



MINUTES
WILD CENTER OCTOBER BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEETING
Hybrid in New York City & Virtually via Zoom
Friday, January 31, 2025 - 9:00 am- 1:00 pm

Trustees Present In Person: Karen Thomas, Board Chair, Vice-Chair, Paul Alioto, Vice-Chair, Ben Ireland, Treasurer, Michael Bettmann, Allison Birdsong, Lynn Birdsong (Trustee Emeritus), Terry Birdsong, Ed Forbes, Sally Hart, Nicky Hylton, Lynn Fox, Brooks Reynolds, Juan Rodriguez, Nancy Simpkins (Trustee Emeritus)

Advisory Board Members Present in Person: Margaret Wiener

Trustees Present Virtual: Joe Beck, Larry Clifford, David Kanietakeron Fadden, Charlie Frenette, Rick Godin, Robin Gosnell, Betsy Lowe, Paul Maroun, Pam Matt, Charlie Svenson, Joel Treisman

Advisory Board Present virtual: Emily Forbes, Clifton Harcum Sr., Michael Hunsinger, Stanley Rumbough, Meadow Rutenbar, Curt Stager

Staff Present: Stephanie Ratcliffe, Executive Director, Hillarie Logan-Dechene, Deputy Director, Ruth Burnell, Libby Clark, Robin Ellis, Jen Kretser, Sara Paula, Isabella Sandersen

Karen Thomas formally called the meeting to order at 9:05 am. A welcome from Karen and thanks for everyone being on zoom.

1. Committee on Trustees - Terry Birdsong

Annual Meeting Business - Election and Re-election of Board Members

K. Thomas invited outgoing Committee on Trustees Chair, Terry Birdsong to present the slate of officers, election, and re-election of the Board and Advisory Board.

a. Election of new trustee - Allison Birdsong

- T. Birdsong announced that Advisory Board member Allison Birdsong will be joining the Trustees.

Motion made by Sally Hart, seconded by Lynn Fox and unanimously approved.

b. Election of officers

- T. Birdsong presented the slate of officers for a one-year term to be approved by the board. Chair: Karen Thomas, Vice Chairs: Paul Alioto & Linda Rosenstock, Secretary: Ginny Valkenburgh, Treasurer: Ben Ireland

Motion by Lynn Fox and seconded by Michael Bettmann and unanimously approved

Karen thanked Jack Ryder and Joe Beck for both of their long time commitments to the board and The Wild Center.

c. Re-election of trustees

- T. Birdsong presented the class of Trustees who are up for reelection for 2025 - 2028. Larry Clifford, David K. Fadden, Elizabeth Lowe, Paul Maroun, Pam Matt, Brooks Reynolds, Linda Rosenstock, Charles Svenson, Karen Thomas, Virginia Valkenburgh

Motion made by Terry Birdsong Seconded by Ben Ireland, unanimously approved

d. Other changes to the Trustee and Advisory Board

- Trustee to Advisory Board: Jim Schoff is moving to the Advisory Board. Terry thanked Jim for his dedication to the board.
- New Advisory Board: Clifton Harcum Sr. Terry welcomed Clifton Harcum Sr. to the Advisory Board and invited Clifton to say a few words. Clifton thanked everyone and expressed his excitement to be on the Advisory Board.
- There will be a New Trustee and AB Orientation - March 18, 2025 2:30 - 4:30pm. Everyone is invited and an invite and reminder will be sent out.
- Karen then presented the Committee structure and assignments for 2025. If anyone has any questions please let Karen know.
- Reminder for the Trustees to fill out the [Code of Ethical Conduct & Annual Potential Conflict Disclosure](#) and [Whistleblower Policy](#) forms by January 31st, 2025. (Advisory Board members do not need to complete these forms.)
- Karen also thanked Terry Birdsong who has served as the co-chair for COT and has been instrumental in furthering board policies and helping to build the board.

2. Administration - Karen Thomas and Stephanie Ratcliffe

Approval of Minutes

Karen called for a motion to approve the October Board Meeting minutes.

A motion was made by Ed Forbes, seconded by Terry Birdsong and unanimously approved by The full Board of Trustees.

A. Chair Report:

Karen remarked that 2024 was a fantastic year. Paid attendance was up, membership revenues were up, the annual fund goal was surpassed. The Fen trail loop is complete, the Smithsonian is eyeing the Solutions Exhibit for a travel exhibition, and there have been multiple leadership activities in the Youth Climate Program and Education department. Follensby tours beginning in the summer of 2025 and acknowledged the wonderful 2024 Total Solar Eclipse last April.

Despite all of the good work of 2024, we were unable to close the 2024 budgeted deficit of \$260,000. We have another proposed deficit in 2025 and she stressed that this does not reflect the hard work of the staff to deliver excellent programs and the pursuit of grants to keep operating expenses down. Expenses were under budget by \$100K. We are at a pivotal moment of expense and financial challenge--with grant revenue down, Covid funding over--we have rising maintenance costs and campaign expenses, and we are tapping into our Board Designated Endowment at an accelerated rate.

On a local, national and global level there has been more uncertainty now than there has been in the four years she has been chair and she indicated three very clear things:

1. The value of our work and mission is to connect people to nature and inspire action. People need us now. We need it emotionally as a refuge from chaos and disruption and need to step into spaces left vacant by government policies.
2. There is a critical need to build up the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund to help secure our financial future which will help our mission.
3. Looking to 2025, we need to continue to be mindful of our spending. We have limited resources, and until they grow, we may need to make choices.

Karen concluded that we need to grow, and grow responsibly, we need to endow and maintain. We have the tools: The LaBella Facilities Assessment report will give us a roadmap and timeline to maintain. Immediate focus on the APEF will deliver tremendous mission impact and future budget relief. We have the campaign which will help us raise funds to leverage our success and maximize our mission. We have the 2025 budget, a good plan with flexibility, which has been reviewed and supported by the Finance Committee.

B. Executive Director Report:

There were a few questions based on the pre-read materials:

- There is enthusiasm for the Smithsonian's interest in a travelling Solutions Exhibit. Will The Wild Center receive compensation for the travelling exhibition? Stephanie explained that we would not. The rental revenue will offset costs to build the exhibit.
 - The social capital gained is huge - the exhibit can travel the country and highlight our work to more people.
- How are we accounting for and planning for the bump from the eclipse?
 - Our budget has been planned and adjusted to account for the Eclipse. Partner relationships have been strengthened because of the event.

3. Financial Reports - Ben Ireland

B. Ireland reported on the 2024 results and presented the 2025 budget. Ben thanked Joe Beck for all of his support, the Finance Committee and Bob Kronenberger for all of their help with putting this together.

Ben reported that 2024 was a great year by a number of metrics and the team should be celebrated for a fantastic year.

Highlights:

- 2024 attendance and admission revenues were both up
- 2024 earned income was up by \$146k, through admissions
- Annual Fund contributions met and exceeded budget
- Operating expenses were under budget
- Endowment: Showing great performance with market value increase and realized gains totaling \$1.6mm in 2024 and led to a return of 13.5% in 2024.
- Finished with a deficit for 2024

The 2025 Budget was built with flexibility in mind.

- Budget deficit of \$298k, includes a large increase in maintenance costs and a decrease in salary recovery from grants.
- There will be draws from Board endowment funds, which is like a down payment for the Campaign with the intention that these funds will be repaid as campaign revenue comes in. There will be operating impact for a few years going forward until these funds are repaid.
- We are planning an admission increase for 2025: \$2 adult and \$1 youth, to begin in May which will help with revenue overall if attendance holds.
- 2025 will show an increase in expenses - including some full time people for campaign and added expenses for staff and benefits as well as the maintenance plan.
 - Cannot defer maintenance needs anymore.
 - The increased fundraising and the development costs are being fully funded by the board designated funds, which from a deficit standpoint is a zero impact.
- Great 2024 endowment performance. Big change for 2025 is the transfer of \$4mm from the Board Designated Endowment Fund to the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund.
 - Board Designated Funds - \$6.6mm balance
 - Permanent Endowment - \$6.9mm balance

Motion to approve the budget, motion by Paul Alioto and seconded by Ed Forbes and unanimously approved by the Trustees.

4. Development - Charlie Svenson, Lee Bailey and Hillarie Logan-Dechene

Development Committee:

Charlie Svenson offered his congratulations to the staff and the Board involved with Take 5 on meeting the 2024 Annual Fund goal. He noted that we are fortunate to have such a great staff and the incredible year end preparation that goes into the Annual Fund, and he remarked that we raise an exceptional amount of annual support when compared with other Adirondack organizations.

Hillarie Logan-Dechene additionally thanked the board for their support and all of their work that they do throughout the year. Hillarie then reviewed the 2024 Annual Fund and Membership results. She also noted that we will be looking at new opportunities for grants through the campaign.

Campaign Update - Lee Bailey, Lynn Fox

Lynn Fox gave a brief update on the Campaign, and noted that there is a lot happening behind the scenes in terms of planning and research. She reminded everyone that at the last board meeting the Board approved the Campaign Co-Chairs to spend up to \$500k on campaign expenses, and she assured everyone that this will be responsible spending as needed.

New Building Status - Paul Alioto, Chair, Buildings & Grounds Committee

Paul Alioto gave a report on the new building status. He noted that he had been on-site often to really understand the campus and needs.

- Highlights from Paul's findings from his own observations and conversations with Stephanie and Phil Wagschal, Facilities Director:

- The Facilities department has a small staff
- The facility is about 20 years old, with some equipment and structures nearing the end of their life, requiring extended upkeep.
- Programming and visitor experience is constrained by facility limitations.

Paul reported on what is happening now and the plans moving forward to meet and exceed the needs of the campus. This included \$207,000 for planned improvements and preventive maintenance that are included in the operating budget and \$293,000 for capital improvements that would be drawn from Board Designated Funds and Grants.

Paul reviewed that the New Building is being worked on in addition to the other campaign priority projects. He emphasized that all of our facilities and the Buildings and Grounds committee priorities need to intersect with the campaign. He said it was time to shift our energies and investment from the Convening Center design to the overall Capital Campaign. Convening is important and more needs to be done on the marketing strategy and business planning side of the Convening Center to give greater confidence in feasibility and sustainability.

Paul suggested having a Q&A document for the board about the New Building, as well as a Board University video.

Paul opened it up to questions and comments and some folks expressed concern over not having enough staff on the facilities team. Discussion continued that this would need more thought and analysis on how we could balance staffing with outsourcing and what is the most financially feasible.

5. Campaign Session - Campbell & Company - Cassie Carter, Christina Knaier, and Heather Korpi

Lynn Fox, Campaign Co-Chair, introduced Campaign counsel from Campbell & Company who facilitated a discussion with the board through where we are at in the campaign and what the plan is moving forward.

Christina kicked off with going over the timeline of the Campaign and where we are currently at, which is the Discovery and Ideation phase. This phase will help inform the next phase of work happening in February - April, which will involve creating various materials - Message Bank, Talking Points, Pillar Briefs and a Pitch Deck. During May - June, these materials will be rolled out.

Christina continued that the work happening today will start preparing the Board to be able to use the same language and talking points for when the time comes to talk with donors.

She reminded the Board where we are currently and what we know:

What we know:

- Campaign priorities: endowment, capital and operational
- Current donor base is supportive but we also acknowledge possible donor fatigue
- TWC can and must build the donor pipeline

As well as what we will accomplish today:

- Think strategically about our prospective donor audiences - new donors
- Share our passion for the three campaign priorities and the vision for the effort as a whole

- Listen for words and ideas that have consensus and a compelling narrative

Heather Korpi then took the Board through a number of different exercises to get everyone to start thinking about the Campaign vision and priorities.

1. The first exercise was to begin to draft a word bank of words that we use to describe The Wild Center and the work we do. The board came up with the following:
 - Optimistic, creative, fun, visionary, leader, exploratory, poised for greatness, impactful, catalyst, trusted, convener, courageous, joy, confident, hidden gem, unexpected, science and nature, welcoming, thoughtful, pride, below the reach
2. The Campaign 3-legged Stool - Endowment, Capital and Operational

Heather asked the question: What do the three legs of the stool work together to solve?

- Programs that support the mission
- Encouraging people to take action to change the world.
- Relationships between nature and people, people and people, other communities and the world.
- Being a leader in this space - we need to sustain a momentum to continue to meet the original vision from Betsy.
- Hope and giving people hope for the future. Giving people a voice through their actions.
- We are a regional anchor and need to be less humble. – we are a leader and we are a convener
- TWC is intentional about who we are on and off campus. Leadership is driven by a connective approach from top staff and all the way down. There is a vision to bring together as many different groups in the ADK as possible. Bring them together through various streams of interest - within the context of the park and whoever visits us.
 - Example is seen in how we approach the people that are shown in the Climate Solutions exhibit - in the heart of the building.
 - Capable of scale - need to be able to grow and to do more nationally, globally, etc. *Toot our horn*
- How do we translate this and capitalize on this to people who have money and don't know us?
- Affinity groups– reaching different people, ages, etc, and appealing to their needs as well.
- Think global
- Use Storytelling - We have rockstars from the YCP and see what they are doing and use them as examples to show what the impact has been on them.

The second asked the Board to fast forward 10 years and think about what we will have solved or created because of this campaign:

- Host events or convenings and have visitors.
- Do residencies for climate
- Be seen as a proven solution - educated, empowered youth to act locally and nationally to organize.
- Continue to build muscle as a thought leader so that TWC staff and advocates are a part of the conversation and have more seats at the table at a big level - state, national, etc.
- Convening around climate and climate science and in ten years
- Financially sustainable
 - The anorthosite endowment will be fully funded, which we will be able to draw on.
- Campus will look the best it has ever looked.
- Sending people out throughout the world and bringing donors on trips with us.
- Managing balance of both global and local

- What is the current market –what do they currently believe and do and what do we WANT them to believe and do? In between is our message and our strategy - what are we doing to change those beliefs and actions? What we say and what we do.

Lynn Fox then gave an introduction to a video by her fellow Campaign Co-Chair, Lee Bailey and his encouraging words for the Board regarding the campaign.

Christina then took the Board through a donor scenario before breaking out into groups. She posed questions to the Board that asked them to think how they would approach different types of donors or audiences when talking about the campaign.

- Example:
 - Campaign Cabinet, Board members and long-term donors – would be well suited for Endowment
 - Current donors, including those who have yet to give at full capacity- would be well suited for Capital giving
 - Broader community and those who love TWC but have not yet given - would be well suited for Annual, Operations and Programs.

Christina took the Board through a hypothetical scenario about how to talk with someone who has never been a donor, but is familiar with The Wild Center. She posed various questions on how to approach this conversation:

- How might you open the conversation? How would you introduce the campaign vision?
- Not making a solicitation - what are some other possible action items that you might land on?
 - Deepening engagement
 - Bringing back the pride - origin stories
 - Idea of a story core - story booth to capture people’s memories from 20 years. - can do it at events, etc.
 - Inclusion and accessibility and how that has evolved - being transparent about the parameters in which The Wild Center exists and because of that is reaching other communities and being a place that is welcoming - transformational being

Christina then had the Board break out into three groups - two in person and one virtual to explore other donor scenarios.

- **Breakout Room 1 -Virtual** - Larry Clifford, Dave Fadden, Charlie Frenette, Emily Forbes, Rick Godin, Robin Gosnell, Michael Hunsinger, Betsy Lowe, Paul Maroun, Curt Stager, Charlie Svenson
 - This group had a hypothetical former trustee, who would be good to speak about the Endowment with.
 - The group discussed and suggested the following:
 - Make a strong connection with the past and the future - create a sense of nostalgia and pride for what they accomplished with their past work
 - Who are we putting the case for endowment in front of? ‘Why not now’ participants
 - Estate planners or lawyers who draw up estate plans

- How do we appeal to people outside of ADKs and create engagement opportunities for them.
- **Breakout Room 2** - Lynn Birdsong, Allison Birdsong, Michael Bettmann, Ben Ireland, Ed Forbes, Charlie Frenette, Sally Hart, Juan Rodriguez, Karen Thomas
 - This group explored how to talk about someone who may be interested in operations and have expressed being interested in the Youth Climate Program.
 - The group suggested the following actions:
 - ask questions about their experience with TWC - what makes them passionate? What was that experience like for them?
 - Educate them on the programs themselves, have an opportunity to serve even more and get more kids who are passionate about saving the planet.
 - Operations gives an opening for broadening the base of support. Trailblazing inclusion and belonging in natural spaces.
 - Giving opportunities to kids, families and people of color to come to the ADKS
 - Leading with stories of whose lives have been impacted
 - Ask them to post their story on the storyboard to share with people
 - Make a connection to other families, invite to attend again or use it as an opportunity to point to another element of The Wild Center.
- **Breakout Room 3** -Paul Alioto, Terry Birdsong, George Cigale, Lynn Fox, Brooks Reynolds, Nancy Simpkins, Margaret Wiener
 - This group explored a hypothetical donor who might support capital, but they are not deeply engaged with TWC yet.
 - The group suggested the following actions:
 - Spend the time thoughtfully listening to what potentially motivates that person and why they would support the organization and capital specifically.
 - Demonstrate value of ADKs and value of the program at TWC and how capital connects to that.
 - Try to better understand what this person is trying to accomplish through their philanthropy - so not a scripted conversation, but listening to what they are saying to drive the conversation.

Note: additional thoughts will be included in talking points currently under development and captured by consultants in each room.

6. DEIA Sub-Committee - Michael Bettmann, Dave Jones and Stephanie Ratcliffe

Stephanie presented on Accessibility and Inclusion at The Wild Center.

- a. Examples of how accessibility is presented throughout the TWC campus and programs:
 - i. Physical - All persons trails, wheelchairs, walkers, wagons, strollers, nursing station, universal design for architecture and exhibits
 - ii. Digital - [Wild Center Digital Virtual Visit](#), virtual field trips, archived content
 - iii. Programmatic - Captioning videos and movies, using amplification for all programs, training and awareness for all new and existing staff
- b. Examples of how inclusivity is presented throughout the TWC Campus and programs:

- i. Cultural - Tribal status, NY state teachers, Tupper Lake School District
- ii. Social - Library program, community free days offered annually
- iii. Experiential - Sensory Free Days, Homeschool Days

Michael Bettmann then reported on the Board book club which began in 2024.

- As a reminder, the Board has been reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* and participants have said that it has been educational, fun, inspirational and energizing.
- There are three more sessions coming up - everyone is welcome
 - Tuesday, February 4 - 12:00 - 1:00pm
 - Wednesday, March 5 - 7:00 - 8:00pm
 - Tuesday, April 1 - 12:00 - 1:00pm

7. Programming - Hillarie Logan-Dechene, Jen Kretser

- a. Hillarie gave an update on New York State's leadership with climate action.
- b. Initiatives that the Climate Team have been working on were provided in your board materials packet and Jen was available to answer questions. She noted that the program in the past year has been expanded not just locally and nationally, but also globally.
 - i. There was a suggestion for Jen to do a Board University session on the Climate program and activities.

8. Executive Session

- **Mark your calendars: 2025 Board Meeting Dates**
 - NYC- Friday, April 25, 2025, Time TBD, dinner April 25
 - TWC- Monday, June 30, 2025, Time TBD, dinner June 29
 - TWC- Friday, October 10, 2025, Time TBD