

WORK SESSION OF THE MOWER COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

February 3, 2026

The Mower County Board of Commissioners in and for the County of Mower, Minnesota, met in Work Session February 3, 2026 at 1:00 p.m. at the Government Center in Austin, Minnesota.

All members present, viz: Chair Dan Sparks, Vice-Chair Mike Ankeny, Jerry Reinartz, John Mueller and Polly Glynn. Also in attendance were County Administrator/Clerk Matthew Verdick and County Attorney Kristen Nelsen.

Rob Maly of Dairyland Power and Laurie Dunham of GridLiance provided an update on the MariBell Transmission Line Project, a joint effort by Dairyland Power Cooperative and NextEra Energy. The proposed segment from North Rochester–Columbia, Wisconsin 765 kV project is part of MISO's Long Range Transmission Planning Tranche 2.1, aims to enhance grid reliability and resilience across Minnesota and the Midwest. The project includes expansion of a 140-mile 765 kV transmission line, a new 161 kV switching station, and connections to existing infrastructure, with completion targeted for 2034. Current activities involve public outreach, permitting, and design, with efforts to use existing rights-of-way where possible. The project will support increased power flow, accommodate future renewable generation, and strengthen Minnesota's link to the broader U.S. transmission network

Tom Dankert and Alex Bumgardner of Austin Utilities presented for the County Board's review SMMPA's plan to construct an \$85 million natural gas-fired combustion turbine facility in Austin, with an expected capacity of 49 MW and construction targeted for 2027. The Austin Energy Station will enhance reliability, provide backup and emergency power, and supply wholesale electricity to SMMPA's 17 member communities, including Austin. The facility will operate as needed, primarily during peak demand or low renewable output, and is expected to create construction jobs. SMMPA is seeking resolutions from the City of Austin and Mower County to support a personal property tax exemption for the project, while continuing to pay real property taxes on the site.

The Board discussed supporting efforts by the Minnesota Rural Electric Association and the Minnesota Nuclear Energy Alliance to repeal Minnesota's moratorium on new nuclear power generation. The discussion emphasized that nuclear energy is the only carbon-free baseload resource capable of meeting Minnesota's 100% carbon-free by 2040 mandate, while providing significant economic benefits through permanent jobs and higher wages. Advancements in technology and growing demand for reliable power were noted as reasons to reconsider the ban, alongside respect for Native American community concerns and safe waste storage. A proposed resolution to endorse exploration of nuclear power and support lifting the moratorium will be brought forward at the next meeting.

County Engineer Mitch Wenum provided a department update noting that work on the County Road 7 bridges began in early January, with demolition of the northern bridge completed and pier construction underway, though progress has been somewhat slow. Additional projects are moving forward, including intersections at County Roads 16 & 57 and 15 & 3, which will go out for bid on February 15, along with township bridge bids scheduled for February 17. Two more bridge projects and a culvert line project are also planned. The department is updating its website to include an interactive project map and online bidding system to streamline processes and reduce duplication. Winter maintenance continues, with plow drivers managing drifting snow despite lighter snowfall compared to earlier in the season.

The Board reviewed the possibility of adopting a shotgun-only ordinance for deer hunting, which would remain in effect until repealed and require standard public input procedures. Enforcement would fall to DNR Conservation Officers for basic shotgun-only rules if the DNR proposed ordinance is adopted and to the County Sheriff if the County would adopt its own model ordinance including any additional restrictions. A recent listening session drew 50–70 attendees with opinions split evenly between rifle and shotgun use, citing safety, accuracy, and herd management concerns. Commissioners discussed timing, noting that action by May would ensure inclusion in the DNR hunting guide, and considered waiting until March to see how neighboring counties proceed. No decision was made; the matter will be placed on a future agenda for further consideration.

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 2:27 p.m. The next meeting is scheduled for February 10, 2026 at 9:00 a.m.

THE MOWER COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

BY: DS _____
Chairperson

Attest: _____
By: [Signature] _____
Clerk/Administrator