



## NEBRASKA STATE FAIR BOARD

### Meeting Minutes

Friday, December 19, 2025

The meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was held on Friday, December 19, 2025 at 1:00 pm at the Nebraska State Fair Administrative Offices in Grand Island, NE. Public notice of this meeting was published in the Grand Island Independent newspaper on December 11, 2025; posted to the Nebraska Public Meeting Calendar website; and on the Nebraska State Fair website. The public was invited to attend in person.

Roll call was read with the following Board members present: Boyd Strope, Chair; Tom Schellpeper, Vice Chair; John McKeever, Secretary; Lanna Hubbard, Treasurer; Dawn Caldwell; Anna Castner Wightman; Ryan Hassebrook; Kevin Havlovic; Kevin Jorgensen; Alan Kahle; and Kathleen Lodi. Absent: Beth Smith and Tom Dinsdale.

Others in Attendance: Jaime Parr, Executive Director; Courtney Glock, Marketing Director; Keaton Irwin, Sales Director; Breanna Kozisek, Business Administrator; Vaughn Sievers, Agriculture Director; Nicki Stoltenberg, Sponsorship Director; Tina Thuernagle, Operations Director; Derek Bosler, Recipient of the 2025 Lifesaving Award; Mike and Sharon Dreher, Double Locked Security; Donovan Fowler, Recipient of the 2025 Lifesaving Award; Terry Galloway, 1868 Foundation Board of Directors; Matt Gunderson, 1868 Foundation Board of Directors; Cindy Johnson, Consultant; Lindsey Koepke, 1868 Foundation Executive Director; Larry Lucas, Recipient of the 2025 Lifesaving Award; RJ Post, Grand Island Independent; Joe Stump, AMGL; and the families and friends of the 2025 Lifesaving Award recipients.

The December 19 meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was called to order by Chairman, Boyd Strope. Strope announced the meeting had been properly advertised as an open meeting and informed those in attendance of the posting location of the Open Meetings Act.

#### Presentation of the 2025 Lifesaving Award

- Marketing Director Courtney Glock presented the 2025 Lifesaving Award to three full-time deputies working off duty with the Fair's security team. They saved the life of a Fair guest on August 29, 2025.
- Part of the Nebraska State Fair's mission is to create a place where families can be safe and create memories, which are made possible by the teams working behind the scenes.
- Derek Bosler of Stanton County, Donovan Fowler of Hall County and Larry Lucas of Hall County were instrumental in saving a guest's life when they began choking. Their quick action made a difference in that Fair guest returning to their family.
- All three deputies received Lifesaving Awards for their actions and embodying what it means to be part of the Fair Family.

#### Approval of Consent Agenda

Motion made by Kevin Havlovic for Approval of Consent Agenda, which included Regular Meeting Minutes of November 21, 2025.

Second by John McKeever.

Upon roll call vote, motion to approve consent agenda passed unanimously.

#### Financial Report by Joe Stump

**Dawn Caldwell moved to approve the November 2025 Financials as presented.**

**Second by Alan Kahle.**

Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.

#### **Committee & Staff Reports**

##### **Events Report by John McKeever and Karli Schulz**

- No report. No action needed.

##### **Facilities Planning & Operations Report by Tom Schellpeper and Tina Thuernagle**

- Committee meeting was held the day before via Zoom.
- ARPA updates continue as work on cattle ties have begun. The demo is complete and pipe work will begin this winter, with weather permitting. Work in the northwest lots are scheduled for the first part of January. The east part of campus is complete for this season, but work will begin again after horse racing season completes in May.
- Security was also discussed for the property south of Stolley Park Rd.
- Thuernagle showed thanks to all and Jaime Parr for attending her first ever IAFE conference.
  - Networked with others in industry, also in operations, and shared ideas.
  - Two takeaways from conference: Improvements on the parking department and leading diverse teams.
  - The parking department will now fall under the operations team. The plan is to schedule attendants for dates and times with the greatest influx of visitors and placing attendants in primarily key locations during weekdays. Another goal will be to plan meetings with local police departments to help direct street traffic and roadways following major events.
  - The seminar on leading diverse teams was important as every diversity has its place in our event. We prioritize putting people in the right place, including translators in our event to help with communication and understanding the differences between groups. Being mindful keeps our mission and core values the focus, starting with leadership, which sets the tone.
- Update was given on the full-time operations team.
  - The operations team continues weekly meetings. Brent and Brian, Operations members, are finishing the AGR show. Progress is also being made to winter project lists.

##### **Agriculture Report by Dawn Caldwell and Vaughn Sievers**

- The Ag department is in full swing hiring judges and superintendents.
- Vaughn Sievers will be absent from the upcoming NAFM convention (Nebraska Association of Fair Managers). Kourtney Lingeman and Tyler Griffeth, from the Ag department, will present at NAFM about DNA nominations for any county fairs interested.
- DNA nominations will be changing for the 2026 State Fair and Aksarben Stock Show (AKSS).
  - Exhibitors in 2025 were able to use one DNA sample for both the Fair and AKSS.
  - Two separate DNA samples will be required for next year's events.
- The Ag team will be going to Denver at different points in January.
  - An equine manager who helped at our event has requested assistance for one of their events in Denver.
- Kourtney Lingeman, Competitive Exhibits Manager, is working on entry books.
- The AKSS budget is now including new sponsorship and fundraising opportunities.
  - Sievers reached out to industry professionals for assistance in these promising endeavors.
- Entry fees are set to increase in 2026, becoming more comparable to other Fairs.
  - Livestock entry fees were at \$30 but will increase to \$50. Additional increases have been considered.

- Vaughn Sievers will also be attending the Arizona National show to experience the show and see what can be taken back and used for the AKSS.
- Boyd Strope expressed appreciation for the time Sievers and other staff put into learning from other Fairs and events.
- Dawn Caldwell presented two action items for consideration.
  - There were two livestock appeal hearings from the 2025 Nebraska State Fair that were held the morning of December 19, 2025 in the State Fair Administrative Offices.
- Caldwell moved to approve that the recommended sanctions be upheld in the first appeal hearing.
  - The appeal was filed by an exhibitor who was randomly tested via blood test and whose test results, from Texas A&M, were positive for a product not approved in that species.
  - The initial determination was that sanctions would be imposed. The exhibitor would not be allowed to exhibit at the 2026 Nebraska State Fair and any animals exhibited by the exhibitor after the 2026 Fair would be subject to periodic and random testing.
  - After considering the evidence, the Ag committee found the exhibitor did not meet burden of proof to change the recommendation.
  - Second by Kevin Havlovic.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.
- Caldwell also moved to approve the recommendation for the second appeal hearing.
  - The appeal was filed by an exhibitor who received a medical diagnostic lab determination, again from Texas A&M. The urine test was positive for a product not typically approved anywhere.
  - The initial determination of the Ag committee was that sanctions would be imposed. The animal would be disqualified along with all privileges associated with the recognition they would have earned, including all photos and no champion recognition. It was suggested that premium monies be withheld and the exhibitor be billed for carcass disposal. The exhibitor would not be allowed to exhibit in 2026 and any animals entered by the exhibitor after 2026 would be subject to testing. We would ask that all banners and awards received be returned.
  - After considering the evidence, the Ag committee found the exhibitor partially met burden of proof. Evidence showed the animal was administered a product manufactured by a company that was sold by a vendor here on fairgrounds. Representations made by the manufacturer to the exhibitor and others were that the product was safe for use in market animals. The manufacturer admitted it made a mistake with respect to the particular batch of the product sold at the 2025 Nebraska State Fair. The manufacturer accepted responsibility for the mistake and offered to reimburse the exhibitor for the cost of the carcass, which it did.
  - The committee recommends the following sanctions be implemented by the full board. The exhibitor will be billed for the cost of carcass disposal. Any animals entered by the exhibitor at future Nebraska State Fairs will be subject to periodic and random testing.
  - Second by Tom Schellpeper.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.

#### FFA Report by Ryan Hassebrook

- Quick thanks were given to the State Fair on behalf of FFA for a successful 2025.
- FFA members are competing at district contests for state convention.
- The State Fair's role in the FFA program is that it is the one opportunity students have to showcase their actual projects, physically bring projects and showcase them.
- Hassebrook gave thanks and wished everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy 2026.

#### 4-H Report by Kathleen Lodi

- Fair books are being sent out to counties so they can put in their county fair books. That leads into the State Fair.
- Judge's training is being scheduled right now for staffing exhibits and some livestock exhibits.
- This weekend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is having commencement as well. Congratulations were given to all those graduates and their families.

### Finance Report by Boyd Strope

- Finance committee held a Zoom meeting this week.
- The 2026 budget was discussed. The staff has come far and doing great with being on time with the budget.
  - Jaime Parr shared how the team has made wonderful efforts to make the budget happen. The staff team is engaged in the process and directors and department managers are taking ownership in the plan.
  - John McKeever moved to approve the 2026 Budget.
  - Second by Alan Kahle.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.
- Consideration was also given for the Nebraska State Fair to diversify Fair investments into low-risk CDs at \$750,000 each at three current Fair partner banking institutions: Five Points, Pinnacle, and FNBO.
  - Kevin Havlovic moved to approve the Investment Diversification.
  - Second by John McKeever.
  - Motion carried.

### Sales Report by Keaton Irwin

- Report was given on the Vendor turnover rate for 2025.
  - There were about 544 spaces occupied, 30 total cancellations and a 6% turnover rate.
  - Sponsorship made up 1% of the turnover rate, which is a historic low compared to the previous 7% rate. Credit was given to Nicki Stoltenberg, Sponsorship Director, for contributing to that low rate.
  - The Expo Center had the largest number of vendors, with over 350 spaces occupied. There was a 4% turnover rate in that building, driven by last-minute cancellations.
  - There is an overall downward trend in turnover for indoor vendor spaces, increasing the competition for those spaces.
- Irwin is working to find a middle ground with bringing in new vendors but also having retention so that vendors continue to come back.
- Irwin will also be attending the National Western Stock Show to meet with some vendors.

### Marketing Report by Courtney Glock

- Glock highlighted how special and important it was to recognize the recipients of the 2025 Lifesaving Award.
  - An update was also given about the guest whose life was saved during Fair. They are doing well and continuing to heal from their broken rib.
- Thanks were shared with those who have given to our organization in some capacity.
- Recognition was also given to Jaime Parr, for enhancing the Fair's safety and emergency preparedness by collaborating with outside emergency and law enforcement partners.
- Holiday wristband flash sales have wrapped up.

- A 24-hour sale was completed for Fair Fans. The sale was advertised in the Grand Island Independent and included in the State Fair emailing list, as a thank you to those subscribed.
- That sale went into a holiday sale ending Monday of this week. The sales were then extended due to a software outage nationwide.
- Wade Shows has shown appreciation for our pre-sales and the strength of our sales.
- As we move into 2026, there is an RFP that will be coming out for an advertising agency. The Fair is currently with Idea Bank Marketing and have been for years. The RFP is ready to push out and see some proposals in early January.

#### **Sponsorship Report by Nicki Stoltenberg**

- The sponsorship department has been busy, but it has been a great opportunity to work more with Janet Enck, who has come on full-time as Sponsorship Manager.
  - Janet has been diving into Sponsorship CX, which is the department's software.
- A hotel RFP is being finalized.
- A partnership has been secured with Cinch for the Aksarben Stock Show.
- Contact has been made with the Walter Scott Foundation.
- Collaboration has been ongoing with Matt Gunderson with the 1868 Foundation funding committee. A plan will be presented later in the day.
- A recent meeting with Earl May resulted in a multi-year deal. Great conversations were had with comment on "it just feel[ing] right to have a partnership with the State Fair."

#### **Executive Report by Boyd Strope**

- Consideration was given to Board By-Law Amendments.
- One amendment regards consecutive terms. Somebody who is willing to step up when someone resigns for vacancy should be allowed three full terms. Originally, no one could serve more than three consecutive terms, which remains. The additional language for this section will include the filling of a vacancy on the board that's expired shall not be deemed or counted as a term of service.
  - Dawn Caldwell moved to approve this amendment.
  - Second by Tom Schellpeper.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.
- Another amendment regards board member discipline, which is entirely new. Section 6 will state the board's authority by a two-thirds majority vote of the entire board to censure, sanction, reprimand, or otherwise discipline any board member who has violated the duties of director, engaged in conduct detrimental to the State Fair or violated any organizational policy, code of conduct or ethical standard adopted by the board and applicable to the board members.
  - John McKeever moved to approve this amendment.
  - Second by Kevin Havlovic.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.

#### **HR Report by Alan Kahle**

- The HR committee met and employee benefits were discussed as a large renewal rate came back from the State Fair's medical insurance carrier Blue Cross & Blue Shield.
- A summary breakdown was provided to the full board with details on what was being considered for approval. The new package offers good medical care and comparable employee benefits at a reasonable price.

- Alan Kahle moved to approve the new employee benefits, including a new insurance carrier (Medica), FSA and HSA options (Omnify) and a new EAP carrier (Wholeness Healing Center).
- Second by Kevin Jorgensen.
- All in favor. Motion carried.

#### 1868 Foundation Report by Lindsey Koepke and Terry Galloway

- Lindsey highlighted all the foundation members present and in support.
- Kudos were given to Matt Gunderson who will present the foundation fundraising plan. The plan will be important for multi-year fundraising and sponsorship, and helpful for long-term stability. This plan also builds confidence, so donors know that funds are going toward action points of interest to them.
- The 1868 Foundation filled out the Visitor Improvement Fund Grant and made their submission at the end of August for \$100k to go toward the 2026 AKSS. The foundation was awarded the full \$100k for AKSS.
- The 'End of Year Giving' is wrapping up and the foundation is just a little short of their goal.
- A budget meeting was also had recently where an additional premium amount for youths was approved. Kudos were given to Vaughn Sievers and his presentation of the youth premiums program opportunity.

#### Executive Director Report by Jaime Parr

- Reminder that financial transparency remains intact, the staff continue to meet weekly to review payables. This same information is also shared to the Board Finance Committee weekly, including bank balances, balance sheet, and the general ledger.
- Kudos was given to Tina for the report of ARPA updates.
- The budget was discussed and anyone with questions is encouraged to ask questions.
  - Parr expressed pride in the staff team who put their thought and effort into the budget.
- The trip to the IAFE conference was great. The team brought home several awards, which Parr is proud of as the team submitting those.
  - There were a couple graduates at IAFE as well: Karli Bartz and Tyler Griffeth.
  - Many workshops and panels, meetings and collaboration were held.
- Parr highlighted the ways in which the staff continues to give back to the community.
  - Some of the ways staff have given back are through the Salvation Army, Red Cross, Adopt A Family, Fellowship of Athletes, CASA and more. Those listed are just ones recollected.
  - The community gives to the State Fair and so it's important that staff give back as well to Grand Island and the state of Nebraska.
- Reminders were given on the upcoming board meetings.
  - The next board meeting will be on January 23rd in Kearney at 2:00 pm at the Crown Plaza. Committee meetings will take place that morning and a schedule will be announced soon.
  - The February meeting will be in Lincoln, as that is the annual meeting. The date is set for February 20th.
- Thanks were given to everyone. The directors have done an amazing job leading their teams. Excitement is shared for the next event season and about the team's collaboration. Thanks were also given to the board for sharing in this leadership and collaboration.

#### Adjournment

Motion made by Dawn Caldwell to adjourn.

Second by Tom Schellpeper.

All in favor. Motion carried.

**Minutes of December 19, 2025**

**Nebraska State Fair Approved:**

**Date: January 23, 2026**

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
**John McKeever, Board Secretary**

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