



MINUTES
WILD CENTER JUNE BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEETING
Hybrid in Tupper Lake & Virtually via Zoom
Monday, June 30, 2025 - 9:00 am- 1:00 pm

Trustees Present In Person: Karen Thomas, Board Chair, Paul Alioto, Vice-Chair, Ben Ireland, Treasurer, Linda Rosentock, Vice-Chair, Ginny Valkenburgh, Secretary, Lee Bailey, Joe Beck, Michael Bettmann, Allison Birdsong, Lynn Birdsong, Trustee Emeritus, Terry Birdsong, George Cigale, Larry Clifford, Ed Forbes, Lynn Fox, Sally Hart, Betsy Lowe, Pam Matt, Meadow Rutenbar, Nancy Simpkins, Trustee Emeritus, Charlie Svenson

Advisory Board Present In Person: Michael Hunsinger, Stanley Rumbough, Curt Stager, Margy Weiner

Trustees Present Virtual: Nancy Howard, Brooks Reynolds

Advisory Board Present Virtual: Martha Bullock, Ross Whaley

Staff Present: Stephanie Ratcliffe, Executive Director, Hillarie Logan-Dechene, Deputy Director, Bob Kronenberger, Finance Director, Ruth Burnell, Libby Clark, Elle Eberhardt, Robin Ellis, Leanne Favreau, Jen Kretser, Sara Paula, Isabella Sandersen, Shannon Surdyk, Phil Wagschal, Kerri Ziemann

Karen Thomas formally called the meeting to order at 9:01 am with a welcome and thanks for everyone being in person and on zoom.

A few of the Community Educators, formerly the AmeriCorps Fellows, were introduced at the beginning of the meeting. Kerri Ziemann spoke about their roles and what changes have been occurring. Canyon, Zac, Lila, Noelle, Breck, and Cassidy spoke about where they are from and the projects they are working on.

Karen then began the business portion of the meeting and thanked Lee and Linda for hosting the Campaign Cabinet dinner the night before.

1. Administration - Karen Thomas & Stephanie Ratcliffe

Approval of Minutes

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

A motion to approve the minutes, as amended, was made by Lee Bailey, seconded by Terry Birdsong and unanimously approved by the full Board of Trustees.

A. Chair Report:

Karen began her report by asking everyone to refrain from using AI during Board meetings. She noted that she has been advised by legal counsel that AI is not confidential and could make our meetings public. With AI automatically joining meetings, please make sure to turn off that function.

She noted that this meeting flow will also be different from prior Board Meetings, with the Executive Session occurring in the beginning versus the end since we will be at the waterfront for the remainder of the afternoon.

Karen then continued by emphasizing that this is a meaningful moment for The Wild Center; having had to navigate shifts in government priorities, reduction and elimination of funding and broader uncertainty with the economy and philanthropy, she commended the staff for their quick thinking and ability to shift focus when needed.

She highlighted that we are leading up to another big milestone, The Wild Center's 25th anniversary, which offers us a time to reflect, clarify and recommit where we want to be in 2031. Karen continued with discussing TWC's mission and how it guides us operationally and how the Board and staff help to advance our mission in different ways:

1. Promoting science based understanding
2. Delivering experiential learning and
3. Revealing nature's interconnected systems

Karen then talked about how today's meeting is focused on one of the interconnected systems - the Hydrosphere. She then reviewed how the Board will have the opportunity to dive a little deeper into the waterfront, both spatially and programmatically. She emphasized that the waterfront will be a wonderful capital project, but it is much more than a place. The Hydrosphere is a programmatic initiative, a living framework where visitors can encounter the complex beauty and interdependence of water, weather, wetlands and life. The waterfront capital project is a great option in the Campaign and the Hydrosphere a fantastic programmatic opportunity that support our mission. Karen then introduced both Dan Spada, and Advisory Board Member, Curt Stager who will be speaking with the Board more throughout the day.

B. Executive Director Report:

Stephanie Ratcliffe reported on the readjusting with budgets and programming. She discussed having to pull back, end a few projects early and go back to the core of what we do. Typically, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and other big grants allow us to execute new ideas, so now we are figuring out ways to execute new ideas without these types of funds.

She then gave an update that the Petty House has been transferred by the Nature Conservancy so we now own the building. The bequest comes with a \$1mm fund restricted to repairs and maintenance. We will be moving slowly to get this work done so it fits with other priorities. The estate is not settled yet, but is expected by Mid-July.

She also reported on the Utica Community Foundation Program. This year they will be going to John Brown's farm and will be staying at the Lake Clear Girls Scouts Camp, which is something new for the program. Michael Bettmann added that the program is championed and led by Advisory Board Member, David Jones. He has been instrumental in helping secure the partnership and funding. Michael also encouraged Board Members to attend the program at the Johns Brown Farm on Wednesday, July 2 from 10:30am - 1pm.

2. Finance - Ben Ireland & Bob Kronenberger

Ben Ireland addressed the initiative to relook at the budget, now through the lens of the loss of federal funding that has occurred. He described the year to date statements as promising, the numbers overall are promising and the AmeriCorps and special Fundraising Appeals have been really important.

Bob then noted that while we are ahead of what had been planned, there are good things to look at and other areas need improvement. Overall the earned income is a little low - compared to last year, but it is important to remember that last year was also a premier year with the Eclipse. He also highlighted that with the Spring Fundraising Appeals, the Community Educators (former AmeriCorps) will be able to stay until mid-October, which is past when they were originally scheduled to stay for. This will give flexibility for us as the new AmeriCorps Request for Proposal is navigated.

Highlights:

- 2025 operations are ahead of plan YTD.
- YTD attendance numbers are down slightly, while admission revenues are up (all excluding eclipse numbers in 2024).
- A re-look at our 2025 budget shows our forecast is for a lower deficit than originally budgeted. This is after the effects of lost Federal grant funds.
- Our investment portfolio has rebounded from market losses earlier in the year and is now showing positive gains of \$278k YTD.

Ben asked Bob whether he would classify this re-forecasted budget as conservative as we typically plan for. Bob noted that we do tend to be really conservative with our budgeting, and felt the re-forecast was conservative.

Joe Beck brought up the Board's commitment to DEAI and what that could mean for us. Is this an issue that needs to be addressed? How do we reposition ourselves with a new administration at the state level.

Meadow reported on how Deloitte has rebranded DEAI - purpose and belonging, so not getting rid of DEAI practices or changing fundamentals, but adjusting what could be perceived by the state.

Linda Rosenstock suggested adding this to an agenda for a different meeting. She urged that we have a longer discussion and do not step back from DEAI, but rework how we talk about it.

Governor Kathy Hochul was in Saranac Lake and Lake Placid, and some staff and board members were able to meet her. Lee Bailey was able to talk with her and mentioned her coming to visit with her grandkids.

3. Executive Session

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

- Lee Bailey said that he is really excited about the materials that have been created for the Campaign and is anxious for everyone to see (*materials were sent by Campbell & Company.) He also spoke about the need for looking at different avenues of funding and how that will be important moving forward.
- Lynn Fox added that the cabinet has now been trained to cultivate, develop relationships and ask for funding. They are currently working on asking each other for their annual fund gift and the cabinet will then be asking the rest of the board for the annual fund gifts.

Hillarie Logan-Dechene spoke about the AmeriCorps Special Fundraising efforts. She thanked Terry and Allison Birdsong for kicking this appeal off as well as Larry Clifford for making an appeal to Big Wolf folks. She reviewed some analysis from the board, staff, Big Wolf and other online gifts. Hillarie also mentioned anecdotes regarding two instrumental donors who created matching opportunities with their donations which encouraged her to do a special Spring Annual Fund Appeal. Hillarie then reviewed the analysis from Special Spring Appeal which helped alert some of our closest supporters to our situation and also asked for a gift now, a pledge, etc. Overall, we raised \$284,783 from both of the appeals.

- Reminder: Summer cultivation - Your Board meeting packets have a list of summer events as well as. Folks in the room were given a button with a magnet to hang this list on your fridge as a reminder that these are all happening.

5. Programming - Hillarie Logan-Dechene

Hillarie also spoke about the Fire Conference which is happening on August 7th, 1:00 - 5:00 PM. There will be a full lineup of speakers touching on different topics. There are sponsorships available and she encouraged all to sign up soon and invite friends.

6. Special Content Briefing - Stephanie Ratcliffe, Jessie Schwartzberg, Kristen Starheim

***Get Stephanie's intro from recording**

Kerri Ziemann led the board through a Visual Thinking Strategy session about the hydrosphere and the waterfront project.

Stephanie then took the Board through more of the waterfront project concept and how this project will set us apart from other natural history museums. She did a brief overview of how water is a key feature in Wild Center indoor exhibits and helps tell that story throughout the space.

Stephanie reviewed the interpretive strategies that created our filter and concept:

- Observational skills - how to read the environment, see the ADKs from a different perspective
- Tell interesting stories - not textbook or guidebook
- Have a sense of humor
- Offer different pathways - (photography, tech, interactives, art)

- Interpretive strategies offer entry for different age groups - we are not branded as a kids museum which is good as we attract adults as well without children. This is a hard line to walk and we have been successful.

Some board members commented that they never knew that depending on which way you go through the exhibits you see them from a different elevation/perspective.

Paul Alioto then spoke more about the Waterfront project. He read aloud a statement from Charlie Frenette, who has been a big proponent of this project but was unable to make the meeting. *The statement is included [here](#).

- Paul Alioto talked about the origins of the Waterfront Committee that was put together last year. Paul emphasized the importance of the waterfront project as a capital project that supports the larger Hydrosphere programmatic initiative. He referred to the Waterfront Committee's strategic initiative compiled last October and available on the online Board Library portal. The Buildings and Grounds Committee will continue the focus on waterfront.
- Paul also mentioned that Dan Spada, Jessie Schwartzberg and Kristen Starheim are in attendance to discuss the project for the waterfront.

Stephanie then took the Board through the different waterfront renderings, showing the early designs of the project. The project includes a new dry boathouse structure which will feature a future accessible dock with overlooking deck, access road improvements, improved utilities, and a composting toilet. Stephanie thanked Lee Bailey and Linda Rosenstock for their Campaign gift that will help with the design process.

- Waterfront Initiative
 - The goal is \$1mm and includes perimeter road, improved utilities, access road improvements.

There was discussion about space being dedicated to educational programming and exhibitions. It was also emphasized that the renderings may show the physical space, there will also be many opportunities for interpretation and education in the spaces that are currently planned. In the future the use of the current cabin site can be explored but it is not in the scope of the current Campaign.

Kerri highlighted that the waterfront area will be activated with various educational programming prototypes during the Get Outside Festival on July 3 - 6. The education team will be doing canoe demonstrations, games, fly fishing, and other activities for visitors to partake in.

There was then conversation about the shoreline and the plan to help restore the shore back to a more natural state versus open as it is now. Stephanie pointed out that the shoreline is a wetland. She reported that the APA approved the current landscape plan.

Stephanie then turned it over to Dan Spada to discuss the ecology and science between wetland, peatlands and fens. He spoke about wetlands and what makes a wetland important. He noted that there are wetlands throughout The Wild Center property. Dan also said that he believes at one point the river will create a bypass through some of the oxbow, creating a lake or a pond. He also highlighted that this is one of the only places that has an influx of silver maples.

The Board was then invited to walk down to the riverfront with Dan who explained the changing ecosystem and plants along the way.

After lunch at the canoe launch area Curt Stager presented an informative and moving session of Water and the Hydrosphere. He spoke about how “Water is magic, Water is life, and Water is connection.”

- Water is magic - it's clear, heavy, disappears like a ghost, cold enough turns to diamonds (ice), drops into water, they float-stone that floats, water eats things.
- Water is Life - We make water when we breath take gas out of air/oxygen turn into breath - that ½ of our body weight is water.
- Water is Connection - We are literally made from the same elements as the natural world - The challenge and frustration is how do you communicate it? If anyone can do it - bring elements of life that connect us to all life and the earth itself, it is The Wild Center can.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:15pm.