

Meeting Minutes March 6, 2025

**Call to Order:**

6:34pm by Kenkel

**Board Present:**

In person: Kenkel, Allen. Via Zoom: Chris Behrens, Dunning

**Staff Present:** Director Behrens, Conrad

**Approval of Meeting Minutes:**

Motion to approve February 2025 minutes by Allen, second by Chris Behrens. All aye.

**Approval of Bills:**

Motion to approve February 2025 Bills by Allen, Second by Dunning. All aye.

**Public Comment:**

No public comment

**Reports:**

No reports. Staff reports to follow in anticipated second March meeting.

**Old Business:**

Budget Updates:

Director Behrens gave an update on new budget adjustments per direction from the BOS to defund the current budget year's dollars by \$100,000 on top of next fiscal years \$150,000 cuts, along with forfeiting Roll Over capabilities of left over funds into the various savings accounts for Conservation. Director Behrens also explained that, per the Auditors office, routine maintenance and operations may reasonably continue ahead as usual, but any substantial spending items would still need the blessing of the BOS. Director Behrens expressed some positivity on this number as it at least produces a baseline of what to do next, versus operating under the assumption that the rest of the funds for the year are untouchable and felt \$100,000 from the current budget was survivable but that it would indeed affect capital projects, large maintenance plans, staffing ability, etc, such as constructing rentable cabins, ADA sidewalk repairs, road repairs, Nature Center improvements. The group is hopeful these are the last budget cuts but remain wary of more to come before budget planning season is over.

Because of weather, and sickness among staff and board members, a future meeting will be planned in the next week to further discuss budget cuts in detail, when the entire group can be present at once.

**Naturalist Position:**

Director Behrens recapped the process for hiring a new naturalist during this financial situation and the checklist required for BOS approval to move forward; including waiting for a 5<sup>th</sup> Conservation Board member to be seated. With new member Chris Behrens, Director Behrens emphasized this as the near last piece of the puzzle to move forward with offering a position to the preferred candidate, so long as that candidate has not found opportunities elsewhere, as it has been more than a month since interviews and applicants are waiting for a response.

Director Behrens stated that he sent the application materials to new Conservation Board member Chris Behrens for his review prior to this meeting and offered Chris Behrens a chance to speak on the applicant at this meeting. Chris Behrens stated he was happy to receive and review the materials and thought the preferred applicant had a very impressive resume and thanked the Director/Board for including him on the process. Director Behrens stated that now with no objections to the preferred applicant: Angela Tague, that he would revise the Hiring Freeze Exemption Request previously put together and get this on the agenda for the BOS meeting next Monday for a hopeful final approval. The Board expressed enthusiasm in getting this applicant hired as soon as possible.

Board member Jim Allen inquired on the determined wages set for this position. Director Behrens explained that he had previously budgeted for a range between \$24-26 per hour, feeling that this candidate was likely qualified for the higher end of that scale, Board members agreed.

### **New Business:**

#### **Newest Board Member:**

Director Behrens introduced Chris Behrens who was attending via Zoom virtual call. Chris Behrens introduced himself and provided some background on his professional and volunteer work and passion for conservation and was glad to be on the Board. Fellow board members welcomed Chris Behrens.

#### **Park Ranger:**

Director Behrens informed the Board that Park Ranger Riley Conrad has accepted an offer to join the Belle Plaine Police Department and his last official day would be Sunday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025, this coming weekend. Director Behrens expressed his sadness to see a great employee leave but emphasized he was proud to have Riley on for as long as he was here, and is happy for the Conrad family and the perks of this new position for them, stating Riley would be very missed, and hopes to see Riley stopping by and pressured Riley into coming back to help do Prescribed Burns during his down time.

Park Ranger Riley stated that leaving the Conservation Board was a very difficult one that he was not expecting at this time, but Belle Plaine had approached him thru various law enforcement networking and made an offer that was hard to refuse. Director Behrens and the rest of the Board wished him the best. Behrens also stated that discussion of how to fill the Park Ranger roll would continue at a subsequent meeting when all Board members were present.

### **Floor Discussion:**

Board member Jim Allen asked about status of the compost toilet that was damaged in a fire at the Otter Creek Park showerhouse. Director Behrens explained that replacement of the damage composting unit has reached a significant delay. Behrens explained that he had previously been coordinating with HR, both prior to and after the HR replacement earlier in the year, to get a check issued for the replacement costs, as the production vendor required full payment prior to shipping the unit. Behrens stated that up until a week ago, no progress has been made through this channel. Behrens stated he is now coordinating directly with Insurance instead of HR to get the check issued for replacement which faces a minimum of 6 weeks turn around. Kenkel asked if it would be more expedient to cut the check ourselves and get reimbursed at a later time to get this repair moving before camping season arrives. Behrens apologized for not thinking of this himself, however stated he was under the presumption that large expenditures like that would be turned away during the

current financial situation facing the county, and that a check from insurance themselves would be more fiscally sound at this time. The Board agreed that the approximate \$12,000 dollars to get the showerhouse open in time for high camper use was worth spending from our current funds, pending BOS approval.

A motion was made by Dunning to table the showerhouse repair finance discussion for the next meeting. Seconded by Chris Behrens. All aye. Discussion on replacement financing is tabled.

Board member Dunning stated that local community members have been reaching out to her, specifically from the library world, curious about the status of hiring a new naturalist and what the future of programming was. Dunning is excited to spread good news of an incoming naturalist and asked the Director if he has also been receiving inquiries and what is being told to them. Director Behrens stated that he too has received several questions about summer camps, programming schedule, availability etc, but has been trying to be both informative and broad as things change day by day and week by week, while trying not to commit to anything until we have things set in stone. Behrens has been explaining in broad detail the conditions of the hiring freeze, BOS requests, and that we are hopeful to provide programming as soon as possible. Behrens explained that even after this week, more changes could develop that puts things on further hold, and Behrens has not wanted to give incomplete information or over promise anything to the public until we can make that job offer and the offer is accepted.

Public Comment was heard from Arlo Cibula who was in attendance, and wanted to know what the status of hiring seasonals is at this time. Director Behrens stated that, as mentioned before, these new budget cuts keep unfolding and changing and that he is trying not to over promise and commit to anything during these uncertain times. Cuts on both sides of the 2025 fiscal year affect not only capital projects and overall maintenance, but will affect how and how many seasonals are hired. But given the new information from just earlier this week, Director Behrens is still working on budget numbers to determine viability for seasonal positions but is hopeful we can utilize as many as possible as the current staff right now is only the Director and Maintenance Supervisor. Behrens stated this is something that will be discussed in greater detail and the next Conservation Board meeting.

The Director and Board discussed scheduling another meeting next week to hone in on the budget and staffing needs for the Conservation Department. The group agreed that Thursday, March 13<sup>th</sup> at 6:30pm at the Nature Center would likely be the best for everyone to get together.

**Adjourn:**

Motion to Adjourn by Dunning, second by Allen. All aye.

Meeting closed at 7:15pm.