



AMENDED MINUTES
WILD CENTER JANUARY BOARD OF TRUSTEE MEETING
Virtually via Zoom
Friday, January 23, 2026 - 9:00 am - 1:00 pm

Trustees Present: Karen Thomas, Board Chair, Paul Alioto, Vice-Chair, Ginny Valkenburgh, Secretary, Ben Ireland, Treasurer, Lance Balk, Michael Bettmann, Allison Birdsong, Terry Birdsong, Lynn Birdsong, Trustee Emeritus, George Cigale, Larry Clifford, Dave Fadden, Ed Forbes, Charlie Frenette, Lynn Fox, Rick Godin, Robin Gosnell, Doug Grierson, Sally Hart, Betsy Lowe, Paul Maroun, Pam Matt, Brooks Reynolds, Juan Rodriguez, Nancy Simpkins, Trustee Emeritus, Charlie Svenson, Joel Treisman

Advisory Board Present: Sally Bogdanovitch, Clifton Harcum, Nell Ryder, Curt Stager, Margy Weiner, 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, Isabella Sandersen, Phil Wagschal

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 able to join on zoom.

1. Administration - Karen Thomas & Stephanie Ratcliffe

Approval of October Board Meeting Minutes

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

A motion to approve the minutes, was made by Paul Alioto, seconded by Michael Bettmann and unanimously approved by the full Board of Trustees.

2. Committee on Trustees - Robin Gosnell and Ginny Valkenburgh

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

K. Thomas invited COT Co-Chairs, Robin Gosnell and Ginny Valkenburgh, to present the election of new trustees, slate of officers and re-election of the Trustees and Advisory Board.

- **Election of new trustees - Lance Balk and Doug Grierson**

- Ginny announced Lance Balk for Trustee.

Motion made by Charlie Svenson, seconded by Ben Ireland and unanimously approved.

- Ginny announced Doug Grierson for Trustee.

Motion made by Paul Alioto, seconded by Terry Birdsong, unanimously approved.

- **Election of Officers**

- Robin 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 made by Michael Bettmann, seconded by Allison Birdsong, unanimously approved.

- **Re-Election of Trustee**

- Robin presented the class of Trustees who are up for reelection for 2026 - 2029. Paul Alioto, Joseph Beck, Michael Bettmann, Ed Forbes, Charlies Frenette, Robin Gosnell, Sally Hart, Ben Ireland, Joel Treisman, Juan Rodriguez, Meadow Rutenbar

Motion made by Larry Clifford, seconded by Charlie Svenson, unanimously approved

- Other changes to the Trustee and Advisory Board

- Ginny Valkenburgh reported on the Trustees moving to the Advisory Board: Jack Ryder and Nicky Hylton. Ginny and Karen both thanked both Jack and Nicky for their service on the board.
- Karen also noted that two Advisory Board members, Rob Gillis and Anna Sommer, will be stepping off of the Advisory Board. She thanked them for their service.

- Karen then reviewed the current Committee Structure and made a note that if someone has questions or is interested in a different committee, to please let her 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.)

3. Chair Report:

Karen shared it is a great time for Board leadership transition. Her original commitment of three years of service as board chair has become five. She expressed that the board is in strong standing with skilled and dedicated chairs leading productive committees. The Campaign is underway, direction is set, the staff is solid and the organization as a whole is in a great place.

As we move to the more public phase of the Campaign and celebrate our 20th anniversary new leadership will bring new energy and perspective. Karen will end her tenure with the April Board meeting.

Multiple members thanked Karen for her service, with Lynn Birdsong remarking that she has done a great job.

4. Executive Director Report:

Stephanie Ratcliffe began her report by sharing that The Wild Center has been nominated again for the USA Today #1 best science museum.

Stephanie discussed the 20th anniversary celebration and mentioned the planning that is happening. Mark your calendars for a July 11th celebration. There will be a full report out on this at the April Board meeting.

Stephanie then spoke about the planning for the Permanent Troll. She noted that the placement would be off of the Fen Trail. More details will come. She noted that later in the meeting, the board will be voting on moving forward with funding the permanent troll. She reviewed the costs for the troll and its installation, a repayment plan to the Board Designated Fund with interest if the temporary troll exhibit falls short of funding this permanent one and a loan from the BDF is required.

Board members made comments of The Wild Center receiving a vote of confidence and praise from the artist Thomas Dambo, as well as this being the first time that trolls are in NY, which is a big deal. There were also questions about the maintenance and longevity of the trolls of which TWC staff will be trained to fix the trolls if needed. There was also mention of making sure that there are accessible opportunities for locals to visit the trolls, like community free days, which are currently offered and planned for in 2026. **Action:** DEIA committee will convene to review accessibility for trolls and other programs.

Stephanie then moved on to discuss the status of the Petty House. The inside renovations are underway and will be complete and ready for May arrival of summer interns. She reminded the board these renovations will be covered by \$1M willed for property maintenance and renovation.

5. Finance - Ben Ireland & Bob Kronenberger

Karen prefaced that if we remember where we were a year ago, we were challenged by cuts in state and federal funding and a deficit budget. The Board and the staff quickly reassessed and pivoted and the results were good in 2025.

Ben Ireland began the finance report by giving some context to 2025. He noted that while 2025 was a good year, it was challenging. He also recalled the funding challenges in 2025 and gave credit to the staff and board on addressing the challenges. Overall, revenue and expenses were up although the year did end in a deficit.

Ben then discussed 2026 - a big year with the anniversary and the trolls exhibits, noting that the finance committee spent a lot of time on this budget and approached it conservatively.

Treasurer Summary:

- Revenue up \$13k vs last year; Expenses up \$110k vs last year, driven by campaign expenses
- Finished with deficit of \$373k
- Revenue assumptions for 2026 are conservative
- Temporary trolls to generate additional \$1.1M in revenue and \$454k in surplus
- Total surplus planned of \$153k
- Included a cash flow forecast - repayment of Q4 loan from BDF and funding of permanent troll
- Anorthosite Fund at \$8.5M - continuing to invest for our future
- Board Designated Fund at \$6.9M - with a few requests for 2026 and included in the resolutions to be voted on.
- Resolutions to be voted on:
 - Approval of 2026 Budget
 - Use of Board Designated Funds
 - Acquisition of permanent troll

Bob Kronenberger then reported on 2025 and reviewed the 2026 budget.

- For 2025, while the attendance numbers are a little lower than in 2024, that is due to the bump from the Eclipse in 2024.
- The results for 2025 reflect a slightly higher deficit than budgeted for the year. This is primarily due to some unexpected expenses - pond renovation and grant funding reimbursement shortfalls - near the end of the year.
- Bob reviewed the budget for 2026, highlighting significant changes in revenue and expense categories. Overall the 2026 budget projects a \$153k operating surplus. Bob reviewed the expected major impact of the temporary trolls exhibit on expenses and revenues, including a planned increase in admission prices.
 - Questions and concerns were expressed regarding the plan to raise ticket costs, especially for locals. It was recommended to have the DEAI committee review what is currently offered for visitors and what could be offered. There was also discussion on library passes as well as exploring different membership options that are cost effective, of which staff have been working on.
- Bob then reviewed the Board Designated Endowment Fund, noting that the board votes on how to spend that money. He also shared a detailed report of the history of the Board Designated Endowment Fund, showing how this money has been used in the past and how it is being proposed to be used for 2026.
- Ben pointed out that this is a larger conversation of how to repay the Board Designated Fund when it is used for Campaign related expenses and recommended that this be a conversation at the April Board meeting.
- Ben also expanded on the proposed uses of the Fund for 2026, describing the BDEF as giving flexibility in support of current operating, maintenance and “idea” needs.
- It was clarified that nothing is being drawn from the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund, that it is a permanent endowment governed by specific guidelines as to growth and draw. Ben emphasized the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund is for our future, that it needs to at least double to \$17-20M before draws are considered by the Finance Committee.
- Ben and Bob also reviewed a cash flow forecast spreadsheet, highlighting the repayment of the \$800,000 funds that were borrowed last year to account for the funds from NY State grants that have not yet been received. The cash flow also shows how capital expenditures and the cost of a permanent troll can be funded through operations and the requested Board Designated Fund.

Resolutions

1. **Resolution:** The Board Approves the Budget as presented.

A motion was made by George Cigale to approve the budget as presented and seconded by Sally Hart, unanimously approved by the Board.

2. **Resolution:** Board approves planned use of Board Designated Funds in 2026:
 - Annual draw \$335k
 - Campaign expenses of \$539k included in budget (only funds to cover actual expenses will be drawn)

- Capital expenditures \$159,500
- Fund 2025 operating deficit of \$373k

A motion was made by Charlie Svenson to approve the planned use of the Board Designated Funds in 2026, seconded by George Cigale, unanimously approved by the Board.

3. **Resolution:** Board approves plan to acquire a permanent troll in 2026 at a cost of \$500,000 (artist fee of \$400,000 + an estimate of \$100,000 for shipping and site preparation).

A motion was made by Lynn Birdsong to approve the plan to acquire a permanent troll in 2026 at a cost of \$500,000 (artist fee of \$400,000 + an estimate of \$100,000 for shipping and site preparation), seconded by Michael Bettmann, unanimously approved by the Board.

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

Charlie Svenson thanked everyone for their Annual Fund contributions and stated that we have a goal of 100% participation from the Board, which we met.

Hillarie then offered a brief recap of the 2025 fundraising and membership results. She acknowledged the challenges faced throughout the year, while also emphasizing the sense of hope that emerged from the outpouring of support during periods of reduced federal funding. In particular, she highlighted the opportunity to connect with new supporters and to discover levels of support that had previously been unseen. She concluded by thanking the Board and noting that 100% of Trustees and 90% of staff contributed to the Annual Fund.

7. Campaign Session

Lynn Fox kicked off the campaign discussion and introduced Lee Bailey, who recorded a video for the session. In his video, Lee reiterated the three pillars of the campaign - Grow, Sustain and Strengthen. Lee shared the campaign progress report. Lee reported on progress at the bank building (Annex) and the need for an additional \$85,000 to fund the renovations on the outside of it, which he urged folks to support if able.

Lynn Fox reiterated the call to action regarding the need to be able to finish the renovations of the bank building. Karen emphasized the importance of completing the exterior renovations of the building as it is in a key location and will become a very identifiable and important symbol of The Wild Center. After Hillarie offered a more complete review of the campaign progress report, Lynn urged folks to make their contributions sooner as it will help when the campaign goes public and we can show that we are halfway to the goal.

Cassie Carter, our campaign consultant from Campbell and Company, was then invited to join the meeting to discuss endowments. Cassie emphasized the importance of finalizing the bank building as it adds to the anticipation of all of the great things to come. She then did an overview of different types of endowments:

- **Permanent Endowments (true endowments)**- only earnings are used, for specific predetermined purpose
- **Board Designated Endowments (quasi endowments)** - function more as a reserve fund where the principal can be used at the board's discretion

Cassie noted that planned gifts can help fund an endowment, and can be counted in the campaign. Bequests, if not specified, go to the Board Designated Endowment. There are plans to have conversations with folks that are a part of the Linda Vaughan Society to let them know that their funds would be so influential as part of the Anorthosite Fund.

- Karen reminded everyone of why the Anorthosite Permanent Endowment Fund (APEF) was created and the importance of it being the “bedrock” of the organization. She then shared the different benefits of the APEF to various stakeholders:
 - **To The Wild Center:** Provides financial stability, supporting both current operation and future growth. A robust endowment also signals the health of TWC, encouraging further investment.
 - **To the Donor:** Offers a great investment for philanthropic donations, potential tax benefits and assurance that contributions will be managed with discipline and have lasting impact.
 - **To Society:** Ensures ongoing contributions to experiential environmental education inspiring the next generation of environment stewards.

Bob then shared a more in-depth look at the APEF, explaining what the Fund is and what it is not, as well as detailing where the Fund is at as of December 31, 2025.

Generative exercise

Stephanie then introduced the Board to a generative exercise, asking everyone to think about their own story at The Wild Center and practice sharing that story to other people. Lynn emphasized that while there is a campaign cabinet, the whole Board is responsible for being able to share their story and connection to The Wild Center.

There was a brief report out. Themes about visitor experience being meaningful and lasting for all of the people that come, the reach of TWC’s Youth Climate program is larger than we realize, economic support that gives to the region is immense and so important. Many people mentioned the impact on youth and their wanting to preserve the environment, and how important it is to expose kids to the natural world.

8. Buildings and Grounds - Paul Alioto, Phil Wagschal

Paul Alioto welcomed Doug and Lance to the Board and thanked the folks that are moving off. He then did an overview of the Buildings and Ground Committee and the work that they are doing, reviewing three main projects:

1. Hydrosphere Initiative - riverfront project
 2. Annex - former bank
 3. 2026 maintenance projects
- The Hydrosphere Initiative
 - Paul outlined the main capital components of the Hydrosphere project, such as the dry boathouse, the accessible dock, and the composting toilet, as well as enhancements that will also occur. He noted that the committee is currently working on the final design elements
 - There were some questions regarding interrupted access to our waterfront during construction, to which staff are planning to be able to work around while delivering programs.

- Discussion followed regarding fundraising for the Hydrosphere and how it fits into the campaign, as well as the impact of the footprint and flooding considerations.
- There was a suggestion to share a strategic brief on the Hydrosphere Initiative, to include both the programmatic ideas and the physical landscape of the waterfront.
- The Annex (bank building)
 - Paul reviewed the current work plan for the Annex building and emphasized the importance of getting this work done before our 20th anniversary celebration. He mentioned that the committee is working on an RFP to be released Mid February, and repairs need to happen to the lighting, wood and bay windows.
 - Paul then reviewed the Annex timeline and budget and emphasized that while we have received commitments for the Annex, we still need to raise funds to make exterior renovations happen.
 - Karen then emphasized the value of these exterior renovations being completed for our 20th anniversary summer and encouraged Board members to contribute to the \$85,000 needed to commence the work. There were then many Board members who responded to this one time call and pledged their support to help complete the exterior renovations. ***Thank you!!***
- Phil then reviewed the different maintenance projects that will be happening in 2026, which have a focus on enhancements and sprucing up for the 20th anniversary.
 - Exhibit lighting
 - Life support
 - Staining building
 - Painting floors back of house

9. 2026 Meeting Dates

Karen then shared the meeting dates for the rest of the year:

Friday, April 17 - New York City

Monday, July 6 - TWC

Saturday, July 11 - 20th Anniversary Celebration

Friday, October 9 - TWC

10. Executive Session