

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

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

**May 14, 2025**

**MEMBERS**

**Linda Byer  
Paul Byer  
Kathleen Lucas  
Steve Lucas  
Anita McMillin  
Brian McMillin  
Rhonda Milner  
Kirt Verhagen**

**GUEST**

**Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum**

**Call to Order by President**

On May 14, 2025, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Membership Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake) at 5:35 pm, CT (6:35 pm, ET).

**Review and Approval of Minutes of March 19 and April 23, 2025**

Brian McMillin moved for approval of the minutes of March 19 and April 23, 2025. Rhonda seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

**Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP-23-06**

Kathy Lucas said that she has received two major billings pertaining to tree and brush removal from the northwestern 1/3 of the trail extension. These were from the contractor, Hill Excavating LLC, and from our consulting engineer, Bob Aloï. She has forwarded checks to both, and they are now pending payment at First Farmers Bank and Trust.

Bob Albert, our liaison from the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum, reported its members have taken down four obsolete telegraph poles from the trail extension right-of-way. He said it might be necessary to take down a fifth. PTC members expressed appreciation for this work by the HVRM.

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

Kathy distributed written copies of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds:



**Treasurer's Report  
May 14, 2025**

**FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)**

**Balance from April 23, 2025 (prior meeting)**

**\$115,413.63**

**INCOME**

04/29/25	RunSignup #4	25.00
04/30/25	Donation from Peggy Stalbrink	100.00
04/30/25	Dues and Donation from Joan Hardesty	50.00
05/06/25	RunSignup #5	75.00

**TOTAL INCOME**

**\$250.00**

**EXPENSES**

04/23/25	Check #1195 to Precept Partners (QR code & monitoring)	\$125.00
04/30/25	Check #1196 to Paul Byer (concrete for bench pad reimbursed)	323.46
05/02/25	Check #1194 to Knots & Spots (Jay Albright plaque)	25.00
05/12/25	Check #1198 to Jim Chessor (Mow 1 mile & rest park 4/14&4/26)	400.00

**TOTAL EXPENSES**

**(\$873.46)**

**ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 05/14/26**

**\$114,790.17**

*(Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer)*

**RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 04/23/24**

**TOTAL AMOUNTS  
PER CATEGORY**

**BENCHES**

Blais-Vlaming	Awaiting placement @ Bass Lake Beach	350.00
McMillin	Awaiting placement	<u>350.00</u>
		700.00

**SIGNAGE/WEB**

Luminous Fund	Signs Bass Lake (incl. UR Here)	685.64
Hardesty Mem.	Wayfinding or historic signs	2,423.32
Lucas lakehouse	Future Vision/Website	<u>662.50</u>
		3,771.46

**NW EXTENSION**

PTC Local Match	Trail Extension	10,000.00
NICF Grant	Trail Extension	25,600.00
Rails to Trails	Trail Extension	<u>1,981.05</u>
		37,581.05

### **DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension**

05/15/24	Reimbursement #1	17,589.06
07/19/24	Reimbursement #2	6,077.48.
11/04/24	Reimbursement #3	4,813.85
03/07/25	Reimbursement #4	<u>1,215.50</u>
		29,695.89

### **MAINTENANCE**

Mower fund	Verhagen mowing donation (NICF)	0.00 (less \$200 for mowing)
Hardesty Mem.	Trail Maintenance	394.00 (less \$200 for mowing)
HVRM (Buckeye)	Trail Maintenance	1,788.61
Rich Stalbrink Mem.	Maintenance or most needed	2,699.11
Doral Solar	Bridge/clearing	<u>7,269.48</u>
		12,151.20

### **K/3K 2025 (CVC Grant)**

Grant from CVC	5K/3K & Panhandle connectivity	2,000.00
RunSignup	Registrant payouts	<u>139.45</u> (\$100 new signups)
		2,139.45

**TOTAL RESTRICTED \$86,039.05**

**FFBT Balance \$114,790.17**

**Restricted Funds \$86,039.05**

**Unrestricted Funds \$29,374.58**

Kathy repeated our thanks to the Northern Indiana Community Foundation for giving \$5,000 to the PTC to design, purchase, deliver and place a Starke County bench in honor of Jay Albright upon his retirement. She said Paul took the lead in the final stages of this process, including site delivery and development of the extensive pad needed for ADA compliance. She has spoken to Jay, and he asked her to pass along to the PTC his thanks. During his tenure Jay was a great supporter of our trail development. She said that the NICF donation for this project was deposited with the First Bank and Trust and not treated as a restricted fund because the bench was a secret until announced to Jay by his staff. In large part because of PTC members' uncompensated volunteer efforts, the amount of the NICF gift exceeded the costs associated with the project. The remainder is included within Unrestricted Funds.

Kathy said the final \$200 from the Verhagen mowing donation, and an additional \$200 from the Hardesty Memorial Fund for trail maintenance, was paid to Jim Chessor to mow the rest park and the area along the trail between the rest park and Main Street in North Judson. The amount needed for additional mowings this season will depend upon weather conditions.

Anita McMillin moved for approval of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Rhonda seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

### **Attendance at Indiana Greenways Foundation Trails Celebration**

Tabitha Balzer as a Director in the law firm of Lewis & Kappes sponsored a table at the April 25 Greenways Foundation Trails Celebration. She was joined at the table by PTC

members Russ Blais, Diane Blais, Joan Hardesty, Peg Stalbrink, Kathy Lucas and Steve Lucas. Also attending from the Jasper County Trails Club were Michelle Lagestee and Char Groet.

The Greenways Foundation Trails Celebration is an annual event blending philanthropy, recognition, and celebration of Indiana's trails. The event plays a crucial role in the Greenways Foundation's mission of supporting trails development.

### **Final Report of Bass Lake Wayfinding Sign to the Erie Trail**

Steve Lucas said Russ carried forward the concept—advocated early by Kathy Carrier—for a new and easy to read large sign along Indiana State Road 10 at Starke County 600 East, to identify a direct route to the Erie Trail. Six-by-six inch posts were placed to hold the sign. Kathy Lucas sent a thank-you letter to property owner, Kurt Basler, for allowing the PTC to place the sign on his property.

Russ asked Steve to pass along that he has received positive comments with respect to the sign—including that it “looks great”, is “easy to read”, and the color “green blends well in the location”. The sign shows well from State Road 10. Russ could not attend the meeting. Member expressed appreciation for Russ’s persistence on this multi-layered project.

The new green wayfinding sign was erected shortly before “April 26 Celebrate Trails Day in Starke County”. Depicted below is an image taken by Russ which shows the new wayfinding sign accompanied by a smaller temporary sign announcing Celebrate Trails Day. The latter sign was removed following the event.



### **Bench Placement in Honor of Retiring NICF Director Jay Albright**

Paul Byer reported that he and Linda Byer mixed two batches of mortar to put final touches on the pad for the Jay Albright Bench just prior to the “April 26 Celebrate Trails Day in Starke County”.

### **Saris/Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Work Station Update**

Paul reported the pad has been placed for the Saris Work Station. One element of the work station had a manufacturing flaw and broke when assembly was attempted. A part to replace the broken one has been requested.

## **Final Report of “April 26 Celebrate Trails Day in Starke County”**

We were greeted by a chilly “April 26 Celebrate Trails Day in Starke County”. Attending the event were PTC members Brian McMillin, Anita McMillin, Russ Blais, Diane Blais, Peg Stalbrink, Joan Hardesty, Rhonda Milner, Steve Lucas and Kathy Lucas.

Rhonda prepared an enjoyable picnic lunch with help from Diane, Anita, and Brian. The core of the attending members groomed the trailhead where the “May 24 5K Run/3K Walk and Bike on the Great American Rail-Trail (Erie Trail)” will originate. Joan and Kathy swept the trail and removed garlic mustard from there almost to the Bartee Ditch Bridge.

Rachel Oesterreich, Starke County Highway Superintendent, and Brock Kinney joined us. Thanks to the Highway Department for placing new signage and crossing markings at the Starke County Road 700 East trailhead for better site identification and pedestrian safety. Russ drove the trail with Steve to observe with Rachel and Brock two sites where organic soils have subsided resulting in asphalt pavement breakup. One site is west of Bogus Run and the second midway between Starke County Road 100 West and Range Road. The group discussed onsite how the trail might be repaired at these and similar locations.

A highlight of Celebrate Trails Day was when Mitch Barloga, Indiana State Coordinator for the Northern Route of the American Discovery Trail, joined us. He is Transportation Planning Manager for the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission and the President of the Board of Directors of the Indiana Greenways Foundation. Mitch, Kathy and Steve drove to the Tippecanoe River Bridge, which, thanks to the HVRM, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Mitch was excited by the thought of connecting the trail to the bridge and then completing an extension to the Monterey Erie Trail.



PTC Members at the trailhead  
Image by Mitch Barloga



Steve and Mitch at the bridge  
Image by Kathy Lucas

## **Final Preparations for the May 24 5K Run/3K Walk and Bike on the Great American Rail-Trail (Erie Trail)**

Brian reported the PTC team was on track to stage the event. Rachel Oesterreich was unable to attend in person but anticipates Nathan Harrington will lend his assistance on behalf of the Starke County Highway Department. Kathy is set to oversee delivery of a portable toilet on the Friday before the event. In addition several members volunteered to sweep the trail on Friday, weather permitting. Steve said that he and Kathy had not yet refreshed the starting line, 3K turnaround, and 5K turnaround but would do so a few days in advance of the event.

A secondary element of the 5K Run/3K Walk, and one supporting the tourism goals of the Starke County CVC, is to identify a backroad connection between the CR 700 E trailhead and the Panhandle Pathway. This signage (designated as S-17 on our Share-the-Road maps) would have reciprocity with the Friends of the Panhandle Pathway. After the Committee designed and vetted signage with QR codes, the signage was shared with John Bawcum, President of the Friends of Panhandle Pathway. Immediately following our April meeting in North Judson, Steve and John agreed to adjustments to the signs to address Panhandle suggestions.

OTES designed two signs and Steve brought them to the meeting to help illustrate the adjustments. A QR code was removed from the sign to be placed on the north side of the gravel parking lot facing south and directing traffic northwest on the Erie Trail. A QR code is already located on a You-are-Here sign immediately across CR 700 E, and it was determined another QR code was unneeded. Also, the sign originally slated for the south side of the parking lot to direct traffic southeast was relocated for placement directly on CR 700 E west of the trailhead. The arrow on this sign was turned to point to the right rather than upwards as a result of this planned relocation.

Steve also noted that the Panhandle Pathway has designed two signs for bicyclist use in connecting between the Erie Trail and the Panhandle. One of these would be paired with the signage slated for the trailhead and CR 700 E (identified on Starke County Share-the-Road signs as S-17). The other would be paired with a connector approved several years ago by the Starke County Commissioners on Starke County Road 200 East (and shown on Share-the-Road signs as S-11). In Pulaski County the route is designated as P-1. The Starke County Commissioners placed Share-the-Road signage on S-11 several years ago, but the PTC has not otherwise developed this route. S-11 is believed to be sparsely used, and further discussion of the PTC's approach was deferred to another meeting.

### **Shirley Heinze NL Conservation Trust at Bogus Run near Erie Trail Update**

During the July 2022 membership meeting, Steve reported on a pending initiative among a family corporation owned by his siblings and him known as the "Big Eastern"; the Shirley Heinze Land Trust (SHLT); and the Department of Natural Resources. The SHLT sought a Next Level Conservation Trust grant to purchase 425 acres of the Big Eastern under the auspices of the DNR. As an element of the grant, SHLT obtained a professional appraisal and the Big Eastern gifted 25% of the appraised value. More than 1000 species of plants and animals have been identified on the property—some of them on threatened or endangered lists. The PTC expressed support for the project, and as PTC President, Rhonda wrote to the DNR to offer support. DNR approved the grant, in principle, and Steve provided a status report last August.

Following completion of a grueling process and extensive vetting, the Indiana State Board of Accounts through the DNR gave final approval for the project. Steve said the SHLT and Big Eastern "yesterday closed on the land sale." SHLT will manage the land subject to DNR oversight for environmental protection. He added that "one element of the project is to develop a direct connection between the land trust and the trail near Starke County Road 100 West."

Kirt Verhagen said the new conservation trust should benefit North Judson and Starke County and can help make the area a travel destination. He thanked the Lucas family for what he described as "its generous contribution".

## **Update on Block Easement Proposal at English Lake**

Following the April 23 meeting, Kathy and Steve prepared a first draft “Trail Easement Agreement” for discussion and consideration by Walter Block. The three then met at Fingerhut’s in North Judson. Walter later staked the site to identify where he might wish an easement boundary placed. Kathy and Steve went to the site to better understand what Walter envisioned. Steve said it is a generous offer.

The first draft was written to provide maximum flexibility and perhaps avoid the need for the cost and time required for a formal land survey, but a survey may still be needed. Linda said Federal and State entities implement programs, which include land elements, using GIS rather than surveys. Bob Aloï would be asked for a survey cost estimate or another approach, such as a GIS identification, that would satisfy Walter’s wishes. Steve added that anyone who wished to join Kathy and him in exploration of this opportunity should let one of them know.

## **Warrior Expeditions Great American Rail-Trail Trekkers Report**

On May 6, this year’s seven veterans kicked off their Great American Rail-Trail trek. Sarah Zeller, Director of Operations for Warrior Expeditions, estimated they would arrive in Starke County near the end of May. Recent experiences are that exact arrival dates are difficult to discern more than a day or two in advance.

## **Review of Hoosier Valley Museum Activities**

Bob Albert reported that “we’re open with a slow start this year.” Weather conditions have not been ideal. Needed volunteer support for some activities has not always met demands.

There was a brief discussion of a verbal dispute among citizens regarding use of the Erie Railroad right-of-way near Ora. An adjacent landowner has complained walkers in that area cause his dogs to bark. The walkers complain the adjacent landowner blocks them from walking on the right-of-way. PTC membership agreed that the right-of-way in this area is under HVRM jurisdiction, and usage is at the discretion of the HVRM. Bob said walkers may use the right-of-way.

## **North Judson Mint Festival Final Disposition**

Deb Mix had earlier suggested that the PTC manage a North Judson Mint Festival booth in which participants would make smoothies from the power generated by a stationary bicycle. The concept was attractive, and members expressed support.

Deb reserved two bikes through Purdue University to make the smoothies. These would be picked up in Winamac. Members learned the PTC would need to wash and sanitize equipment after each smoothie batch, smoothie preparation is a slow process, the bikes must be removed from the site and stored in a secure location each night, and at least three persons would be required at all times to manage the festival booth.

Members agreed the concept was imaginative and creative and were respectful of Deb’s considerable efforts to try and make it work. But the project’s logistics made the concept unfeasible. Although regrettable, they agreed Mint Festival officials should be informed the PTC could not continue to pursue the project.

## **Gate Theft at Starke County Road 600 East Update**

Russ caused WKVI to post the theft occurrence online and to ask for citizen assistance with identifying the perpetrators. WKVI identified the PTC website as a location where citizens could provide information. Our webmaster emailed that he became aware of the event as a result of the posting. Kathy and Steve checked to assure the address for someone to comment worked properly, and they confirmed that it did. Unfortunately, no public comments had yet been received on the PTC website.

## **Weed Suppression Along the Trail**

Paul and Linda reported that glyphosate, purchased two years ago to suppress weeds located on the trail, has been exhausted. Linda added the trail from Starke County 700 East to Starke County 700 South has been treated, but a pop-up thunderstorm caused a pause in progress.

If glyphosate is to be continued to the west, another purchase would be required. Linda said the good news was the cost has not increased in the last two years. 30 gallons are expected to cost less than \$900. Members thanked Paul and Linda for their continuing high-level of support. Steve moved to approve the amount of \$900 for Paul or Linda to purchase additional glyphosate. Kirt seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Paul said he also needed funding to continue the purchase of sealing blocks that can be used to fill asphalt cracks. An exact cost figure was not stated, but an amount less than the cost of the glyphosate purchase was anticipated. Members also expressed support for this request. As PTC President, Rhonda declared that the requested purchase was approved by consensus.

## **Next Membership Meeting**

Rhonda confirmed the next membership meeting is set for June 11, 2025 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the Starke County Community Foundation Meeting Room, 300 Keller Avenue, North Judson. The SCCF's Meeting Room is located in the First Farmers Bank & Trust Building with access through doors on the northeast side of the building.

## **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:10 p.m., CT (8:10 p.m., ET).