



## NEBRASKA STATE FAIR BOARD

### Meeting Minutes

Friday, May 15, 2026

The meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was held on Friday, May 15, 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 May 7, 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; Lanna Hubbard, Treasurer; John McKeever, Secretary (Zoom); Alan Kahle; Anna Castner Wightman (Zoom); Dawn Caldwell; Kathleen Lodl; Kevin Havlovic; Mark Hesser; Scott Russman; and Tom Dinsdale. Absent: Ryan Hassebrook.

Others in attendance: Jaime Parr, Executive Director; Karli Bartz, Entertainment & Events Director; Courtney Glock, Marketing Director; Keaton Irwin, Sales Director; Breanna Kozisek, Business Administrator; Kourtney Lingeman, Competitive Exhibits Manager; Nicki Stoltenberg, Sponsorship Director; Tina Thuernagle, Operations Director; Lindsey Koepke, 1868 Foundation Executive Director (Zoom); Joe Stump, AMGL; and public guests.

The May 15th meeting of the Nebraska State Fair Board was called to order by Chairman Boyd Strope at 1:01 pm.

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 Lanna Hubbard for the Approval of Consent Agenda, which included the Regular Meeting Minutes of April 17, 2026.**

**Second by Tom Dinsdale.**

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

#### **Financial Report by Joe Stump, AMGL**

**Kevin Havlovic moved to approve the April 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**

- Anna Castner Wightman deferred the reporting to Karli Bartz.
- Concert tickets are selling good, blowing last year's sales out of the water.
  - The Fair has sold about 4,500 tickets more than this time last year.
  - Phil Wickham is the most popular concert so far with Shinedown in second.
- There will be over 600 hours of free entertainment across the grounds from strolling to free stage attractions. These shows include tigers, acrobats, dogs, pigs, robots, strolling piano, eco-magic, close-up magic, comedy, and more.

- Over 60 different Nebraska bands will be performing at the State Fair.
- There are 50 school marching bands and 73 classes signed up to attend the State Fair, totaling 5,370 students and teachers registered.
- There are 17 schools registered for FFA day, which is equal to last year, but expecting an increase still.
- The State Fair Marathon will have athletes coming from across 21 different states.
- Volunteer registration is open and enrollment looks good for the State Fair and Marathon slots.
- The box office will be utilizing a new credential system this year to print bar codes on name badges in-house instead of outsourcing.
  - This allows more control over individualized access.
- Board members were asked to submit their event ticket requests as soon as possible.

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

- Tom deferred the reporting to Tina Thuernagle.
- ARPA projects continue.
  - Parking lot improvements are looking good.
  - Most everything will be done before the State Fair outside of a few items.
- The GILCA transition progresses.
  - The Grand Island Livestock Complex Authority (GILCA) will be transitioning into Grand Island Expo Livestock and Events as run by Fonner Park.
  - The team is helping Fonner personnel get uploaded on the stock show processes.
- The State Fair's Beyond the Budget list was discussed in committee.
  - All projects secured follow the State Fair's procurement policy.
- The State Fair recently held the annual surplus auction, which did well.
- Progress continues across the grounds from establishing the new long horn exhibit layout and Gate 10 guest experience to the redesigned parking lots.
- Work is in full swing behind the scenes to get things like fuel, temporary fence layouts and operation logistics finalized.
- The operations staff team continues to meet weekly, setting goals and addressing challenges.
  - Thuernagle expressed appreciation for Brian Hoffman and Brent Shaw – members of the operations staff team – for their effort in making each meeting productive.
- Shoutout was given to Nichole (Nicki) Stoltenberg, Keaton Irwin, Karli Bartz, and Courtney Glock for all their help.
- Operations looks forward to making 'It All Happen Here.'

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

- Vaughn Sievers was absent. Dawn Caldwell started the committee report.
- Thanks were given to John McKeever and Sievers for their work on livestock scales. They've worked with Central City Scales to get set up for this year and beyond.
- Caldwell and Sievers have recently met with the new facility harvesting champion animals.
  - Planning is going well with the new facility.
  - Thanks were given to those who have contributed to that progress.
- Caldwell invited Kourtney Lingeman, Competitive Exhibits Manager, to give further update.
- Thanks were given to Caldwell and the board for being here.
- Announcement was given that a State Fair member passed away – Wilma Knippelmeyer.
  - Knippelmeyer worked with the State Fair seasonally for about 50 years.
  - Jaime Parr and Lingeman attended the funeral along with other seasonal Fair staff. The service highlighted Knippelmeyer's strong history with the State Fair.
  - Knippelmeyer will be greatly missed.
- Broiler orders are open for the Aksarben Stock Show and DNA submissions are coming in.
- Excitement was shared about the ag summer intern starting Monday from Montana.
- Parr thanked Lingeman for her speech at Knippelmeyer's funeral.

- **Strope asked where the broilers were being acquired from. Lingeman didn't know the name of the specific hatchery but said Sievers would know.**

#### **FFA Report by Ryan Hassebrook**

- **No report. Not present.**

#### **4-H Report by Kathleen Lodl**

- **Offer was made that chickens could be secured through the 4-H Embryology Project.**
- **4-H is in full force with students entering summer break.**
- **One exciting change this year is with PASE (Premier Animal Science Event).**
  - **The contests are shifting three weeks earlier this year, starting after Memorial Day.**
  - **There is a 30% increase in enrollment so far.**
  - **This shift came from youth feedback wanting more days of activities and learning.**
- **Raising Nebraska is filling slots for during the State Fair.**

#### **Finance Report by Boyd Strope**

- **The finance committee met and Joe Stump gave further in-depth reports.**
- **Discussion was had regarding some future projects and the allocation of some funds.**

#### **HR Report by Lanna Hubbard**

- **HR committee met regarding some HR policies that will need some editing.**
- **A full review of the updated HR policies will be brought to the June meeting for the full board's consideration.**

#### **Sales Report by Keaton Irwin**

- **Vendor agreements continue to be sent out, signed, and filed.**
- **The sales department has switched payment systems to Square, which has been awesome.**
- **Thanks were given to everyone who attended the grounds tour yesterday.**
  - **This year's layout feels full with everything going on, especially on the east side of the grounds. There's more potential for guest engagement and vendors/concessionaires.**
- **A teaser was given on some new concessionaires this Fair season.**
  - **Wandering Lobster will offer lobster rolls, lobster pimento cheese sandwiches, crab cakes, fish and chips, and more.**
  - **Skew It – This vendor will offer various food on a stick like fried chicken, fried stick, salad, and a split corn dog with green chili and cheese curds on it.**
  - **Freund Family Foods – This vendor will be in food pod eight offering a menu of \$5 food items and less. The portion sizing will be smaller but it's a value meal deal concept and will bring more inexpensive food options. They will specifically offer chicken tenders, fries, funnel cakes, corn dogs, and the like.**
  - **Vendors will also help expand the number of gluten free items.**
    - **Gluten free options were introduced last year, but more with desserts. This year, gluten free meal options like chicken fingers will be offered.**
- **The Silver Spur Square shopping area is getting full.**
  - **The shopping square will be located near the secondary first aid station featuring a mix of vendors and sponsors.**
  - **The shopping square was highlighted in a recent vendor newsletter prompting an overwhelming response from vendors.**
- **Excitement was shared over how the State Fair will grow, especially on the east side.**

- **Strope asked where vendors are primarily coming from.**
  - **About 80-90% of the vendors come from current vendor recommendations.**
  - **There are vendors coming from as far out as Arizona, California, Montana, and Florida.**
- **Strope commented on how the spread of vendor communication speaks to how great our Nebraska State Fair is.**
  - **Irwin shared how returning vendors help a lot with recruitment.**

#### **Marketing Report by Courtney Glock**

- **Shoutout was given to Hayley Eriksen, the Marketing & Hospitality Manager, who started at the beginning of March.**
  - **Eriksen hasn't been with the State Fair long but has done great work.**
  - **The marketing department has been further ahead with projects than prior years.**
- **The State Fair had a branding exercise last week – the first that staff has participated in.**
  - **Staff members, volunteers, and board members Dawn Caldwell and John McKeever attended the three-hour exercise.**
  - **The exercise aimed at identifying where we want to go as far as theme.**
  - **The results of the exercise will help establish a five-year marketing campaign.**
  - **The advertising agency, who hosted the exercise, will collaborate with marketing in ironing out a theme for 2027.**
    - **This is important to know ahead of time as it helps marketing decide what to capture for content at the 2026 Nebraska State Fair.**
  - **There were many takeaways from the exercise, but one of the biggest was understanding how staff wanted the State Fair to be recognized versus how the public views the State Fair.**
    - **Staff collectively agreed that the State Fair is a celebration of Nebraska.**
    - **Data from various groups showed they didn't view the Fair as a celebration.**
    - **This identifies an area to focus on and reframe communication.**
- **The marketing department continues to emphasize ag education and "Beyond the Barn" signage throughout the grounds.**
  - **This signage will be put in waiting areas where patrons may be standing.**
  - **This started in 2024 with the message of "Ag, it's everywhere."**
  - **This year the goal is to weave that into every inch of the fairgrounds to show how people are impacted by agriculture every day.**
- **The countdown continues - 104 days until the Nebraska State Fair!**
- **Strope thanked Caldwell and McKeever for attending the branding exercise.**

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

- **Sponsorship continues to work with IEG, the consultant helping to reevaluate the valuation on sponsorship packages.**
  - **The IEG representatives have been great and very timely in their communication.**
  - **Time has been focused specifically on developing a State Fair rate card tool.**
  - **A final product will be developed by the end of the month.**
- **A discovery meeting was recently held with a potential new partner based in Omaha.**
  - **Thanks were given to Anna Castner Wightman for connecting the State Fair with Great Plains Communication.**
- **Progress continues with the joint fundraising plan between the Fair and 1868 Foundation.**
  - **A new grant was submitted with Kubota to add to the fleet of UTVs.**

- The Fair was invited to apply for a grant through the Roy and Gloria Dinsdale Foundation.
- The Fair was also invited to apply for a grant through Nebraska Children’s Hospital, thanks to Castner Wightman.
- The JBS Show Barn is now established with a new sign and lights.
  - JBS, as part of the new partnership, will also participate in this year’s community decorating contest.
- The “Bud Bar” is making a come back this year with Eagle Distributing.
- The Fair Information Kiosks will receive new paneling in partnership with Chief Industries.
- DBL Christensen Cattle Company is joining the State Fair as a partner.
- Sponsorship continues to work on securing funds for the Aksarben Stock Show.
  - Goal is to bring in new corporate dollars for AKSS, but it’s a process.

**Executive Report by Boyd Strobe**

- Thanks were given to all who helped with the grounds tour yesterday. It was a great tour.
  - Request was made for the informational tour sheet to be emailed to the board.
- The executive committee discussed Jaime Parr’s recent review, following the initial review with the HR committee. More highlights will come in June.
- ARPA projects were also discussed in committee and the south lot.

**1868 Foundation Report by Lindsey Koepke**

- No report. Will present updates next month.

**Executive Director Report by Jaime Parr**

- The internal staff team continues to meet weekly to share payables before paying the bills.
  - Payables are also shared with the finance committee in advance.
- Extra thanks were given to the staff team for being mindful of the budget throughout the year.
- The staff team recently completed the first of the year’s staff reviews.
  - It’s a great opportunity to sit down with each director to share goals and tasks.
  - Lots of departments track their to-do list overtime and ensure tasks are covered.
  - The staff’s commitment shows as they become more familiar with the Fair, evolve their departments, and adjust as the busy season nears.
  - Pride was expressed in the staff team and their preparation.
- ARPA construction is well underway.
  - Both parking lots under construction should be completed by the State Fair.
  - Projects on the east side of campus will continue following AKSS.
  - All work will need completed, invoiced, and requested to the state by the end of this year. ARPA closes December 31st and the State Fair is in progress to meet that date.
- A lot is in store for this year’s America 250 celebration.
  - A lot of America 250 will be evident in the events department and in marketing with a new web page introducing the celebration to the public.
  - Some America 250 teasers include the continuation of the firework and drone show, the “Where I Served” map, flags, bunting, and many Veterans Day activities.
    - More will be shared closer to the State Fair and AKSS.
- The internal team has scheduled the annual “Fuller Staff Meeting” for June 4th where seasonal staff are invited to the office for a virtual campus tour.
  - Everyone discusses areas on campus and what changes are coming this year.

- **The staff team continues to participate in the community, including PASE.**
  - **Staff members are helping this year with the quiz bowl and livestock judging.**
- **Nebraska Admirals with USS Nebraska will be in Grand Island on June 17th.**
  - **The State Fair will welcome them in Raising Nebraska with a lunch and submarine photo op.**
- **State Fair presentations for the public have begun.**
  - **Presentations are on the calendar for Kiwanis, Rotary, and many service industries.**
  - **These presentations highlight State Fair events and get people excited for the season.**
- **The Volunteer Banquet in April was a success.**
  - **Thanks were given to Alan Kahle for attending.**
  - **There were 500+ people in attendance this year.**
  - **David Zumbrum was honored for his 1868 hours of service. Zumbrum is often found in the antique tractor area and parade.**
  - **Others who hit service milestones were also honored at the banquet.**
- **AKSS challenge animals have been distributed.**
  - **The program is underway as exhibitors have received their challenge animals.**
  - **Two sponsors attended the distribution of the animals and got to meet the exhibitors.**
  - **It will be fun watching the exhibitors grow and record their progress.**
- **Thanks were given to John McKeever and Kevin Havlovic who attended county fair district meetings recently.**
  - **Irwin also attended a couple district meetings and gave presentations.**
  - **Glock will be attending one this summer, once the date is confirmed.**
- **The State Fair's annual County Fair Tour is scheduled for this year.**
  - **There are ten on the calendar and scheduled for July.**
  - **The staff team sign up to volunteer at the county fairs. Usually, two to four people attend each county fair and volunteer about four to six hours.**
  - **The staff team has visited 36 different counties so far since the tour first started. Some county fairs are revisited but this year ten unique fairs are scheduled.**
- **Planting Day is on the calendar for June 6th at 9 am.**
  - **Flowers donated from local green houses are planted in temporary planters to be placed across the fairgrounds. Volunteers also sign up for week-long shifts to water, weed, and trim the plants.**
  - **The State Fair has also hired a seasonal landscaper to help with the more permanent landscaping on grounds, which we are grateful for.**
- **The State Fair continues to offer Lifetime Pass Memberships.**
  - **Nominations can be made now.**
  - **Criteria include board members who have served a full nine years, former foundation board members who have served full terms, staff members who have worked 20 years, seasonal staff members who have hit 25 years of service, and volunteers who have reached 1868 hours of service.**
  - **New members are honored at the opening day of the State Fair.**
- **Reminder was given to board members to submit their event tickets, credentials, and parking permit requests as soon as possible.**
- **Reminders were also given to board members to check their State Fair Board emails.**
- **The next board meeting will be held at 1 pm on June 19th in Grand Island.**
- **Thanks were given to the board for all they do and the additional time they commit to the Fair.**

**Adjournment**

**Motion made by Dawn Caldwell to adjourn.**

**Second by Tom Dinsdale.**

**All in favor. Motion carried.**

**Meeting adjourned at 2:04 pm.**

**Minutes of May 15, 2026**

**Nebraska State Fair Approved:**

**Date: June 19, 2026**

By:   
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John McKeever, Board Secretary