



MINUTES
WILD CENTER OCTOBER BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEETING
Hybrid in New York City & Virtually via Zoom
Friday, April 25, 2025 - 9:00 am- 1:00 pm

Trustees Present In Person: Karen Thomas, Board Chair, Paul Alioto, Vice-Chair, Lee Bailey, Allison Birdsong, Ed Forbes, Lynn Fox, Sally Hart, Ben Ireland, Treasurer, Linda Rosentock, Vice-Chair, Jack Ryder, Ginny Valkenburgh, Secretary

Trustees Present Virtual: Michael Bettmann, Lynn Birdsong (Trustee Emeritus), Terry Birdsong, Joe Beck, George Cigale, Larry Clifford, David Kanietakeron Fadden, Charlie Frenette, Rick Godin, Robin Gosnell, Nancy Howard, Nicky Hylton, Betsy Lowe, Pam Matt, Charlie Svenson, Brooks Reynolds, Juan Rodriguez, Joel Treisman

Advisory Board Present virtual: Emily Forbes, Clifton Harcum Sr., Paul Maroun, Stanley Rumbough, Curt Stager, Nell Ryder, Mark Valkenburgh, Margy Wiener

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

Campbell & Company Consultants: Christina Knaier & Heather Korpi

Karen Thomas formally called the meeting to order at 9:03 am. A welcome from Karen and thanks for everyone being in person and on zoom.

1. Administration - Karen Thomas & Stephanie Ratcliffe

Approval of Minutes

Karen called for a motion to approve the January Board Meeting minutes. Betsy Lowe asked that her name be added to the attendance for the digital breakout room on page 7 of the minutes.

A motion to approve the minutes, as amended, was made by Lynn Fox, seconded by Paul Alioto and unanimously approved by the full Board of Trustees.

A. Chair Report:

Karen made remarks about the reception the night before and made note of Andrew Fagerheim who had been a guest speaker at the reception. She highlighted his work that he did while in the Youth Climate Program, and what he has been involved in since.

- Lee Bailey also noted how much he appreciated the mini bios that staff wrote for the board.
- Hillarie also thanked Advisory Board member Grant Reynolds for connecting us to the reception venue.

Karen continued that a year ago, this board had discussed and decided on goals we needed to set for The Wild Center's future - endow, grow and maintain - and how 12 months later we are on our way with each of those initiatives.

- Endow - The Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund is established, initial gifts invested and solicitations are underway.
- Maintain - Paul Alioto will be speaking more today about his report of the consultant we hired to give us a study of our maintenance and capital needs going forward.
- Grow - Thanks to Lee, Lynn and the whole staff we have the Campaign that will solidify our core and grow to support the work of The Wild Center for years to come.

Karen thanked the whole board and staff for making this time period so productive. These initiatives are critical in these uncertain times: grant funding threatened, then canceled and grant sources gutted. The team was proactive, faced the realities, prepared for the worst and are now working with the Finance Committee to look at alternatives. She said that we will take these challenges and turn them into opportunities and fill in the spaces left vacant by government policy. She emphasized that we have what people will be seeking. The need to connect with nature. We will need to inform, engage and inspire our visitors to love and value the natural world and to take action. We are good at this, and yes, there will be challenges but there is tremendous opportunity.

B. Executive Director Report:

Stephanie did an overview of what is happening with federal grants and how that has impacted The Wild Center and what the next steps are for moving forward.

Stephanie reviewed the current situation with current federal grants and their impacts below:

- IMLS - Cima-teen program - Terminated
- IMLS w/partner - Climate Camp - Terminated
- NSF - Family Science - On Pause
- AmeriCorps - ON Alert
- Animal Care Renovation - NYS Grant - Not affected

She then addressed the question 'what does our future look like without Federal grants?'

- Federal funding will end and not return for a long time
- NYS grants will not end, but do not fill the scope that the federal grants have filled
- Other grants will become more competitive
- Grants allowed extras, new experiments and special projects
- We will receive much less salary recovery for projects
- Fewer staff on the floor/campus unless new funding sources are identified. This will have us regrouping on how staff is planning to maintain the visitor experience.

There was a question about AmeriCorps and whether we think that program will be terminated. Hillarie noted that they have already put 75% of staff at the Federal level on administrative leave. And while it is a very bipartisan program, none of the State programs know what is happening yet.

Stephanie then reviewed how we are adapting:

- Re-tool intern/fellow program - fewer in number and paid for by underwriting or partnership (SUNY ESF/Fink).
- Volunteer Program becomes even more essential (and is growing). This program has helped from facilities to serving the public on the floor. Working on more content training going forward.
- Our focus on the next 5 years is the campaign, solidifying and focusing our funding requests on our core work.
- Our promise to our donors is a positive future and aspirations - that is our work, not new projects

There was discussion on what work AmeriCorps does in the community and how we would continue to do that without AmeriCorps if it comes to that.

There was then a robust discussion regarding the current administration's plans moving forward and how that could impact us. George Cigale shared his experience with higher education boards. This included commentary on the importance of building coalitions with other non-governmental groups such as the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) and American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and zero expectation of any federal grants in the next 3 years. There was a suggestion from Nancy Howard about hosting a gathering of these organizations which could be beneficial. There was also conversation about 501c3 status as well as how being a Smithsonian Affiliate might impact our work with climate change programming and DEIA. Ben Ireland also noted that the Finance Committee will be doing a re-forecast of the budget at the June Board Meeting.

Stephanie then shared more information about what The Wild Center has received through Federal Funding from 2017 - 2024 (totalling: \$2,550,028):

Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

- Emerging Leaders – Youth Climate Program (\$175,711)
- Natural Connections Education Programs (\$249,040)

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

- Empowering Youth – Youth Climate Program (\$475,038)
- Convening Youth (\$449,278)

AmeriCorps Total Grant: \$574,474

- Living Allowance for AmeriCorps Members (2022–2024)

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Total Grant: \$37,500

- The Clothesline Project by Brenda Baker (\$27,500)

National Park Service (NPS) Total Grant: \$19,994

- Student Climate Summits Framework (\$19,994)

2. Audit Committee - Paul Alioto & Bob Kronenberger

Paul Alioto echoed the sentiment of appreciation for leadership during this time and all of the committee leadership that have stepped up. Paul then reported on how we had to switch our accounting firm to West and Company, who did a very thorough job.

Bob Kroneberger then reported that the auditors conducted a clean audit and found no risks, meaning that in the opinion of our auditors the financial statements present fairly the financial position and results of the operations of the organization.

Ben Ireland commented that with a strong balance sheet we can embrace our ambition from a position of strength.

Resolution: To Approve the 2024 Audit Report as presented.

A motion was made by Linda Rosenstock, seconded by Lee Bailey and unanimously approved by the full Board of Trustees.

3. Financial Reports - Ben Ireland & Bob Kronenberger

Ben Ireland reported that this team has been really proactive and everyone should feel really good about how the team is reacting to challenges. We have high standards, and overall we are in a good position. We will take the conservative view, make programming adjustments and choices as needed, such as taking a draw from the Board Designated Endowment. The Finance Committee will work with staff to present a re-forecast at the June meeting.

Bob then presented the current financial statements--we are very close to where we have projected to be.

Highlights from the Financial Report:

- 2024 audit report completed. Final results for 2024 reflect an increase in net assets of \$1.1mm. The total support and revenues were \$6.6mm and total operating expenses were \$5.5mm in 2024.
- Overall 2024 March YTD operations are close to plan
- There is currently a lot of uncertainty with regard to funding from Federal grant programs. We are being proactive and making programs specific plans in the event of the loss of funding.
- Total endowment funds are \$13.5mm , consisting of \$6.2mm in Board Designated funds and \$7.3mm in permanent endowment.

4. Buildings and Grounds Committee - Paul Alioto

Paul Alioto presented work that the Buildings and Grounds committee have been working on, which includes a review of the survey that Trustees and Advisory Board members have taken.

- Reports overview

1. Survey Report - Existing Facilities

Conclusion and Key recommendations - management is already working on many of these things.

- Prioritize exhibit revitalization, focusing on aging or underwhelming displays
- Expand visitor programming to maintain engagement for return visitors
- Enhance visitor navigation with better signage and clearer entry/wayfinding

- Improve infrastructure (bathrooms, cafe, parking)
- Invest in outdoor space improvements, like the underutilized waterfront
- Create long-term master plan to guide TWC's development - this plan exists and is in process

2. LaBella property Condition Assessment Survey

a. 10 Year Maintenance Plan & Budget

Paul shared the LaBella reports - *Executive Summary*, the *Narrative*, which provides a bit more detail, and finally the *New Proforma* report which has full detail on the plans. Paul also shared the *Cost Projections spreadsheet* which has been put together with the help of Phil and Bob. All of these documents are available on the Online Board Portal.

There was then discussion that related to choices that will be made to help prioritize and understand upcoming projects. Additionally, the question regarding what has been spent in the last ten years was asked, to which Bob noted it is probably \$2.5mm, but still very much on par with what has been projected as the next 10 years reflect a building and infrastructure that is over 20 years old.

Joe Beck noted that this has been an incredible effort and that our depreciation is about \$1.4mm, and that the \$4,500,000 reflected over the ten year period could be a little higher.

b. Master Plan

Paul reviewed the master plan which is the document that facilities staff use to inform their work plans. The document outlines projects in progress, as well as individual plans for separate projects, such as the bank building, waterfront development, etc.

All of these documents are included on the Online Board Portal. Paul urged everyone to review the documents to better understand them.

3. Survey II Report - The New Building

Paul identified that the overall consensus of the New Building is optimistic, yet cautious. More work needs to be done to understand the financial assumptions, operational risks and overall strategic alignment of the project. There is also a need for an enhanced analysis to identify and understand the strategic and mission-critical considerations as well as adjust to critical external uncertainties.

Paul discussed the need for taking the long view of the building as more work needs to be done, especially now during uncertain times. We need to take time to look at our plans for the next 3 -5 years and help support the business and operational plans. And lastly, we need to continue to be a place that brings people together.

Paul then reviewed what the Buildings and Grounds Committee will be working on next, which involves the following:

- Ensure the Buildings and Grounds Committee work supports mission driven programming
- Deep dive into the Waterfront Development Plan - planned for at the June Board Meeting
- Review and provide continual feedback on the Master Plan - this is an ongoing dialogue with Phil

- Continue to work on the Business and Operational Plans for the New Building
- Continue to communicate with Phil and he will offer a Board University Session on Facilities - will provide opportunity for Board members to be able to dive more into the plan.

5. **Development Committee - Charlie Svenson, Lee Bailey & Hillarie Logan-Dechene**

Karen noted that the summer events are a great opportunity to begin thinking of future board nominations and to use these events to introduce prospects to other board members.

Hillarie reminded the board that they have received a list of curated development events for this summer. They are a great way for our board to get to know new and existing friends of The Wild Center. There is a huge variety of events - education programming, member events, donor events, etc. If you have questions please let development staff know.

Hillarie also gave an overview of the One Day Fire Convening Conference which is on August 7th.

6. **Capital Campaign - Lee Bailey, Lynn Fox & Hillarie Logan-Dechene**

Lee kicked off the conversation about the Capital Campaign and described how things have evolved over the last 12 months. He noted that we are moving in the right direction and that after the reception last night, it is very clear that this is important work for us, for the community and for the world.

Karen made remarks about being clear eyed on the challenges that confront us. We must ensure financial stability and for the remainder of the year we will be focused on the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund and the all important annual fund. We will do critical outreach to old and new friends who will come to understand our vision and join our campaign when the world is more settled. We have time and will take opportunities, adjust to changing circumstances to make smart decisions.

Lynn finished by noting that this work has never been more important and that we will keep working at it. The reception was a great example of the great work we do.

Campbell & Company - Message Bank Presentation

Christina Knaier and Heather Korpi from Campbell & Company outlined their plan for the campaign session, which included reviewing the case development process, sharing input on the message bank and discussion of next steps.

Christina reviewed what a message bank is, the talking points and what they are both for and how they should be used. She urged that these are tools for the Board to use when communicating with donors. They are not to be shared with donors, but used more as guidelines. Christina also reviewed forthcoming donor materials, such as the pillar briefs and the cultivation deck.

Heather then took the board more thoroughly through the [Campaign Message bank](#), which has been shared with the board and is linked here with a clip of the reading of the message bank from Heather - [Message Bank Recording](#).

Message Bank Discussion:

Christina reviewed the pre-meeting survey results, highlighting some of the overall comments.

They heard from respondents the following:

- The framework of the plan (the three legs) is a helpful organizing structure and instills confidence
- The Wild Center's credentials is a strong and grounding message
- Reasons for donating are clear and compelling
- Within the helpful framework, there are varying layers of comfort with each of the "three legs of the stool." Some feel most comfortable talking about endowment, others about program or capital
- Some expressed confidence in the overall messaging but insecurity around the ask.
- Some concern over the changes in government funding priorities.

Review of what members feel they need to feel ready to have donor conversations:

- Concrete examples of what the endowment funds
- Quantitative details of how capital projects will impact programming
- More clarity around the phased approach to capital projects
- Testimonials from successful convenings
- Breakdown of capital costs beyond the aggregate goal
- Details on economic impact

What materials were asked for:

- Renderings of capital projects
- Prospect details
- Stories of how TWC has influenced individuals
- More detailed info for each priority
- Campaign videos

Discussion

- There was then discussion on what was just reviewed by the Board. Folks commented that the messaging bank was impactful, emotional and really brought people in.
- The essence of The Wild Center was really captured and some people commented that it encapsulated our need to express our strengths. There were comments about adding in more about the development of youth education, young leaders, and teachers.
- There was a request for visuals, the buildings, topography, waterfront, etc. that would be helpful to share with people. Graphs and other examples would be helpful to share and help people fall in love with and help ground the narrative.
- Comments about how TWC impacts Tupper Lake were made and whether or not we are addressing that sufficiently.
- There was discussion around the funding target and that at this stage, goals should not be shared with donors as it could be limiting in the long run. The message bank does not include talking about the specific goals, but could be noted in more broad terms.

Christina and Heather will be taking comments from the meeting and will finalize the message bank and talking points, develop pillar briefs and a digital cultivation deck. Campaign message training will be provided at the June Board meeting.

7. Programming & Marketing Overview

- a. Sally Hart reported on the Adirondack Climate Conference - she commented that it was an extremely uplifting day and how important it was for people to come together, collaborate and have conversations. She encouraged the board to attend these types of events at TWC to see what goes on to really get a sense of the community gathering that happens.

Stephanie noted that these gatherings are about content and that TWC becomes a place to create those connections and give people a space to do these types of convenings and deep dive into content. To view the five recorded plenary sessions, visit our youtube page - [Wild Center YouTube](#).

- b. Stephanie gave an update regarding the Albany International Airport —Stephanie and Dave Fadden have been working with folks from Albany to advise them on a new children's area in the airport. They will be replicating various things from around campus as well as Dave's Thanksgiving Address mural.
- c. Hillarie gave a brief Office Annex update- it is coming along, anticipating it being ready in June, hopefully in time for a tour around the Board meeting.

Karen then surveyed the board to see what way everyone has liked receiving information for the board meeting as they are moving away from more interactions in board meetings and less report outs. Folks commented that they appreciate Hillarie's videos. Karen noted that moving forward that Board members will receive the board packet as well as a video from Hillarie with pertinent updates.

Executive Session

- **Mark your calendars: 2025 Board Meeting Dates**
 - TWC- Monday, June 30, 2025, 9:00 am - 1:00 pm, with post-meeting lunch at the river.
 - TWC- Friday, October 10, 2025, 9:00 am - 1:00 pm