

**MEETING MINUTES OF
PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.**
Bass Lake Property Owners Association Community Center
6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake)
July 29, 2026

MEMBERS

Paul Byer
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Kirt Verhagen

GUESTS

Robert Aloï, PS (Consultant)
Walter Block

Call to Order by President

On July 29, 2026, at 5:36 pm, CT, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Road 10, Bass Lake.

Review and Approval of Minutes of June 25, 2026

Anita McMillin moved to approve the draft June 25 minutes without amendment. Paul Byer seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

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
July 29, 2026**

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

<u>Balance from June 25, 2025 (prior meeting)</u>	\$61,145.31
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INCOME

7/13/26 Ace Hardware North Judson (Round Up program)	<u>140.00</u>
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TOTAL INCOME	\$140.00
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EXPENSES

6/23/26	Check #1245 to W. Block (from K. Verhagen thru SCCF)	125.00
7/01/26	Check #1246 to Jim Chessor (Mowing 5/30 & 6/13)	450.00
7/01/26.	Check #1247 to Hill Excavating.	40,889.70
7/20/26	Check #1249 to Kathleen Lucas (reimb. for 5K porta potty)	150.00
7/27/26	Check #1248 to Jim Chessor (Mowing 6/27 & 7/08)	<u>450.00</u>

TOTAL EXPENSES (\$42,064.70)

ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 07/29/26 = \$19,220.61

Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer 07/29/26

RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 04/23/26**SIGNAGE/WEB**

Luminous Fund	Signs Bass Lake (incl. UR Here)	685.64
Hardesty Mem.	Wayfinding or historic signs	1,707.31
Lucas lakehouse	Future Vision/Website	<u>662.50</u>
		3,055.05

NORTH JUDSON 5K/3K & GRAND OPENING

CVC grant	361.20
McMillin Donation & prior RSU	-0- (less \$125 portable toilet 5k/3K)
Proceeds at Race	<u>761.00</u>
	1,122.20

DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension

Balance in DNR Project Fund incl. reimb. Invoice #5	-0- (less \$7,458.70 & 24,836.50)
Also from Unrestricted [All applied to Hill Excavating billing]	(less \$8,594.50)

MAINTENANCE

Hardesty Mem.	Trail Maintenance	157.24
HVRM (Buckeye)	Trail Maintenance	593.61
Rich Stalbrink Mem.	Maintenance or most needed	1,981.08 (less \$250 for Jim Chessor mowing)
Doral Solar	Bridge/clearing	7,269.48
Arrowhead Grant	Invasive Species Control	145.19
Verhagen Family Fund	Mowing	<u>0.00</u> (less \$650 for J. Chessor mowing)
		10,146.60

TOTAL RESTRICTED \$22,918.75

FFBT Balance	\$19,220.61
Restricted Funds	<u>-14,324.25</u>
Unrestricted Funds	\$4,896.36

Kathy said the only income this period was from the Round Up program at Ace Hardware in North Judson. The continuing support from this local business is much appreciated.

Most of the discussion focused on expenditures. The primary of these was a large billing from Hill Excavating. Members at the June meeting directed her to cover the full \$40,88.907 billing because it should not effect the bottom line on the trail construction grant. On July 22 our grants coordinator, Erika Siebenthal, informed us this payment has been forwarded to the State Budget Agency for what would be an 80% reimbursement. Bob Aloï has followed up with what, if approved by the State, would document grant completion and make possible final PTC payment to him and Hill Excavating.

During the meeting Paul delivered a \$20 bill. He said a couple from Williamsport, Indiana gave him the cash as appreciation of the trail and its PTC supporters.

Paul moved to approve the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Kirt Verhagen seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP-23-06

Bob Aloï reported that he believed the only element in the contract yet to be completed is the placement of concrete caps on the retaining walls. Jeremiah Patrick of Hill is waiting for Ozinga to finish making the caps. *{Editor's Note: A site inspection on August 2 revealed the caps were placed as illustrated below. They are atop the trail's retaining wall.}*



Bollards were recently placed to better separate Main Street from the parallel trail section west of Main Street. Paul said a gap between the bollards made for a tight truck passage. Bob responded that he conferred in advance regarding the bollards both with the Town of North Judson and the HVRM, and neither expressed concern for their designs. But a space could be widened by removing one of them.



Illustrated on the left are the bollards facing northeast adjacent to Main Street. In the center is the kiosk at Sycamore Street.

All three images August 2 by K. Lucas.

There was a discussion of vandalism at the northwest terminus of the trail extension at English Lake Road. Small red stop signs have been repeatedly removed—first being thrown aside, and when returned to their former position, the signs were taken from the site. Also, a sign that identified the site as the beginning of the trail and included a Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail designation, along with their supporting post, were taken. Bob urged that the PTC engage the Town and Starke County to help resolve the problem. PTC members responded that there have been discussions with the North Judson Town Marshal and Clerk-Treasurer, and further action is anticipated.

Kirt complimented Bob and Hill Excavating on the execution of the trail extension. He and several other members reflected upon how attractive it is and how the trail can help with transforming the town.

Ad Hoc Committee for Bike Racks, Bench and Signs on ITP-23-06

With committee input, Kathy purchased signs prohibiting use of unauthorized motorized vehicles on the trail extension. These signs would be identical to red signs already placed at several locations on the trail.

Steve Lucas said that he has consulted with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and INDOT, respectively, regarding placement of transAmerican signs to identify the Great American Rail Trail and US Bike Route 35. There would be two or three of these signs on the trail extension and one similar sign at the Block's easement. A former transAmerican sign design was shown at the meeting which he used to illustrate modest changes that could be made from former designs on the two-mile trail extension southeast of US Highway 35 (and as erected prior to that off-trail within the Town of North Judson).

Steve added that he and Kathy met on the trail with Andrew Hunnicutt of Little Shop of Signs regarding manufacture of the signs and seeking cost quotes. Hunnicutt quoted a price for 18"x 36" two-sided signs at \$83.18 each. The figure does not include framing. The same price was quoted by Hunnicutt for reproducing modified "You are Here" signs.

No one expressed reservations or concerns. The proposals will be presented to the Ad Hoc Committee for final action.

Preparations for August 21 Trail Final Inspection, Grand Opening and "Trail Town" Designation

The Final Inspection and Grand Opening of the trail extension have been set for Friday, August 21. Andrew Rowe, North Judson Town Clerk-Treasurer, and Town Manager, Joe Leszek, expressed their flexibility as to timing of particular events on that day. Andrew said he would like to have the American Discovery Society "Trail Town" celebration as part of the event. Mitch Barloga was contacted regarding this possibility. Mitch is the ADT's Northern Branch State Coordinator and sits on the Board of Directors for the American Discovery Trail Society. He agreed to include the "Trail Town" celebration as part of the festivities on August 21. PTC members anticipate attending the North Judson Town Council Meeting on August 3 to further refine activities on August 21.

Signage Development for English Lake

Walter Block borrowed historic images from the French family for sites at English Lake. Kathy scanned several of them, and together with images in the public domain, they have

been emailed to Yancy for the development of a recommended sign. There would also be a transAmerican sign at the English Lake site, but because that site is not yet identified as the “preferred route” of the Great American Rail-Trail, the RTC has asked that the PTC share its design for review and possible approval. The Block easement has been next to US Bike Route 35 since its inception, and with an amendment made earlier this year to the route of the American Discovery Trail, is now also next to the ADT.

Yancy Lucas said earlier in the day he is planning interpretation at the Block easement in English Lake for signage in concert with similar interpretation for Bass Lake signage along the trail where it crosses Starke County Road 700 South. This approach would provide continuity and allow for visually appealing mixed media (images, drawings, texts, and maps). An image of the rivers, rail line, roads (Bigler Road in LaPorte County and County Road 250 South in Starke County) and nearby landmarks would be overlaid with historic photographic and interpretive text providing information on the space over time. An additional focus on how the river crossing might have been used long before the development of the railroads would provide a glimpse into its long history.

La Crosse Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail Grant Update

Bob Aloï, in his capacity as Senior Project Manager at Jones Petrie Rafinski, has entered a contract with the Town of LaCrosse, LaPorte County, as consultant for an NLT grant to extend the Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail. The extension is anticipated for trail elements between LaCrosse and the Kankakee River. Beginning about July 22, Bob had a field crew identify Section corners and survey monuments around the corridor. Bob added that he would probably start Topographic Data collection the following week.

Shirley Heinze Big Eastern Land Trust Update

Steve said the Shirley Heinze Land Trust has made quiet progress on the south tract of the Big Eastern. A 1.3 mile lollipop-shaped walking trail is now accessible from a gravel parking lot placed north of Starke County Road 800 South and about midway between Starke County Roads 100 West and 150 West.



Early summer 2026
Images by K. Lucas

Launch of Starke County Public Art Initiative

The Starke County Convention & Visitors Commission, Starke County Community Foundation, and Town of North Judson have announced launch of a public art program to bring large-scale outdoor artwork to communities throughout the county. The project is funded in part by the Norem family and Verhagen Family funds through the Starke County Community Foundation.

Kirt informed the PTC the goal is to unveil at least one new artwork in a public setting each year for the next five years. The first installation was unveiled at Norwayne Field in North Judson recently. Now being developed with Starke County Parks Department Superintendent, Amie Flora, is a 2027 installation to be placed at Bass Lake. The hope is Knox, Hamlet and San Pierre will later support the placement of public art within their communities.

After five years, an artwork will return to the sculptor unless purchased by the community. This approach will encourage a constant rotation of new art throughout the county. To kick off the initiative in 2026, Kirt's family provided a stipend, and the Town of North Judson contributed the cost of installation. In the future, \$5000 stipends will come from different interested parties with funds channeled through the SCCF.

Kirt said he was sharing this information with the PTC because he hopes to place an artwork along the trail, possibly in North Judson, or in cooperation with the Starke County Parks Department, along another easily accessed part of the trail.

American Discovery 250 Relay Update

Steve said participants in the ADT 250 Relay were scheduled to leave Nevada and enter Utah about July 31. During the June meeting, Diane had suggested the PTC participate in this extraordinary event. She and other PTC members could provide student artistry materials for temporary signs to be placed along the trail. These ideas were viewed very positively during the June 29 meeting of the Starke-USA250 Committee. The Committee is scheduled to have its final meeting on August 13 in the Knox Library. Between now and then, Steve will contact Diane and Russ to ask how they wish to proceed. He plans to attend the August 13 meeting.

Trail Counters

Paul circulated the updated trail counting data. He said some technical difficulties were encountered during this period. He and Linda are working to resolve those difficulties and to install another counter to have a more complete idea of the amount of trail usage.

Maintenance Report and Possible Work Force Detail

Stormy weather has resulted in many fallen trees since the June meeting. Kevin Kennedy removed portions of a large silver maple. Yancy followed up on the effort. In separate occurrences, bicyclists on the trail Robert Plant and Joshua Ross stopped to help Steve with removing fallen trees. Other unidentified trail users have contributed to the effort, some using power tools.

Linda has resumed the daunting task of chemical invasive species control courtesy of funding in a grant from the Arrow Head Country RC&D.

Steve said Russ Blais texted him about a recent conversation with Chief Starke County Deputy, Wayne James. Russ said he inquired about whether jail trustees might provide a work force for the trail. Deputy James said trustees only work on public projects, and he believed the trail would qualify as a public project. Deputy James indicated Sheriff Jack Rosa decides what projects to approve. Russ was generally optimistic the Sheriff would approve a PTC maintenance project. "The biggest thing I see is coordinating the time and areas where we will need help." Russ asked Steve to present the proposal to see if there is membership interest. If there is he would inform Deputy James who can communicate that interest to the Sheriff.

During the meeting there was a consensus of support for the concept. Rhonda said that when she worked in Starke County government, she had several experiences with the use of trustee help. Those experiences were positive. Trustees often appreciated a chance to have relief from jail cells. They are nearing release from incarceration and not inclined to cause mischief that would delay release.

Reminder August is Membership Dues Month

Members were reminded that August is dues month. With the PTC treasury stretched by funding final stages of the trail extension through North Judson, the need is particularly notable.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for Wednesday, August 19, 2026 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the Starke County Community Foundation Meeting Room First Farmers Bank & Trust, 300 Keller Avenue, North Judson.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:07 p.m., CT (8:07 p.m., ET).