

October 23, 2026

Proposed Veterans Committee Reduction Raises Questions About Retaliation and Veteran Representation

Proposal follows years of disagreements involving certain Livingston County commissioners and Veterans Services leadership.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH RIKER IN HIS INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY. These views and opinions are mine alone. This release is not issued on behalf of Livingston County, the Board of Commissioners, the Livingston County Veterans Services Committee, the Veterans Services Department, its director, or its employees.

HOWELL, MICHIGAN - A proposed resolution before the Livingston County Board of Commissioners is raising concerns about the future of Veterans Services oversight, the independence of its leadership, and the potential elimination of the committee's only Iraq- and Afghanistan-era representatives.

Resolution 2026-10-126 would reduce the Livingston County Veterans Services Committee from five members to three, effective January 1, 2027.

The two appointments expiring December 31 belong to Committee Chair Robert Stants and Vice Chair Joseph Riker.

The Livingston County Veterans Council has endorsed the reappointment of both members, according to Riker.

The resolution does not identify specific financial savings, operational deficiencies, performance concerns, or anticipated benefits to veterans. It states only that committee membership has historically fluctuated between three and five members.

Years of Disagreements With Certain Commissioners

The proposal follows several years of publicly documented disagreements between Veterans Services leadership and individual county commissioners.

In 2022, Livingston County began reducing its Veterans Services millage to draw down accumulated reserves, with the understanding that the annual levy would gradually increase as the department approached its targeted operating reserve.

In August 2024, Veterans Services Director Ramon Baca requested increasing the levy from 0.0770 to 0.0918 mills to support the department's approximately \$1.2 million budget for 2025.

The requested rate remained below the 0.1127 mills previously authorized by county voters.

Commissioners Jay Drick, Wes Nakagiri, and Nick Fiani voted against the increase. However, the majority of commissioners supported the department's request, approving it by a 6-3 vote.

Another dispute occurred in March 2026, when Commissioner Nakagiri proposed changing the committee's requested veterans millage renewal rate and moving the election from August to November.

Riker and Director Baca publicly challenged how the committee's recommendation had been handled.

Following public disagreement, Board Chair Nick Fiani and Commissioner Frank Sample worked with Veterans Services leadership to reach a compromise that retained the August election date.

During that March meeting, former Veterans Services Director Mary Durst publicly criticized what she described as longstanding interference and micromanagement involving county commissioners. She specifically acknowledged that her concerns did not apply to every commissioner.

In August 2026, Livingston County voters approved the Veterans Services millage renewal with 71.4% support.

Concerns About the Proposed Reduction

Riker believes certain commissioners may be seeking to eliminate the two expiring seats because of previous disagreements with the committee's leadership.

"Rob and I have consistently defended our veterans, our director, and the employees who serve this community," Riker said.

"We have challenged certain commissioners when we believed their decisions were contrary to the interests of Veterans Services. That does not mean we have been opposed to the entire Board. Several commissioners have supported our department and worked collaboratively with us."

"Now, immediately before our terms expire, a proposal has emerged that eliminates exactly two positions without explaining what benefit that would provide to veterans. Given the history, I believe the timing raises serious questions about possible retaliation."

The specific motivations and roles of individual commissioners in developing the current proposal have not been independently established.

Riker emphasized that his concerns extend beyond two appointments.

"When you undermine the independence of the committee responsible for administering Veterans Services, the potential consequences extend to the director, the dedicated employees, and ultimately the veterans and families who depend on the department."

Decorated Combat Veterans With Decades of Public Service

Robert Stants is a retired United States Army Special Forces combat veteran who served more than 30 years, from 1986 to 2021. His service included assignments in the Middle East, Central and South America, and Europe. His decorations include the Bronze Star Medal and Combat Infantryman Badge. He continues his public service as a firefighter with Hartland Township.

Joseph Riker served in the United States Army and Navy from 2004 to 2013, including deployment to Iraq with the Army and service in Japan and Afghanistan with the Navy.

His decorations include three Army Commendation Medals, one with the "V" device for valor in combat, the Combat Infantryman Badge, and the Seabee Combat Warfare Specialist insignia.

Riker's professional career included working in a United States congressional office providing military and veterans services, constituent assistance, and community outreach. He has also served in leadership positions with multiple nonprofit organizations.

He joined the Veterans Services Committee in 2017, serving approximately seven years as chair before becoming vice chair.

Following former Director Mary Durst's departure in 2022, Riker says he temporarily assumed acting-director responsibilities while continuing his regular employment with Brighton Charter Township, accepting no additional compensation for the acting-director work.

Both committee appointments are volunteer public-service positions, not salaried county employment.

"This isn't about losing a paycheck or a job," Riker said. "We volunteered because we believe in protecting and serving the veterans of our community."

Protecting an Award-Winning Department

Livingston County Veterans Services has expanded outreach programs, strengthened community partnerships, and moved into a modern facility designed to better serve veterans and their families.

The department received Tyler Technologies' 2023 VSO Excellence Award for "Awesome Organization," recognizing the collective work of its employees, committee members, and community partners.

"Our department's success belongs to the staff, the leadership, the veterans organizations, and the entire community that supports it," Riker said.

"My concern is that decisions affecting the committee should be based on the needs of veterans and the department, not disagreements involving certain commissioners."

Public Meeting

Michigan law permits county veterans committees to have between three and seven members. However, the proposed resolution does not explain why three members would better serve Livingston County than five.

The Board of Commissioners is scheduled to consider Resolution 2026-10-126:

Monday, October 26, 2026 - 6:00 PM

Livingston County Administration Building
304 E. Grand River Avenue
Howell, Michigan

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This press release expresses only Joseph Riker's personal views. It is not an official statement or communication of Livingston County, its Board of Commissioners, the Veterans Services Department, or the Veterans Services Committee.

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