

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

November 13, 2025

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Russ Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Joan Hardesty
Charlotte Liss
Corey Liss
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Peggy Stalbrink

GUESTS

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum

Call to Order by President

On November 13 2025, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the BLPOA Community Center, Bass Lake, Indiana at 5:35 pm, CT (6:35 pm, ET).

Review and Approval of Minutes of October 16, 2025

With the correction of clerical errors, Anita McMillin moved to approve the October 16, 2025 minutes. Joan Hardesty seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP #23-06

Kathy Lucas reported on the continuing progress of the trail extension. On October 10, following close of the year's Third Quarter, she wrote checks to Territorial Engineering and Hill Excavating for work completed. These were approved by DNR and forwarded through the State's billing process for 80% reimbursement to the PTC. Subsequently, as described by our consultant Bob Aloï in an email to the DNR, Hill Excavating completed "a large part of the paving on the trail" resulting in a "rather large" additional billing of \$154,948.04. Aloï added the project is "Looking great and am real happy how things are progressing with very few issues or problems."

Kathy said the PTC is not positioned to pay billings of this amount in the current grant process where State funding is provided as a reimbursement. This approach contrasts with the prior Next Level Trails grant for the extension southeast of US Highway 35 where

we received funding up front and justified expenditures as trail construction progressed. She emphasized that the PTC had made clear to our consultant and our contractor that payments were on a reimbursement basis. Under our contractual arrangement, the PTC would pay its 20% of the billing to Hill Excavating within 30 days. Additional payments would await reimbursements from the State. DNR had given additional instructions to the PTC that billings could only be processed following the completion of a Quarter, so the next cycle for payments would be in early January 2026.

Bob Aloï, DNR Grants Coordinator Erica Gummere, and Kathy had discussions regarding how payments to Hill Excavating might properly be accelerated. Erica expressed an understanding that a small non-profit could have difficulty making large payments to a contractor. With this understanding, she could “make an exception to our programmatic 1 billing/ quarter rule for the Prairie Trails Club, given they are a nonprofit. To the best of [her] knowledge, this is a programmatic standard, not SBA or DNR purchasing.” But she would need confirmation that the October billings were reimbursed to the PTC before she could process another reimbursement request. Erica wrote on November 5: “Given the Prairie Trails Club's situation, I'm happy to process a larger billing between quarters. Please feel free to send the billing request in, once you've received the payment from billing 6 (submitted for approvals 10/24/2025).”

Kathy reported during the PTC meeting she just received approval notice from the State Comptroller of 80% reimbursement from our October 10 payments. The requested amount of \$28,119.48 would be deposited in the PTC's bank account on November 14.

Bob, Kathy, and Erica discussed the possibility of breaking the invoice into two or three payments to cover the \$154,948.04 billing from Hill Excavating. Kathy reflected that after crunching the numbers, she believed the PTC could pay half of the outstanding bill rather than just one third. If Hill Excavating and Bob provide her an invoice in the amount of \$77,474.02 (half the original request), she would expedite payment. The sooner the PTC account shows the check has been cashed, the sooner Kathy can put together documentation to seek State reimbursement. After the PTC receives reimbursement, she would turn around payment of the other half as soon as practicable.

Char asked if the trail construction seemed to be progressing satisfactorily within the PTC's budget. Members at the meeting who have observed the construction expressed positive views. Steve added that the billing created a cash flow problem but should not impact the bottom line. He guessed the project was nearing 60% of completion, but to date the PTC has made only relatively small payments. There has been a lot more work completed than paid for. The \$154,948.04 billing all at once poses a challenge, and to pay half (\$77,474.02) would require the use of funds dedicated to the project as well as unrestricted funds. If the \$154,948.04 is paid and the PTC reimbursed before the spring, he believed the project should be in good stead for a successful conclusion.



New asphalt trail after placement of the second asphalt layer in late October

Images by K. Lucas

Members thanked Kathy for her hard work on helping to develop a good approach for compensating Hill Excavating in a way that can be productive for the contractor and stay within the PTC's limited budget. She was encouraged to continue on the outlined course.

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Liaison to the PTC, spoke about elements of limestone bases for the C&O Railroad water tank that were unearthed by Hill Excavating. He said "One of them is pretty much completely intact." He wrapped the nearly-intact base with yellow construction tape and tagged it for historical use. In an email he wrote, "If you want to put up signage at the spot the tank was located, maybe it could be moved back and placed as a monument with signage." Several members recommended use of one or more of the limestone bases as the guard at the trail crossing of English Lake Road.

Bob noted he believed an original image of the water tank was archived at the Starke County Historical Society. Russ Blais said he would look for the image and others at the Historical Society that might be relevant to the trail route. Bob asked if Yancy Lucas might be willing to develop interpretative signage for the water tank. Char said these limestone bases provided a good opportunity for an informative and fun addition to the trail. Bob reminded members that North Judson was once an important railroad town.



Limestone pillars unearthed by Hill Excavating, LLC during trail extension through North Judson. Images by R. Aloï (Oct. 31, 2025)

Maintenance Report including Workdays

Following weather delays, Prairie Trails Club members and friends conducted a variety of maintenance projects aimed largely at invasive plant species control west of US Highway 35 and between Starke County Road 250 West and 100 West. On October 31, Walter Block and Larry Wickert trimmed large overhead branches near Starke County Road 800 South. The main day of the event was November 1. A special thanks is owed to Paul who started and Travis Markin who completed much needed repairs to bridge planks on Bogus Run bridge. Linda Byer and Frank Stalbaum brought expertise and equipment for suppressing autumn olive, bush honeysuckle and oriental bittersweet beginning near SCR 100 West and going west. In this area Paul used a chain saw to cut large branches of invasive species and trees overhanging the trail. They were joined by Rhonda, J.D. Castleman, Anita, Kathy and Steve. Rhonda funded and prepared a hot meal for workers at Bogus Run bridge. The following week Linda sprayed invasives with glyphosate on both sides of the trail between US 35 and Starke County Road 300 East.

“Rules of the Trail” signs Update

Paul reported that on November 2 he placed new “Rules of the Trail” signs at Main Street, Indiana Highway 10, and Starke County Road 250 West. Steve added that with the new signs placed in August on the west side of US 35 and at Starke County Road 100 West, three remain to be placed. These are tentatively slated for Starke County Road 300 East, the east side of US 35, and Starke County Road 700 East. The PTC might instead place one or two of them in the North Judson trail extension.

Report of Ad Hoc Committee to Provide ABC Promise Partnership Bench

Joan provided an update on efforts to collect lids for the ABC Promise Partnership Bench. She said she bartered five-plus gallons of black walnuts for 1.5 pounds of lids. Joan updated members on what Green Tree Plastics requires to qualify for a lids exchange including what medicine containers are acceptable. At her request, several members brought lids that she will take home, weigh, and check for compliance. A first estimate is that the PTC had so far collected about 40% of the amount needed. *[Editor's Note: Subsequent information makes it appear additional lid collection is unnecessary.]*

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 November 13, 2025

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

<u>Balance from September 18, 2025 (prior meeting)</u>	\$109,163.27
---	---------------------

INCOME

10/20/25 Kay Reimbold (dues/donation after October meeting)	100.00
---	--------

TOTAL INCOME	\$100.00
---------------------	-----------------

EXPENSES

10/20/25 Check #1220 to Hill Excavating (Invoice #2)	\$31,160.00
10/24/25 Check #1221 to Jim Chessor Mowing (Invoice #6)	400.00
11/10/25 Check #1222 to Paul Byer for materials for Bogus Bridge repairs.	136.76

TOTAL EXPENSES (\$31,696.76)

ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 11/13/25 \$77,566.51

Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer 11/13/25

RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 11/13/25

SIGNAGE/WEB

Luminous Fund	Signs Bass Lake (incl. UR Here)	685.64
Hardesty Mem.	Wayfinding or historic signs	1,831.13
Lucas lakehouse	Future Vision/Website	<u>662.50</u>
		3,179.27

NW EXTENSION

PTC Local Match	Trail Extension	9,700.00
NICF Grant	Trail Extension	8,306.25
Rails to Trails	Trail Extension	<u>823.87</u>
		18,920.12

DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension

05/15/24	Reimbursement #1	-0-	Reduced 17,589.06*
07/19/24	Reimbursement #2	-0-	Reduced 6,007.48*
11/04/24	Reimbursement #3	-0-	Reduced 4,813.85*
03/07/25	Reimbursement #4	-0-	Reduced 1,215.50*
07/11/25	Reimbursement #5	<u>12,069.63</u>	Reduced 1,464.11*
		12,096.63	

MAINTENANCE

Hardesty Mem.	Trail Maintenance	294.00 (reduced \$136.76 Byer bridge)
HVRM (Buckeye)	Trail Maintenance	593.61
Rich Stalbrink Mem.	Maintenance or most needed	2,699.11
Doral Solar	Bridge/clearing	<u>7,269.48</u>
		10,388.17

5K/3K 2025 (CVC Grant)

Grant from CVC	5K/3K & Panhandle connectivity	989.45
RunSignup	Registrant payouts	<u>1,128.15</u>
		2,117.60

TOTAL RESTRICTED \$46,565.03

FFBT Balance	\$77,566.51
Restricted Funds	— \$46,565.03
Unrestricted Funds	\$31,001.48

Kathy said that the only income for this period was the \$100 from longtime member Kay Reimbold. She expressed appreciation to Kay for her continuing support and enjoyed her participation in the October meeting. Activities and expenditures pertaining to the trail extension are addressed previously in the minutes.

Char moved for approval of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Joan seconded the motion, and the motion carried

Report of Preliminary Planning for May 23, 2026 Event

Steve said on November 3 Kathy provided the Town of North Judson a status report and images showing progress on the one-mile trail extension. She outlined plans for a 5K Run and 3K Walk in North Judson to help support a Grand Opening. The Town identified Saturday of Memorial Day Weekend as the preferred event date. Town Superintendent, Joe Leszek, informed us the Town would donate \$800 to sponsor our race timer. Steve said the PTC owes a debt of gratitude to the Town for financial and personal support of our trail initiatives. Also, with this support, he believes the PTC can reasonably stage a May 23 event regardless of whether the CVC approves our pending grant application.

On November 10, Todd Henderlong of T&H Timing wrote to inform the PTC that, as a past customer, our organization would get "first choice" for a 2026 event. Steve responded by expressing interest in a May 23 date and asking about the price for timing. Todd wrote that the price would be \$850, the same as last year, and that he would reserve the May 23 date for us. He asked the PTC to sign a race agreement and return it to him at our first convenience.

CVC 2025 Grant Application Update

Following input from Officers and Board Members, a grant application seeking financial support for a 5K Run/3K Walk was mailed to the Starke County Convention and Visitors Commission on October 23. The CVC sent an email stating that it intended to announce grant recipients by November 15.

Panhandle Pathway Signage for S-17 Backroads Collaboration Update

For two collaboration signs with the Panhandle Pathway located near CR 700 East, the PTC requested and obtained Indiana 811 clearance from two of three companies. But Buckeye Pipeline inspected the sites and said both signs would be near active pipelines. Buckeye said the PTC could move forward only upon giving 48 hours notice so that an employee can observe digging.

Rick Vlaming and Steve met onsite on November 6. Rick subsequently designed and built the last elements for sign posts. He and Steve were scheduled to meet onsite with John Rangel on November 15 to review and make any adjustments to sign placements needed to avoid damage to pipelines and assure public safety.

Update on Gate Segment Replacement at Starke County 600 East

Russ said Reinhart Welding & Repair has not moved forward to fabricate and replace the stolen gate element and powder coat and install the gate. He added that the company assured him it would begin work within a week.

Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Update

Bob Albert said HVRM members were "resting up for the Santa Trains" which will begin on November 22 and run through December 20. This year a new record was set with nearly 3,500 passengers enjoying the Pumpkin Trains.

Trail Counters Review

Joan distributed copies of the PTC trail counters review. She provided an interesting comparison between the TRAFx counter and the trail camera that focused upon sampling dates September 1 (Labor Day) and September 24. These dates confirmed that at US Highway 35 both the counter numbers and camera images are good gauges of what is on the ground—though numbers are somewhat under-reported. Sometimes the counter failed to include a trail use shown on camera, and sometimes the camera showed a use not counted. To be noted is this site has the lowest numbers among the three counters. Steve suggested in contrast to areas near North Judson, and to some extent for the area near the southeastern trailhead, the trail immediately east of US 35 is not frequented by many walkers. Also note the category “walkers” includes runners.

September 1, 2025

Time	Counter Number	Camera Number	Objects
7:00 am	1	1	1 bike
8:00 am	5	7	4 bikes, 3 walkers
9:00 am	5	5	2 bikes, 3 walkers
10:00 am	4	3	3 bikes
11:00 am	5	4	2 bikes, 2 walkers
12:00 pm	7	3	3 bikes
1:00 pm	11	5	5 bikes
2:00 pm	0	0	0
3:00 pm	2	2	2 bikes
4:00 pm	1	1	1 bike
5:00 pm	6	6	1 bike, 3 walkers, 1 skateboard, 1 scooter
6:00 pm	2	9	6 walkers, 1 skateboard
7:00 pm	0	0	0
TOTAL	49	47	

September 14, 2025

2:00 am	1	1	1 bike
3:00 am	0	0	0
4:00 am	0	0	0
5:00 am	0	0	0
6:00 am	0	1	1 bike
7:00 am	2	2	2 bikes
8:00 am	0	0	0
9:00 am	0	0	0
10:00 am	1	2	2 bikes

11:00 am	7	7	7 bikes
12:00 am	8	6	6 bikes
1:00 pm	1	1	1 bike
2:00 pm	5	5	5 bikes
3:00 pm	8	5	5 bikes
4:00 pm	3	3	3 bikes
5:00 pm	0	0	0
6:00 pm	0	0	0
7:00 pm	0	0	0
8:00 pm	0	0	0
9:00 pm	0	0	0
10:00 pm	1	0	0
TOTAL	39	33	

Joan recommended that the PTC perform further ground-truthing. Kathy agreed to assist her.

Peg Stalbrink said she was confronted at one of the bazaars by an individual asserting that no one used the Erie Trail, and it was a waste of taxpayer money. Projections based on counters reflect 2025 annual usage east of US 35 at 4,140 persons, CR 800 South at 6,502 persons, and CR 250 West at 13,933 persons. Before placement of the counters, an estimate was that 8,000 persons were using the trail annually. The number has risen since. 80% of the funding for trail expansion comes after successful competitive grant applications to the State or the Federal Government. The issue when a grant application is made is not whether to spend the very limited grant funding available for trails, but whether it is to be spent in Starke County or elsewhere. The other 20% of funding comes almost exclusively from private donations, labor of volunteers, and membership dues. Joan's efforts with monitoring the trail counters underline the usage of the Erie Trail and of non-motorized trails generally.

Report of RTC TrailNation Summit and Trail Tourism Tool Kit

On behalf of the PTC, Steve and Kathy participated in the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's TrailNation Summit held October 27 through October 29 in Cleveland and virtually during its Trail Tourism Tool Kit discussion held earlier on November 13. The TrailNation Summit focused on strategies and innovations to accelerate development of connected trail and active transportation networks. The event highlighted the Great American Rail-Trail but not to the exclusion of other trails. The Trail Tourism Tool Kit focused on advancing communities that can benefit from trail extensions in terms of economic development, better health, and quality of life.

No PTC or public funding was used for participation in the two events. Steve and Kathy paid the costs associated with travel, accommodations, and attendance at the TrailNation Summit. Costs associated with the virtual Trail Tourism Tool Kit discussion were paid by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

The TrailNation Summit drew about 400 advocates and stakeholders from 40 States to its sessions and workshops. Concepts for trail user safety were among those discussed, and models from other trails might help the Erie Trail and soon-to-be Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail. Some of these concepts may be considered at future PTC meetings.

Supplies of the 5,000 PTC brochures printed three years ago, and which were designed and executed in large part by Susan Byer and Yancy Lucas, are now nearly exhausted. A Nebraska trail group brought to the TrailNation Summit a pocket-sized fold-up trail brochure that has images and brief descriptions of several native wild animals. With the need to develop new brochures along the Erie Trail and soon-to-be Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail, the pocket fold-up brochure drew interest. There are concerns that a brochure using the Nebraska model may be cost prohibitive, and Diane Blais reflected that its brochure was for a trail hundreds of miles long, unlike our soon-to-be twelve-mile long trail. Reference was made to Marty Lucas's research and photography along and near the Erie Trail that has identified 1,000 wild plant and animal species, some of which are endangered or threatened. If he would allow the PTC to include images of a few of these species in a new brochure, an informative and attractive document could result. The Nebraska model might blend with or augment the PTC brochures now in circulation. Char took the fold-up brochure with her to explore costs and what is technically feasible.



Images by K. Lucas

With respect to the Trail Tourism Tool Kit, the PTC is already speaking informally with the Town of North Judson. Experience at other towns adjacent to trail systems is that there are needs for improved wayfinding signage, both to get trail travelers to town amenities, and for local businesses and public services such as libraries and police departments to be aware of the proximity and needs of travelers to them.

Renewal of SSL Certificate

PTC webmaster Steve Antisdal wrote on November 11 he is renewing our SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) Certificate. The certificate is a digital credential verifying website identity and enabling encrypted connections for secure data transmissions. It protects sensitive information like login credentials and credit card numbers from interception. Included elements are registrant information, a public server key, and a unique serial number.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for Wednesday, December 10, 2025 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. Members plan to bring items for a Holiday celebration.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:55 p.m., CT (7:55 p.m., ET).