



MINUTES

WILD CENTER OCTOBER BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEETING

Hybrid in Tupper Lake & Virtually via Zoom

Friday, October 10, 2025 - 9:00 am- 1:00 pm

Trustees Present In Person: Karen Thomas, Board Chair, Paul Alioto, Vice-Chair, Rick Godin, Ben Ireland, Lynn Fox, Sally Hart, Betsy Lowe, Meadow Rutenbar, Joel Treisman

Advisory Board Present In Person: Michael Hunsinger, Jim Schoff, Margy Weiner

Trustees Present Virtual: Lee Bailey, Joe Beck, Michael Bettmann, Terry Birdsong, George Cigale, Larry Clifford, Ed Forbes, Robin Gosnell, Pam Matt, Brooks Reynolds, Juan Rodriguez, Linda Rosentock, Vice-Chair, Jack Ryder, Nancy Simpkins, Trustee Emeritus, Charlie Svenson, Ginny Valkenburgh, Secretary,

Advisory Board Present Virtual: Sally Bogdanovitch, Martha Bullock, Clifton Harcum, Sr., Curt Stager, Ross Whaley

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

Additional Guests: Cassie Carter, Campbell & Company

Karen Thomas formally called the meeting to order at 9:00 am with a welcome 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 June Board Meeting minutes.

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

A. Chair Report:

Karen highlighted our successful summer and our mission being a north star during a time when there have been challenges impacting us every day. Between AmeriCorps being defunded, to Wild Center friends supporting the program and then it being reinstated, we have navigated the roadblocks along the way.

We convened people around Fire this summer, a timely conversation in the Adirondacks. Jen and Garrett had an outstanding five days in NYC at the American Museum of Natural History for climate week, partnering with Yale, AMNH, and meeting climate scientist rock star Katharine Hayhoe. Jen made over 2000 connections during the week and The American Museum of Natural History is looking to Jen's program and our Solutions exhibit as a model for their own climate programs. Our strong presence outside the blue line is due to the extensive network Jen and her team have created, nurtured and grown globally over the past 14 years.

And finally, our Climate team moved into the newly renovated bank building. Ben and Bob are the finance dreamteam, not only responsible fiduciary stewards but they have enhanced reporting for more clarity and detail. Paul and Phil lead transparent and dynamic processes to keep TWC looking and functioning its best within budget. The campaign's silent phase is underway and gifts are accumulating under the leadership of Lee, Lynn and Hillarie's team.

Karen reminded the board of the June meeting where the board spent time reflecting on the hydrosphere and heard from Advisory Board Member, Curt Stager. Curt has also agreed to help further explore programming concepts around water and there are ideas to do a film about the hydrosphere in the next couple of years.

Next summer we expect big bumps in visitation with our 20th anniversary, the opening of Trolls, rail/trail riders and the opening of the new KOA Campground.

B. Executive Director Report:

Stephanie began by reporting on the passing of Jane Goodall, and reflected on how important she has been to the science community. She related the importance of National Geographic to Jane Goodall's story and equated The Wild Center being National Geographic for our visitors.

Stephanie then did an update on the federal relationships, partnerships and affiliations that we have:

- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)** - While we still have connections at NOAA, many people have been laid off. Funding opportunities have also dwindled. We will continue to see how this affects us in the future.
- **AmeriCorps** - Hillarie gave a full report further into the meeting.
- **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)** - These grants have in the past fueled our leadership status in the field, having allowed us to pursue exciting and innovative projects. While IMLS is still here, they only have a small amount of money to allocate and are now focused on "American Exceptionalism."
- **American Museum of Natural History (AMNH & Sites)** - We still have a partnership with them and Jen just worked with them in NYC. There are still conversations that are happening but smaller and quieter than usual.
- **National Park Service** - This relationship has been between Jen and a NPS Director, with a plan to work together to structure a Youth Summit to be used within the NPS. Jen and Bob noted that while the money that they were supposed to receive for this had been "lost" in the agency, they were able to secure the funding as of now.
- **Smithsonian Institute** - We continue to be an affiliate, which we applied for and were accepted in 2024. The board was in agreement that we continue as an affiliate for now.

Stephanie then gave an update on the Petty House. She and staff toured the Architectural Heritage staff this fall, of which they were very happy it was being 'saved.' The house is getting ready to be usable for interns in the future. This is an ongoing project, and with the funding from Ed Petty we will be hiring folks to help do the renovations and different work which will alleviate stress from The Wild Center Facilities team.

Stephanie reported on the opening of the last leg of the Rail Trail that leads to Tupper Lake. She mentioned Hillarie and staff who are working with a group to eventually make a connection to The Wild Center, accessible by bike. There is currently a shuttle that does a drop off and pick up at The Wild Center for the train riders, who are taking the train from Old Forge to Tupper Lake.

2. Program and Marketing - Hillarie Logan-Dechene, Nick Gunn, Jen Kretser

- **Fire Conference**

Hillarie gave a report out on the Fire Conference and that it went extremely well. We had a great group of partners for the conference and an exciting keynote speaker. Hillarie commented that we learned a lot about doing a one-day conference in the middle of the summer. She also thanked Advisory Board Member Sally Bogdanovitch for all of her help and advice during the planning process. Fire Conference recordings can be viewed on our youtube channel here: [Fire Conference YouTube Playlist](#) .

- **Climate Week NYC 2025**

Jen Kretser did a debrief about Climate Week NYC and happenings of the climate team. Jen spoke about new guidelines coming out for New York State in regards to climate education. The Wild Center serves on the NYSED Advisory Committee for Climate Change Education, so this is an important initiative to be a part of.

Jen noted that while the Climate Conference is in NYC, it is really a global and important reach for TWC. The visibility that Jen and team had while there was extremely valuable and they were able to make exciting connections. The team went to over 5 events throughout the course of the week, reaching over 2,000 people. Cedar also hosted a virtual Climate week event about Youth Climate Summits with over 50 people attending. Jen and Garrett connected with youth alumni, and many climate thought leaders. Elizabeth Bagley - director of Project Drawdown and was an advisor for the Climate Solutions exhibit.

The climate team has many things coming up:

- NYS Climate Adaptation Forum - Oct 16th & 17th
- Phipps Climate Toolkit Symposium - Oct 27th - 28th
- Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums - Oct 29th
- Adirondack Youth Climate Summit - Nov 5th & 6th

Karen highlighted the global impact that this team has and that they operate on a shoestring budget. Karen urged everyone if they know of any foundations, friends who can help fund this, to please do so. There was also a suggestion to put the climate team schedule and the Youth Climate Summit Network schedule on the website.

- **Trolls: Save the Humans**

Nick Gunn shared information about Thomas Dambo, the artist who creates large trolls from recycled material. His work carries a message of stewardship, sustainability, and finding beauty in trash. These messages have had a far reaching impact on millions of people. He then reviewed which trolls we will be getting here at The Wild Center. To learn more, visit our webpage with the trolls names, pictures and stories: [Trolls](#).

Nick then discussed the various programming ideas and experience impact that will occur on campus, including extended days and hours, as well as a press and member opening, Midsommar event and troll Tuesdays.

He presented the expected expenses and potential revenues for this event. He shared conservative projections for The Wild Center and examples of how other venues who have had Trolls have experienced an increase in visitation. To breakeven, we would need to attract an extra 14,722 people in those 5 months-- that represents a 21.7% increase in attendance.

Jun 1 - Aug 31	2015 Wild Walk	2019	2025 <i>anticipated</i>	2026 +21.7%	2026 +50%	2026 +100%
Tickets Sold	144,094	86,748	67,863	82,585	101,764	135,726
Revenue	\$1,552,445	\$1,124,764	\$977,227*	\$1,189,224	\$1,493,078	\$1,954,454
				+\$212,000	+\$515,851	+\$977,227
			*Average per ticket transaction revenue = \$14.40			

Other Venues

Virginia Aquarium (Virginia Beach, VA)

- Year over year visitation: +24.8%

Filoli (Woodside, CA)

- 2024: 81,000 visitors
- 2025: 177,000 visitors (+118%)

Bernheim Forest (Clermont, KY)

- +200% in 2019

Morton Arboretum (Chicago, IL)

- Record setting yearly attendance

Nick emphasized the following points:

- Mission Alignment
- Track record as a visitation drive
- Whole year of new programming
- Prestige - first troll site in New York means an enormous earned-media potential and long-term bragging rights.

Nick also shared that there is a waiting list for a number of sites to get a permanent Troll and that it takes years to get on the list. However, he received a phone call from Thomas Dambo’s assistant, who shared that Thomas Dambo loves TWC and wants TWC to host a permanent troll in the near future. Thomas Dambo is coming for a site visit on October 20th to see the site and to help him be inspired to design a troll for TWC.

Nick will be sending the board a formal proposal about considering a permanent troll at TWC in the next few weeks.

- **AmeriCorps**

Hillarie reported that amidst all of the confusion and chaos of the federal government effectively stopping the AmeriCorps program, there was money that had already been allocated and approved for NYS. Subsequently, thanks to our positive relationship with the NYS Commission, they approved an award for AmeriCorps at TWC in 2026 for \$249,841.

We will now have 10 AmeriCorps positions for 2026.

3. Development - Lee Bailey, Lynn Fox, Charlie Svenson & Hillarie Logan-Dechene

Hillarie reported on the 2025 Annual Fund plans and noted the work that the Campaign Cabinet & Take 5 volunteers are doing. She encouraged anyone interested in joining the Take 5 and receiving names of prospects to reach out to, so reach out to Sara Paula at spaula@wildcenter.org.

She mentioned that the Campaign Cabinet members are currently making calls to the board asking for a commitment for 2025 and encouraged anyone who has not yet, to make a three-year annual fund pledge if able.

Hillarie then reviewed the Campaign Progress Update as of September 30, 2025. Everything looks very positive and it is a good reminder that we are just at the beginning and still in the quiet phase. At this time, we have really only been talking to the board and some close friends.

Hillarie mentioned we have a \$50,000 Challenge for the Waterfront Project from Bill and Joan Grabe on the Advisory Board. Lee challenged and encouraged someone to meet the match by the end of the meeting.

- This discussion spurred an anonymous pledge of \$50,000 for the Waterfront from one trustee. *This is to be an anonymous gift outside of the board meeting. All were grateful.*
- **Pillar Briefs exercise:**
The board was asked to decide which pillar brief (Sustain, Strengthen, Grow) they would like to learn more about and what they gravitate towards.

The board then broke out into three different groups, dividing into groups based on what brief they are most interested in. For notes about what each group discussed see [here](#).

4. Buildings and Grounds - Paul Alioto, Phil Wagschal

Paul did an overview of the work of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, including highlighting summer project upgrades and the Master Plan, as well as the work that Phil and the facilities team has done on the Greenhouse Gas inventory, Climate Action Plans, The Office Annex and the Waterfront project.

- **Master plan & Maintenance**

Phil reported on various projects that have been completed, including the riverside boardwalk, new railings, updates to the composting toilets and exterior staining. He also mentioned that the facilities team has been working on life support maintenance in the basement, replacing windows in the Oxbow exhibit and adding trail counters on the Fen Trail.

- **Greenhouse Gas inventory**

Worked with an outside group, funded by a national endowment humanities grant, and done in accordance with international standards -the Green House Gas Protocol. This study is important to set the standard, be an example for other organizations and our area, and it is critical for us to understand emissions levels to achieve net zero campus.

The organization now has a baseline to start from and work towards scaling down. Most of our power is hydro but we have a high energy intensity because of our life systems for our animals.

Next steps:

- Continue reduction in Greenhouse Gas
- Track and report progress
- Create climate action plan
- Determine a pathway to net zero
- Plan to offset remaining emissions

- **Preparing for Climate Change TL & TWC**

Phil then discussed the plans that are in place to address climate change at TWC and in Tupper Lake. He reviewed different climate vulnerabilities that the organization could face, how that could impact us and how we can mitigate some of them.

He mentioned the following as vulnerabilities and shared data points relating to the increase in temperatures and flooding:

- Warmer temps
- Decrease in winter snowpack
- Increased precipitation and flooding
- Severe wind

- **Office Annex Building**

Paul then reported on the New Office Annex, noting that staff have already moved in which has improved communications and work privacy, more open and less cramped space. He then discussed that while the interior has been improved inside, there is still work to be done on the outside, which is the next phase.

Next steps for the Annex building will be to update the facade, lighting and landscaping. The B&G Committee has put an RFP out and will be meeting with a few architects to review their proposals in the coming weeks, with the hope to have designs complete by December 2025 and construction to begin in 2026. Hillarie and Karen noted that with about \$75,000 - \$100,000, we could start the exterior of the building and begin that process much sooner.

Paul mentioned that while we have the funding to be able to get a design from the architects, we still need to raise funds for the actual construction.

In a great spirit of giving, two board members, Nancy Simpkins and Jim Schoff, both pledged \$25,000 towards the Annex building outdoor renovations.

- **Boathouse updates:**

Paul reported on the plans for the new Boathouse and that the programming plan is commencing. Curt Stager will be helping the conceptualization with the programming of this space and will be working with staff to make that a reality.

- Design and construction: has been signed with Black Mountain Architects
- Construction documents are expected to be ready February, 2026
- Construction is expected to be as early as April 2026 (funding dependent)

Paul reviewed the costs for the projects, estimating \$987,240 with the boathouse and associated projects. We have already received restricted commitments for this project.

Next steps:

- Complete program & Business Plan
- Consider future of the Intern Residence
- Determine Names for the Hydrosphere Exhibit & facilities
- Raise Funds through the Capital Campaign

Lynn Fox asked if in the future we could do something to highlight the folks that work outside on the landscaping and what they do for the grounds. She also commended Sally Hart for her beautiful work on putting the pumpkins and gourds at the front entrance.

5. **Finance - Ben Ireland & Bob Kronenberger**

Ben Ireland started by discussing an overview of what has been happening. He noted that the finances are better than planned and the work that the committee did to reforecast the budget was helpful. He also mentioned that there is a resolution that needs a board vote.

Bob then reviewed where the organization's finances are through September and reviewed the investments performance.

Summary:

- 2025 operations are \$352k ahead of budget YTD. Some of the favorable expense variance will be given back during the fall with the completion of several facilities projects.
- YTD attendance numbers are very close to LY, while admission revenues are up 7% (all excluding eclipse numbers in 2024).
- Our investment portfolio has continued to show market gains, with YTD gains of \$1.4mm through September. Total investments now exceed \$15mm.

Bob then reported on funding that we are still waiting to receive from NYS from 2023 & 2024. He detailed the difficulty that he has had working with NYS to be able to receive these funds.

Overview of funds

- Amount borrowed under line of credit currently at \$825,000. The current interest rate on borrowed funds is 7.25%.
- Grants receivable from NYS:
 - 2023 marketing grant \$316,000 - in 90 day processing zone
 - 2024 marketing grant \$320,000 (estimate) - in process of submitting in quarterly installments.

- Fidelity Cash Reserves balance is currently \$2.8mm and is earning 4%.

Resolution: Allow borrowing of \$800,000 from Fidelity Cash Reserves to be repaid, with interest of 4%, from proceeds from NYS marketing grants and normal excess cash flow from year end donations.

Motion made by Lee Bailey seconded by Joe Beck to allow borrowing of \$800,000 from Fidelity Cash Reserves to be repaid, with interest of 4%, from proceeds from NYS marketing grants and normal excess cash flow from year end donations. The motion was unanimously approved.

Proposed Dates for 2026

- VIRTUAL - Friday, January 23, 2026
- NYC - Friday April 17, 2026
- TWC - Monday July 6, 2026
- 20th Anniversary Celebration Saturday, July 11, 2026
- TWC - Friday, October 9, 2026

6. Executive Session