had been involved in discussions about the transfer station being a potential turnaround point. Member Copek agreed that at least Chair Bierle should have been involved in the coordinators' meeting, and someone from Gerlach should be involved in all planning meetings.

Chair Bierle thought these plans were a step in the right direction and a sign that residents' concerns were heard. He wanted to know the location of turnarounds and emergency evacuation points before this year's event so he could tell people where they needed to go when they were parked or dumping in inappropriate locations.

On the call for public comment, Theresa Soos wondered whether there will be a backup plan in the event the liaison becomes unavailable. Director Dolman expressed regret that the liaison could not be present at this meeting. He said the organization was already contemplating a backup plan to cover part of the 24-hour shifts.

7. NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT HUB & OTHER ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Candee Ramos, Media and Communications Program Manager, displayed the County's website and demonstrated how people could locate their County Commissioner, find information about the Citizens Advisory Boards and agendas for Board meetings, and learn more about volunteer opportunities. There is a current opening on the Board of Equalization as well as an opening for retired County employees on the Washoe County Deferred Compensation Committee. She urged people to submit feedback to the County, either anonymously or not, and noted that Gerlach/Empire has its own page. She said 64 people from Gerlach have already participated. She provided a brief demonstration on how to sign up for district news on a variety of subjects.

Manager Ramos promoted an upcoming virtual neighborhood meeting to discuss the Iveson Ranch Employee Housing project. Chair Bierle added that Dave Snelgrove, the consultant on that project, encouraged people to attend the meeting on May 26. Manager Ramos remarked that the County posts on the Gerlach's Nextdoor page as well.

8. REPORT ON REQUESTS FOR SERVICE FROM PREVIOUS CAB MEETINGS

Regarding Member Gambrell's previous request for information about a Gerlach ambulance being held at the Longley Lane facility, Chair Bierle said County staff is trying to determine whether a grant opportunity might exist to help with the purchase of a new ambulance. He has been invited to strip elements off the ambulance that were purchased with grants obtained by the Gerlach community.

With respect to previous feedback about the difficulty in getting County inspectors to come to Gerlach, Chair Bierle said Member Gambrell was put in contact with the planning manager at the Community Services Department. Member Gambrell said Kelly Mullin informed her that much of the work around permits is currently done over Zoom, and multiple different departments responsible for different steps in the process are often on one call to streamline the process. She thought that would be valuable for people looking to add buildings or accessory dwelling units on their properties.

9. CAB MEMBER/COMMISSIONER ANNOUNCEMENTS/REQUESTS

Chair Bierle announced that the Gerlach General Improvement District (GGID) recently approved a \$20,000 donation from Washoe County for water tower restoration and authorized the signing of a contract with a structural engineer to work on the project. The engineer believed the water tower and the footing could all be saved through a polymer injection process. He hoped that project would be completed in a year or two. Member Gambrell listed other updates from the most recent GGID meeting, including a favorable update on the art trail and a call for local artists.

Chair Bierle provided an update on the gnat problem, saying he was able to identify the specific species of insect, which was originally classified in Gerlach.

Member Copek requested that the Washoe County School District perform weed abatement at the school as it has become quite overgrown and poses a fire risk. Member Gambrell requested an item on an upcoming agenda for the School District to discuss maintenance of the property.

10. GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

Assistant County Manager Dave Solaro thanked Greg Nielsen and Russell Bierle for their work with the Gerlach Volunteer Fire Department and their collaboration with the Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District on a recent training event. He spoke about an interlocal agreement between the District and the County regarding coverage of areas north of Township 22, for which funding has been identified.

ADJOURNMENT

There was no response to the call for public comment.

Member Copek moved to adjourn the meeting. Member Gambrell seconded the motion, which carried on a 4-0 vote, with Vice Chair Evans absent.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:21 p.m.

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