

**MEETING MINUTES OF
PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.**

**BLPOA Community Center
6996 South SR 10
Bass Lake (Knox), Indiana**

September 23, 2021

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Russell Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Bruce Fingerhut
Joan Hardesty
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Max Rehlander
Rich Vallicelli

GUESTS

John Bawcum, Friends of Panhandle Pathway, Inc., President

Call to Order by Secretary

Steve Lucas, Secretary, called to order a meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") on September 23, 2021 in the BLPOA Community Center, Knox (Bass Lake) at 5:38 pm, CDT (6:38 pm, EDT).

Review and Approval of Minutes of August 26, 2021

Russ Blais identified an error at one location in the August 26 minutes to the referenced date for the Erie Trail Fall Run/Walk and Ride. With this error corrected, Paul Byer moved to approve the minutes of the membership held on August 26, 2021. Russ seconded the motion and the motion carried.

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

Kathy reflected it has been a good month for the PTC. Because August is our month to renew annual dues, we collected \$986.23 in dues and additional donations by members. There were two lifetime memberships as part of the dues, Rhonda Milner and Max Rehlander. Kathy thanked the members for their generous donations in addition to their dues in a timely fashion.

PTC members earned an additional \$2,120.50 as our share of proceeds from sponsoring the Bass Lake 5K race in July. Russ discussed this subject later in the meeting.

The income for the month was also increased by a \$5,000 grant from the local VFW. Kathy thanked Larry Wickert and Russ for their role in obtaining the grant, which included a presentation before the VFW Board. The grant was earmarked for “trail improvements” and will help to cover some items in the county’s soft match which was made more difficult by COVID-19 challenges.

As for disbursements, the Treasurer paid \$112.36 for asphalt supplies used by Paul Byer to fix damage in certain locations. She thanked Paul for the asphalt repairs he has made. Through the efforts of Bruce Fingerhut, we spent \$436 on T-shirts, cups and “swag bags” for the upcoming Walk/Run/Bike event on October 2. Finally, we paid Thomas Excavating \$44,449.88 to satisfy Invoice #2 for the southeast trail expansion. Kathy said that amount was divided on the Restricted/Unrestricted Page with 80% attributed to the DNR Next Level Trails Grant and 20% divided among grants received from the Indiana Greenways Foundation of Indiana, the Luminous Fund, the Northern Indiana Community Foundation and the PTC’s share of the local match. A new restricted fund was created to help keep track of the \$5,000 VFW grant.

Kathy presented the written Treasurer’s Report and Report of Restricted/Unrestricted Grants and Donations as follows:



**Treasurer’s Report
September 23, 2021**

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

Balance forward from 8/26/21 **\$ 359,281.53**

INCOME

8/27/21	Lifetime Membership (<i>Rhonda Milner</i>)	250.00
8/27/21	Dues (<i>Kirt Verhagen, Larry Wickert</i>)	50.00
8/27/21	Sale of weed wand (<i>Paul Byer</i>)	30.00
8/27/21	Dues & donation (<i>Sharon Smead</i>)	50.00
8/27/21	Dues & donation (<i>Joan Hardesty</i>)	50.00
8/27/21	Dues thru PayPal (<i>Deb Mix, Linda & Paul Byer, C.Heilstedt</i>)	143.29
8/30/21	Dues (<i>TI Jones</i>)	25.00
8/31/21	Lifetime Membership (<i>Max Rehlander</i>)	250.00

9/1/21	Proceeds from Bass Lake 5K sponsorship	2,120.50
9/1/21	PTC 5K entrant fee <i>(thru RunSignUp)</i>	115.51
9/7/21	Dues <i>(Arlene Noble)</i> & PTC 5k <i>(Rick Staresina)</i>	45.00
9/8/21	PTC 5K entrant fee <i>(thru RunSignUp)</i>	74.46
9/13/21	Dues & donation (Kay Reibold)	100.00
9/13/21	PTC 5K entrant fee (check S&J Mathews)	40.00
9/15/21	PTC 5K entrant fee <i>(thru RunSignUp)</i>	458.36
9/20/21	Dues & donation (Rick Vlaming)	42.94
9/20/21	PTC 5K entrant fee (Gail & Mark Little)	60.00
9/20/21	VFW Grant for Trail Improvements	5,000.00
9/20/21	PTC 5K entrant fees <i>(thru RunSignUp)</i>	<u>208.59</u>

Total Income	9,113.65	368,395.18
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EXPENSES

8/31/21	Check # 1082 to P.Byer <i>(Reimbursement for asphalt supplies)</i>	112.35
9/02/21	Check # 1084 <i>(National Pen for 5K merch. By B.Fingerhut)</i>	436.00
9/22/21	Check # 1083 <i>(Thomas Excavating Invoice #2)</i>	<u>44,449.88</u>

Total Expenses	(44,998.23)
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Ending FFBT balance as of 9/23/21:	\$323,396.95
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*/s/Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer
As of 9/23/21*

Restricted/Unrestricted Grants and Donations

Luminous Fund Grant #2 (2018)	Signage BL (inc. "You are Here")	\$4,124.94
Luminous Fund Grant #3 (2019)	Matching NLT Grant	1,218.25 (-2,222.50 TE#2)
Luminous Fund Grant #4 (2020)	Northwest Extension	5,000.00
Luminous Fund Grant #5 (2021)	Northwest Extension or Operations	5,000.00
Hardesty Memorial Grant	Wayfinding/Historic Signage	6,911.50
Hardesty Memorial Grant (2019)	Matching NLT Grant	1,218.25 (-2,222.50 TE#2)
PTC Account Commitment	Matching NLT Grant	1,218.25 (-2,222.50 TE#2)
Marshall County Horse Assn.	Bench for SE Extension	350.00
Indiana Greenways Foundation	Matching NLT Grant	1,218.25 (-2,222.50 TE#2)
Lucas Lakehouse Guests' Donation	Future Vision/Website	700.00
Next Level Trails Grant	SE Extension (2nd Installment)	270,308.43 (-35,559.90 TE#2)

Mitchel-Kane Charitable Fund	Northwest Extension	4,000.00
Stalbrink Donation	Scholarship/Most Needed	100.00
Blais/Vlaming Bench	Trailhead @ 450/210	350.00
McMillin Bench	Trailhead @ 450/210	350.00
Maintenance Fund (Mower Sale)	General Trail Maintenance	4,000.00
KVREMC Bike Rack Grant	Balance of Grant Amount	1,500.00
VFW grant	Trail Improvements	5,000.00
	TOTAL RESTRICTED FUNDS	\$312,819.87

BANK ACCOUNT

First Farmers Bank & Trust (FFBT)	\$323,396.95	TOTAL IN BANK
	<u>-312,819.87</u>	RESTRICTED
	10,577.08	TOTAL UNRESTRICTED

Diane Blais moved to approve the Treasurer’s Report and Report of Restricted/ Unrestricted Grants and Donations as presented. Brian McMillin seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Final Planning for October 2 Erie Trail Fall Run/Walk and Ride

Bruce Fingerhut said the Run/Walk and Ride was the first event of this type that he has managed. He expressed his appreciation to the North Judson Police Department for agreeing to handle motor vehicle traffic on Starke County Road 250 West. At the initial stage of the event, runners and walkers will cross CR 250 W. But both the runners’ 5K and the walkers’ 3K will cross the finish line on return several feet east of CR 250 W.

Bruce expressed appreciation to the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum for supporting the train ride without a fee. Following the event “Return to Normal”, the duo of Marty and Corinne Lucas, will be the opening music act. He thanked them for performing without a fee. The second music act will be the “Derek James Band” with Davey Johnston and John Cruce. Leg Shakers BBQ will be present for food service. Bruce said participants in the event will be able to take their bicycles on the train. He said he will work with his committee to bring together the final touches for the event.

Report of Southeast Trail Extension Workgroup

Larry Wickert emailed on September 22 that Jason Young of Thomas Excavating and Welding informed him the paving subcontractor was scheduled to begin placing asphalt on September 27. Completion of paving would be the keystone of the project.

On September 18, Russ made an oral presentation with photos to the VFW in support of a \$5,000 grant request. He said the presentation “went real well,” and he was pleased by the warm reception he received from this prominent veteran’s organization.

Kathy thanked Larry and Russ for their successful efforts in seeking a \$5,000 grant from VFW Post 748 to support “trail improvements”. She said the funding should allow the PTC to help address the soft-match responsibility committed by the Starke County Board of Commissioners. The hope is the Commissioners will yet assist with the placement

and acquisition of signage and other trail construction activities. Any amount remaining from the VFW grant might then be applied to making other trail improvements.

Steve said an anonymous donor provided finished signs to warn trail users of the switch to a plank surface on Bartee Ditch Bridge. A secondary purpose would be to identify the bridge site where services might be needed. Structurally identical signs have been placed at the bridges for Bogus Run and Fell Ditch following allegations the unidentified switches there from asphalt surfaces to a plank surface may have contributed to bicycle accidents. He expressed appreciation to the donor for making the helpful and productive donations.



Image by Kathy Lucas

Bruce reflected that the donation has a financial value, and the value should be identified as part of our local share. Steve said the donor did not identify a value. But a total of four signs with eight-foot posts for Bogus Run and Fell Ditch were purchased for \$313.92 from Traffic Control Systems on December 11, 2018 (Check #1025). For two signs (one half of the number of signs purchased in 2018), a reasonable value for the signs and posts for Bartee Ditch would be \$156.96.

Celebration for Opening Southeast Trail Extension Set for October 22

With optimism that the two-mile extension was likely to be paved within a week or two, and the downturn of temperatures with autumn's arrival, the membership discussed whether a date should be selected to celebrate the extension's opening. After reviewing options, and factoring the need to have the Department of Natural Resources perform a site inspection, a consensus was achieved that an opening celebration should be set for October 22, 2021.

Report of Northwest Trail Extension Workgroup

During the August 26 membership meeting, the Northwest Trail Extension Workgroup announced an onsite get together with LaPorte County officials on August 31 at English Lake. The purpose was to consider options for a trail bridge across the Kankakee River. A written summary of the August 31 get together was circulated among the membership and is included and incorporated into these minutes as follows:

A. Summary of August 31, 2021 Kankakee River Crossing Get Together

As discussed during our August membership meeting, PTC representatives of the Northwest Extension Workgroup and officials from LaPorte County met at the DNR's Yellow River Public Access Site in English Lake on August 31, 2021. PTC representatives were Max Rehlander, Larry Wickert, Russ Blais, Sharon Smead, Kathy Lucas, and Steve Lucas. Mitchell Bishop and Justin Kiel also participated. Mitch is Director of Planning and Development/Grant Administrator for La Porte County. Justin is the President of the LaCrosse Town Council and Editor of *The Regional News* in southern LaPorte County.

The primary purpose of the August 31 meeting was to view the active railroad bridge over the Kankakee River which is now owned by the Northern Indiana Railroad LLC and used most frequently by HVRM for excursion rides. This line was formerly owned by the C&O Railroad and is the line on which the PTC has a trail easement. Our group also viewed two other bridges that are near the former C&O Railroad—a bridge to the west that was formerly owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad and the bridge to the east that serves motor vehicle traffic on LaPorte CR 650W and Starke CR 650W. The motor vehicle bridge crosses from north to south in short succession: Hannah Arm, Kankakee River, Yellow River, and Kline Arm. These four watercourses converge so that the two railroad bridges cross a singular Kankakee River.

Larry and Sharon brought kayaks so that participants could view the bridges from below. The DNR access ramp enters on the mouth of the Kline Arm just a few feet upstream from where the watercourses converge.

Ramp on Kline Arm



We viewed the former C&O Bridge from below and on top, the former Pennsylvania Bridge from below, and the motor vehicle bridge from on top.



Looking downstream:
Former C&O Bridge in
The foreground and
Former Pennsylvania
Bridge in the
background.

View from below
former C&O Bridge



Max is a Civil Engineer for Abonmarche, a firm with a Valparaiso branch that was consultant for the Great American Rail-Trail segment opened last year in Hebron. Based on his training, experience and expertise, he provided much-appreciated insights as to the potential of the three crossings for public trail use. Excerpts of his onsite comments are set forth below. Following observation from the Kankakee River by kayak, and speaking with respect to the former C&O Bridge, he said:

“To see a bridge in that good a shape is a great sign. One thing.... We really should check to see how far back the bridge goes within the flood plain.... Just because you’re not going to have to widen it, not just for what’s over the river, but you’re going to have to widen it the whole length, which just means it’s more cost. It can be done, it’s just a matter of your cost increase.... [O]verall, it’s a really nice bridge.”

In response to question, Max reflected that the former Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge was also in remarkably good condition, and from an engineering perspective, seemed to offer an excellent option for a trail crossing. This bridge would not require space sharing with an active railroad. But during group discussion it was suggested the bridge was in private ownership, and there was no sense of whether the owner would be amenable to a trail. Also, Justin pointed

out that additional real estate would have to be acquired to connect this bridge to the easement on the former C&O Railroad.



Max Rehlander responding to a question

Max referenced the need for a Department of Natural Resources, Division of Water, permit for construction in a floodway. A floodway permit was also required for the bridge over Bartee Ditch during the PTC's southeast two-mile extension of the Erie Trail. The Kankakee River floodway is much wider. The PTC would also be required to obtain a floodway permit if the former Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge were used for the trail.

Max then resumed his overview of the condition of the former C&O Bridge. "Coming off the I-beam. I think that would be your best bet as far as you drill holes into. It's a pretty simple operation, honestly."

Max asked, "Do you guys know, is there any horizontal separation that the railroad requires? There are federal laws for that under the FRA but this is such a low traffic track, I think they just delegate that to the local entity."

Participants walked to the bridge on LaPorte and Starke CR 650W. Mitch said a project was in process between LaPorte County and INDOT to rehabilitate the bridge. If a trail were to be added to the project, the bridge would need to be widened and there would be a major cost increase. He agreed to inquire. Mitch emailed on September 10 that his engineer's "back of the envelope estimate" was \$1m "for all expenses." The bridge is LaPorte County's longest with "over 300' from abutment to abutment."

The participants then drove to the intersection of the former C&O Railroad and Starke CR 650 W. Viewing the railroad from on top, Max observed:

"It's in good shape, surprisingly, which is great, especially like there [pointing] with the angled pieces within the I-beam section, and that's probably your best connection point to provide bolts."



In response to a question from Sharon about how far from the rails the trail would need to go, Max said:

"That was my [earlier] question..., as far as, 'Is it a 10 foot buffer? Is it a 20 foot buffer...?' There are federal guidelines, as far as that goes, but since this is such a low traffic railroad track, they do not necessarily have to comply with those regulations. The private entity can say, 'We take full responsibility....'"

Images in this report were provided by Kathy Lucas.

During the September membership meeting, Max Rehlander reiterated the former C&O Railroad Bridge and the former Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge were in good condition. The concrete pillars and steel I-beams are in great shape. Was has offered preliminary estimates for the cost of a trail extension through North Judson, across the Kankakee River, and to LaCrosse. Kathy thanked Max for his much needed professional advice.

B. Recordation of Trail Easement Agreement in LaPorte County and in Starke County

The Trail Easement Agreement between the PTC and the Northern Indiana Railroad LLC (“NIR”) has been recorded in LaPorte County and Starke County. For LaPorte County recordation took place on August 17, 2021 (2021R-13017), and for Starke County took place on September 16, 2021 (2021003492). North Judson Town Attorney, Justin Schramm, had his staff record the documents at no cost to the PTC and additionally paid the recording fees (totaling \$50) as a contribution to our organization. Kathy sent a letter to NIR attorney, Thomas Hayes, to confirm recordation.

Report of Bass Lake Festival 5K Run and 3K Walk

Russ provided his final report on the Bass Lake Festival 5K Run and 3K Walk held on July 24. He said the members did an excellent job, especially considering the need for an early arrival time to prepare for the race. The timer hired this year made a number of mistakes and will not return next year. He said Bass Lake Festival organizers expect to enter an agreement with a new timer with a demonstrated history of proficiency. But the new timer will also be considerably more expensive so that net proceeds from the event may be reduced.

Diane reflected that the event requires a lot of effort from our volunteers and underlines the PTC’s need to develop more vibrant participation from younger members. On the other hand, she is appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the Festival. There are other entities that would be happy to sponsor the event, but the local partnership in an important benefit, and to the extent the event is profitable, those profits are returned to our community.



Festival Queen
Hope Walkowaik
and
Peggy Stalbrink
at merchandise
table



Russ Blais readies race start

Images by Kathy Lucas

The members discussed both the benefits and challenges of sponsoring the Bass Lake Festival 5K Run and 3K Walk in 2022. The final consensus was for the members to authorized Russ and Diane to seek PTC sponsorship for next July's event.

Maintenance Committee Report with Proposal for Trail Section Adoption

Paul reported that he and Bruce have repaired horizontal timbers on the gates at CR 700 South and CR 300 East, respectively. The structures had been rotted, presumably as a result primarily of carpenter ant infestations. The membership thanked the men for their remarkable and creative solutions to maintain the integrity of the gates with little or no cost.



Horizontal at Starke County Road 700 South following work by Paul Byer

Image by Kathy Lucas

The membership discussed Linda's August proposal to "start an adopt a trail program" modeled generally after INDOT's adopt a highway program. Steve said the subject was particularly timely because an email proposal by Richard Gumz Farms LLC had been forwarded to him for signage indicating it had "sponsored" a mile of the Erie Trail. He said he invited Brenda Wendt, Gumz Office Manager, to attend this evening's meeting but received no response from her.

Several members expressed frustration that there are two sets of sponsorship signs on the trail but no understanding of what sponsorship entails. Signage crediting particular individuals was seen as a disincentive to volunteers where there were no standards for what a sponsor was doing or was expected to do to help maintain the trail.

Trail ownership rests with HVRM with the PTC volunteering support on the existing nine miles of the Erie Trail. That ownership is for "Interim Trail Usage under the National Trails System Act." On the pending two-mile extension, the PTC will additionally have an easement which could lend itself to a pilot program for management in coordination with HVRM and Starke County government.

The membership agreed Linda's proposal was an attractive concept and deserved more discussion—ideally when the liaisons were present. Engaging the Starke County Park Board could also be productive.

Informal Review of HVRM Activities

In the absence of liaisons Bob Albert and Larry Wickert, Linda provided a brief report of HVRM activities. She said ticket sales have been strong. For October a full schedule is planned. The cooperative event is set between HVRM and the PTC on October 2. For the four subsequent Saturdays in October four Pumpkin Trails are scheduled each Saturday.

Improving Connectivity between the Erie Trail and the Bass Lake Community

Our newest member, Rich Vallicelli, expressed interest in having the Starke County Highway Department upgrade CR 450 E south of CR 210. He said he understood that plans were still anticipated for a new trailhead at the intersection of CR 450 W and CR 210, although those plans were delayed by the pandemic.

Kathy reflected she had recent conversations with local officials that confirmed Rich's understanding. Her belief was that resurfacing at least a portion of CR 450 E was on the Highway Department's priority list. Improving the connection between the Erie Trail and the Bass Lake community, in terms of both signage and comfort, should be an ongoing PTC emphasis. In addition to improving connectivity of the trailhead and the existing trail using CR 450 E, the PTC will pursue better connectivity to the two-mile extension of the Erie Trail from the Bass Lake County Beach using CR 600 E and to the north side of Bass Lake using CR 700 E.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, October 12, 2021 at 5:30 pm, CDT (6:30 pm, EDT) in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake), Indiana.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:06 p.m., CDT (8:06 p.m., EDT).