



**NEBRASKA STATE FAIR BOARD
Meeting Minutes
Friday, April 17, 2026**

The meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was held on Friday, April 17, 2026 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 April 9, 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, Chairman; Tom Schellpeper, Vice Chair (Zoom); Lanna Hubbard, Treasurer; John McKeever, Secretary; Alan Kahle; Anna Castner Wightman (Zoom); Dawn Caldwell; Kathleen Lodl (Zoom); Kevin Havlovic; Mark Hesser (Zoom); Ryan Hassebrook; and Scott Russman. Absent: Tom Dinsdale.

Others in attendance: Jaime Parr, Executive Director; Karli Bartz, Entertainment & Events 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; Cindy Johnson, Consultant; Lindsey Koepke, 1868 Foundation Executive Director; Chris Linder, Forvis Mazars; RJ Post, Grand Island Independent; Joe Stump, AMGL; and public guests.

The April 17 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.

Strope verbally moved the “Presentation of the 2025 Audit” to be the first agenda item.

Presentation of 2025 Audit by Chris Linder, Forvis Mazars

- Chris Linder thanked the team for participating in the audit and hosting him. A special thanks was given to Jaime Parr, Executive Director, and Joe Stump, AMGL Consultant.
- The State Fair Finance committee reviewed the audit in-depth that morning.
- The audit conducted consisted of three different audit opinions.
 - The first opinion was the financial statement audit. The result was an unmodified or a clean opinion – the highest level of assurance. There was no identified audit adjustments needed to those financial statements.
 - The second opinion involved the internal control structure. The audit indicated no significant deficiencies or material weaknesses were identified. It was a clean opinion.
 - The third and last opinion related to compliance with financial awards, like the ARPA grant. The audit report indicated no instances of noncompliance, meaning there was a clean opinion received.
- Chris opened the floor for questions, to which there were none.
- Strope thanked Chris for his time and attending the meeting to present the audit findings.
- Parr also extended thanks to Chris for his time and work.
- Chris expressed appreciation for the partnership.

Approval of Consent Agenda

Motion made by Dawn Caldwell for the Approval of Consent Agenda, which included the Regular Meeting Minutes of March 20, 2026, and the Ratification of the March Meeting Actions.

Second by Lanna Hubbard.

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

Financial Report by Joe Stump, AMGL

Lanna Hubbard moved to approve the 2025 Financial and Single Audit as presented by Chris Linder, Forvis Mazars.

Second by Mark Hesser.

Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.

Kevin Havlovic moved to approve the March 2026 Financials as presented.

Second by Alan Kahle.

Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.

Committee & Staff Reports

Events Report by Anna Castner Wightman and Karli Bartz

- Karli Bartz started the events report.
- The committee had a great meeting going through event items.
- Last month, during the board meeting, the events team received a final acceptance for the concert series. The concert roll out has since been a success.
- Bartz extended gratitude for the staff team who helped executive that roll out. Joy was shared among team members about the influx of positive comments online.
- The State Fair sold 2,000 tickets for each concert so far and 10,000 tickets across all four concerts.
 - The Phil Wickham show is about 70 tickets away from being sold out.
 - The Fair is seeing more success this year at this time than in 2025 and 2024.
- Reminder was given about the Volunteer Banquet happening next Thursday (April 23, 2026). Board members attending were told to notify Haley Hewen, Volunteer Coordinator, in advance.
 - David Zumbrum, a State Fair volunteer, will be recognized at the banquet having reached the milestone of 1,868 service hours.
- Anna Castner Wightman asked Bartz if the Husker volleyball game will be played on State Fair grounds as done with football games.
 - Bartz announced the volleyball game would be screened in bars and other areas, like the Husker football games.
- Parr reminded the group of the event team's agenda item – Consideration of Strategy for National Concerts.
 - The strategy includes securing future shows earlier in advance and considering what would be available for the following year's State Fair.
- Dawn Caldwell moved to approve the Strategy for National Concerts allowing staff to explore and book concerts, with the booking agent, for future State Fairs beginning 18 months to two years in advance, contingent upon the Board's final approval of the 2027 National Stage show budget, planned for October 2026.
 - Second by Lanna Hubbard.
 - Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.
 - Anna Castner Wightman arrived in-person for the vote and remainder of the board meeting.

Facilities Planning & Operations Report by Tom Schellpeper and Tina Thuernagle

- Tom Schellpeper asked Tina Thuernagle to share the report.
- The Facilities committee met that morning.

- ARPA projects are moving forward as planned. Concrete has been poured into the northwest lot, and the improved parking area has started taking shape. Excitement was shared about how the updated lot will improve parking structure.
- GILCA was another topic discussed in committee. The State Fair continues to upload Fonner on the set-up/tear-down process for shows. The Fair hopes to share all knowledge possible.
- Beyond the Budget items were discussed as items are getting secured this year, following the State Fair procurement policy.
- There are lots of continuous conversations about State Fair layout. The ARPA projects have produced a little more usable ground which helps ensure great guest experiences, especially on the east side of campus.
- The internal operations staff team continues to meet weekly to align priorities and set goals. The weekly meetings keep staff informed and give opportunity to address any challenges.
 - Appreciation was extended toward Brian and Brent – members of the operations team – for their efforts and consistency.
- Thuernagle shared how they are looking forward to “It All Happening Here.”

Agriculture Report by Dawn Caldwell and Vaughn Sievers

- Dawn Caldwell started the Ag report.
- Caldwell shared that fellow board member John McKeever is stepping forward as the State Fair’s Scale Master as he is a certified Scale Master.
 - The Fair will still contract with someone else for the Aksarben Stock Show, but McKeever will help make considerations for State Fair scale investments.
- Kudos were given to Vaughn Sievers and the internal Ag staff team.
- Vaughn Sievers continued leading the Ag report.
- There’s a potential opportunity to work with someone at Texas A&M on thermal camera imaging this year and/or in the future.
- Discussion was also had about this year’s new fundraising for the Aksarben Stock Show.
 - The online auction through Show Circuit brought in about \$73,000.
- The internal Ag team is busy working on the challenge program.
 - Goats were picked up last weekend and sheep will be picked up next weekend. Swine will be picked up in May.
- There will be a change in DNA submissions this year – separated submissions will be required for the Nebraska State Fair and Aksarben Stock Show.
 - A webinar series will start next Tuesday to educate exhibitors on the three-step process of getting DNA put in, nominations, and entry fees.
- Work on the State Fair entry book is underway. A goal has been set for all areas of competitive exhibits, equine, and livestock to have entries online by May 1st. That goal also includes having health regulations and State Fair rules and regulations online.
- A bee box will be coming back to the State Fair this year. Courtney Glock and Tina Thuernagle are committing time to that project.
- Caldwell reminded the group that a lot of time was spent last month reviewing livestock infractions. Kudos were given to Sievers for his diligence with those infractions.
 - Members of the public have expressed their appreciation for the Fair’s effort enforcing rules and regulations.
 - Caldwell extended thanks to the Board for their patience with those infractions.
- Strope highlighted Sievers’ diligent effort with the challenge program.
 - The first step of the program is finding a ranch, farm, or other facility to acquire the challenge animals.
 - Strope asked Sievers where the swine, goats, and lambs were coming from this year.
 - Sievers recognized the Ag staff team for all their help in the challenge program efforts.
 - Recognition was specifically given to Kourtney Lingeman, Tyler Griffeth, Abi Parker, and Sarah Kucera for their time committed to the Ag Team overall.

- A ranch operation in South Dakota, Dvorak Herefords, is providing the cattle challenge animals. The sheep challenge animals are also coming from an operation, Rules, in South Dakota. The goats are coming from a Nebraska operation, Went Show Goats. The swine animals will be provided by a Nebraska operation, Beattie Family Farms.
- Strope thanked Sievers again for this time in that effort.
- Ryan Hassebrook asked where the webinar series would be located online.
 - Sievers announced that a link will be provided on Facebook and can be sent via email.

FFA Report by Ryan Hassebrook

- No report.

4-H Report by Kathleen Lodi

- It's a busy time for 4-H members who are preparing to graduate. The 4-H club helps young people be "Beyond Ready," which is the highlight of a recent campaign.
 - Each graduating senior in a Nebraska 4-H club will receive a special honor cord and poster reading, "Beyond Ready" and "Congratulations 4-H Graduate."
- Thanks were extended to everyone for helping develop these young people, working through the logistics of last year's State Fair for 4-H, and moving forward positively.

Finance Report by Boyd Strope

- The committee met that morning to discuss the audit report, RFPs, and ticket sales in detail.
- Further grant funding and applications were discussed, with the help of Sponsorship Director Nicki Stoltenberg and 1868 Foundation Executive Director Lindsey Koepke.
- ARPA updates continue.
- The work transition with GILCA continues.
- The cost of the State Fair Birthing Pavillion remains in discussion and funding options will continue to be explored.

HR Report by Lanna Hubbard

- The committee held their first meeting of the year that morning.
- The committee mainly discussed the State Fair's parental leave staff policy and some updates.
- Strope mentioned there were additional HR policies discussed in committee – provided to the full board in advance – but the parental leave policy was the focus of this month's meeting.
- Hubbard asked Business Administrator Breanna Kozisek to expand on the leave policy.
 - A parental leave policy existed previously, but amendments presented would expand that policy. The eligibility status would change from 12 months of full-time employment to six months of permanent employment. The leave would expand from two weeks of leave to six weeks of maternity leave, three weeks of paternity leave, and two weeks of parental bonding. There would also be the inclusion of a 60-day notice period and "foreseen" and "unforeseen" leave verbiage.
- Lanna Hubbard moved to approve the amended parental leave policy.
 - Second by Alan Kahle.
 - Strope thanked Kozisek for the time put into the policy, making the State Fair more competitive in the employment market.
 - Upon roll call vote, motion to approve passed unanimously.

Sales Report by Keaton Irwin

- Update was given on the 2026 State Fair Food Champion Belts. (One was brought for display.)

- Leon's Food Truck, who received a Food Champion Belt last year, continues to show off his belt in interviews and stories. This was a reminder that the 2026 belts will be extra special as they will match the America 250 theme incorporating red, white, and blue along with the State Fair's logo. These will be one-of-a-kind belts so vendors will have only one chance to win them, making it more competitive.
- The belts will be awarded in the Sweet and Savory Competitions.
- The State Fair staff's community outreach hours were highlighted.
 - Recent volunteer events included the Bear Fair and District County Fair meetings. Events like these allow staff to interact with the community, promote the State Fair, and get excited about the next fair season.
 - At the end of March last year there were 43.5 volunteer hours contributed by staff members. This year the team hit 71 hours in March – a more than 63% increase.
- Some 2026 vendor teasers were shared.
 - African Delights is a new vendor attending this year's State Fair. They will have authentic West African cuisine and traditional street food. They will be located in food pod one.
 - Food pod one has been a destination pod where gluten-free items were served last year as well as some spinoff items.
 - A Philippine street food vendor is also located in food pod one that tends to attract some foot traffic.
 - Guardian Tornado & Safe Rooms will be a new commercial vendor. They are FEMA and ICC-certified storm shelters. They will be located inside Pinnacle Bank Expo.
 - Stir It Up Strawberries with Dubai Chocolate will be in the outdoor marketplace. They will have stirred strawberries, pistachio ice cream, a Dubai chocolate strawberry cup, and a gamut of other items.
 - Moo U livestock tours will return to the Fair this year. They will have livestock barn tours and a booth inside Pinnacle Bank Expo offering plush toys for kids.
 - Quirky Décor is another new vendor coming this year offering wood resin artwork, tables, and charcuterie boards.
- The 2026 bargain book is getting an update with help from Marketing Director Courtney Glock and Sponsorship Director Nicki Stoltenberg.
 - Last year the brochure was called "Bobby's Bargain Book." This year it will be called the "Blue Ribbon Bargain Brochure." This year's bargain brochure will be free and include similar coupons as last year – like \$5 off or 20% off coupons.
 - The 2026 Brochure will be complimentary available to all guests and coupons valid for Tuesday and Wednesday only.
- Overall, things in Sales are going well.

Marketing Report by Courtney Glock

- The concert series announcements have occupied most of Marketing's time.
 - The response has been great. Happy comments have turned into visible transactions.
 - Shout out was given to Haley Hewen leading the box office and Karli Bartz for handing the concert contracts.
 - The five-week roll out – one announcement per week – was new this year and has been effective. However, that's not to say it will work or be used next year.
 - Appreciation was shown to Jaime Parr for allowing the team autonomy to be flexible and experiment using market strategies.
 - The marketing department continues to work on consistency, so the public knows what to expect from the Fair each year from public announcements to Fair Fan newsletters.

- Success with the concert roll out means some marketing dollars can be reallocated.
 - There is one show with less than 100 tickets left, so advertising monies are being reallocated from that show to other shows.
- The Fair is sharing social media content showing where tickets can be purchased.
 - Comments online have brought to light scam sites and third-party resellers up-charging consumers on concert tickets. The Fair does not verify authenticity of tickets purchased on a third-party site.
 - All State Fair tickets should be purchased through the statefair.org and etix.com websites ONLY.
- State Fair socials incorporated some April Fool's Day fun.
 - A post was made about a "blindfolded tractor parking contest," which resulted in some curious comments, messages, and calls. (There is no such event.)
- A fun post was also shared featuring State Fair staff and their childhood photos.
- More social media posts will come as entry books and entertainment events are announced.
- There are several contests open for participant sign-up, including the t-shirt contest, poster contest, and both human and animal rooster crowing contests.
- Social media engagement is up about 935% as posts have reached about 2.2 million people in the last 20 days.
- There are 132 days until the 2026 Nebraska State Fair!

Sponsorship Report by Nicki Stoltenberg

- Sponsorship has worked with Events & Entertainment on sponsorship benefits.
 - Sponsors are traditionally offered access to VIP concert tickets. However, with this year's concert success, some additional planning was needed.
 - More than 50 ticket order forms were sent to sponsors with a cap on VIP tickets depending on their sponsorship level.
- The State Fair continues to work with IEG in partnership with the 1868 Foundation.
 - Sponsorship received a sneak peek of what a proposed sponsorship package could look like. The proposed package could change and evolve future sponsorship approaches.
 - There is still some work needed to complete the valuation analysis by the end of April.
 - IEG has been great to work with, and the team assigned to the Fair is responsive.
 - Thanks were extended to the board for their approved funding of the IEG project.
- The joint fundraising plan with the 1868 Foundation has opened opportunities.
 - Contacts provided, especially by State Fair board members, have led to new partners.
 - Thanks were given to Anna Castner Wightman for providing contacts at Nebraska Children's Hospital.
 - Sponsorship will also have a meeting soon with the Omaha Community Foundation.
 - It's exciting to see how the Omaha business market can be reached.
 - Thanks were given to Dawn Caldwell for connections with Lauritzen Gardens.
 - Some of their team visited the Fair recently to tour Fonner Park grounds. Conversations were had about plants, flowers, and Fair landscaping.
 - The fundraising plan also includes grants, which staff members and Lindsey Koepke continue to work on.
 - A grant roadmap has been made internally to track the status of those grants.
 - Beyond the Budget items are taken to potential funders to see what projects they would like to help with.
 - A grant with Burlington Northern Santa Fe will partially fund the building of an operation shop bathroom.

- The Dixon Family Foundation is supplying partial funds for the dirt project in the Five Points Bank Arena.
 - An application was submitted to the Walter Scott Foundation to fund a campground project and doors to Raising Nebraska.
 - An application was also submitted to Union Pacific this past week.
- Update was given on a gift from Wilson Trailer.
 - Wilson Trailer previously gave a trailer to the FFA Grand Champion Market Beef winner on a one-year lease. This year, a trailer will also be given to the 4-H exhibitor as well.
- New partner announced – Woodhouse.
- Central Nebraska Trimlight will be lighting up the grounds in a new way.
 - Last year they hung up lights around the Welcome Center. This year they will be hanging up lights at the campground shower house.
 - Gratitude was extended to Fonner Park for letting those lights be hung year-round.
- Anna Castner Wightman asked if the funding from the Walter Scott Foundation was pending.
 - Stoltenberg announced that the grant was submitted to the foundation, but no funding has been received.
- Strope circled back to the Wilson Trailer agreement adding that at the end of the year lease, champion exhibitors have the option to buy the trailer at a discounted rate.

Executive Report by Boyd Strope

- No report.

1868 Foundation Report by Lindsey Koepke

- The Foundation is doing great facilitating grants and utilizing the Beyond the Budget list.
 - A total of \$500,000 in grant submissions has been completed. Thanks to Parr, Stoltenberg, and Thuernagle.
 - There are ten more grants to do before the end of the month, mid-May at the latest.
- The Beyond the Budget list has come in handy when talking with current Foundation donors.
 - A recent donor conversation led to funding new TV screens in the Five Points Loft, in addition to their 1868 Foundation gift.
 - Another donor wants to donate a trailer.
- Koepke handed out 1868 Foundation informational packets to the board members.
- The Foundation has provided over \$3 million in funding to the State Fair over the years. This funding has helped with the master plan, securing ARPA funds, paving parking lots, supporting the volunteer program, 4-H and FFA exhibitor premiums in the large market animal division, new LED screens in the livestock barns, and more.
- The Foundation continues to work on the “250 for 250” initiative celebrating America’s 250th.
 - The foundation is asking donors for a \$10,000 gift to have their name put on a bronze commemorative sculpture. The \$250,000 raised will be primarily used for youth livestock exhibitors. A grant opportunity will help fund the bronze sculpture itself.
 - So far there is \$100,000 in funds raised.
 - The initiative will be celebrated at this year’s Blue Ribbon Great Steak Debate.
 - A couple new vendors will be participating in that event this year as well.
 - Anyone interested in donating auction items can submit a form.
- Sponsorship renewals are coming in great. The Foundation is reaching new people.
- So far this year, the Foundation has invested \$500,000 in the State Fair.

Executive Director Report by Jaime Parr

- Thanks were given to the State Fair staff team for their teamwork and working across departments, across organizations, and with the 1868 Foundation.
- The Fair remains transparent in sharing financial statements weekly with the staff and finance committee before bills are paid.
- Gratitude was shared with the audit's completion. Thanks were extended to Jennifer Stump, AMGL, and Breanna Kozisek for their efforts in that process.
- Parr traveled to a couple conferences since last month's meeting.
 - The Midwest Fair Managers Conference in Missouri had attendees from about 40 different Fairs. Discussions included safety and security, brand image, and ag trends.
 - The annual IAFE Management Conference had about 100 attendees.
 - Parr gave a presentation on change and moving fair locations. Other presentations were done by Domino's and the World War I Museum & Memorial.
- The Fair Board will be receiving a ticket allotment for State Fair events, for those interested.
- Board and staff were reminded of the horse race following the day's board meeting.
 - A State Fair sponsored blanket would be awarded to the winner of the second race.
- The next board meeting will be on Friday, May 15th with a grounds tour the day before.
- Appreciation was extended to the State Fair Board for all their support and work.
- Stroe thanked Parr for going above and beyond attending conferences.

Adjournment

Motion made by Kevin Havlovic to adjourn.

Second by John McKeever.

All in favor. Motion carried.

Minutes of April 17, 2026

Nebraska State Fair Approved:

Date: May 15, 2026

By: _____
John McKeever, Board Secretary