



**NEBRASKA STATE FAIR BOARD  
Meeting Minutes  
Friday, February 20, 2026**

The meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was held on Friday, February 20, 2026 at 2:00 pm at the offices of Rembolt Ludke in Lincoln, NE. Public notice of this meeting was published in the Grand Island Independent newspaper on February 12, 2026; 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 (via Zoom); Dawn Caldwell; Anna Castner Wightman (via Zoom); Ryan Hassebrook; Kevin Havlovic; Alan Kahle, Kathleen Lodl; and Scott Russman (via Zoom). Absent: Tom Dinsdale.

Others in attendance: Jaime Parr, Executive Director; Karli Bartz, Entertainment & Events Director (via Zoom); Janet Enck, Sponsorship Manager (via Zoom); Courtney Glock, Marketing Director; Haley Hewen, Volunteer Coordinator & Box Office Manager (via Zoom); Keaton Irwin, Sales Director; Breanna Kozisek, Business Administrator (via Zoom); Kourtney Lingeman, Competitive Exhibits Manager (via Zoom); Vaughn Sievers, Agriculture Director (via Zoom); Nicki Stoltenberg, Sponsorship Director; Tina Thuernagle, Operations Director; Karlyn Anderson, Gates Manager (via Zoom); Cindy Johnson, Consultant; Lindsey Koepke, 1868 Foundation Executive Director (via Zoom); Joe Stump, AMGL (via Zoom); Mark Hesser and Beth Smith.

The February 20 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 on-site posting location of the Open Meetings Act.

**Approval of Consent Agenda**

**Motion made by Anna Castner Wightman for Approval of Consent Agenda, which included Regular Meeting Minutes of January 23, 2026.**

**Second by Kevin Havlovic.**

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

**Financial Report by Joe Stump, AMGL**

**Dawn Caldwell moved to approve the January 2026 Financials as presented.**

**Second by Tom Schellpeper.**

Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.

**Committee & Staff Reports**

**Events Report by John McKeever and Karli Bartz**

- The committee meeting included subjects such as Veterans Day events, the Board Reunion, Grand Marshals, and the parades.
- Concert planning continues and more are getting booked. Further discussion will be had.
- One Events Intern has been hired for the summer and another intern pending hire will be split between the Events and Marketing departments.

- **The Grand District layout is in the works. The team is working to find the best layout for programming to increase the movement of people toward the east side of campus.**
  - Improvements will include additional vendors, more shopping, a trapeze troupe, a unique animal act to be shared soon, and a small “Ag-tivity Acres” station.
- **Updates with the State Fair Marathon –**
  - Work on the State Fair Marathon is going better this year than last year at this time.
  - HAL Sports has been great to work with.
  - Registration opened February 1st and right now 25 people have registered. This is a good start to registrations considering the lack of marketing that’s gone into it so far.
  - The Fair is working also with the Grand Island Partnership of the Arts to do a competition for designing the marathon race shirts.
- **Haley Hewen, Volunteer Coordinator & Box Office Manager, has been tasked with finding 800 volunteers for the Fair and an additional 500 for the marathon.**
  - There are currently 25 of those 500 volunteers signed up for the marathon.
  - Anyone interested in volunteering and waking up early is welcome to sign up.
  - Anna Castner Wightman recommended the Fair reach out to the Omaha Running Group as way to further the reach of marathon volunteers.
- **The Volunteer Banquet will be held on April 23rd.**
  - Board members were requested to attend and can reach out to Haley Hewen for additional information.
  - Grand Island Young Professionals will be helping to serve food and clear plates.
  - Anyone else willing to help is welcome.
  - Help is needed with greeting attendees and other activities to give back to the volunteers who do so much for the Fair.

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

- **ARPA projects were discussed in committee and things are moving right along.**
  - Projects are expected to be done before Fair.
- **GILCA was another point of discussion.**
  - The Fair has been working with Fonner and uploading them on the GILCA process of setting up, tearing down, and when to switch over.
- **Internal Operations Department Updates –**
  - The project list continues and is shared weekly with Jaime. The operations team also goes through the list weekly.
  - Brent is organizing the back rooms, waxing floors in the Nebraska Building, and working on the south property.
  - Brian helped with the recent Cornhusker Chaos event at Fonner, where the Fair was commissioned at the new 2026 rental rate. He also cleaned and painted the cattle barn wash racks and gathered items for the spring surplus auction.
    - Cattle barn racks were cleaned and turned back over to Fonner Park, but certain repairs were delayed due to other events happening at the barn.
  - Tina participates in GILCA meetings, layout meetings, one-on-one meetings with full-time staff, meets with extended staff, and brings America 250 ideas.
- **A new landscaping specialist will be working on beds around the Fair grounds, so expect to see a new splash of color.**
- **Excitement was shared for Fair 2026 where “It All Happens Here.”**

#### Agriculture Report by Dawn Caldwell

- **The Ag Subcommittee is working through some appeal processes.**
- **March is expected to be the department’s biggest month.**
  - The team will work through SOPs for drug testing and go through rules and regulations.
- **Most of the event judges are hired for State Fair and Aksarben.**

- Kourtney Lingeman is working on and sending out contracts.
- All the event season interns have been hired.
  - There will be three for the State Fair, five for Aksarben Stock Show, and a full-time summer intern to assist with DNA.
- The Fair Board was invited to attend the Statehood Day at the Capitol the following Friday.
- Kourtney Lingeman is working on her IFM (Institute of Fair Management) certification and will be leaving Wednesday to attend Summit, which is part of the process.

#### FFA Report by Ryan Hassebrook

- State FFA Convention is March 25 – 27th.
  - There will be an expected 8,000 FFA members and guests attending.
  - The Fair Board and Staff were invited to attend.

#### 4-H Report by Kathleen Lodi

- It's the middle of 4-H enrollments.
- Quality assurance training continues.
- Statewide robotics competitions will be on campus with over 100 teams.
- A new Director of Experiences was hired at Raising Nebraska a month ago.
  - A "pork pop-up" was sponsored last month by the Pork Producers.
  - Everyone is invited March 23rd to "Tator Tales" in partnership with the Potato Council.
    - Nebraska is the second largest producer of potatoes in the country.
  - The director is working on new ways to engage the public and programming.

#### Finance Report by Boyd Strobe on behalf of Lanna Hubbard

- The Fair received Aksarben Foundation scholarship funds and has worked on the administration of those funds.
  - Funds moving forward will be awarded as pure premiums.
- The committee also discussed the Five-Year Joint Fundraising Plan in conjunction with the 1868 Foundation.
  - The plan was previously presented by Matt Gunderson, with the Foundation.
  - Boyd Strobe entertained the motion to continue utilizing and raising funds for the Nebraska State Fair improvements in coordination with the 1868 Foundation for the Five-Year Joint Fundraising Plan.
  - Tom Schellpeper moved to approve the Five-Year Joint Fundraising Plan.
  - Second by Dawn Caldwell.
  - All in favor. Motion carried.
- The Fair's Cash Reserve Policy was another point of discussion.
  - The policy was put into place several years ago and has been updated yearly.
  - Joe Stump, AMGL, prepared a policy for 2026.
    - A copy of the policy was distributed to all board members.
    - The Capital Reserve for equipment and vehicles is \$575,000; Operating Reserve is \$3,725,000 for a total of \$4.3 million.
    - Kevin Havlovic moved to approve the 2026 Capital Reserves and Operating Reserves.
    - Second by Alan Kahle.
    - All in favor. Motion carried.
- The Fair's 2026 participation in GILCA was considered.
  - The Fair worked with GILCA for many years.
  - Fonner Park has been working to take GILCA over and 2026 is a transition period.

- Instead of contributing cash, the Fair would like to contribute in-kind through labor and equipment rentals in the approximate amount of \$25,000.
- John McKeever moved to approve the contribution of labor in-kind to GILCA for 2026.
- Second by Tom Schellpeper.
- All in favor. Motion carried.
- Boyd Strobe thanked the board for their consideration and passing those important items as the Fair moves forward financially.

### Sales Report by Keaton Irwin

- Returning vendor agreements is a focus in the Sales department.
  - There were 250 agreements sent to the Fair's normal concessions and vendors. Out of those, all but 19 are returning.
  - The challenge this presents is space. The Fair has done better about creating space and working as a team to get creative exploring what there is to work with.
- There was a recent hiccup with the software used for sending contracts.
  - Contracts weren't sent out until late December and, to add to the challenge, the system wasn't dividing payments into two parts.
    - The first payment is due February 13th and the second is due July 1st.
  - Most of the vendors who are long-standing knew the payments were split into two, but the system error created a delay in January.
  - Work has been done to process those contracts and payments, ensuring that deposits are going through and lining up with vendors.
- Mapping vendors and booth spaces has continually been a project.
  - Vendors have the option, from one year to the next, to elect a new booth space.
  - For first-time vendors, the space assigned is a gateway into the State Fair. They then have the option to check out other spaces during Fair to consider for following years.
  - The challenge becomes getting them into those spaces.
  - Karli Bartz mentioned the growth in the Grand District area. Food and shopping will look different out there this 2026 Fair.
    - There will be food court areas and spaces for concessions and vendors. Committee meetings between commercial exhibitors and concessionaires caught the interest of some who want to move out there.
    - Staff efforts to grow that area contribute to vendor interest.
    - It was always a matter of "when" not "if" this would happen, and this year is the start.
- There were over 100 applications received for the 2026 State Fair, which is great.
  - We can only afford to bring in one or two new concessionaires, which will be really unique and something we don't see.
  - The staff team is asked at the weekly staff meetings about what they are seeing and if they have any ideas.
  - Current Fair partners are also asked about ideas and some, who have been with the Fair 50 years, are willing to create new products.
  - There is even less space available for the ag market area.
    - There are three to four prominent building companies on State Fair grounds, and all are selling 30+ products during Fair, from sheds to tiny homes and chicken coops. Each year they want to expand, but we have to put the reins on that because of other good products coming in.

- There's a heavy machinery dealer from Papillion, who was new last Fair, and wants to continue to grow. The battle is it's sometimes easier to get them into a sponsorship role because that allows them space.
- There isn't a ton of space available at Pinnacle Bank Expo.
  - There are 10'x10' and 10'x30' booths open and many applications coming in are for those larger spaces.
- The IAFE Zone 5 Conference is coming up.
  - Keaton will be presenting on the State Fair campgrounds and how that's evolved.
  - Last year was the first year working with Set Your Sites and they've done a great job.
    - They meet with campground hosts during the off-season.
    - They've created ways to take the campgrounds to the next level.
    - The campgrounds will go live March 6th and will be as easy as booking a hotel room. Those interested can book directly from our website instead of calling in or mailing in forms.
- Keaton has worked with Courtney Glock on America 250 themed awards.
  - The new food contest champion belts arrived and are on brand with America 250.
  - The banners for the Outstanding Exhibitor Awards will be America 250 as well.
- State Fair Community Outreach –
  - The Fair is already 44 hours ahead of where we were in 2025.
  - The team has done a great job of contributing to the community.
  - Staff will be at the Bear Fair at the Grand Island Public Library in a couple weeks.
- Excitement was shared about the Fair's current progress compared to last year.

#### Marketing Report by Courtney Glock

- The marketing department had a busy last month.
- The active RFP for ad agencies brought in six proposals ranging from agencies in Washington, South Dakota, several in Nebraska, and our current agency.
  - There are three pitches left and will wrap up next week for a decision to be made.
- The Marketing & Hospitality Manager position has been filled.
  - Courtney was recently messaged by a family friend who knew someone looking for a marketing position. They had the experience needed, were able to visit the following day, applied immediately, and will be joining the team.
- A summer Marketing Intern has also been secured.
  - The intern from last summer will be returning, which doesn't happen often.
  - The intern wants to go out of state long-term but is coming back and will already have one year of Fair under her belt.
- Numbers were shared about the impact of the marketing budget.
  - About \$150,000 of the marketing budget, less than half, is spent directly on getting people to buy an admission ticket.
  - A chart presented by Courtney showed where those dollars go, how different Nebraska regions perform in ticket sales, and the total ticket revenue that is brought from each region between the ticket sale and resulting food/beverage costs.
  - The Southwest region is the Fair's highest net return per ticket.
    - For every dollar put toward marketing in that region, we get \$27 back from the person that comes through the gate.
    - In the Sandhills there's just under \$26 per ticket returned value.
    - The third highest returned value is from the Northeast part of the state while the fourth highest area is the Central region with a \$23 per ticket return.

- The cost per is much lower in the Central region as it's in our backyard.
- Right now, the Fair averages about \$0.98 in marketing per individual to get someone through the gates.
- There's a lot of people in Nebraska who have no idea the Nebraska State Fair is in Grand Island. The goal is to reach those people.
- As far as tactics, the Fair is meeting with media partners and placing some media buys, billboards, radio ads, and things like that. Once the entertainment, ag shows, and some vendors are secured, the advertising can extend to more than the general Fair.
- Keaton Irwin gave kudos to Courtney for the strength of her work and the recognition it receives, from vendors to other State Fairs.
- Quick note was made about the Fair being 188 days away.

### Sponsorship Report by Nicki Stoltenberg

- As mentioned at the last board meeting, the Fair joined efforts with an IEG consultant to help put valuations on sponsorship assets.
  - The approved fundraising plan will help with continuing improvements.
  - IEG needs data from the Fair to kick off valuations. These valuations will help the Fair understand if we are valuing naming rights or banners correctly.
  - Thanks were given to the 1868 Foundation for their effort in that as well.
  - The hope is to be done by end of May with these valuations.
  - This effort has not paused progress as sponsorships continue to sell.
- Another joint effort with the 1868 Foundation is grant funding.
  - Kevin Stocker with the Nebraska Public Service Commission has helped connect the Fair with Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad.
    - A grant has already been submitted with Burlington Northern.
    - The Fair's capital improvement list is taken as a wish list for these grants and have helped the Fair to think bigger.
    - Burlington Northern's grant will help place permanent bathrooms in the shop.
    - Union Pacific opens in April 1st.
    - Lindsey Koepke, 1868 Foundation, has helped strategize what to apply for and contacting places before submitting forms so they know what's coming and we better understand them.
- Sponsorship is closing a brand-new multi-year deal with CHI St. Francis.
- Bryan Health is going to add a first aid station to the start and finish of the marathon race.
- There's a new president of Home Federal Bank in Grand Island.
  - They support the Aksarben Stock Show but are really interested in getting their team from across state and allowing them the time to volunteer at the State Fair.
  - While there's no check from Home Federal Bank, which is typically the goal, the volunteer program will lead to some good exposure.
- The City of Grand Island –
  - The Fair secured another interlocal agreement with them.
- Nebraska Poultry –
  - A partnership has been formed with the folks at Nebraska Poultry.
  - Effort has been made to close the gap between their wish list and the Fair's poultry superintendents' wish list.
  - A joint committee meeting will be held next week.
- Midwest Dairy –

- There's a new person in charge and that transition will be great.
- **Bosselman –**
  - The Pump & Pantry Party Pity is going to move along the State Fair's "Cowboy Way" and rebrand that area. The Party Pit itself will move to the middle where the "Bud Bar" was located last year.
- **Central Nebraska Trim Light –**
  - Trim Light was a new partner last year and lit up the Welcome Center with permanent lighting. Fonner Park was generous to allow year-round lights.
  - The Fair has control of the lights and will soon control the lights at the campgrounds on the permanent facility – a partnership between Trim Light and the Fair's Sponsorship and Sales teams.
- **Hy-Vee –**
  - The contract has been renewed.
  - The Ag-tivity Acres will get a freshen up.
- **Bomgaars –**
  - They will be the 4-H t-shirt sponsor.
- In general, there's a lot of sponsorship renewals taking place.
- **Cindy Johnson, a Fair consultant, has been a big help.**
  - She's helped bust into new accounts and grow a list of sponsorships.
- **Sponsorship has been busy and trending upward from last year.**
  - Cindy's efforts have helped the Fair and AKSS continue sponsorship progress that lines up with progress in 2025.
  - Hope to continue matching 2025 revenue or bring more money in.
- **Dawn Caldwell mentioned that an auction will be added to the Aksarben Stock Show fundraising strategy as well.**
  - The auction will include anything from livestock supplies to nutrition, an experience, tickets, or a jacket.
  - If anyone has ideas about what could be included, let Vaughn Sievers know.

#### Executive Report by Boyd Strope

- Nothing to report.
- Pride was expressed in the staff team's community hours.

#### 1868 Foundation Report by Lindsey Koepke via Zoom

- **Welcome was given to Mark Hesser who was previously part of the 1868 Foundation Board.**
  - The Foundation and Fair have come a long way.
- **A brief review was given of the Foundation's financials.**
  - Total Cash ~ \$255,000
  - Pledges Receivable ~ \$500,000
  - Investment Account ~ \$670,000
  - Total Assets ~ \$1.4 million compared to \$1.1 million this time last year.
- **The Foundation is happy to support the IEG partnership.**
  - It comes in a great time as the Five-Year Joint Fundraising Plan will move forward.
  - The IEG valuations will come in handy for the US Foods Arena as the Foundation constructed it in 2015 and the area surrounding the arena was underutilized.
    - The initial naming rights cost were low at the time, but the naming rights contract will come up next year.



- Dawn Caldwell nominated the current executive officers to remain in their positions for another year.
  - Caldwell motioned for the executive committee to be Boyd Strobe as President, Tom Schellpeper as Vice President, John McKeever as Secretary, and Lanna Hubbard as Treasurer.
  - Second by Kevin Havlovic.
  - Boyd Strobe asked if there were any other nominations, to which there were none.
  - Roll calls were done. The majority were in favor, with one member abstaining from the vote. Motion was carried.

#### **Board Member Recognition**

- Beth Smith was recognized at the end of the meeting and thanked for her time served on the Nebraska State Fair Board. Her term ended this past year.

#### **Adjournment**

**Motion made by Kevin Havlovic to adjourn.**

**Second by Tom Schellpeper.**

**All in favor. Motion carried.**

**Minutes of February 20, 2026**

**Nebraska State Fair Approved:**

**Date: March 20, 2026**

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