

**MEETING MINUTES OF
PRAIRIE TRAILS CLUB INC.**
Bass Lake Property Owners Association Community Center
6996 South State Road 10, Knox (Bass Lake)
March 19, 2026

MEMBERS

Linda Byer
Paul Byer
Joan Hardesty
Kathy Lucas
Steve Lucas
Rhonda Milner
Peg Stalbrink

GUESTS

Bob Albert, Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum
Bob Aloji, Jones Petrie Rafinski Corp.

Call to Order by President

On March 19, 2026, Rhonda Milner, President, called to order a Meeting of the Prairie Trails Club Inc. ("PTC") in the BLPOA Community Center, Bass Lake, Indiana at 5:35 pm, CT (6:35 pm, ET).

Review and Approval of Minutes of February 18, 2026

Joan Hardesty moved to approve, with technical corrections having been made by her, Russell Blais and Anita McMillin, the draft February 18, 2026 minutes. Peggy Stalbrink 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
March 19, 2026

FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST (FFBT)

Balance from December 10, 2025 (prior meeting) **\$73,357.05**

INCOME

03/02/26	Ace Hardware North Judson Round-Up Donation	\$85.00
03/03/26	RunSignup Payout	50.00

	TOTAL INCOME	\$135.00
<u>EXPENSES</u>		
02/24/26	Check #1233 to Hill Excavating (Invoice #4)	34,899.96
	TOTAL EXPENSES	(\$34,899.96)
ENDING FFBT BALANCE AS OF 03/19/26		\$38,592.09

Kathleen Lucas, Treasurer 03/19/26
RESTRICTED/UNRESTRICTED FUNDS 03/19/26

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

DNR REIMBURSEMENT for ITP 23-06 Northwest Extension

02/13/25	Balance in February	45,584.40 less 34,899.96 to Hill Excavating
		10,584.44

MAINTENANCE

Hardesty Mem.	Trail Maintenance	157.24
HVRM (Buckeye)	Trail Maintenance	593.61
Rich Stalbrink Mem.	Maintenance or most needed	2,231.08
Doral Solar	Bridge/clearing	<u>7,269.48</u>
		10,251.41

TOTAL RESTRICTED \$23,891.30

FFBT Balance	\$38,592.09
Restricted Funds	— \$23,891.30
Unrestricted Funds	\$14,700.79

Kathy said the primary movement of funds was to Hill Excavating in furtherance of the PTC's 20% contribution under the DNR's ITP-23-06 grant. She will seek reimbursement from the State of Indiana for 80% of the billing following the close of the first quarter on April 1.

Kathy thanked Ace Hardware in North Judson for its continued support through Round Up donations. She expressed enthusiasm for the first participants in our 5K/Run 3K/Walk through RunSignup.

Paul Byer moved for the approval of the Treasurer's Report and Report of Restricted and Unrestricted Funds. Joan seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Northwest Trail Extension Report for ITP-23-06

Kathy was disappointed to report Erica Gummere, Grants Coordinator at Indiana State Parks, is transitioning to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, managed by OCRA, on April 2, and will no longer be the grant coordinator assigned to ITP-23-06. Gummere has been a wonderful partner and will be deeply missed. She is working with the Grants Team to re-assign her projects to colleagues, while mitigating possible disturbances to project partners. She hopes “to introduce the Prairie Trails Club team to our new grant coordinator” prior to departure.

Bob Albert, Liaison from the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum, reminded members he has marked one of the limestone pillars with yellow construction tape for historical use. The pillar is intact and was part of the base of a former C&O Railroad water tower. He said the HVRM would like to see the pillar returned to the location of the former water tower about 150 feet west of a vacated alley from Franklin Street. This pillar and others were moved to HVRM property while in the process of clearing the new trail route.

Steve Lucas asked Bob Aloï if it would work to use other smaller elements of the C&O water tower as bollards where the new trail crosses English Lake Road. Aloï responded in the affirmative. Aloï asked Albert if the HVRM had equipment that would be capable of relocating the pillars. Albert responded that it did not.

Russ Blais has obtained permission from the Starke County Historical Society to use an image of what is believed to be the C&O Railroad Tower. During the meeting, the image was circulated. Bob Albert said he had another image or images that he would forward to Steve. Yancy Lucas has said he would be amenable to creating historic signage for the C&O Railroad Tower to interface with recovered elements of the pillars.

An image was circulated of what Bob Aloï confirmed is the core structure for a kiosk at the corner of the triangle and adjacent to the new trail. It includes a seat. He said the structure will later have a roof and include information about the trail and town.



Kiosk core structure on March 6, 2026

Image by K. Lucas

English Lake Progress

On February 24, Walter Block, Larry Wickert and Steve met on Walter's property, along the Pinsky Railroad at English Lake, to identify a property interest that Walter is granting for a northwest extension of the Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail. They agreed on a 100-foot wide parcel measured at a right angle from the centerline of the Pinsky tracks. The parcel would include a water tower foundation and allow trail placement south of it and avoid being squeezed toward the railway. In the near term, the parcel could allow for signage and a modest stopping place for bicyclists and other travelers.

Walter subsequently placed millings to level the site and accommodate parking—without burying the remains of the water tower. The project will also advance Walter's efforts to dig a pond and place a home on the same parcel. Kathy and Steve personally donated \$250 to him, on behalf of the PTC, toward the millings cost supportive of trail extension.

Bob Albert said he intended to coat the surface of the water tower foundation to improve its longevity.



Millings placed by Walter Block with water tower foundation, Pinsky tracks and former English Lake Inn in the background. (March 8, 2026)

Image by K. Lucas

Bike Racks Sandblasting and Powder Coating Update

Last September, Steve spoke with Aaron Williams of Technicoat about powder coating two artistic bike racks designed and built by Knox High School welding students. Aaron said he was interested but busy with large projects and unavailable to address the bike racks until winter. After sandblasting, he said he would powder-coat them.

Paul delivered the bike racks to Technicoat in Grovertown. It was agreed the bike rack with native animals would be copper-colored and the one with a railroad theme black.

On March 4, Kathy and Steve met with Aaron. He was loading the bike racks for delivery to a sandblasting facility. By phone on March 17 Aaron reported the bike racks were at the facility. He asked whether the PTC wanted a glossy or a matte finish on the railroad-themed bench. Aaron said glossy could be accomplished sooner, but he added that he was also willing to apply the matte finish. During the meeting members discussed the options and agreed upon the glossy finish.

Also for discussion was a concept discussed between Paul and Aaron for painting the two RAILROAD CROSSING signs on the railroad themed rack white to make them stand out. Bob Albert recommended the use of a quality acrylic to provide longer endurance.

Report of Arrow Head Country R C & D Grant Award

In a letter mailed on February 23, David Altman, Secretary/Treasurer of the Arrow Head Country RC&D, wrote to congratulate the PTC on approval of its requested grant amount of \$706.19. He also invited an organization representative to attend and share a photo op on March 24 at 7:00 pm, ET (6:00 pm, CT) in the Pulaski County Library. Rhonda said she planned to appear on behalf of the PTC for the awards ceremony and welcomed others to join her.

Notice of Starke County Treasures Tour on April 11

As an early element of the Starke County Celebrating USA 250 activities, on April 11, students from the Advanced Placement American History Class at North Judson-San Pierre High School will guide a trip across Starke County—called the “Starke County Treasures Tour”. Those who attend will hear about railroad history, local veterans, the crash landing of the Vin-Fiz, and the two terms of Governor Henry Schricker. The bus tour will stop in Aldine at PTC signage designed by Yancy Lucas and financially supported by the Luminous Fund. Tickets are \$5 per person and available at the Public Libraries in Knox and North Judson with a maximum of 60 seats.

Notice of Tea Party Reenactment on May 9

On May 9, a Boston Tea Party Reenactment will begin at 7:00 p.m., CT, at the Bass Lake Beach and Campground. The event is part of Starke County Celebrating USA activities and will be presented by Knox Masonic Lodge #639 and North Judson Masonic Lodge #438. The Reenactment will be followed by fireworks at dusk.

Preparations for RTC April 25 Celebrate Trails Day

Similar to last year, Rhonda has agreed to lead an informal cookout. There will also be maintenance activities. Steve has requested signs and non-alcoholic beer from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Depending upon the weather, members could visit one of the new kayak launches.

Celebrate Trails Day is same date as Arbor Day is observed locally by the Starke County Arbor Day Committee of the Starke County American250 Initiative. This year the event will be at the Starke County Forest, 10655 East Division Road, Knox. It will run from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm and feature a Ceremonial Liberty Tree Planting, tree and plant raffles, educational booths, local vendors and community displays, and self-guided nature trails.

Gwen Rentz, Starke County Surveyor, has encouraged PTC participation. She wrote that “having an unmanned booth at the Starke County Forest for Celebrate Trails Day is completely acceptable. We truly appreciate your willingness to include the County Forest as part of the CONNECTIONS conversation and broader greenways/blueways efforts.

“We would be very grateful to have Prairie Trails Club informational materials available for the public during the event. Providing those resources is a wonderful way to increase awareness and encourage community involvement.”

An important element of CONNECTIONS is promoting community awareness. Char has made postings on the PTC Facebook Page. Steve suggested the PTC collaborate on Celebrate Trails Day with the American250 Initiative.

Rhonda said she can provide a 4' by 4' table for use at the Starke County Forest. Final preparations for the April 25 Celebrate Trails Day will be made at the next PTC Meeting.

Preparations for May 23 5K Run/3K Walk

On February 28, Brian chaired an informal workgroup at the Bass Lake Pub to help move forward with the May 23 5K Run/3K Walk. Participating were Charlotte Liss, Anita, Joan, Kathy and Steve. Brian and Russ had ordered red, white and blue ribbons for the medals. Rhonda circulated an image of the ribbons during the Membership Meeting.

The workgroup discussed possible alternatives for routing the event in North Judson. Much will depend upon how trail construction progresses. It was acknowledged that the PTC would consult with the Town of North Judson, Hill Excavating, and HVRM on route selection.

During the meeting Kathy said she was making arrangements for a portable toilet. LRS, the business the PTC has used previously, told her it will not enter a commitment until a street address for placement is provided. She said she would discuss with the Town of North Judson its preference for site placement.

Brian has worked with Knots & Spots to help develop a participant T-shirt. Logos were obtained for the Erie Trail, Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail, Great American Rail-Trail, and US Bike Route 35. These would appear with the trail route lined on the back of the shirts. Rhonda showed the proposed shirt during the meeting.

Russ and Steve suggested the shirt be simplified to show the route but with only one walker element. Rhonda said that if still possible she thought the shirt should be re-aligned so the transAmerican trail elements formed one cluster and the local Erie Trail and Grand Kankakee Marsh Trail elements another. After discussion by the members, there was a consensus favoring Rhonda's suggestion. She called Brian during the meeting, and he told her the changes could still be made.

Bass Lake and Trail Connectivity

Steve said that he was passing along updates on behalf of Russell Blais who was unable to appear for the meeting.

- Russ has obtained reflective tape for the gate replacement at Starke County Road 600 East. He plans to attach the tape when weather permits.
- Russ reported the 2026 BLPOA Directory will again include the Erie Trail map—at no cost—and he expects it will this year include a reference to the trail extension through North Judson. Ordinarily persons and businesses must pay a \$100 fee to

place images in the BLPOA Directory. The fee was waived for the map as it provides a service from a non-for-profit that cannot charge a fee for trail use.

- Russ thanked Cathy Wagner, who as a Member of the BLPOA Board of Directors, has included a new PTC meeting notice on the BLPOA's electronic sign.



BLPO Community Center
(March 8, 2026)

Image by K. Lucas

Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum Update

Bob Albert reported that final preparations are underway for the HVRM's first trips of 2026. He said there will be Easter Trains on the next three Saturdays. "Sales are pretty good." On returning to the museum, younger passengers (ages 2 to 12) can participate in an Easter Egg Hunt and have a chance to take pictures with the Easter Bunny. Each train ride lasts approximately 45 minutes with Easter activities at the museum grounds upon return. All seats will be enclosed and heated.

American Discovery 250 Relay

Steve attended a North Judson meeting of the Starke County Celebrating USA Committee on March 5. A discussion topic was the American Discovery 250 Relay. Dave Whitson will manage the relay for the Society. He wrote that the "(very) rough schedule draft has us traveling from Lansing [Illinois] to North Judson on October 13." Several at the March 5 meeting said this timing conflicts with school fall breaks. Steve responded Whitson's October 13 target was still a rough estimate and unlikely to be precise.

Mark Rippy suggested the Committee contact Culver Academies to carry the banner. Steve noted the American Discovery Trail does not pass through Marshall County. Mark said the route could be adjusted. There was also discussion of crossing the Kankakee River at English Lake instead of on US 421 as now planned. Mitch Barloga manages the ADT North Branch through Indiana and could make an adjustment with respect to that part of the Relay.

Venita Cunningham, Committee Chair, said any fees for Starke County participation should be resolved. She created a subcommittee of volunteers to address the 250 Relay which would include Steve and any Committee members. Mark Rippy was the only Committee member to volunteer.

Beginning March 11, Steve exchanged emails with Pulaski County America250 Chair, Rhonda Terry. She wrote that she is "making arrangements for traffic support from the

Pulaski County line (down US 35)". The current route of the American Discovery Trail turns south at the parking area onto US 35.

Steve said on March 16 he outlined the status of the Relay in Starke County at a regular meeting of the North Judson Town Council.

Trail Counters

Joan provided an update on the TRAFx trail counters. She sought to compare data from the TRAFx counter and the camera located near the trail US 35 but was stymied because of a counter malfunction. The malfunction resulted because of a battery failure—and that failure was likely the result of the extreme cold and snow cover this winter. The battery is solar-charged and was adversely affected by the weather conditions. She will seek to do ground-truthing after equipment is brought back to full performance.

Shirley Heinze Big Eastern Preserve

Last May, Steve reported on the closing of a bargain land sale (75% of appraised value) of the Big Eastern, owned with his siblings, to the Shirley Heinze Land Trust. Former Gov. Eric Holcomb's Next Level Conservation Trust provided funding through the DNR to Shirley Heinze. More than 1,000 species of plants and animals have been identified in the area—including some threatened or endangered. The sale was covered regionally on TV and radio.

Steve said work is beginning on development of the property as a preserve. Shirley Heinze scheduled a seed sowing volunteer workday for December 10, 2025.

On March 1 of this year, Doug Botka, Shirley Heinze Stewardship Ecologist, wrote that the organization is "currently reworking our preserve guide and wanted to include" the Big Eastern Preserve. "Because of plans to make the preserve accessible, it makes sense to include an initial, simple trail in the guide, ... opening up part of the preserve this year."

The Shirley Heinze Big Eastern Preserve includes about 425 acres. There are two units. The north unit borders the west side of Starke County Road 100 West, approaches very near to the Erie Trail, and contains nearly 325 acres. As part of negotiations with Shirley Heinze, provision was made for a public access to the Big Eastern through a pathway across property retained by the Lucas family from the Trail. The south unit contains about 100 acres and is geographically unconnected to the north unit.

Botka continued, "Our thoughts are to make a trail on the south unit that is accessible from" Starke Road 800 South. His initial thoughts were "to make it a loop or 'lollipop' trail (single trail out to a loop), going through the sand prairies for most of its length." During the meeting, Steve circulated an aerial photograph that illustrated the anticipated loop trail.

Botka acknowledged "that many have expressed interest in connecting... [the north unit] to the bike trail, but that is a much larger project...better planned [and] executed after... [Shirley Heinze terminates] the farming and starts our seeding and restoration of those fields." A farmer has a lease, scheduled to expire in the near future, for a small fraction of the land in the north unit.

AARP Community Challenge Grant Application

During the February 18 meeting, members discussed possibly filing an AARP Challenge Grant application to fund improvements at the “triangle”. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy urged the PTC to apply. The consensus was an application should be made if supported by the Town of North Judson. A concern was the unknown cost of connecting to the municipal water system, and Verhagen Station was suggested as an alternate site where a hookup might be less costly.

The day after the PTC meeting, Kathy and Steve met with Town Manager, Joe Leszek. He later that day provided an outline for the Town’s intentions on the triangle. They include a \$4,500 ADA-compliant bottle filling station/drinking fountain. This improvement would be central to an AARP grant request. Notably, Joe said the Town would cover all material and labor costs for placement of a filling station/drinking fountain at the triangle, as well as for monthly water bills. The coverage alleviated cost concerns for using the triangle.

Support letters for the grant were sought from the Starke County Community Foundation and from the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Each provided wonderful support letters—copies of which were circulated during the meeting. On February 27 a timely application was emailed. On the same day AARP responded “Thank you for applying to the 2026 AARP Community Challenge grant program! We have received your application successfully.” AARP indicated it would announce action on grant applications in May.

Consideration of making a Hive Video Grant Application

Kathy announced she had received information regarding a video grant application to The Hive a Giving Circle of the Starke County Community Foundation. Applications must be filed by April 20 and will be reduced by a selection committee to four finalists. These finalists would be presented and voted on during the Annual Gathering of The Hive set for May 20. The awards are typically between \$500 and \$2,000. Every finalist receives some funding.

Members discussed what the PTC might request. The consensus was that Kathy should pursue a grant. She welcomed anyone in the PTC who might be interested in assisting to get in touch with her.

North Judson Request for ADT Society “Trail Town” Designation

On March 13 on behalf of the Town of North Judson, Andrew Rowe submitted a request to the American Discovery Trail Society for designation as a “Trail Town” on the American Discovery Trail. If the request is granted, one element required by the Society is formation of an Advisory Committee to implement and manage a designated area. The area would be the segment of the trail within the Town’s corporate boundaries. The first Advisory Committee would consist of Joe Leszek, Kirt Verhagen, Andrew and Steve. Each would serve one year terms and serve at the will of the North Judson Town Council.

Eric S. Howard, ADT Society Executive Director, acknowledged receipt of the request, thanked Andrew, and forwarded it to ADT Committee Chair, Peter Schoettle, for review. Schoettle responded and outlined the review process. He wrote “it would be wonderful if

North Judson... [will have] completed the entire process... [when the ADT 250 Relay comes] and could receive the relay runners/bikers as an official American Discovery Trail Town.” The Town’s request is now under review by the ADT’s Board of Directors.

On March 17, Steve received a call from Richard Vonnegut, the ADT Board Member who supervises the Southern Branch of the trail through Indiana. They reviewed current routes of the Northern Branch of the ADT and US Bike Route 35 within North Judson and the designation application—as well as Vonnegut’s concept for extending the trail from Starke County Road 700 East to Monterey. Vonnegut indicated he planned to support the designation request referencing the route of the North Judson trail extension now in progress.

Greenways Foundation Trails Celebration Annual Charity Luncheon

Kathy said the Greenways Foundation’s annual luncheon and awards ceremony is set for April 10 at 10 a.m., CT (11 a.m., ET) the Heirloom at NK Hurst, 230 West McCarty Street, Indianapolis. She and Steve plan to attend as well as Tabitha Lucas Balzer and Kirt. General admission is \$100 per person. She said the luncheon is a great way to keep in touch with people working on trail projects as well as those managing grant programs in Indiana Government.

Next Membership Meeting

The next membership meeting was set for Thursday, April 23, 2026 at 5:30 p.m., CT (6:30 p.m., ET) in the BLPOA Community Center, 6996 South State Highway 10, Knox (Bass Lake), Indiana.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:17 p.m., CT (8:17 p.m., ET).