

**Carroll, Lee & Whiteside Counties
Extension Council
May 11, 2026**

Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 PM by Council Chair Pam Martinez. The meeting was held at the Whiteside County Extension Office in Sterling, IL, with members participating both in person and online.

Attendance:

Pam Martinez (Chair), Daniel Swihart (Vice Chair), Mardi Ybarra, Lupita Serrano, Sasha Logan, Susie Welch, Mike Delany (CED Educator), Martha Ebbesmeyer (4-H Educator), Bruce Black (Horticulture Educator), and Karla Belzer (County Director).

Public Comment:

None.

Introductions:

Council members and staff went around the room and online to introduce themselves.

Extension Mission and Vision:

Karla Belzer shared a brief review of the Extension mission and vision, highlighting the official tagline: *"Lifelong learning, lifelong impact."* She emphasized that Extension exists to provide educational programs and resources to local communities and thanked council members for serving as the "eyes and ears on the ground" to help fulfill that duty.

Approval of Minutes:

The minutes from the previous meeting held in February 2026 were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes as written was made by Mardi Ybarra. Second: Daniel Swihart. Motion carried.

Budget Update:

Karla Belzer provided an update as the current fiscal year (ending June 30) draws to a close:

- Local Funding & Cash Reserves: Extension has successfully spent down its cash reserves over a 3-to-4-year process as previously requested by the county boards. Local funding remains solid, and relationships with all three county boards are strong.
- State Funding: Funding at the state level remains stable. Extension requested a \$10 million budget increase from the state government to address being the lowest-funded extension service among neighboring states; conversations are wrapping up soon.
- Federal Funding: Initial executive budget orders threatened to cut federal extension funding in half, but federal funding has since been restored to level funding.
- Next Steps: Over the summer, Karla will prepare the FY 27 budget requests for the county boards and will provide updates at the September meeting.

Programming Update:

- Horticulture (Bruce Black): Gearing up for spring and summer growing questions. Free research-based support continues through the Help Desk. Three sessions of the CDC-grant-funded *Homegrown Healthy* program are scheduled (Sauk Valley Community College, a women's shelter in Rock Falls, and a men's home in Dixon), featuring raised garden beds and biweekly

programming. An in-person Summer Master Gardener training will run weekly from June 12 through August (skipping holiday weeks) utilizing a new "master naturalist" style format with an hour of review followed by a site visit. They are working to see if it can be approved for teacher history credits.

- 4-H Youth Development (Martha Ebbesmeyer): Wrapping up *Mindful Me* mental wellness programming with Sterling Franklin first graders, who enjoyed making calming jars and learning about mindful eating. The *Health Rocks* program is wrapping up with Sterling Washington fifth graders, focusing on brain health. Summer plans include *College for Kids* at Sauk Valley Community College, elementary summer school programming, and a babysitting workshop at the Prophetstown (Pop Hall) Library. Council members were invited to attend the summer 4-H shows.
- Community and Economic Development (Mike Delany): Strong online webinar participation over the last 3 to 4 months from Lee and Whiteside county leadership (averaging close to 40 participants). Programs included a 5-part series on rural business transitions, opportunity zones, financial authority, an ongoing series on resilient communities (including an upcoming feature on tourism promotion), and an upcoming webinar on receivership. Additionally, a tourism toolkit and a specific riverfront community report generated from a 4-year-old study were recently reshared with the Carroll County team to foster closer collaboration.

Grants: West Carroll STEAAM Hub:

Karla Belzer announced that federal funding secured in December 2022 for the West Carroll School District has finally been released for spending.

- High school teachers were consulted last week, and elementary/middle school teachers will meet this Wednesday to identify classroom supplies, curriculum resources, and equipment (such as drones or virtual reality gear) to purchase.
- Renovations were removed via a grant revision after learning that internal construction would trigger extensive environmental reviews involving recent property changes (e.g., the school's new track and football field).
- An open "extra help" position (up to 20 hours/week) is currently available for an individual to administer this programming in Carroll County.

2025 Annual Report:

The 16-page 2025 Annual Report highlighting the unit's accomplishments and community impact was distributed to in-person attendees. Copies will be mailed to those participating online.

FY 26 Extension Council Budget Agreement:

The council reviewed a formal funding agreement to pull money out of the local Extension Gift Fund. A motion to approve the \$14,000 budget agreement was made by Daniel Swihart. Second: Mardi Ybarra. Outcome: Motion carried. Pam Martinez signed and dated the formal agreement.

Staffing Update:

Karla reported that Family Life Educator Kara resigned in mid-February due to a difficult commute from Rockford. After evaluating local needs and structural possibilities, Karla has made the strategic decision not to fill or replace this position immediately.

2026 Meeting Dates:

All upcoming meetings will begin at 6:00 PM:

- Monday, September 21
- Monday, December 7

Adjournment:

With no additional items raised, the meeting was adjourned.