

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

August 19, 2026

**Starke County Community Foundation Meeting Room
300 Keller Avenue, North Judson, IN**

MEMBERS

Diane Blais
Russ Blais
Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Rhonda Milner
Anita McMillin
Brian McMillin
Rhonda Milner
Rich Vallicelli
Larry Wickert

GUEST

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum

{Editor's Note: I've had requests for images of our successful August 21 event. It's outside our usual sequence, since these minutes are for a meeting two days before the event, but below are two images for those who were unable to join us.}



On the left is a celebration of the trail's one mile extension and designation by the American Discovery Trail Society of North Judson as a "Trail Town". Above is a bench of 100% recycled materials financed by the PTC and friends; also a bike rack designed by Knox student welders using mostly scrap materials.

Call to Order by President

On August 19, 2026, at 5:33 pm, CT, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the Starke County, Community Foundation, 300 Keller Avenue, North Judson.

Review and Approval of Minutes of July 29, 2026

Diane Blais moved to approve the draft July 29 minutes without amendment. Peggy Stalbrink seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Review and Approval of Treasurer's Report

With the meeting focus on preparing for DNR's final inspection, "Trail Town" designation, and ribbon cutting ceremony in two days, the treasurer's report was deferred. Deferral allows flexibility to respond to any DNR directives from the inspection, as well as timing of final payments to our consultant and contractor. A comprehensive treasurer's report and report of restricted and unrestricted funds will be presented for membership review at the October 8 meeting. Kathy said she would provide further information on request.

Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP-23-06

On July 21, PTC consultant Robert Aloï reported that he and our contractor, Jeremiah Patrick of Hill Excavating, were "finishing up the punch list items" for ITP-23-06. Those items were subsequently finished. Subject to approval by the DNR, responsibilities for contract compliance are believed to be complete.

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

On August 14, Andrew Hunnicutt of Little Shop of Signs, provided proofs for new trans-American signage on the trail extension and the easement donated by Peggy and Walter Block at English Lake. Steve Lucas emailed the designs to Kevin Belle at the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and Brandon Burgoa at INDOT for comment with respect to the ADT and USBR35 respectively. He said he also plans to share images with Mitch Barloga for comments he might have on behalf of the ADT.

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

There was an extended conversation among members regarding August 21 activities, in particular regarding staging of the Grand Opening and celebration of the "Trail Town". The site for activities was identified as the OSSIS Project's Archway of the Sun just southeast of the Main Street crossing. One of the portable toilets acquired through a 2026 Hive grant was already onsite. Members agreed to bring potable water and chairs for the comfort of attendees. There would be cake and refreshments. Featured will be the music duo, *Return to Normal*. The duo consists of PTC members Marty and Corinne Becknell—who are also generously loaning use of their sound system.

American Discovery Trail 250 Relay Update

On August 12, Diane Blais emailed that, if Steve would get contact information for her, she would "get in touch and find out what and when art supplies are needed and be glad to purchase them. We can deliver to schools in the county or wherever needed." Steve shared Di's most generous offer the next day at a meeting of Starke County's Celebrating USA 250th Committee. The members enthusiastically welcomed the offer, and Committee

Co-Chair, Venita Cunningham, emailed Mark Rippy, Kimberly Miller, Sarah Gillard and Dusty Minix to advance the process.

Venita emailed that Dusty has already said he plans to send an email to learn what grades and classes wish to participate. She asked Sarah and Kim to do the same. Venita asked Kim to also contact St. Peter Lutheran School. Venita added Mark Rippy is going to contact local home schoolers.

Venita added that once recipients of her request have a list of people, the list should be emailed to Steve. She urged that the list be provided by August 21 to give the “Prairie Trails Club time to get supplies and deliver them to the correct schools.” Kim Miller had already emailed that “Annette Skibbe @ St Peter's has great interest from her teachers. Amie Clemons is my contact at the elementary and she is checking with her teachers, but she would be the name for the list. Myself as well.”

With respect to the advancement of the 250 Relay itself, Steve exchanged with managers several communications. Bob Palin, Relay Coordinator, emailed on August 17 that the ADT North Branch ground coordinator “will be Sara Heitman” with assistance from Mitch Barloga, and Bob is likely to be present also. He wrote that PTC ideas for student-made signs on H-stakes on the travel route, and interested local bicyclists joining trekkers as they leave North Judson on October , “sound great”. Bob urged that local cyclists who wish to participate register in advance at discoverytrail.org/registration. Mitch Barloga also reflected Starke County’s approach to receiving the trekkers was “great”, and he would serve as our primary ADT contact person for this event.

As of August 19, the ADT relay was thought to be at or near Grand Junction, Colorado. Participants are expected to arrive in North Judson late on October 15 and to leave on the morning of October 16.

Trail Counters

Linda distributed a paper copy of recent data from the trail counters. She said the counter at US Highway 35, which had been invaded by an ant colony, is no longer functioning. She has also experienced problems with the counter placed at Starke County Road 250 West. Linda said she intends to pursue further possible resolutions to these problems. Members suggested the PTC consider replacement of units that do not respond to repair efforts—though the ones we have were purchased from a Canadian company and may now be subject to hefty tariffs.

Maintenance Report

Stormy weather continues to bring trees down on the trail with withering frequency. Paul and Linda have led the effort to remove them. A frequent trail user, Mike Carlino, has also made a major contribution to the effort. Their efforts were most notable between Starke County Roads 400 East and the trailhead at 700 East. Steve and Kathy also helped along the trail further west, including daylighting the signal bungalow art project and Rich and Peg’s bench east of SCR 200 East.

Paul reflected that the trail is in need of resealing cracks. Several members agreed. A work detail of the willing will be identified by the next meeting.

Discussion with Starke County Sheriff

Russ outlined a recent discussion with Starke County Sheriff Jack Rosa. He said the Sheriff is supportive of the concept of trustees assisting with PTC labor on the trail, but he needs an explanation of what they would do. The members discussed possibilities but expressed the view that the trustees would not have tools that could be used as weapons. Supervision was anticipated. Paul and Linda were asked about having the trustees remove sticks and branches from the trail after they cut up fallen trees or cut branches. Linda responded that Paul and she did clean-up as they went.

Kathy said she thought it important that Deputies and other first responders understand how trail gates worked. Russ indicated he would follow up with Chief Deputy Wayne James on how we might proceed.

Kankakee River Launch Group Update

Steve said on August 5 he joined the Kankakee River Launch Group for its most recent meeting in Hebron. The current focus is on seeking to develop an access, from the Jasper County side of the river at the Aukiki Wetland Conservation Area, which borders Indiana Highway 49 on the east side.

The initiative's broader goal is to establish more Kankakee River access sites. Russ spoke of a new site developed by Amie Flora, Starke County Parks Superintendent, on SR 23 at the Yellow River bridge, just South of SR 8. Steve reflected that Amie has also participated with the Group. Addition of the SR 23 access is harmonious with the Group's broader goals.

Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Update

Bob Albert, Liaison from the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum, said two diesel trains were scheduled for the coming weekend. Pumpkin Trains return October 3. New this year is that Norfolk and Western Business Car 300 will be joining the Pumpkin Trains offering additional first class seating.

Bob said he believes he has an image of the former New York Central Railroad structure on the trail extension, but he has been unable to find it. He plans to look again. If he is able to find the image, it can be used in historical signage.

August Membership Dues Month Reminder

Members were again reminded that August is membership dues month. The amount for those who are not Lifetime Members is \$25 annually.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for October 8, 2026 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake).

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:54 p.m., CT (7:54 p.m., ET).