

Valparaiso Environmental Advisory Board

Meeting Summary | March 3, 2025

1. Call to Order & Roll Call

- The meeting was called to order at **4:33 PM**.
- All board members were present.
- Amendment to the agenda: Due to recent news regarding a potential data center, discussions were held, and the board meeting was opened to public comment prior to beginning the official agenda items.

Overview of the Data Center Option Agreement & Official Explanations

The option agreement grants the developer a 300-day period to evaluate the feasibility of constructing a data center in Valparaiso. During this period, the developer has the exclusive right to determine whether to proceed with the project, but no final approvals or formal commitments have been made. According to George Douglas, Director of Development, who opened the meeting, the Redevelopment Commission (RDC) initially issued a request for proposals (RFP) in December 2024 for the development of 249 acres. The intent was to explore potential non-residential development opportunities, one of which was a data center campus.

The 300-day option period began on January 13, 2025, during which the developer is conducting feasibility studies in collaboration with NIPSCO and the RDC. Douglas emphasized that no official project exists yet, and the process will involve multiple approval steps before any development moves forward.

City Attorney Patrick Lyp provided additional context, stating that the land was previously considered for a regional sports complex under the former mayor's administration. However, there were no legally binding restrictions on how the property could be developed. He clarified that any future use of the land will require rezoning by the City Council, which will be a public process with opportunities for community input.

Lyp also addressed concerns about transparency, noting that city officials, including elected representatives, were aware of discussions related to the data center. He explained that economic development projects frequently involve non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) in their early stages to protect proprietary information. However, he assured the board that no formal proposal has been submitted and that any development would need to comply with local zoning laws and environmental regulations.

Community Member Concerns & Statements on the Data Center

Melissa Reed (Duneland Against Data Centers):

Melissa voiced strong concerns about the lack of transparency in the agreement process. She criticized the absence of public notice or an opportunity for residents to comment before the option agreement was signed. She drew a comparison to a previous data center proposal in Chesterton, suggesting that the developer simply moved to Valparaiso after failing to secure approval elsewhere. Melissa emphasized that residents deserve the same level of protection from noise pollution as businesses downtown and the local hospital, advocating for similar decibel limits to be put in place. She expressed skepticism over whether the city is prioritizing sustainable growth and warned that this type of development could alter the character of Valparaiso in a way that residents may not have control over in the future.

Andrew Chonoski:

Andrew raised multiple environmental concerns regarding the potential data center, particularly its impact on air, water, and noise pollution. He speculated that the energy consumption required for such a facility could lead to increased utility bills for local residents. Citing the Porter County Unified Development Ordinance (Chapter 5), he argued that a data center does not align with the current zoning designation for the land, which has historically been classified as agricultural and vacant space. He also noted that the original landowner, the Polly Hicks Conservation Trust, would not have sold the land if they had known it would be used for a data center.

Thomas Fernaec:

Thomas was among those who strongly opposed the development, stating that the site was originally intended to be a park and should remain a green space for public use. He pointed to studies suggesting that large industrial facilities can impact local groundwater supplies, arguing that this type of development could have unintended consequences on residents' water access and quality.

Quimby Ingram:

As a resident in the neighborhood bordering the proposed site, Quincy expressed concern about the impact on families and children. She mentioned that her children were excited about having a park nearby, and now they fear that a large industrial project will replace that vision. She also referenced how her family recently enjoyed stargazing outside their home, an activity that could be negatively affected by the light pollution caused by a data center.

Viviana Franco:

Viviana, another Meadowbrook subdivision resident, stated that the data center would be directly behind her house. She and her family moved to Valparaiso to escape the noise, congestion, and bright lights of urban environments, hoping for a peaceful and safe community. She was emotional about the potential loss of her "forever home," saying she does not want to leave but may feel forced to relocate if the development moves forward.

Vanessa Moore (Washington Township Resident):

Vanessa focused on the broader regional impact, arguing that a data center would disrupt schools, churches, and local wildlife. She highlighted that Valparaiso was the first city in the region to become a "Monarch City," meaning it has designated efforts to protect monarch

butterfly migration. A data center, with heavy infrastructure and artificial lighting, could negatively impact this protected migration pattern. She compared the community involvement in previous sports complex discussions, where residents had a say, to the lack of public input for this project, questioning the city's commitment to transparency.

Nick Violanti:

Nick was vehemently opposed to the data center, calling it a “preposterous idea” and expressing disbelief that the city would even consider such a development. He reiterated multiple times that he considers it a terrible proposal that will negatively impact residents and the environment.

Ann Jones:

Ann, who only learned about the proposal the day before the meeting, stated that she moved to Valparaiso for its character and natural environment. She is particularly concerned about high security requirements and light pollution, which she believes would disrupt bird migration and natural ecosystems. She urged the EAB to formally recommend rejecting the project.

Michelle Johnson:

Michelle purchased property in Audubon Estates in 2019 and stated that she was shocked by how loud the area already is due to existing infrastructure. She previously requested sound abatement measures from the city and was denied, making her skeptical that noise pollution from a data center would be properly mitigated. She argued that any additional sound disturbances would be unjustifiable.

Mike Lowe:

Mike, a landowner on 300 East, spoke from the perspective of a farmer and longtime resident. He strongly opposed industrial-grade buildings being placed on farmland without the proper research or consideration for environmental impact. He described the ongoing tension between Washington Township residents and Valparaiso officials, warning that the project could escalate that conflict.

Kathy Sipple:

Kathy expressed appreciation for the formation of the Environmental Advisory Board. However, she was concerned about the energy demands of data centers and their connection to nuclear power discussions. She referenced a recent statehouse event about small modular reactors, indicating that this data center could set a precedent for increased nuclear energy reliance.

Jeannine Hornback:

Jeanine criticized the lack of communication between the Mayor's office and the EAB, stating that it was unacceptable that the board learned about the project from a newspaper article rather than city officials. She detailed potential health risks from extreme noise and vibrations, arguing that these could have serious effects on both wildlife and human well-being. She also emphasized Valparaiso's community-oriented culture, stating that the city's identity is at risk with this type of development.

Bret Kutansky

Michael Hodge

Mary Brown

Motion Passed:

- Ellen Kapitan made a motion for the EAB to conduct research into the environmental impacts of a data center at 500 N to present to city council.
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Official Agenda Items

1. 2025 Goals Overview

- Sara McKelvey provided an overview of the tentative board goals (see Goals for 2025 document).
- Emphasized that the goals are a working draft and will be finalized during a goal-setting session on March 17, 2025, at 4:30 PM.
- Key focus areas include waste reduction, environmental policy, air and water quality, community engagement, and sustainable practices in city parks.

Action Item:

- The board will meet for a goal-setting workshop on March 17, 2025, from 4:30–5:30 PM in the large conference room at City Hall.
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2. Department Head Discussions: Environmental Sustainability Efforts

- Discussion on engaging with city department heads to gather insights into ongoing environmental initiatives.
- Board members will compile a list of questions regarding sustainability initiatives, environmental challenges, and areas for improvement.
- There was consensus to invite 2–3 department heads to the first meeting in April for further discussion.

Motion Passed:

- Ellen Kapitan made a motion for her to send emails to department heads and request their attendance. Malorie Medellin seconded the motion.
 - Action Item: Ellen will reach out to department heads by March 7, 2025.
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3. Creating Subcommittees

- The board discussed the need to establish subcommittees for specialized topics.
- Suggested subcommittees include:
 - Waste & Recycling
 - Sustainable Development & Land Use
 - Community Education & Engagement
 - Air & Water Quality
- Each subcommittee will be staffed with applicants and community members and headed by 1–2 board members.
- Focus will be on medium- and long-term environmental goals.

Action Item:

- Develop a structured process for subcommittee formation and member selection.
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4. Meeting Format & Public Comment Structure

- Discussed potential adjustments to meeting structure to accommodate public concerns and board discussions more effectively.
- Considered a revised public comment process to ensure all voices are heard while allowing the board to operate efficiently.
- Proposed adjusting meeting times for better accessibility.

Action Item:

- Board to determine whether a new public comment format or meeting time changes are needed.
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5. Upcoming Events

- **Family Nature Night** – Two dozen vendors, live wild animals, and Field Museum participation.
- **Salt Creek Event** – March 13 at Brummett.
- **High School Environmental Debate** – March 17 at 6:30 PM (Porter County Administration Building). The Valparaiso High School and Chesterton High School teams will debate fast fashion.
- **No Mow May Planning** – Discussed plans to promote pollinator-friendly landscaping initiatives.

Action Item:

- Finalize event details and confirm board involvement.
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Adjournment

- The meeting adjourned at **6:03 PM**.

Next Meeting: March 17, 2025 (Goal-Setting Workshop) at 4:30 PM.