



Request for Action

Board of Commissioners - December 16, 2025

Agenda Item:

Approve 2026 Legislative Priorities

Department: Administration

Submitted by: Michael Williams, County
Administrator

Presenter/s: Michael Williams, County
Administrator

Recommended Board Action:

Approve 2026 Legislative Priorities

Summary/Background:

In previous years the County Board adopted Legislative Priorities for the upcoming legislative session. The Board then met with local Legislators to discuss the priorities and followed through during the Legislative Session. The 2026 legislative session is set to begin on February 17, 2026.

Once the Priorities are established by the Board we will create handouts for the Legislators. We are considering asking our delegation to meet with the Board after the Board Meeting on January 6th or January 27th.

Attachments:

[Final Legislative Priorities 2026](#)



Stearns County Legislative Priorities and Requests

2026

Stearns County Justice Center Construction Sales Tax Expansion of Exemption

Stearns County is seeking special legislation under Minnesota Statutes §297A to exempt sales and use tax on materials and supplies purchased for the construction of the entirety of the Stearns County Justice Center. Voters supported a local sales tax to fund construction. A sales tax exemption helps make sure their money goes where they intended, into the construction of the facilities. The construction materials for the jail and law enforcement facilities of the project are exempted under existing statute. The exemption should be extended to the courthouse facilities to prevent the unnecessary administrative burden of monitoring exemption status of materials purchased.

Modernization and Replacement of Human Services Technology

Stearns County appreciates the Legislature's investments in the past few years to address the outdated, functionally burdensome software that operates human services programs. However, those investments are part of a long-term solution that will not help Stearns meet the significant demand increase from the Federal HR 1 law expected in 2026. To help Stearns and other counties adequately respond to the new system demands, we ask the Legislature to provide innovation aid to support technology modernization and collaboration across counties and ensure the State prioritizes use of already appropriated funding for systems improvement and technology.

Mitigate Federal Cost Shifts in SNAP and Medicaid

Stearns County urges the Legislature to take action to mitigate the financial and administrative impacts of recent federal changes to SNAP and Medicaid, resulting from the 2025 Federal Reconciliation Act (H.R. 1). Stearns County requests legislative action to:

- Invest in system modernization to reduce error rates and improve efficiency. H.R.1 will double the eligibility paperwork Stearns will be required to process. Without better software systems in place, we will be unable to process applications in a timely manner and Minnesotans will lose access to benefits.
- Protect against cost shifts to counties, which would otherwise result in unsustainable property tax increases. Including having the State assume the non-federal cost shares for SNAP benefits and administrative expenses.

Invest in a Comprehensive Mental Health Continuum for Adults and Children

Stearns County supports sustained state investment in a full continuum of mental health care. Minnesota's mental health system is fragmented, under-resourced, and increasingly reliant on jails, emergency departments, and out-of-state placements to manage individuals with complex needs. To address these gaps, Stearns County urges the Legislature to:

- Invest in state-operated facilities to restore Minnesota's role as the safety net for individuals with high-acuity needs.
- Increase funding for community-based services, including Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs), Intensive Residential Treatment Services (IRTS), and psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs).
- Create a Medical Assistance (MA) benefit for children's crisis residential and stabilization services.
- Establish a Children's Mental Health Initiative (CMHI) modeled after the successful Adult Mental Health Initiative (AMHI), with flexible, county-directed funding.
- Expand acute care and residential capacity to reduce costly and disruptive out-of-state placements.
- Codify and expand relief from county cost-share obligations for Does Not Meet Medical Criteria (DNMC) patients awaiting transfer between state facilities.
- Reform juvenile legal barriers, including Rule 20 and Chapter 611, to improve care options for youth with complex needs.
- Shift financial responsibility for juvenile competency proceedings from counties to the courts.

Resource the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA)

Stearns County is working toward implementing the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (The Act) before the January 2027 deadline. Stearns County will need to expand its workforce due to The Act's implementation because the County will be required to provide additional child welfare services to the majority of eligible families. Stearns requests the following Legislative actions in order to successfully implement The Act:

- Clearly define: target populations, active efforts, and economic supports in the law.
- Provide sustainable state funding for workforce expansion, training, and community-based prevention services.
- Ensure timely SSIS system upgrades that incorporate new requirements and reduce administrative burden.
- Centralize case review and audit functions at the state level to promote consistency, reduce duplication, and support counties in implementation.
- Prioritize quality over speed in statewide rollout, allowing counties time to build capacity and align systems with the law's intent.

Delay the Change in Age of Delinquency

Stearns County supports delaying the implementation of the change in the age of delinquency raising it from 10 to 13. We support the policy change, however, children under 13 who previously would have been served through juvenile justice interventions will now fall under the child protection system. County child protection systems are not currently equipped to meet their behavioral and developmental needs and will not be adequately prepared to meet the needs of this population. Counties need additional time to develop service models and prepare staff to meet the new service demands.

Establish Base Funding for Local Road Wetland Mitigation Program and Modify Transportation Projects to a 1:1 Replacement Ratio

Stearns County supports continued and stable funding for the Local Road Wetland Replacement Program (LRWRP), which is essential for maintaining and improving local transportation infrastructure while protecting Minnesota's wetlands. Inconsistent funding and a rigid replacement ratio of 2:1 have created significant financial and operational changes for public transportation projects, delaying projects and forcing counties to purchase costly private wetland credits on short notice.

Stearns supports Legislative action to:

- Provide a mix of bonding and cash funding totaling \$35 million to meet current and projected credit demand.
- Establish base funding for LRWRP within BWSR's operating budget to ensure long-term program stability.
- Allocate bond funds for wetland construction and property acquisition, and cash funds for purchasing credits, easements, and covering planning and administrative costs.
- Modify the required replacement ratio for all public transportation projects to a 1:1.

Fund the Local Bridge Repair & Replacement Program and the Local Road Improvement Program in the Bonding Bill

Stearns County supports continued and expanded investment in the Local Bridge Repair and Replacement Program and the Local Road Improvement Program (LRIP) through the state's bonding bill to ensure safe, efficient, and well-connected transportation networks across Minnesota.

Local governments are responsible for over 80% of the state's bridges. As of January 2025, counties and cities have identified over 1,000 bridges for replacement in the next five years, with an estimated cost of \$875 million and anticipated requests of \$271 million in state bridge funds. In Stearns County alone, nine bridges are currently deficient and 12 are load-posted, posing safety and mobility concerns.

The LRIP provides essential funding for road projects across county, township, and small city systems. However, demand far exceeds available funding. In 2023, Stearns County submitted 27 LRIP applications — only two were funded. Statewide, 378 applications requested \$417 million, but only \$103 million was available, supporting just 86 projects.

To meet growing infrastructure needs, Stearns County urges the Legislature to:

- Provide robust bonding and cash appropriations for both programs, including \$200 million for LRIP to meet statewide demand.
- Ensure ongoing, predictable funding to support long-term planning and avoid delays in critical safety and connectivity projects.

Tax Forfeiture

Stearns County requests two changes to the state tax forfeiture statutes. For counties to effectively manage tax forfeited lands, MN Statute 282.005 needs to be amended to clarify what actions counties may take prior to the EMV sale and Minimum bid sale. Counties need clear authority to be able to evict upon forfeiture prior to sales occurring.

Stearns County also requests the creation of a statewide funding source for tax forfeiture related cleanup costs. The new process deters counties from making any expenditures toward cleaning up properties because there is no mechanism for recovering costs incurred through a sale process. Any attempt to recover cost would be a potential “taking of equity” from a property owner. The cleanup fund could be funded through an increase in the deed tax rate with an oversight body to approve requests composed of Department of Revenue staff, County Auditor-Treasurer representatives from across the state, and members of the Legislature.

License Centers

Stearns County requests MN Statute 84.922 be amended to increase the DNR registration and titling filing fees to match those collected for motor vehicles and trailers. These filing fees have not been adjusted in over 20 years, and this disparity places a financial strain on deputy registrar offices that rely on filing fees to cover operational costs.

Current Filing Fee Comparison:

- DNR Filing Fees (ATVs, Boats, Snowmobiles): \$4.50 – \$8.50
- DVS Filing Fees (Motor Vehicles & Trailers): \$8.00 – \$12.00

Stearns County supports extending the existing \$1 surcharge to all vehicle registration renewals, including those done online or by mail. This would eliminate customer confusion and ensure fairness by supporting local deputy registrar offices, which currently lose business to online and mail in renewals that avoid the fee. Consider redistributing the \$1 collected by DVS back to deputy registrars to ensure sustainability in License Centers.