

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

**LaCrosse Public Library
307 East Main Street (Indiana Highway 8)
LaCrosse, Indiana**

December 15, 2021

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Russell Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Joan Hardesty
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Bruce McDonald
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Deb Mix
Suzanne Morrow
Sharon Smead
Peggy Stalbrink
Richard Stalbrink
Kirt Verhagen
Larry Wickert

GUESTS

Justin Kiel, President of LaCrosse Town Council and Newspaper Editor

Call to Order by Secretary

Steve Lucas, Secretary, called to order a meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. (“PTC”) on December 15, 2021 in the LaCrosse Public Library at 5:39 pm, CST (6:39 pm, EST). He said PTC President Carolla Heilstedt was unable to attend, and PTC Vice President Rhonda Milner would arrive while the meeting was in progress.

Steve introduced Justin Kiel, President of the LaCrosse Town Council and Editor of southern LaPorte County’s *Regional News*. He said PTC members have met regularly with Justin on initiatives directed to or supportive of a trail extension from North Judson to LaCrosse, including the Kankakee River site view on August 31. For more information on the site view, please see *Meeting Minutes* of September 23, 2021, p. 5. Steve thanked Justin for joining us for the first PTC meeting outside Starke County. He also thanked Peggy and Rich Stalbrink for arranging the room reservation in the library and serving as our Holiday meeting hosts. He said was he looking forward to working with Justin as we move forward on the trail initiative and to our celebration of the season immediately after the meeting. Self-introductions were made around the table.



December 15, 2021 Membership Meeting in the LaCrosse Public Library. In the left image from left to right facing, Paul Byer, Richard Stalbrink, Peg Stalbrink, Brian McMillin and Anita McMillin and opposite Sharon Smead. In the right image from left to right Justin Kiel, Larry Wickert, Russell Blais, Diane Blais, and Steve Lucas. Images by Kathy Lucas

Review and Approval of Membership Minutes of November 16, 2021

Paul Byer moved to approve the minutes of the November 16, 2021 membership meeting without amendment. Kirt Verhagen seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Report of Board of Directors Organizational and Annual Meeting

The Board of Directors assembled earlier in the evening for its Organizational and Annual Meeting. Board Members present were Kirt Verhagen, Diane Blais, Larry Wickert, Peg Stalbrink and Steve Lucas. Also present was Treasurer Kathy Lucas. Steve was elected Chair and Peg Vice Chair. Carolla was re-elected Secretary. After the members review and approve the Board minutes, they will be circulated to the membership.

Review and Approval of Treasurer’s Report

Kathy Lucas provided written copies of the Treasurer’s Report as follows:



**Treasurer’s Report
December 15, 2021
*LaCrosse Public Library***

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

Balance forward from 11/16/21 **\$334,251.16**

INCOME

11/16/21	Amazon Smile Donation (from % of purchases)	\$5.75
12/06/21	Peggy Stalbrink & Diane Blais <i>(Sale of crafts & baked goods @ Chesapeake Bazaar)</i>	231.00

communicating with Lisa Herber, DNR Grants Coordinator, on achieving consensus with respect to punch list items which were identified during the October 22 trail extension discussion.

Bruce McDonald asked the cost of the two-mile southeast extension. Although the actual cost cannot be determined until accounting is completed by the PTC and approved by the State of Indiana, the cost stated in Exhibit B of the Grant Agreement was \$490,888.18. Bruce said he read recently that a typical asphalt bicycle trail costs about \$1,000,000 a half-mile.

Report of Northwest Trail Extension Workgroup

Larry Wickert asked if workgroup participants have been named who would pursue a trail extension from Main Street in North Judson to State Road 8 in LaCrosse. Steve said he did not recall the status of membership but would check prior minutes and emails to help identify persons who have been active in the effort. He said he would name them in the draft minutes. When the draft minutes are emailed to PTC members and friends, he would also invite others to join the workgroup.

After checking prior minutes and emails, the following persons were identified as having been active with discussions of the northwest trail extension: Russ Blais, Bruce Fingerhut, Carolla Heilstedt, Kathy Lucas, Steve Lucas, Brian McMillin, Max Rehlander, Kirt Verhagen, Larry Wickert and Sharon Smead. This list is intended to address primarily the segment of the proposed trail from North Judson to the center of a bridge over the Kankakee River at English Lake. The list is shared with the understanding others may be interested and that some of the persons identified may no longer wish to participate.

Justin Kiel outlined the opportunities and challenges posed by the project. An important opportunity is provided by the Trail Easement Agreement issued by the Northern Indiana Railroad LLC in favor of the PTC. Copies of the document have been recorded both in LaPorte and Starke Counties. But the document does not provide an opportunity for an easement northwest of LaPorte County Road 875 West. For the trail to enter the LaCrosse Town limits, an additional agreement or agreements must be achieved. There are other challenges for building or rehabilitating a bridge over the Kankakee River at English Lake.

Larry reflected there are issues for trail extension within the Town of North Judson. Kathy said these might be addressed by a memorandum of understanding for usage in the former rail corridor within town among the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum, the Town of North Judson, the Northern Indiana Railroad LLC, and the PTC. Kirt concurred and said he believed a discussion should be scheduled among these entities.

Justin suggested the greatest challenge was to obtain funding sufficient for the nine-mile corridor between North Judson and LaCrosse. In August, Max Rehlander inspected the two former railroad bridges at English Lake. Focusing on the former C&O Railroad Bridge, Max provided an Engineer's Opinion of Probable Costs estimating the total project at \$3,714,600 (LaPorte County portion at \$1,953,000 and Starke County portion at \$1,761,600).

Russ reflected the Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge might offer an appealing alternative to the C&O Railroad Bridge. Unlike the C&O bridge, the Pennsylvania bridge does not serve an active railroad. Also, the GIS suggests the DNR owns the Pennsylvania bridge, and DNR might concur in its use for the trail. Russ has tried to clarify with DNR whether

it owns the Pennsylvania bridge, but the effort has so far been unsuccessful. Also, the Trail Easement Agreement between the Northern Indiana Railroad and the PTC does not apply, and access to the Pennsylvania bridge would also have to be acquired.

The membership discussed an appropriate name for the trail if extended between North Judson and LaCrosse. The former Erie Railroad did not cross the Kankakee River at English Lake but rather it crossed the river three miles west near Horseshoe Bend and in the vicinity of Wilders. Using the name "Erie Trail" would be historically inaccurate and possibly confusing. Kirt had previously suggested using the name "Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail" (or perhaps it might be abbreviated as "GKM Trail") reflecting its unique geographic and historic context.

Branding, Identity and Continuity ("BIC") Committee Report

The BIC Committee met by ZOOM on December 9. Committee members are Russ, Linda, Susan Byer, Carolla, Kathy, Steve, Yancy Lucas, Bruce McDonald, Suzanne Morrow, Kirt, Brian and Deb. The PTC is particularly pleased that Susan and Yancy have agreed to again lend their expertise to updating the Erie Trail map and brochure.

These topics within BIC Committee authority were considered:

- (1) Updating the "2016 Erie Trail Future Vision" with a Five Year Future Vision Beginning in 2022
- (2) Development of New Signage and Modified Connectors.
- (3) Update of Map and Publication of a Revised Erie Trail Brochure
- (4) Refinement of the Prairie Trails Club Website and Facebook Page

The Committee determined the first priority for action should be presentations to the Starke County Commissioners and to the Town of North Judson for modified or new Connectors. Decisions on Connectors could be made this winter without construction or the immediate placement of signage. These decisions would be precursors to the most efficient development of mapping and You-are-Here signage.

A preliminary draft was distributed for a new Five Year Future Vision. The preliminary draft is limited to text and lacks graphics or images which would be included later. Members of the Committee were invited to offer comments or suggestions to augment or improve the draft. These will be referenced in a second draft scheduled to be circulated among Committee members shortly after January 7.

Informal Review of HVRM Activities

Linda and Paul reported on a successful year for the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum. Despite the COVID 19 pandemic, the Museum set ridership records in October. Receipt of new rolling stock provides dramatic opportunities for its expansion, although well-trained volunteers are needed to fully implement the opportunities. Paul noted that one concept could incorporate bicycle and kayak usage. With conclusion of the Santa Trains on December 18, HVRM ticketed events will pause until March.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, February 22, 2022 at 5:30 pm, CST (6:30 pm, EST) in North Judson. The exact location will be announced later.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:26 p.m., CDT (7:26 p.m., EDT). Following adjournment members and friends enjoyed a Holiday celebration including delicious treats.