

**MEETING MINUTES OF
PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.**
Bass Lake Property Owners Association Community Center
6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake)
February 18, 2026

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
JD Castleman
Joan Hardesty
Charlotte Liss
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Rich Vallicelli
Kirt Verhagen

GUESTS

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum
Donald Ensign, Chairman of the Porter County Indiana Dunes Tourism Board
Frank Stalbaum, Veterans Memorial Trail in Hebron

Call to Order by President

On February 18, 2026, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. (“PTC”) in the BLPOA Community Center, Bass Lake, Indiana at 5:30 pm, CT (6:30 pm, ET).

Review and Approval of Minutes of December 10, 2025

Charlotte Liss moved to approve as written the December 10, 2025 minutes. Paul Byer 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
February 18, 2026

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

Balance from December 10, 2025 (prior meeting) **\$28,136.97**

INCOME

12/10/25	State of Indiana ITP #23-06 (reimb 80% of Hill invoice #3A)	\$61,979.21
12/11/25	Income from Holiday Bazaar (from Peg Stalbrink)	690.00
12/11/25	Donation from Char & Corey Liss	1,000.00
12/15/25	Additional Holiday Bazaar income (from Peg Stalbrink)	65.00
02/04/26	Donation for gate repair at 600E (from S&K Lucas)	1,000.00
0213/26	State of Indiana ITP #23-06 (reimb 80% of Hill Invoice #3B).	61,979.21

TOTAL INCOME **\$126,713.42**

EXPENSES

12/12/25	Check #1229 to Hill Excavating (2nd half Invoice #3)	77,474.02
12/15/25	Check #1225 to Green Tree Plastics (4' Denali bench)	258.50
12/15/25	Check #1228 to Rick Vlaming (sign posts materials)	123.82
12/18/25	Check #1230 to Reinhart Welding (gate repair at 600E)	2,200.00
12/23/25	Check #1224 to Territorial Engineering (Invoice #24-106-8)	1,000.00
01/14/26	Check #1231 to Precept Partners (Dec. 5 invoice)	125.00
01/14/26	Check #1232 to Precept Partners (annual website monitoring)	<u>312.00</u>

TOTAL EXPENSES **(\$1,493.34)**

ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 02/18/26 **\$73,357.05**

Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer 02/18/26
RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 02/18/26

SIGNAGE/WEB

Luminous Fund	Signs Bass Lake (incl. UR Here)	685.64
Hardesty Mem.	Wayfinding or historic signs	1,707.31 (-123.82 for Panhandle/Erie signs)
Lucas lakehouse	Future Vision/Website	<u>662.50</u>
		3,055.05

DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension

12/10/25	Reimbursement #7	-0-	less 61,979.21 to Hill & Terr. Eng.)
02/13/26	Reimbursement #8	<u>45,484.40</u>	less 16,494.81 to Hill & Terr. Eng.)
		45,484.40	

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	<u>7,269.48</u>
		10,251.41

TOTAL RESTRICTED **\$58,791.26**

FFBT Balance	\$73,357.05
Restricted Funds	— \$58,791.26
Unrestricted Funds	\$14,565.79

Kathy said the large movements of funds were caused by the one-mile trail extension through North Judson. The DNR's grant to the PTC provides for reimbursement funding. We were unable to cover a \$154,948.04 billing from Hill Excavating with existing cash. The DNR allowed us to divide billing into two parts—receiving 80% reimbursement on a half payment that would later be dedicated to making a second payment. The State of Indiana later provided 80% reimbursement on the second payment. That reimbursement allowed her to forward yet another check to Hill Excavating—in this instance in the amount of \$34,899.96. She said the most-recent check had not yet been cashed and will be reflected in the March PTC meeting.

Kathy thanked Peggy Stalbrink for again leading the effort to produce and market items for the Holiday Bazaars. In this effort, Peg received major support from Anita McMillin, Joan Hardesty, and Diane Blais. Not only does this tradition provide significant funding, it also serves as an important source for better public understanding of our trail systems and the activities of the PTC. Members gave a round of applause.

Kathy thanked Corey and Char Liss for their generous financial donation. She also noted the promised financial donation by Steve and her was applied to the gate repairs at Starke County Road 600 East. Members applauded both of these contributions.

Kathy thanked Rick Vlaming for his beautiful effort designing and erecting two sign posts at Starke County Road 700 E. Rick donated both expertise and time. His efforts completed the final element of our commitment to the 2025 5K Run/3K Walk and allowed closure of this item and its re-designation to unrestricted funds. On December 13 Steve made a supplemental report to the CVC identifying Rick's efforts.

Kirt Verhagen moved for approval of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Diane Blais seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Report of Required Government Fiscal Filings

Kathy reported she has completed documentation and made these required fiscal filings:

1. Federal Form 990-N
2. 2025 Entity Annual Report (Form E-1) and then received a tentative waiver of audit from the Indiana State Board of Accounts
3. Confirmed the Indiana Secretary of State's Business Entity Report, which is required to be filed on alternate years, is next due on February 28, 2027

Steve reflected that these filings were of varying difficulty, but Kathy spent a full day wrestling with them. Portals were sometimes dysfunctional and required her to make multiple phone calls to achieve completion.

Election of Officers

Rhonda called for the election of PTC officers. In 2025 she served as President; Russ Blais as Vice President; Steve Lucas as Secretary; Kathy Lucas as Treasurer; and, Linda Byer as Liaison to the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum. Each have said they were willing and able to continue service but would agree to have others serve instead. Rhonda asked if any PTC member wished to seek or to nominate another member to any of the positions. No other person sought or nominated another person to serve. Rhonda then

declared by acclimation that all five persons were re-elected to the positions in 2026 that they held in 2025.

Report of Arrow Head Country R C & D Grant Application

Rhonda reported she filed on January 30 a timely grant application with the Arrow Head Country RC&D Area, Inc. The grant sought funding to purchase 30 gallons of Buccaneer 41% Glyphosate Herbicide and a STHL Backpack Sprayer for invasive species control along the Erie Trail. The total amount of the funding sought was \$706.19.

JD Castleman asked Rhonda if she had received notice whether the PTC's grant request had been approved. She responded that she had not. JD reflected his understanding was that among more than 20 applications, the PTC's scored the second highest. There will be an awards ceremony to which successful applicants will be invited.

Preparations for RTC April 25 Celebrate Trails Day

The PTC is registered with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy for "Celebrate Trails Day on April 25". The celebration is recognized at locations nationwide but focuses on the Great American Rail-Trail. Locally the celebration is titled "CONNECTIONS" and will start at 9:00 am, CT at the North Bend Township trailhead on Starke County Road 700 East about a quarter mile north of the Starke County-Pulaski County Line. PTC collaborations with partners will be highlighted. An example is signage completed at the trailhead that helps bicyclists connect between the Great American Rail-Trail and the Panhandle Pathway.

April weather often presents a challenge in northwest Indiana. So the scope of the local celebration is flexible. Similar to last year, there will be an informal cookout and trail maintenance activities. If the weather is good, members may visit one of the new kayak launches referenced later in the minutes.

An important element of the CONNECTIONS theme is promoting community awareness. Char has begun postings on the PTC Facebook Page. The postings will be a mixture of material provided by the RTC and material developed by PTC members and friends. Members can see postings by visiting the PTC Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/people/Prairie-Trails-Club/100066977471221/> Char said marking a post as "love" (a heart symbol), commenting, or sharing will push algorithms in a positive way. Simply marking as "like" will have little or no impact. Steve said he requested non-alcoholic beer, signs, insignias and similar materials from RTC to advertise and stage the event.

Consideration of AARP Community Challenge Grant

Kevin Belle, Project Manager for the Great American Rail Trail, occasionally writes to suggest grant applications that might be suitable for use by the PTC. Steve said he checks them and responds. Often the grant opportunity seems of unlikely benefit, would require massive funding that the PTC does not have, or is unavailable to a 501(c)(3) non-profit.

On January 28, Kevin identified an AARP "Community Challenge" grant opportunity for:

- **Flagship grants:** Supporting projects that improve public places; transportation; etc... Awards range up to \$15,000.

- **Demonstration grants:** Funding projects that encourage replication of exemplary local efforts. This year's focus is on improving pedestrian safety, etc... Awards typically range from \$10,000-\$20,000, not to exceed \$25,000.

Steve wrote to Kevin that the AARP grant opportunity would be placed on the PTC's agenda after preview with the Town of North Judson. A possible collaboration between the Town and the PTC was outlined. The RTC does not typically follow-up, but both Kevin and RTC Senior Strategist for External Relations, Ken Bryan, urged the PTC to move forward. Ken had been critical to the PTC obtaining RTC funding to support the North Judson trail extension.

The PTC already had a lot of activity so the perspectives of the Board and Officers were sought. Char, Kirt and Russ recommended that we seek a grant, and no one objected or expressed reservations. Steve said he and Town Clerk-Treasurer Andrew Rowe had a brief discussion about the possible scope for a grant.

The deadline for filing an application is March 4. A grant project must be completed by December 15. Those are tight windows. But if the Town is supportive, Steve said his sense is the PTC should make an application—though competition will be intense. If it is nothing more, filing an application is important to a good relationship with the RTC.

Rich Vallicelli asked what kind of projects the Town of North Judson expressed possible interest in pursuing. Steve responded that a partnership using what is sometimes called "the triangle" is a possibility. The triangle is a small parcel bordered by Sycamore Street, Ohio Street, and the Pinsky Railroad. The ten-foot wide asphalt trail was this summer placed between the Pinsky Railroad and the triangle—but with an exception for a signal bungalow to keep it adjacent to the railroad. The Town intends to develop the triangle as a pocket park. A kiosk is planned in that vicinity as part of the PTC's trail extension.

The Town and PTC representatives discussed the possibility of a collaboration between them at this location early in the design stages of the trail extension. Steve said he has on several occasions received comments on the need for potable water along the Erie Trail. None is available on the trail's current 11 miles and soon to be 12 miles. A water line would need to be run to the site from the nearest existing piping, and the early guess was that the cost of the line might be in the vicinity of \$35,000 at the triangle. That cost would be well in excess of the limits of an AARP Community Challenge Grant.

Linda suggested that another possibility would be to locate a potable water station in the vicinity of Verhagen Station (near the OSSIS Sun Arch). This site might be nearer to an existing water line because of its proximity to Main Street. Steve said hers was a good alternative, and he would share it with the Town.

Update for May 23 Events including 5K Run/3K Walk

Former CVC President, Kathy Norem, communicated in December the PTC grant request "for 2026 has been approved by the Starke County Visitor and Commission Board for \$2,000. The request for the check will be submitted to the Auditor by the CVC Board after their 2026 organizational meeting. Usually, that is in February."

Brian McMillin has been developing the elements of the 5K Run/3K Walk. He said he and Anita were again committing to a \$1,000 contribution to the event. They have worked on designs for the shirts and asked members for T-shirt color preferences.

Possibly using HVRM restrooms was raised. Members decided that the PTC should itself secure a port-a-potty. Kathy will make the contacts and rent one port-a-potty.

Brian said medals were being designed that would feature the Erie Trail on one side and the Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail on the other. Rich said a major purpose of the event was to raise public awareness of the PTC. He believed one side should carry the Prairie Trails Club logo. It was agreed that for this event the Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail and the PTC would be featured. Diane suggested that we include reference to the Erie Trail on the ribbons rather than the medals. The feasibility of this approach will be pursued.

Brian said he has had multiple conversations with Run SignUp, and he was encouraged to complete registration promptly because Memorial Day Weekend is a popular time for races. That has been done, and the event is now posted on Run SignUp.

During the PTC meeting, Char took phone shots of two images Brian brought in paper form to the meeting. These were entitled “Prairie Trails Club 5K Run/3K Walk” and “Prairie Trails Club 5K Rn/3K Walk on the Erie and Grand Kankakee Marsh Trails”. She then posted both images with added text on the Prairie Trails Club Facebook page.

Final Report for ABC Promise Partnership Bench

Kirt picked up at Evansville a new four-foot wide green bench on December 11. Shortly afterwards he delivered it to Kathy and Steve’s house on Bass Lake. With successful completion of this task, the business is completed of the Ad Hoc Committee to Provide ABC Promise Partnership Bench.

Update on Gate Segment Replacement at Starke County 600 East

Steve said Russ Blais had a conflict and was unable to attend the PTC meeting. Russ did the heavy lifting for pursuing a replacement gate arm through Reinhard Welding. He plans to buy reflecting tape to make the original and replaced arms match more closely.

When the theft of the gate occurred, a pin was left behind. Paul has returned and pad-locked the replacement gate arm on the south side of the trail. An emergency vehicle can get through by turning the gate arm on the north side.



Gate at Starke County Road 600 E facing southeast
(February 14, 2026)

Image by K. Lucas

Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Update

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Liaison to the PTC, said HVRM was getting ready for the Easter Trains. Todd Flanigin resigned as Chairman of the HVRM Board of Directors. Fred Haberkamp was just elected as the new Chairman. With Fred Haberkamp vacating the position of Vice President, Steve Newland was elected the Vice President.

American Discovery Trail Updates

In the December meeting members discussed the “American Discovery 250 Relay” and possibly seeking a “Trail Town” designation for North Judson by the American Discovery Trail Society. Both subjects have progressed.

Participation in American Discovery 250 Relay

On January 20, Venita Cunningham, who Co-Chairs the Starke County America250 Committee, invited the PTC to a meeting at the Starke County History Center in Knox. Steve attended the meeting, and there was a good discussion of the trail and how the PTC and Committee might collaborate on an event. But what the ADT Society envisioned as the cross-country event was uncertain to us.

On February 10, Steve participated in an ADT Zoom call that presented initial plans for the American Discovery 250 Relay. Primary presenter was Dave Whitson who the ADT “brought on board” to “orchestrate” the event. He is a former teacher turned hiker, guidebook writer, and podcaster in Portland, Oregon. The winter issue of *Discover America*, the ADT Society newsletter, was circulated during the meeting. It features Dave Whitson and states “The relay will involve runners, bicyclists, and equestrians—any non motorized mode of travel.”

Following the Zoom call, Dave and Steve shared emails to focus on what the American Discovery 250 Relay might be in Starke County. This included discussion of roles for the Starke County 250 Committee, PTC and HVRM. Dave wrote the “(very) rough schedule draft has us traveling from Lansing [Illinois] to North Judson on October 13, on what will likely be a bike-heavy day. However, we would absolutely be willing/pleased to build in a final leg of the journey into/through North Judson that could incorporate non-bikers. The following day is slotted to be 37 miles to Rochester, which will also probably require bikers (or maybe runners), but could again kick off with a shorter leg out of North Judson that would incorporate others. We absolutely want folks in Starke County to populate these sections, if the interest is there. An event that ties into the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum would be most welcome.”

Request for ADT Designation of North Judson as a Trail Town

A request for the ADT Society to designate North Judson as a “Trail Town” must come from the municipality. Andrew Rowe informed me he has spoken with members of the North Judson Town Council, and they are supportive of seeking the designation. The Town’s request is now in the drafting stages.

Bob Albert reflected that the Town of North Judson is taking measures to brand it as a rail town as well as a trail town. Steve responded that he understood that to be true and that he thinks it an excellent concept. The ADT Society designating North Judson as a “Trail Town” would be supplemental to any action by the municipality identifying itself as

a rail town and trail town. The hope is that the ADT Society designation would encourage visitors from across the nation to come to North Judson—benefitting the Town, the HVRM, and the PTC.

Trail Counters Update

During the meeting, Joan circulated a written updated report of the trail counters. For a few parts of this brutal of the winter, counts were at zero. But trail usage has seen a large uptick with the coming of warmer weather and a few sunny days.

Linda reflected that one of the identified high points of usage likely reflected work that was then being done on the trail. Joan responded she had already adjusted the report to remove that anomaly.

Don Ensign expressed interest in the PTC use of counters. He said grant applications often seek applicant data as to expected usage.

River Kayak Launches Report

The PTC mission statement includes advancing, promoting and maintaining blueways. Blueways are routes using waterways for recreation, most notably rivers and streams. In 2017 the PTC helped design, and committed to funding support for, a grant application by the Starke County Parks Department to build a kayak access site on the Yellow River at Range Road. In 2020 the PTC secured a letter of support from the Indiana Greenways Foundation for another Parks Department initiative. Unfortunately, neither of the efforts were successful.

More recent efforts have succeeded. Amie Flora, Superintendent of the Starke County Parks Department, recently led the development of kayak launches on the Yellow River. One shares the DNR parking lot at the confluence of the Yellow and Kankakee Rivers in English Lake. The Parks Department has placed another kayak launch upstream on the Yellow River near Ober. Amie plans to have a ribbon cutting ceremony this year for the Ober site on land donated by Dr. Walter Fritz. Yet another initiative would collaborate with Knox to place a second launch in Wythogan Park—this one for use by kayaks.

Our friends at the Jasper County Trails Club are seeking to place a new kayak launch on the Kankakee River north of Wheatfield. That location would support a partnership with Starke County and particularly the launch at English Lake. The Kankakee River Access Site Collaborative will consider developing kayak launches on April 14 at 11:00 AM, CT in the Hebron Community Center, 611 North Main Street. Steve said he and Amie plan to attend the meeting.

Donald Ensign described kayak launch initiatives on the Kankakee River west of Starke County. Don is the Chairman of the Porter County Indiana Dunes Tourism Board. He is also Vice Chair of the Friends of the Veterans Memorial Parkway, a route which like the Erie Trail, hosts the American Discovery Trail. Don said the distance downstream from the kayak access at Dunn's Bridge was longer than most kayakers and canoeists wish to travel without a public access. No available site on the Porter County (north) side of the river was identified. But on the Jasper County (south) side there is what is thought an adequate space on public land. Discussions with the Jasper County Commissioners have been productive, and the April 14 meeting in Hebron is intended to help move the project forward.

Report of Monterey Depot Restoration

Steve said he was writing a retrospective about those who took the first steps towards what would become the North Judson Erie Trail and the Monterey Erie Trail. The Erie Railroad depot is located next to the Monterey Erie Trail on the west side of town.

As part of the research he emailed HVRM Board Vice Chairman, Steve Newland. Newland informed him that in 2013 Newland purchased the Monterey Erie Railroad depot in order to save it. Newland wrote that he had recently made major progress on restoration and expects to finish the outside of the building this spring. Bob Albert said one of the things Newland has done is to place a new slate roof on the depot.



Monterey Erie Railroad Depot and
Monterey Erie Trail (February 14, 2026)

Image by K. Lucas

Update for 2026 Warrior Expeditions Bicycle Trek

Sarah Zeller wrote on January 23 that the Warrior Expeditions Bike program is scheduled to kick off from Washington, DC on May 21. She expects the veterans to arrive in Starke County “around June 9th, give or take a few days.” This timing should avoid challenges experienced last year in attempting to coordinate arrival of the veterans with the 5K Run/ 3 K Walk held on Memorial Day weekend. There are expected to be six veterans this year, including one who served in Vietnam and one woman. It will mark the sixth year for PTC participation in the joint Rails to Trails Conservancy and Warrior Expeditions project.

Diane, Kathy, and Char spoke of continued communications with past participants. They said that while accommodating the varied arrival dates of individual veterans can at time be challenging, the experience is rewarding. It as a wonderful opportunity to give back to men and women who have sacrificed so much.

Notice of “Moonlight Over the Tippy 2026” on June 5

The Friends of the Panhandle Pathway informed us that the 20-Mile evening ride of “Moonlight Over the Tippy 2026” will begin at the Train Depot on the Corner of Logan and

Main Streets, Winamac. Early registration is by May 29. The Mass Start time is 7:00 pm, ET (6:00 pm, CT).

Brian said that he and Anita participated in the ride last year. They reflected it was a very nice event.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for Thursday, March 19, 2026 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Highway 10, Knox (Bass Lake), Indiana.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:18 p.m., CT (8:18 p.m., ET).