The Prairie Enthusiasts
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Board of Directors Meeting
Tuesday, November 25, 2025: 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Members Present: Matt Dettlaff, Peter Fritz, Katie Hahn, Greg Heberlein, Alice Mirk, Jerry Newman, Jon Rigden, Jim Rogala, Nancy Gloe, Harvey Halvorsen, Jay Rutherford, Peter Hartman, Addie Theis Paradis, Shawn Kadlec,

Members Not Present: Rich Henderson, Kay Wienke, and Gary Eldred

Staff Present: Jessica Bizub

Guests Present: Becky Fernette

Agenda

1. Call to Order/Roll Call

Board President, Jim Rogala, calls the meeting to order.

2. Adopt Meeting Agenda

Harvey makes a motion to adopt the agenda. Peter Fritz seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

3. Approve Consent Agenda

Jon asks about the chainsaw and herbicide policies mentioned in the land management committee notes. Jim says these policies have not been finalized and will be addressed in the December meeting.

Jon asks regarding management plans for non-TPE sites and whether Dan charges for them. Jim says typically, a donation is expected, and they become members. This strategy may change as Dan spends more time on TPE properties.

Jay makes a motion to approve the consent agenda. Alice seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

4. Treasurer's Report – Jay Rutherford

A. ACTION ITEM: August 2025 Financial Reports – Dashboard and Details

Jay presents the treasurer's report. Jay mentions that the financials are behind schedule, with the Board reviewing August financials at the end of November. This may be something to take a look at.

Year-to-date income is close to budget, with fewer grants but more release from restriction. Expenses are below budget by over $30,000.

The screen shows the Revenue Analysis, a visual representation of income sources from this year versus last year. Last year saw more unrestricted contributions, while this year is seeing more other unrestricted revenue. Restricted revenues are relatively close. We are on track from where we are expecting the income. There was an $86,000 bequest last year that makes it look different. Jessica adds that $15,000 was given to up the Season of Giving match from $35,000 to $50,000. Jay encourages the Board to give as every dollar counts.

Continuing to look at the Revenue Analysis. Individual contributions through August were up slightly from the prior year, with $88,000 in endowment contributions to the TPE Trust. The endowment could be an area of focus over the next couple of years to create a base of money for operations that doesn't need to be fundraised every year.

Looking at cash flow. Cash is down from the previous year, which is expected based on the budget. August through October is typically the lowest point for cash flow, with an increase expected towards the end of the year. Jessica and the staff arew orking on appeals and Giving Tuesday on December 2nd.

Revenue is on track with the budget through August, with an expected increase in October and November, and the majority of activity in December.

Expenses are well-managed and under budget at the Chapter level, possibly due to fewer grants received. Chapter expenses are doing well as well. We are under budget.

Jerry asks to go to the cash balance chart and says the cash balance represents only one month of operating expenses, which is a cause for alarm. A healthy cash reserve should cover three to six months of operating expenses, or even more. There is a deficit of $481,740 and Jerry proposes that the organization should never drop below three months of operating cash. Adding the missing two months of operating cash to the existing deficit puts the organization in grave territory.

Jay agrees that the low cash balance is a concern and we plan to address it in the next budgeting round. The deficit is due to investments in growing the organization and supporting Chapters, not from borrowed money. A line of credit is available as a backstop, but the preference is to avoid using it. The current year's performance will be crucial in determining future budget decisions.

Jerry hopes we don’t act too late. He says attendance at a recent Chapter meeting tripled, indicating widespread concern. Members are unhappy with TPE, citing uncertainty due to the executive director position being vacated. People discussed not donating and redoing their estate plans. Members want Prairie Bluff to retain a larger portion of their donations and dislike Viroqua taking Prairie Bluff's money. Jim says there is a cultural issue where Chapters view donations from their members as "their money" rather than "TPE money" to be distributed back to the Chapter as needed. The low cash on hand (one month) was also raised in the finance committee. Jim agrees that we will have to see how we do with the end of year giving. If people do not want to give, then we will be facing some tough decisions. Jay adds that Chapter Support does a lot for the Chapters. There is a lot of effort from Chapter Support. Katie adds that the executive director departure for unknown reasons may have a chilling effect.

She says it would be very important to discuss this as there are concerns at the Chapter level.

Jerry asks if the meeting is being recorded as he has some people who would like to see it. Jim says yes, but some information cannot be spread around to just anybody, discretion is advised.
Jon says that there is concern about unrestricted cash balances and having one month. Three months should be the goal. The next few months will be important to encourage Chapter members to support the organization. On page four of the detailed report, the unrestricted cash in Central checking is negative $400,000. Subtracting this from the balances leaves $207,000. Factoring in an $88,000 bequest, the number is really $123,000. Chapters may not have what is stated. They may only have about a third of what's in there. This was recognized by the Finance Committee and we need to come up with a better way to report this. We are skating on thin ice. And we need to try to encourage everybody to give because that's the state we're in.

Katie asks how we expect to ask people to give without giving them information as to what happened with the executive director departure or a plan moving forward.
Jim says that personnel issues are confidential.
Matt says that the change of executive directors was a choice because of issues that came up. There was turnover because of her management style, which was unhealthy for the organization.
Katie says that the membership sees a sudden change and doesn't understand why.

Jerry goes back to the unrestricted contribution chart and says the top line that's going to make the organization somewhat healthy was conceived by a person who's no longer here. There's no guarantee of hitting that top line. Hitting somewhere in the middle will not preclude adding to the deficit. Jessica says the deficit is now $80,000 less than it was. The top line is highly optimistic. She does believe the projections were extremely optimistic.
Jim says the retreat will be an opportunity to discuss this in detail and get a better estimate for the third quarter.

Greg adds his concern if the average member fully understands what Chapter Support does for the Chapters. There is an extraordinary effort that Chapter Support puts in. Jerry says they do know. Under the allocation method, one year there was 100% allocation, meaning the Chapters got nothing. With the Cost Share mode now, it's way more than 100%. Prairie Bluff's budgeted income for this year was $25,000, but they pay almost $80,000 in Cost Share. People just can't wrap their head around that.

Jay says part of the problem is the $400,000 deficit that Jon pointed out was under the asset allocation model. The change to a new model has been painful for some Chapters. The Board decided to take a growth stance under Debra’s leadership. We will see how this year plays out and decide whether to continue as is or make changes.

Greg talks about a startup analogy. A startup brings people on Board in the early stages and they're taking minimal salaries, working lots of overtime, foregoing raises, maybe

have limited benefits. There are issues of trust regarding the direction, leadership, and vision.
Jay says the new member reports show more people signing up and two new Chapters. Jessica is very good at seeing things clearly and what we need to do to keep moving forward. The change from asset allocation to Cost Share has been painful for some.

Peter Hartman makes a motion to accept the Treasurer's Report. Jon seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

5. President's Report - Jim Rogala

Jim gives the President's Report.
A severance agreement was offered to Debra, she countered, we met in the middle, and she signed. It included 15 weeks of severance pay. Typical language within the severance agreement, some of which restricts what can be released. There was language about providing references agreeable to both parties. Jim will send out the severance agreement if people want to see it. Employee records from Chapter Support were compiled, along with documents associated with Debra's termination, and delivered last Friday.
Jerry asks about the possibility of Debra coming back after them for wrongful termination. Jim says the HR attorney didn't think Debra had a strong case, as red flags related to gender or age discrimination were not apparent. Debra would have to pay for an attorney to pursue the matter.

Jay, Alice, and Jim met with staff in Viroqua for a listening session to address their concerns and show appreciation. The meeting aimed to develop encouraging relationships and guidelines for moving forward, with the Executive Director continuing to oversee staff. We are considering implementing employee surveys twice a year to gauge job satisfaction and identify areas for organizational improvement. Jessica is checking in with staff to maintain open communication lines and address job-related issues and demands.

The Board can take a larger role in working with donors, especially since Debra is no longer doing in-person visits. There is a list of 60 major donors, and Jim can provide contacts, especially if Board members want to reassure them about the organization's direction.

Volunteers have stepped up to fill voids, such as Becky assisting with the info@ email correspondence. Executive Committee members and Chapter leaders are also helping out, and others with relevant skills are encouraged to offer support.

Continued patience is requested during the transition, as the organization is short-staffed and focused on fundraising and the conference. If a request is not handled quickly, remind us and we can let you know when we might get to it.

Matt asks if there has been concerns from donors regarding Debra's firing. Jim says there have been a few, but most rumblings seem to be happening at the Chapter level. Most concerns came from people vested in the organization, but not necessarily major donors. Rich wanted to contact a number of his major donors in the Empire Sauk Chapter to let them know that there's no reason to panic with regard to the Executive Director change. Matt says he only got one inquiry was received about what's happening down in Viroqua from a longtime member of Prairie Sands. Jessica says she also got a couple inquiries, but it doesn't seem to be impacting donors.

No other questions or comments.

6. Acting Executive Director's Report – Jessica Bizub

Jessica opens it up for any questions.

Jon asked about the mention of the increase in members. Jessica says we purchased an acquisition list, which are people that they are doing mailings to who are not current members. This may be related to that. Jessica will follow up with the exact number. Katie asks about Mark. Jessica says Mark will be at the Land Protection Committee meeting and the Land Management Committee meeting. He's taken to it like a fish to water and is very easy to work with. He's already making notes for improvements for next year. Mark and most of the staff will be at the retreat.

Jay adds that Jessica has done an incredible job stepping into her role. She has been working very hard and is showing a very analytical look at things. She is also working on the personnel side, getting things stabilized, and encouraging the staff. The staff has been freed up of the various rocks they were carrying, so they're able to focus more on operations and getting things running more smoothly. Jessica has been showing excellent leadership and judgment. Things would be a lot worse if Jessica was not there. Jim seconds that. The last time we switched executive directors, the president had to step in as the acting executive director. Jessica was on the inside for some time, so she knew how the operations worked and had good relationships with the staff.
Greg asks about morale in Chapter Support. Jessica says the executive committee came and gave staff a chance to ask questions and raise concerns. Since that time, the air was cleared and staff are focused on their work. They've got great attitudes and seem to be optimistic. There seems to be more teamwork than there has been in the last few weeks. Jon asks about the process of hiring a new executive director and where that is. Jim says we have not even thought about hiring a new executive director yet. We want to get things stabilized first. The executive committee has a meeting planned next week and that will be one of the topics they talk about.

7. New Business

Finance Committee

A. Chapter budget variances
   i. DISCUSSION: ESC Equipment Purchase

Jim says this is informational. Another Chapter budget variance came forward. This was an adjustment that was based on a donation that was coming to cover the cost. The Finance committee approved it. Empire Sauk will be moving forward with the equipment purchase.

No questions or comments.

Land Management Committee

A. ACTION ITEM: MVC Sime Property Management Plan

Jim says this is a management plan that's come forward from Mississippi Valley Conservancy. They now own the property that they have an easement on.

Jessica begins to present. The Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) is looking to acquire property, a portion of which TPE holds a conservation easement on. MVC shared a land management plan related to the property. The Land Management Committee recommended the Board approve the plan in place of the current Land Management Plan.

Jon asks about the acreage and easement. The total property acreage is 83 acres and TPE has a conservation easement on 50 of those 83 acres. The property will be added to the Boscobel Bluff property, making it 400+ acres total. TPE has had the conservation easement since 1998. Jon asks if they would entertain the thought of transferring the conservation easement to MVC.

Jim says the possibility of transferring the conservation easement to MVC has been discussed. MVC would likely be open to it. It depends on TPE and Land Trust Alliance approval. It could relieve TPE of easement monitoring responsibilities. MVC is waiting for approval of the management plan before closing.
The management plan was written in March 2024, specifically for the new acquisition, not the entire Boscobel Bluff property.
Matt asks if there was any analysis done on the new plan. Jim says that Dan Carter reviewed the plan and found no red flags.

Peter Hartman makes a motion to accept the management plan. Matt seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

There is more discussion about transferring the conservation easement to MVC.
LTA should be consulted to ensure any decision aligns with organizational goals and resource protection.

Land Protection Committee

A. ACTION ITEM: Hanley Savanna Application for IL Nature Preserve

Jay presents. An application has been submitted for further protection on one of the preserves. The goal is to get the property designated as a nature preserve in Illinois. This designation offers the highest level of protection in Illinois, preventing eminent domain overrides. It also unlocks additional grant funding opportunities. The property is adjacent to another nature preserve, which is viewed favorably. The process involves working with the Nature Preserve Commission. It could take one to two years due to the Commission's workload. Our focus has shifted to maintaining properties and ensuring they're in the best shape. This is another step in that direction.

Greg makes a motion to approve the application. Jerry seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

B. ACTION ITEM: New Project Proposals Approval

i. West Dane Conservancy CE addition Project Pre-Approval – ESC

Jim presents. This is an addition to an existing easement. Doug and Chris have done a tremendous job on restoring the property. It has a unique gradient going down to the stream. The prairie restoration extends from the ridge down to the stream.

Jessica notes that they are willing to donate the easement and contribute to its endowment.

Jay makes a motion to approve. Peter seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

ii. Deneen addition to Erbe FT Project Pre-Approval - ESC

Jim presents. This is a fee title project. Funding would be obtained through grants. The project aims to increase the area of grassland in Erbe Grassland Preserve by restoring ag land into prairie grassland. Funding could come from Knowles Nelson Stewardship funding and the Dane County Conservation Fund. Jim says the motion should include approval for seeking out these grant funds. Jay asks if the approval is contingent upon obtaining funds from grant sources. Jim says correct. Jim adds that the land is adjacent to an existing nature preserve and will be a buffer.

Harvey makes a motion to approve the Deneen addition fee title acquisition, contingent upon obtaining the necessary funding. Greg seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

iii. Benedict Prairie FT Project Pre-Approval – GPC

Jim presents. This is another fee title project. The Glacial Prairie Chapter has already put a lot of work into it. Jessica says that UW Milwaukee may seek to sell it and not transfer it. It is an open question at the moment. Jessica says there is a parallel process happening with extending the management agreement.
Jim adds that if acquired, there was talk about purchasing adjacent ag land as a buffer. Katie asks if the ag land is restorable to match what's existing. Jim says for railroad remnant, it is very diverse. The main thing would be to have a buffer. Right now they are spraying herbicide and pesticide adjacent to the site.
Harvey asks about drain tile. There is a need to ascertain if there is drain tile from the ag lands going into the river. Jessica isn't aware but will find that out.
Jim adds that this may take a while to happen.

Nancy makes a motion for the Chapter to continue discussions and gathering information regarding the possible acquisition of the property. Jay seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

Question: Harvey asks about the distance from the site to Chiwaukee Prairie. Jim estimates it to be around 20 miles. Harvey says that the plant list is phenomenal for a small site. Jim says the site was initially thought to be highly degraded, but many species are still present. Seed collecting efforts are underway to scatter diversity throughout the site.

iv. Oak Drive Wet Prairie Proposal - SVC

Jim presents. This is a land management agreement to formalize work on the site. The land management plan has been approved by the Land Management Committee, but not yet seen by the Board. Jim adds that we need to formalize a process for this.
The agreement is set up to be one year at a time, with annual recommitment.
Harvey said the monitor found marsh at the site. The site needs some burning.
The Chapter is enthused about this site and where it could go in the future.
Jim says there is no anticipation of additional protection like an easement or ownership in the near future, but this agreement is a stepping stone to that.
Jon says where it says the funding sources and endowments will be discussed with the landowner in the future, is that for acquisition or management? Jim says it is potentially for higher protection like a conservation easement.

Greg makes a motion to approve the project proposal. Peter Hartman seconds the motion. All in favor. Motion carries.

8. Annual Conference Discussion

Jim gives some background on the conference. The conference went virtual during the pandemic, and the advantages of virtual outweighed in-person. There is a consideration to revisit the decision to remain virtual. In-person conferences were previously run by the Chapters with some Chapter Support help. The amount of staff time to put on the virtual conference is a concern. Jessica adds that the contract with WHOVA is up, prompting the discussion about the conference format. If the conference remains virtual, they're looking at least two more years being virtual. Chapter Support can provide registration help, marketing and design materials and outreach, getting sponsorships and exhibits. We would be looking for a volunteer group that would handle the programming, whether that's in person or virtual. If in person, the host Chapter would handle the logistics.

Katie says that running a conference representing the entire organization carries a lot of pressure. Chapter Support should take the lead to avoid recreating the wheel with Chapter volunteers every year.
Jim says that in the past, the Chapter hosting one year would be part of the committee the following year for transition. Documentation on when things need to be done, including day-of conference tasks, is helpful. With the Chapter hosting, it gives the Chapters flexibility allowing them to focus on specific program tracks.

Harvey says that in 2001, they used the university resources for marketing and programming to help plan and promote. It's still available. With the Chapter Support team expertise, especially with Jessica, that can still be utilized.

Harvey asks about the WHOVA contract and if we could renew a year at a time.
Jessica says the WHOVA contract can be renewed on a year-to-year basis instead of a multi-year package, costing approximately $1,000 more annually.

Alice says there are pros and cons to an in-person conference. Finding a central spot for in-person conferences that is comfortable for people to travel to is a concern due to the organization's spread-out nature. The most attended live conference was in Madison with Empire Sauk, reaching almost 300 attendees, while a conference at Glacial Prairie only drew about 180 people and resulted in financial loss. Virtual conferences generate a significant net gain. Jessica says we roughly make between $20,000 to $30,000 on the virtual conference, but securing sponsorships is challenging.

Nancy adds that winter storms can also disrupt in-person conferences.

Matt adds that summer events are more suitable and popular for in-person gatherings.

Katie says it's important to revisit past discussions and notes to determine the conference's purpose: meeting old friends, outreach, education, business, or field trips. Jim says the decision to go virtual was left open for a potential return to in-person meetings.
Katie asks some key questions: Are we meeting our goals? Are we losing touch with people from different regions? Are we gaining new members?
Jessica says that the virtual conference has stagnated in terms of audience growth. In-person conferences create different feelings about organizations. Summer gatherings have primarily attracted local Chapter members, not achieving cross-Chapter connections.

Greg brings up an idea to poll participants to gauge interest and willingness to travel, considering travel time, hotel stays, and expenses.
Jessica says that if we did a poll, it would target participants from the previous year's conference due to the mid-December deadline for contract signing. The conference is in February.

Jon says past discussions considered an in-person conference every third or fourth year, timed with the end of WHOVA.
Jessica says the consensus was that transitioning formats can be challenging, but donor surveys show mixed opinions on in-person vs. virtual events. Potential mitigation for virtual conference drawbacks: webinar series.

Katie likes the idea of a webinar series. She asks about the reason for the timing of the conference. Alice said it was all about the burn season.
Jim says that an in-person conference in the non-dormant season has advantages: field trip opportunities, but there are potential conflicts with people's summer schedules.

Harvey says the virtual conference is a preferred moneymaker, with opportunities for summer picnics, webinars, and staff involvement.

Jessica says that staff load is a concern with virtual conferences, and adding a webinar series may not be feasible at this time.
Jim says increased volunteer involvement could alleviate staff workload, such as a committee for speaker selection. Jessica agrees.

Katie suggests an in-person summer conference with volunteer-led webinars.
Greg and Katie discuss field trip opportunities and past events. The Empire Sauk event was limited to 80 people due to transportation.

Harvey asks about co-hosting. Alice and Jim say that past co-hosting experiences include events with Wild Ones and the Wisconsin Wetlands Association in the early 2000s.

Alice suggests a financial breakdown of the different conferences. In-person conferences: Chapters organized and kept the profit, which was very lucrative for the Chapters.
Jerry says if the Chapter did that, it would increase the Chapter's Cost Share the next year if they made good money. Jessica says that net revenue was previously shared. Jim says in later years, it was 50%. When Chapter Support got more involved, the revenue was split. Alice says there would need to be an exemption for Cost Share and a split with Chapter Support.

Greg says it's unfortunate having a December deadline with a "pretty steep premium" for a one-year renewal. Concern that the deadline puts pressure on making a decision with many questions and possibilities. Jim says the $1,000 difference is not seen as a barrier. We can decide not to do the multi-year contract and pick it up later. The later date will come sooner than we think.

Shawn agrees that we need to be planning next year's in-person conference a year out. Jessica clarifies that the 2026 conference will be virtual, and registration has already launched. Discussion is about the 2027 conference. Summer event talk is about 2027, not 2026.

Jessica says the difference in contract is 8 or 9,000 between 1 and 2 years. Harvey requests for clarification on WHOVA pricing, minimum contract length, and multi-year contract length.
Jessica clarifies. A one-year contract for 2027 would be $9767, which is reportedly a discounted rate from the normal $13,000. A two-year contract for 2027 and 2028 would be $8790 each year. Costs have increased, while attendance hasn't increased substantially, impacting net revenue. There is a mid-December deadline to decide whether to look at other platforms. WHOVA had technical challenges last year and did not provide a refund.

Jay mentions considering taking a break from the conference or going biannual. Need to assess what would be lost by going biannual or not having a conference.

Harvey is curious how many major donors sign up and participate in the virtual conference.
Jim says The North American Prairie Conference is held every other year and is successful despite not being a formal organization.

Nancy mentions that the first day of the conference is always burn school. The conference makes it easier for people to get invited to burns. Jim says burn school can be facilitated through other mediums.

Jon asks for clarification on the definition of a major donor for the organization; Jessica says it may be less than $5,000. Jim thinks it may be $5,000.

Jim asks if a group should compile the thoughts from the meeting into a document for discussion at the next meeting. Harvey likes the idea of having the conference every other year. Katie likes the idea of webinars throughout the winter and a summer conference with a field trip on the first day.
Jessica needs to know if the WHOVA contract will be renewed for one year for 2027 or multi-year. This decision needs to be made by the middle of the month.

Greg says there's a move towards shifting responsibility for planning the conference onto a group of volunteers from the membership. Jim mentions that online conferences allow for speakers from further away, as travel costs are not a factor. Jessica says that online conferences tend to be better financially. In-person conferences outside the university system tend to break even. In-person conferences at a university generate more revenue. Alice says we should consider every other year for conferences and then go with the webinars to see where it lands. This would give some breathing space and mean they don't have to re-up with WHOVA. Katie asks if this might make the organization appear to be losing steam. Greg thinks that they want to display strength and not lose touch points. There's been a lot of enthusiasm, and the Burn school filled up almost instantaneously. Greg likes the idea of keeping some momentum going.

Jim suggests doing one more year of virtual in 2027 with more support from volunteers. Several people like this idea.

Matt is opposed to extending the virtual event just to take a break and figure out what to do. He believes signing up for another virtual contract is "kicking the can" and that they need to decide what they actually want to do.

There is a question on clarity on the contract with WHOVA. Do they need to decide by December 12th whether they're going to go with WHOVA for 2027? Jessica has already asked for an extension on the contract quote.

A one-year contract right now is $9,767. Without the current discount, it will either be close to $13,000 or $11,000.
Matt says the rack rate is $13,000, discounted to $9,000 with an extension. Jim says skipping a year reverts to the $13,000 rate, potentially $15,000 in the future.
Jessica says she needs to know the exact extension date being asked for.

There is more discussion on doing a virtual or in-person or skipping a year.

The consensus is to extend the WHOVA contract for one more year and form a committee early on to make a decision for the future of the conference. There will be a virtual conference in February of 2027.

Jerry moves to adjourn the meeting. Greg seconds the motion. All in favor. Jim adjourns the meeting.