

**Friends of the St. Joe River Association Board Meeting**

June 22, 2023

Minutes respectfully submitted by Chris Temple

Meeting location: Elkhart Environmental Center

Address: 1717 E Lusher Ave, Elkhart, IN 46516

Board Members Present:

- 1. Matt Meersman, President
- 2. Jeff Reece, Vice President
- 3. Chris Temple, Director
- 4. Shaun Grace, Director
- 5. Annie Klehfoth, Director

Other Attendees:

- 1. John Law, St. Joseph County, Department of Infrastructure Planning and Growth (DIPG)
- 2. Kyle Burchett, LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation District
- 3. Jenna Meert, Stantec

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Minutes

Meeting was called to order by Matt Meersman at 1:00 PM.

A. Introductions – Everyone introduced themselves, and Matt thanked everyone for attending. He also thanked Annie for arranging the nice meeting space at the Elkhart Environmental Center.

B. Minutes from the last Board Meeting

Matt asked if there were any questions about the minutes posted online from the last Friends Board meeting, and there were no questions. Jeff moved that the minutes be approved. The motion was seconded by Annie, and the motion passed with a unanimous voice assent.

C. Treasurer’s Report

Matt said there will be significant activity reflected on the next Treasurer’s Report because of the 15th Annual St. Joseph River Watershed Celebration that was held in May, but the report will not be available for review until the next Board meeting. Chris moved that the Treasurer’s Report be tabled until the next Board meeting. The motion was seconded by Shaun, and the motion passed with a unanimous voice assent.

D. Old Business

- 1. Board action taken via email since the last meeting: The Board communicated by email to unanimously approve the payment of a \$300 honorarium to Aaron Helman who was the guest speaker at the Watershed Celebration event on May 12<sup>th</sup>. Aaron is the author of "An Incomplete History of St. Joseph County, Indiana." There was a general discussion about how well received his presentation was for the whole group.

2. Collaborative Watershed Event: The Friends a dinner and networking event for a 15th Annual St. Joseph River Watershed Celebration at the Pinhook Park Community Center in South Bend, Indiana. The event was a lot of work, but everyone also agreed it was a great success. There was a question about the “jointness” of the day’s event since the Friends celebration followed the meeting of the Saint Joseph River Basin Commission at the same venue. There was a general agreement that affiliating the two events together made sense. There was not a concrete sense of how many individuals attended both events, but Matt thought perhaps 15 people attended both events. The Pinhook location seemed to work very well despite the rainy weather that day, and the catering food and drinks options also seemed great. There was unanimous agreement that the day required a lot of logistical work, but it was a big success.

#### E. New Business

1. River Cleanup Liability – Brian Will organized a Friends-affiliated trash pickup on Earth Day in April 2023 that received WNDU media coverage. At the last Friends Board meeting, Chris volunteered to do some research into the liability concerns that should be considered when planning events such as river trash pickups. Chris presented a summary of his research. To survey some different opinions, Chris consulted with Brian Will, Carolyn Grace, Doug McLaughlin, and Grant Poole. He shared their perspectives with the group that included some website references and some sample liability waiver forms. Also, Chris described two national organizations – “River Network” and “American Rivers” – that provide some guidance for best practices relative to organizational liability for sponsoring events. “River Network” hosted a liability insurance presentation on March 29, 2023 which can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4rJKyekwm8>. In the video, the insurance representative mentions “Conserve-A-Nation” which is a national program of Alliant Insurance that focuses on serving conservation-minded 501c3 non-profit organizations. The organization “American Rivers” provides a handbook with guidance and a standard liability form for consideration (see [https://www.americanrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AR\\_NRCHandbook\\_FINAL\\_High-Definition-1.pdf](https://www.americanrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AR_NRCHandbook_FINAL_High-Definition-1.pdf) and <https://www.americanrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/nrc-participant-waiver.pdf>). In the discussion that followed, John Law suggested that we check with the Indiana DNR Adopt-a-River program for their liability recommendations. John also reminded the group that there might be differences between Michigan and Indiana practices and expectations. Sean asked if the goal was to sponsor more trash pickups in the future, and the group responded “yes.” Jeff mentioned that AEP can be consulted to (for example) “lower the river 2 feet” before a trash pickup event. There was a general sense in the group’s discussion that trash pickup events seem like a really good fit for the mission of the Friends organization, and Chris mentioned that his was one of Al Smith’s particular passions in founding the Friends. The group’s discussion also mentioned the challenges of the overall size of the watershed. Matt thought it made sense for the Friends to think about the idea of providing a liability insurance service and to play a role in providing “best practices” guidance to enthusiastic volunteers, local communities, or organizations that might ask about how to do a trash pickup event. The particular challenge of Board member liability and “Directors and Officers Liability” was also discussed. The group agreed that additional research and discussion was necessary. Chris agreed to continue this research, seek insurance liability quotes, and report back to the Board again at the next meeting.

2. Friends Website/Membership Management – The software platform used by the Friends group to manage its website and its recurring membership fees is called WildApricot. The software license is renewed every two years, and the price will be going up from \$51/month to \$63.75/month on October 28, 2023. The pricing is based on the number of contacts in the organization with “250 contacts” being a particular limit for the current license, and the Friends group has been as efficient as possible in managing this number. The software provides such features as payment processing, event registration, automated membership renewal notices, and website management. Matt and Jeff have particularly appreciated how easy it is to use. There is still time to consider other software options before the forecasted rate increase on October 28th. Chris moved that the Treasurer be authorized to pay for a renewal of the WildApricot software license for two more years unless a better software alternative is discovered in the interim. Jeff seconded the motion. The motion passed with a unanimous voice assent.

#### F. Items from the floor (Watershed Council and Visitors)

1. Announcement – The next Friends Board meeting will be “in person” at 1:00 PM on Thursday, August 24<sup>th</sup> at Conservation Park located at 221 South Main Street in Three Rivers, Michigan. Matt will not be able to attend, and Jeff volunteered to run the meeting in his absence.

2. News – John said there would be a dredging project soon for the Woodward Ditch Bayou in Mishawaka, Indiana. Funding for the work comes from a DNR Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) grant.

3. News – Sean described a recent river trash pickup event with great turnout that included volunteers from a Scout troop, and he also talked about video surveys of tributaries including the Prairie River.

4. News – Annie talked about the Elkhart Environmental Center’s upcoming “26th Annual Envirofest” event on August 12, 2023 at Island Park. Details can be found online at <https://elkhartenvirofest.com/>.

5. News – Kyle discussed recent efforts to kickstart and organize the lake associations in LaGrange County.

6. News – Matt discussed Indiana state legislation that will allow the St. Joseph River Basin Commission to evolve into a “Watershed Development Commission” with the major difference being the authority to institute taxes, levees, or fees with the approval of the affiliated counties. The funds could be used anywhere in the given watershed. With rates such as \$7/parcel and \$1 for agricultural land, there are potentially sizable amounts of funding that could become available. Based on some rough calculations, Matt estimates that just three Indiana counties might generate \$4-5 million per year which is a significant increase over the current budget of roughly \$160,00 for the St. Joseph River Basin Commission.

7. News – Matt described a recent PCB class action lawsuit that resulted in some sizable checks from Monsanto Chemical Corporation going to about 23 qualifying communities in the watershed. If a community had the population density to qualify as Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) and was in the watershed of a stream listed as impaired for PCBs, it

received a check in amounts such as \$17,000 or \$24,000 but with very little information regarding the reason for the funds. Through the St. Joseph River Basin Commission, Matt has been contacting these communities, explaining the source of the funds, and offering to collaborate with them to use the funds for their intended purpose. The collaboration involves SJRBC offering to fund the technology to install bridge-mounted flow monitoring equipment if the community will use the Monsanto funds to pay for the affiliated hydrology study work that is necessary. The city of Angola is an example of a city that has agreed to this collaboration offer.

Sean moved that the meeting be adjourned. Jeff seconded the motion. The motion passed with a unanimous voice assent, and Matt adjourned the meeting at 2:38 PM.