

**MEETING MINUTES OF
PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.**
Starke County Community Foundation Meeting Room
First Farmers Bank & Trust
300 Keller Avenue, North Judson.
May 14, 2026

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Russ Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Brian McMillin
Anita McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Peggy Stalbrink
Rich Vallicelli
Kirt Verhagen

GUESTS

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum
Frank Stalbaum, Veterans Memorial Trail in Hebron

Call to Order by President

On May 14, 2026, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the Starke County Community Foundation Meeting Room, First Farmers Bank & Trust Building, North Judson, Indiana at 5:27 pm, CT (6:27 pm, ET).

Review and Approval of Minutes of April 23, 2026

Peg Stalbrink moved to approve the draft April 23 minutes without amendment. Diane Blais seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Review and Approval of Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds

Kathy circulated written copies of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds:



Treasurer's Report
May 13, 2026

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

Balance from April 23, 2025 (prior meeting)

\$67,518.25

INCOME

4/28/26	Joan Hardesty (Dues & Donation)	\$50.00
4/28/26	Brian & Anita McMillin (Donation of T-shirts for 5K/3K race)	1,500.00
4/28/26	Starke County Convention & Visitor's Board (CVC)	2,000.00
4/28/26.	RunSignup	25.00
4/30/26	Frankie & Dennis Newcomb (Dues)	25.00
5/05/26	RunSignup	<u>75.00</u>

TOTAL INCOME \$3,675.00

EXPENSES

4/24/26.	Check #1234 to Hill Excavating (Invoice #5)	31,045.71
5/01/26	Technicoat (sandblast & powder coat two bike racks)	600.00
5/05/26	Read's (medals for 5K/3K)	<u>188.80</u>

TOTAL EXPENSES (\$31,045.71)

ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 05/13/26 = \$39,358.74

Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer 05/13/26

RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 04/23/26

SIGNAGE/WEB

Luminous Fund	Signs Bass Lake (incl. UR Here)	685.64
Hardesty Mem.	Wayfinding or historic signs	1,707.31
Lucas lakehouse	Future Vision/Website	<u>662.50</u>
		3,055.05

NORTH JUDSON 5K/3K & GRAND OPENING

CVC grant	1,211.20 (-788.80 powder coat/medals)
McMillin Donation	<u>1,650.00</u> (+1,500 + 150 RunSignup)
	2,861.20

DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension

Balance in DNR Project Fund **7,458.70** (Invoice #5 -31,045.71)

MAINTENANCE

Hardesty Mem.	Trail Maintenance	157.24
HVRM (Buckeye)	Trail Maintenance	593.61
Rich Stalbrink Mem.	Maintenance or most needed	2,231.08
Doral Solar	Bridge/clearing	7,269.48
Arrowhead Grant	Invasive Species Control	<u>706.19</u>
		10,957.60

TOTAL RESTRICTED \$23,626.76

FFBT Balance	\$39,358.74
Restricted Funds	— <u>23,626.76</u>
Unrestricted Funds	\$15,731.98

Kathy expressed special appreciation to Brian and Anita McMillin and the Starke County Convention & Visitor’s Board for their critical support of the 5K Run and 3K Walk in advance of the Grand Opening of the trail extension through North Judson. This vital project is a challenge but has the potential for long-term benefits in the Town of North Judson and more broadly in our area. She thanked Joan Hardesty for annual dues augmented by a donation. She thanked Frankie and Dennis Newcom for renewing their membership.

Brian McMillin moved for approval of the Treasurer’s Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Kirt Verhagen seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP-23-06

Kathy reported that Hill Excavating is continuing to advance the trail project in North Judson. Within the last week the first layer of asphalt was placed near Main Street. She said the kiosk now is supported by what she believes is ADA-compliant concrete. New red “tactile pavement” has been placed on the trail adjacent to street intersections. This material was invented in Japan and is now frequently used to help blind or persons with limited vision identify crossings.



May 6, 2026
Images by K. Lucas

Russ Blais said he spoke with Jeremiah Patrick who said he hopes Hill Excavating will have progressed sufficiently with construction by the end of the week to allow for trail use in the planned 5K Run/3K Walk.

American Discovery Trail Route Change North and West of North Judson

Steve Lucas said yesterday Dave Whitson, American 250 Discovery Relay Coordinator, emailed “the long-discussed route change to the ADT in Northern Indiana is now official, and we will be following it in the relay as well.” He acknowledged “This significantly lengthens the stage coming into North Judson, which now is a 102-mile ride.” A link to the updated route is provided here: <https://discoverytrail250.org/RelayDayMap.php?date=2026-10-14®ion=North>

Whitson added that Mitch Barloga “has been a huge advocate for this, and I have no doubt it will be a more scenic ride and a safer one. We definitely need to increase our efforts to find riders for it, though--especially since some willing participants may not be able to handle the full distance.”

Steve said he had requested repeatedly that the ADT Kankakee River crossing be moved from US 421 to English Lake. But he did not envision the fundamental relocation that was implemented. Going into LaPorte County from English Lake, a traveler would now proceed north through LaPorte and Michigan City before turning west and following the Lake Michigan coast. Within Starke and LaPorte Counties, the new route is very similar to that of US Bike Route 35.

He was surprised by the scope of the change but has decided it’s probably a good choice. With the existing route, there were no services between Crown Point and North Judson—although LaCrosse, Kouts and Hebron are not that far away. The existing route goes through farm fields. The new route will be more interesting and allow bicyclists to more directly take advantage of substantial new trail infrastructure along Lake Michigan.

Delivery of Sandblasted and Powder Coated Bike Racks

Paul and Linda Buyer picked up both bike racks and are holding them in anticipation of placement along the North Judson trail extension. Members thanked them for their work and discussed possible site placement.

One suggestion was on an unused concrete slab adjacent to the trail and across English Lake Road from the Town’s garage. Bob Albert said the slab was formerly part of the New York Central Railroad facilities, and he will inquire whether HVRM would support such a use. Other possibilities suggested were near the kiosk or at Verhagen Station.

Final Preparations for May 23 5K Run/3K Walk

Brian outlined progress on final preparations for the 5K Run and 3K Walk. Rainy weather and the newness of a trail section not yet ready for an event have been challenges. There are numerous competing outdoor events this year, including those promoted by the America 250 organization.

But Brian, Anita, and the several PTC volunteers have been working diligently to prepare for the event. Largely as a result of the generosity of Brian and Anita and the support of the Starke County CVC, the PTC has purchased medals for winners in categories and 100 shirts. Rich Vallicelli, Brian, Rhonda, Peg, Paul, Linda, Kathy and Steve are among those slated to assist. Kathy has scheduled placement of a portable toilet. North Judson Town Marshall Frank Thomas will also provide support.

Trail Maintenance

Linda said Paul felled a tree of heaven that was posing a danger along the trail east of Main Street. This invasive species is particularly difficult to manage. In the same area she sprayed poison hemlock, but it's too early to be sure whether the effort was effective. Linda has obtained preliminary estimates for the cost of sealing cracks and blacktop on the trail section between Main Street and the Indiana Highway 10 and 39 crossing. There will be further discussion of these estimates and how a project might be funded. Trail maintenance was also performed as a primary element of Celebrate Trails Day.

Celebrate Trails Day and Arbor Day Events

Steve reported on Celebrate Trails Day 2026 held on April 25. He said Rails-to-Trails Conservancy signs were posted along the trail. A feature was non-alcoholic beer from Athletic Brewing Company. Rhonda led a group providing a fun lunch. The celebration was mostly directed to trail maintenance from Starke County Road 700 East to Starke County Road 600 East. Sticks and leaves removed from the trail included Anita's use of a blower. Weeds were pulled from around the three nannyberries (*viburnum lentago*), planted in 2022 at the direction of DNR, on the west side of Barte Bridge.

Celebrate Trails Day was on the same date that Arbor Day was observed locally by the Starke County Arbor Day Committee of the Starke County American250 Initiative. As an element of a CONNECTIONS theme, Rhonda provided a table with PTC brochures as well as some of the items that the RTC donated. The Arbor Day event was held at the Starke County Forest where the PTC was welcomed by Gwen Rentz, Starke County Surveyor, and Amie Flora, Superintendent of Starke County Parks and Recreation.

Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum

Bob Albert, HVRM Liaison to the PTC, provided an update. July 11 will be HVRM's annual "Civilians and Soldiers in History Day". He indicated there would be no steam trains this year. Linda added that diesel ice cream trains are set for several Saturdays. On the date of the PTC's 5K Run/3K walk, the first of two ice cream trains is scheduled to begin at noon. The discussion then turned to recent communications between INDOT and HVRM regarding the rail crossing of State Roads 10 and 39. Those discussions will be revisited during the next meeting.

Preparations for Warrior Expeditions Trekkers in June

Veterans of the Warrior Expeditions are tentatively scheduled to begin their trek on May 21. They are estimated to arrive in Starke County on June 9. Previously, five veterans were referenced, but a sixth has been added. They are now Justin Abramo, who served in Afghanistan; Jason Goetz, who served in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan; Winston Hall, who served in Vietnam; Mary Montigny, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan; Patrick Smith, who served in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan; and Mitchell Villafania, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kathy said veterans often overnight bicycles or stay at Steve and her home because it is next to the trail. But she is uncomfortable with also committing to a group dinner. Diane volunteered to host a dinner, and Peg volunteered to assist with that effort. Char Liss has previously expressed an intention to host veterans the night after they stay in Starke County.

Report of AARP Community Challenge Grant Denial

Steve said he was disappointed to report the denial of the PTC's application for an AARP Community Challenge Grant. The application was made, in part, at the recommendation of the RTC and always seemed unlikely to succeed. There were 5,100 applications.

Report of The Hive Grant Award

In April Kathy submitted an application for a competitive grant from "The Hive" a Giving Circle of the Starke County Community Foundation. The SCCF required the application to be made as a video. Kathy drafted an application to fund one or two portable toilets with hand sanitation along the trail for the warm months this year. If the grant exceeded what was needed for the portable toilets, remaining funding would be used to develop new pamphlets for the PTC's growing trail system. Yancy Lucas and Nadia Corral-Frias formatted the application as a video, and Nadia provided narration.

Kathy said she was pleased to report the PTC application is one of five finalists. Each finalist will receive funding. On May 20 the SCCF will hold a dinner at which she will speak briefly about the PTC application. The amount of each award will be determined by a ballot of Hive members.

Trail Counters

Linda provided an update on the trail counters. She made comparisons to weather and trail usage. She noted the hottest day in the period between April 20 and May 10 was on April 24 when the high temperature was 81 degrees Fahrenheit. That date had the fewest trail users. The busiest day was May 26 when the high temperature was a comfortable 62 degrees—with the three sites combining for 158 counted users.

Workday to Prepare for 5K Run/3K Walk

Members agreed to a workday on Wednesday, May 20, 2026 at 1:00 p.m., CT (2:00 p.m., ET) in North Judson for site orientation and preparation for the May 23 5K Run/3K Walk.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for Thursday, June 25, 2026 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Road 10, Bass Lake (Knox), Indiana.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:08 p.m., CT (8:08 p.m., ET).