

# MEETING MINUTES OF PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.

## North Judson Town Park and Videoconference

August 27, 2020

### MEMBERS

Tabitha Balzer  
Diane Blais  
Russell Blais  
Paul Byer  
Linda Byer  
Joan Hardesty  
Carolla Heilstedt  
Kathy Lucas  
Steve Lucas  
Anita McMillin  
Brian McMillin  
Rhonda Milner  
Sharon Smead  
Peggy Stalbrink  
Richard Stalbrink  
Rick Vlaming  
Larry Wickert

### GUESTS

Bob Albert, HVRM Liaison  
Mary Perren, Constellation of Starke  
Rich Vallicelli

### Call to Order by President and Introductions

Carolla Heilstedt, President, called to order a meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") at 6:06 pm, CDT (7:06 pm, EDT) on August 27, 2020. The attendees introduced themselves.

### Review and Approval of July 27, 2020 Membership Meeting Minutes

Diane Blais moved to approve the draft minutes without amendments as the final minutes of the July 27, 2020 meeting. Rhonda Miller seconded the motion. The motion carried.

### Proposed Trailhead at Starke County Roads 450 East and 210 (Bass Lake)

Carolla introduced Mary Perren and thanked her for attending. She said Mary serves in dual roles as Starke County Highway Department Office Manager and as Constellation of Starke Program Facilitator.

Mary said she was pleased to meet with PTC members as stakeholders in the development of a Bass Lake trailhead for service to residents and visitors in this important recreational area. She outlined the history of the Stellar Communities initiative and Starke County's participation. The trailhead is one of four sites in Starke County where a facility is being

developed with an award as a Stellar Communities finalist. The trailhead would include restrooms, parking facilities, and wayfinding signage. She said the primary purposes of her presentation were to obtain feedback on the proposed trailhead and suggestions to improve the project.

Russ Blais referenced two PTC benches, one underwritten by Rick and Mary Vlaming with Diane and him, and the second underwritten by Brian and Anita McMillin. He said the PTC membership approved usage of these at the proposed trailhead if the Constellation of Starke is interested. Russ said the two benches were previously offered for use at the trailhead and asked whether there was a decision. Mary answered the Constellation of Starke was “very interested” in using the benches at the trailhead, accepted the offer, and added that she was “very appreciative of the offer”.

Kathy Lucas said public access to potable water was lacking on the existing trail system. Neither the Erie Trail nor the four Connectors that have been approved by the Stake County Commissioners have a place to get a drink or fill a water bottle. She said it would be of significant benefit if the trailhead could include a water bottle station. Mary said she expected the trailhead would have water and connect to the Bass Lake Conservancy District sewage collection system so it would be feasible. She thought Kathy offered a great concept and would share it with the Constellation of Starke workgroup.

Rich Vallicelli said the proposed trailhead was not on the Erie Trail, and connectivity to the Erie Trail was not understood at Bass Lake. He said there needed to be signs placed to inform the public. Steve Lucas responded the route between the proposed trailhead and the main stem of the Erie Trail includes share-the-road signage placed in a cooperative project between the PTC and the Starke County Highway Department. This signage is a recognition that the Starke County Commissioners approved, as S-13, the roads from the site of the proposed trailhead to the Erie Trail (Starke County 450 East and Starke County 800 South). In addition, the route is shown on PTC trail brochures and its website. But he agreed more was needed. Steve said he has spoken with Mary and Starke County Highway Superintendent, Rik Ritzler, about enhanced wayfinding signage. A private donor has expressed possible interest in assisting with the design and possible location of signs. Signage could extend south to the Erie Trail and might also extend north past Bass Lake to Knox and potentially north of Knox.

Rich Vallicelli said he understood the need for motor vehicle parking at the trailhead to support trail usage and to augment boaters using the DNR access site to the northwest. He doubted the need for golf cart parking and suggested it be eliminated from design plans. Mary asked if golf carts can lawfully drive on the Erie Trail. Bruce Fingerhut and other PTC members responded the trail was restricted to non-motorized vehicles, but with limited exceptions for emergency or maintenance vehicles and as required to comply with the ADA. Kathy added that as a condition to obtaining state and federal funding for the existing Erie Trail, and for the trail extension now in progress, these limitations are required. Mary said she would convey the comments to persons designing the trailhead.

## Report of Workgroup for Southeast Trail Extension

Carolla provided an update on progress with the two-mile extension of the Erie Trail southeast of US 35. She said in an August 20 letter, Jonathon Geels, Landscape Architect and Project Manager for the Troyer Group, provided the report for Project NLT-01-07. The report stated the design phase is 62% completed, and we are on schedule to meet our timeline obligations.

She said IDEM Rule 5 review has begun, as well as review with the Starke County Surveyor who is responsible for drainage. Structural design for the Bartee Ditch bridge is underway with details anticipated in early September.

Carolla said she has been in contact with the Troyer Group and the DNR with respect to the trail surface. We are expecting to bid 4” inches of aggregate with 2” of asphalt, but will likely use 3” of asphalt if bidding is favorable. The DNR reflected it would consider gravel/limestone screenings if bidding costs are more than anticipated. There will be a direct connection with the existing trail at US 35. INDOT suggested a “piano key” style pavement marking for the highway crossing.

Carolla said that in his August 20 letter, Jonathon Geels also indicated the Troyer Group needed to “confirm location and number of proposed benches for placement in plans.” To satisfy our contract with DNR, the benches need to be ADA accessible. She said that from conversations with Jonathon, her understanding is the benches from our lids-to-benches initiative will likely comply if they are reasonably connected by a hard surface at nearly the elevation of the asphalt trail. She said she believed we were progressing well considering our COVID-19 challenges. The Troyer Group provided an informative and encouraging report this time, and its billing seems consistent with where we should be.

Russ asked if the DNR has said our deadline on the trail expansion would be extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She responded that we have received no indication it would.

Steve suggested the membership inform the Troyer Group there are to be two benches on the trail, one located near Starke County Road 600 East and the other near Starke County Road 700 East. We wish to use benches from our lids-to-benches initiative. In addition, we wish to include bike racks in the same vicinities. Bruce offered this suggestion in the form of a motion for approval by the membership. Brian McMillin seconded the motion. The motion carried.

Steve said that on August 23, John Bawcum, President of the Friends of the Panhandle Pathway, emailed “a suggestion for your people working on the trail extension.... When you review the plans for the construction east of [US Highway] 35, be sure the following is included in the work:

- 1 Before any prep work or paving is done, cut all trees back 20 feet to flush ground level from both edges of the new proposed trail area and apply TORDON to remaining tree stumps.
- 2 Trench down 2 feet along the proposed trail edge and apply TORDON to both ends of the exposed tree roots.

This prep work will be an added upfront cost but will help keep the tree root bumps from appearing for many years to come. We know. We did it the hard and expensive way—after the trail was down.

Paul Byer agreed Tordon is an effective chemical to control of unwanted vegetation and would be suitable for usage along the trail in some circumstances. “Tordon” is the brand name of a product manufactured by Dow AgroSciences containing a powerful herbicide known as “Picloram”. He said it would be helpful to know bidding expectations for the pre-construction treatment of vegetation along the two-mile trail extension.

Bruce said in development of the plans for the existing segments of the Erie Trail, there was an effort to cause minimal damage to natural vegetation. Our experience tells us that going forward we need to be conscious of the damage that can be caused by the roots of large trees growing near the asphalt, particularly the roots of cottonwoods.

Linda Byer said the strategy in the last two or three years has been to cut back vegetation of all types within five feet of the edge of the trail. She said there are important native species along portions of the Erie Trail, and she believed a set-back of 20 feet would be “a little excessive”. As for invasive species, however, control efforts extend beyond a five-foot setback. The Panhandle Pathway borders mostly agricultural or urban areas along US Highway 35 and might present a somewhat different circumstance than for much of the Erie Trail.

Sharon Smead asked whether the five-foot setback applied just to the asphalt trail or to the equestrian trail as well. Linda answered that it applied to both.

Carolla said she appreciated that John Bawcum shared his thoughts. The grant for the two-mile trail extension seems “pretty tight” and might not allow us to do much more than the minimum in terms of pre-construction vegetation treatment. But we should be sensitive during the trail extension as to the location of trees, particularly cottonwoods, and would be well-served if we can minimize the future impact along the trail extension.

### Developments Pertaining to HVRM and Possible Northwest Trail Extension

Kathy said she received a call from Todd Flanagin, President of the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Inc. (“HVRM”), on the morning of August 17. He asked her if the PTC could speak favorably to the North Judson Town Council about the possibility that railroad ownership northwest of North Judson could be donated to the HVRM. She said the conversation was quite cordial. Kathy told Todd she believed the PTC could be supportive and hoped that HVRM would support an easement within a transferred right-of-way for the extension of an asphalt bike and pedestrian trail. Todd said he believed right-of-way was sufficient for both an excursion railroad and a trail and would support inclusion of such an easement. She and Todd agreed HVRM ownership with a trail easement to English Lake was a great possibility, but having this status extend to the Town of LaCrosse would present better options for tourism and HVRM’s long-term financial success.

A few minutes after her conversation with Todd Flanagin, Kathy emailed the PTC Board members to seek their thoughts and to inform them of the Town Council meeting if they wished to attend. The email indicated she and Steve planned to attend the meeting to support “in concept the transfer to HVRM of the rail line to English Lake, asking that they preserve space for a potential trail at the same time.” She expected Todd would suggest the rail transfer to HVRM with an easement “go all the way to LaCrosse.... That would be a boost toward the connectivity to the northwest that we seek.” Carolla responded to the email by writing “I’m in support of this.”

Kathy said that both she and Steve voiced support during the August 17 Town Council for transfer to HVRM of the railroad right-of-way northwest of North Judson. During the meeting, there was discussion about the merits of a transfer ending at English Lake or perhaps extending to LaCrosse. We asked that an easement be maintained in the space for an extension of the “Erie Trail” (by that name or some other). As WKVI reported on August 22, HVRM President Todd Flanagin agreed there was room for a trail to run along the existing tracks. We spoke of the potential tourism benefits a viable excursion railroad and trail to LaCrosse could provide. Town Council President John Rowe said he did not want the concept of the trail extension to “fall between the cracks.”

Also of potential significance to a northwest trail extension, the DNR Division of Outdoor Recreation announced on August 21, a change to “the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) that will benefit grant awardees.” DNR reflected that “By partnering with INDOT, federal RTP funds will be exchanged for state funds. The new grant program is called the Indiana Trails Program (ITP). The switch to state funds will streamline grant processes for awardees to make their projects more cost and time effective. This allows for the grant money to build more trails with the same funds in a shorter time period.” The Indiana Greenways Foundation also communicated this change to the PTC on August 27.

### Report of Maintenance Committee

Paul provided an update on contracting to remove large cottonwood trees with roots that are buckling asphalt on the Erie Trail. The problem is extensive and expensive to control. During the July 27 membership meeting, Paul was authorized to spend up to \$1,000 to contract for service to remove two trees near Aldine. He reported he has since spoken with C & J Affordable Tree Service with a commitment to spend \$900. The two trees to be removed are located between Starke County Roads 125 East and 200 East.

Linda reported that they have not expended the \$400 amount authorized for chemical treatments of plants along the trail. Although there are annual weeds, such as foxtail (Setaria), the hot, dry conditions this mid-summer have generally suppressed plant growth, so this expenditure of money and labor is unwarranted.

### Report on Treatment of Buckeye Pipeline Markings on Erie Trail

Kathy said she had pursued failed efforts to have Buckeye Pipeline remove or cover 16 recently painted markings on the Erie Trail asphalt. These markings invited additional graffiti and sometimes had directional arrows which could be confusing to travelers.

At Bruce’s suggestion, Kathy sent an August 3 letter to T. Andy Baldwin in the company’s Lake County office. She said that he responded promptly and courteously. At Baldwin’s direction, the recent markings, as well as a few older ones, have received rectangular black coatings. She said she thanked Baldwin by email but wanted to also express publicly the membership’s appreciation for his responsiveness.

The first two images below are illustrative of painted markings as they appeared in June. The third image is typical of a marking following remediation in August. The first and third image were taken at Starke County Road 400 East.





Images by Kathy Lucas

## **Review and Approval of Treasurer's Report & Restricted/Unrestricted Funds**

Kathy circulated copies of the Treasurer's Report for the period from July 27, 2020 through August 27, 2020. She expressed special appreciation for the generous continued support that has been given by the Luminous Foundation. She thanked Brian and Anita McMillin for underwriting a bench, and Larry Wickert, Joe Milausnic, and Kay Reibold for annual dues accompanied by donations. She also thanked Chris and Tabitha Balzer, Yancy Lucas and Nadia Corral Frias for their annual membership renewals.

Kathy said at the request of the Northern Indiana Community Foundation, PTC funds which it held have been transferred to First Farmers Bank & Trust. Kathy said she spoke with Jessica Martinović, Director of Development for the Foundation in Starke County, who said it had agreed to hold the funding for the PTC before we gained IRS 501(c)(3) not-for-profit status. The PTC is now authorized by state and federal governments to serve as a charitable organization, and the need no longer exists. Kathy said having our funds in a single account will simplify our finances. She said Jessica anticipates that the excellent working partnership between the Foundation and the PTC will continue. The text of the Treasurer's Report follows:



**Treasurer's Report  
August 27, 2020**

<u>FIRST FARMERS BANK &amp; TRUST (FFBT)</u>	<u>Balance</u>
<b>Balance forward from 7/27/20</b>	<b>\$79,122.73</b>
 <b><u>INCOME</u></b>	
8/5/20 Donation from Luminous Fund <i>2020 Grant Award</i>	5,000.00
8/5/20 Brian & Anita McMillin <i>Bench at 450E &amp; CR 210 Trail Head</i>	350.00
8/24/20 Transfer of balance in NICF Account <i>Per discussions with J. Martinovic</i>	3,915.28
8/24/20 Larry Wickert <i>Dues for 2019-20</i>	50.00
8/24/20 Joe Milausnic <i>Dues &amp; donation</i>	50.00
8/24/20 Kay Reibold <i>Dues &amp; donation</i>	100.00
8/24/20 Y. Lucas/N. Corral Frias/T. & C. Balzer <i>Dues for 4 members</i>	<u>100.00</u>
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>9,565.28</b>
 <b><u>EXPENSES</u></b>	
-0-	-0-
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<u>-0-</u>
<b>Ending FFBT balance as of 8/27/20</b>	<b>\$88,688.01</b>

/s/Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer

Kathy then reviewed PTC Restricted/Unrestricted funds. She said the new Luminous Grant 4 would join the Mitchel-Kane grant tentatively earmarked as match for northwest extension of the trail but could be reassigned if the extension does not materialize.





persons to select officers and board members, as well as to join in the decision-making of our organization.

## **Report of Mid-America Trails and Greenways (MATAG) Virtual Conference and Scheduling of Annual Greenways Foundation of Indiana Virtual Luncheon**

Tabitha said she attended the Mid America Trails And Greenways (“MATAG”) 2020 Virtual Conference held on August 18 and hosted by the Greenways Foundation of Indiana. MATAG includes greenway and blueway advocates from Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin. Members include decision-makers from government agencies, non-profits, and industry leaders who develop and manage trails. Tabitha said the PTC is not unique with its challenge to provide trail maintenance. This challenge was a major topic during the MATAG Luncheon.

Tabitha reminded our membership that the Annual Indiana Greenways Foundation Virtual Luncheon is set for Thursday, September 24, 2020 at 11:00 a.m., CDT (12:00 noon, EDT). The Greenways Foundation helped promote successfully the concept of a caucus within the Indiana General Assembly to address trail issues, including financing and maintenance. This effort was spearheaded within the General Assembly by Rep. Carey Hamilton who will be honored during the Virtual Luncheon for work in establishing the “Indiana Legislative Trails Caucus”. Other members of the bipartisan caucus include Rep. Anthony Cook, Sen. Dennis Kruse, and Sen. Eddie Melton. Information regarding the Greenways Foundation Virtual luncheon is available at [greenwaysfoundation.org](http://greenwaysfoundation.org).

## **Consideration of Sale of PTC Toro Lawn Mower**

Bruce reported the Board of Directors met on June 30 and discussed a possible agreement with an individual to store our Toro TimeCutter HD MyRide mower. The individual would use the mower primarily on the western third of the Erie Trail. As a consideration for storing the mower, he would be authorized to also use it at his residence. The Board drafted a document with a proposed agreement but did not receive a favorable response.

Carolla observed that generally the mower “doesn’t serve our needs for use” on the Erie Trail. It has been used sporadically west of Starke County Road 100 West, but for the six miles to the east, a ten-foot wide equestrian trail makes usage unfeasible. The two-mile southeast trail extension will also include an equestrian trail.

Bruce said, “We can’t use it on the horse trail. It gets stuck in the sand.” Linda said that a heavy mower like the Toro can be operated if two tires are kept on the asphalt, but the result is a mowing width that is much less than the ten feet expected for the equestrian trail.

Carolla added that another organization has now embraced a regular initiative for mowing from the rest park at Indiana Highway 10 to the North Judson trailhead. The organization emailed us that it has made arrangements other than use of the Toro for this purpose.

Bruce said the PTC bought the Toro mower for \$5,487 on May 31, 2018 from Heinhold and Feller in LaCrosse. The mower has since had usage and has depreciated, but it is in good condition and continues to have significant value. He suggested the mower be sold and proceeds retained by the PTC.

Steve said when purchased the Toro mower was easily the largest expenditure made from PTC funds. He said it reflected on the organization's understanding that maintenance of the Erie Trail was a priority. He moved that the Maintenance Committee, through Bruce, Paul, and Linda, be authorized to sell the Toro mower. Proceeds from the sale would be delivered to the PTC's treasury and dedicated to a maintenance purpose. Russ seconded the motion. The motion carried.

### Proposal for Plaque to Honor Pioneer Erie Trail Proponents

Brian proposed that a plaque or plaques be placed on the trail to honor the pioneer Erie Trail proponents. He suggested Bruce, Rhonda, Marty Lucas and Corinne Becknell Lucas be identified. Rhonda said Brian and Anita McMillin should also be included. Bruce added that the acknowledgement could be made and the plaque shown at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the two mile extension.

### Proposal for Fundraiser

Joan Hardesty presented an idea and presented materials at the meeting for a possible PTC fundraiser. The idea was tabled to allow time for membership to review and provide feedback. Carolla thanked Joan for bringing the idea to the membership.

### Informal Update on HVRM Activities

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Liaison to the PTC, said that probably the most notable recent HVRM initiative was its effort to assume ownership of the railroad northwest of North Judson as discussed previously in the meeting.

Bob said the HVRM "has been running on a very limited schedule" due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of labor is required for a few train rides. Events have been scheduled one day a month this summer. Public interest has not waned with two-a-day trips sold out. "Unfortunately, we've sometimes had to turn away people in order to accomplish social distancing." He said that there were three trips scheduled for September 5 and two for October 3.

### Informal Update from Starke County Economic Development Foundation

Larry Wickert, who is the Executive Director of the Starke County Economic Development Foundation, reported on activities pertinent to the PTC. He said he has spoken with HVRM representatives, and they have an interest in the railroad crossing at English Lake. The bridge over the Kankakee River could be a very popular attraction with a footbridge that includes a bump out and a reviewing platform. Although costs would be challenging, the concept seems feasible, particularly if there is participation by LaPorte County. The footbridge could form an element of the main stem trail going northwest.

Larry said there is interest in improving access to the Kankakee River and Yellow River for kayaking and canoeing. The Starke County Park Board is scheduled to meet September 15, and Steve and Kathy will present the PTC perspective to the Board. Possibilities for new or improved access sites exist in English Lake (where DNR already has a functional access on the Yellow River), at Knox, and northeast of Knox toward the Marshall County

line. Public lands are located along Range Road where it crosses the Yellow River, but there does not currently seem to be enough land for a full access site. The Starke County Commissioners have funded a study to better understand these blue trail options.

Larry reported interest in advancing public art to augment the interpretive painting of the otters and sandhill cranes in North Judson. Anthony Brooks painted this mural, is now in Indiana, and is interested in carrying forward. Two possible sites are the ruins of the creamery adjacent to Main Street in North Judson and of the signal bungalow north of the Erie Trail and just east of Starke County Road 200 East. Bob Albert said the HVRM Board has endorsed the idea of Anthony doing paintings at either these sites. Larry said he would continue to communicate with Anthony about these projects.

### Preparations for September 19 Workday

Linda suggested relocating the September 19 workday from the prior stated location to the Erie Trail between Starke County Road 700 South and Starke County Road 125 East in Aldine. She said the prior location has been the site of previous workdays, and there is need west of Aldine where the bordering vegetation is “kind of closing in”. This trail segment is dominated by invasive species. The membership agreed to the relocation.

Linda said she would focus her attention on an established population of tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). This invasive species will require special chemical applications and is difficult to eradicate. Tree of heaven is resistant to ordinary control methods, can be confused with native species such as sumac, and ordinary controls are likely to cause the plant to spread.

Linda said she encourages the participants to focus on two other invasive plants: bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera maackii*) and Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*). The invasive ability of bush honeysuckle may in part be due to biochemical effects on surrounding plants, a rapid growth rate, and a tolerance of moderate shade to outcompete neighboring plants for sunlight. Siberian elm is an invasive species found from central Mexico northward across the eastern and central United States to Ontario, Canada. Wikipedia states the species is “found in abundance along railroads and in abandoned lots and on disturbed ground. The gravel along railroad beds provides ideal conditions for its growth: well-drained, nutrient poor soil, and high light conditions; these beds provide corridors which facilitate its spread.” Because the species has high sunlight requirements, it does not typically invade mature forests. There are large numbers of both bush honeysuckle and Siberian elm along this portion of the Erie Trail.

On the other hand, native plant species are present that deserve protection. North of the trail and just west of Starke County Road 125 East is a colony of wild plum, also called “American plum” (*Prunus americana*). According to the Morton Arboretum, wild plum “is a small, fast-growing, short-lived, colony-forming native tree, commonly found along fencerows, open fields, and roadsides. Abundant tiny white flowers open before the leaves emerge in spring.” Small plums may appear in late summer. According to Swink and Wilhelm’s *Plants of the Chicago Region*, the species is native to our area. On the next page is an image by Kathy from May 2020 when the wild plum trees at Starke County Road 125 East were in bloom.



Focusing during the workday on three identifiable invasive species (tree of heaven, bush honeysuckle and Siberian elm) will help assure that unintended damage is not done to our native species.

### Membership Meeting Scheduled for September 24

The next meeting of the PTC membership was scheduled for Thursday, September 24, 2020 at 5:30 p.m., CDT (6:30 p.m., EDT) at a shelter house in the North Judson Town Park.

### Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:51 p.m., CDT (8:51 p.m., EDT).