

**Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan  
Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes  
Tuesday, August 19, 2025**

*Our mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit authentic articles and artifacts of art, history, and science to inspire curiosity for all ages, foster community pride, and cultivate personal legacy.*

**Board Members:**

**Present:** **President**, Mike Beaulac, **Vice President**, Ashley Peterson, **Secretary**, Jim Johnson, **Treasurer**, Sue Stender, Ann Diamond, Gary Goren, Dan Florip, Sara Winter, Beach Hall, Brian Bartosh, Linda Baker, and Jon Gougeon.

**Absent:** Julie Austin not excused.

**Staff present:** Executive Director Chris Witulski.

**1) Call To Order**

The meeting was called to order at 4:53 pm.

**2) Review June 17, 2025, Board Meeting Minutes for approval (action item)**

The motion to accept the minutes as written was made by Linda Baker and seconded by Brian Bartosh. All in favor. Motion carried.

There was a lack of quorum in July, thus no meeting minutes for that month. Informal notes of the meeting are on the website.

**3) TREASURER'S REPORT:**

- a) June report: See report filed on website by Sue Stender. Admissions were up, thanks to school groups in part. And so were store sales. Paid \$5,900 for plumbing (pump for the HVAC system), plus \$800 for costs of Log Cabin days. There were other facility expenses and a rise in employee associated costs, with an additional staff member. June had a loss of about \$25,000.
- b) July report. See report filed on website. Admissions were slightly higher and memberships were up significantly from last year, almost 4 times higher. Payment to Good Design, Facility maintenance costs a bit more than \$3,300, including costs of HVAC repairs and elevator inspection. Legal and accounting costs were zero because of a delayed billing. July had a loss of \$8,000, a major improvement from July of last year.
- c) Year to date: For all of FY 2025, our admissions are down \$7,500 because of the closure last winter, and no Season of Lights. There was a major increase in donor restricted funds from fundraiser and from DNR grant to Fisheries Exhibit. Memberships are down and store sales down slightly, also largely because of closure and no Season of Lights. Expense highlights are: increased costs of exhibit items as Discover project was built out, utility expenses, and cost of billboards contributed to rise in costs; payroll increased, and audit costs were up. Overall, other costs were near budget.

There was concern expressed about the sustainability of deficit budgeting. Each month the Museum usually report operating at a significant loss. This was the case last fiscal year. Is this a pattern or just a one off? A pattern of losses each FY would be evidence of an unsustainable financial plan.

Investment in outreach was intended to increase visitation and membership, but has it and will it be

enough? A financial plan or strategy, with metrics to indicate progress toward the deficit, would be helpful, perhaps essential.

Chris pointed out that we need to convey to our members and potential members and donors that this is a way they can help. Donor restricted contributions and grants (we have been quite successful in gaining these) cannot be used to help with operating costs. Some donors wish to have their contributions used for visible, tangible exhibits, rather than for routine operating costs.

Brian suggested we set up a subgroup of interested board members and advisors to address this issue.

Beach Hall wondered if we could increase income by tapping into Viking Cruises and getting on their itinerary. Chris reported she has been in contact with Viking. Should we subsidize bussing people to the Museum or work with Austin Brothers on a joint shuttle?

It was decided we would invite Marie to meet with a group of Board volunteers and Museum staff to begin work on this issue. Is there a way (Quick Books?) to sort out routine operating budgets from special projects and grants? The ‘noise’ of these activities masks what is going on with our operating budgets.

#### **4) Reports to the Board:**

a) **DIRECTOR’S REPORT:** Full report can be found on the Museum’s website. Some highlights of the report were:

1. Attendance last month (July) rose more 25% over July of 2024. In addition, Besser hosted four programs in partnership with an Alpena Public Schools grant-funded program for APS students going into 4th, 5th, and 6th grades. We averaged between 8 to 10 students at each session. The Museum will receive \$2,520 for the four sessions.
2. The contract was signed with Control Solutions to replace the faulty valves and actuators on the HVAC system.
3. Lower-level exhibit renovation (Phase II):
  - a. Split Rock Studios is working under contract (\$45,000) for phase II schematic design of the lower-level renovation. The SD work will produce the graphic design images needed for the fundraising campaign.
  - b. Split Rock met with Museum staff, board members, and advisors August 6-7 to collect information that will be included in the plan. Draft drawings should be available for review in November.
4. The planetarium is still operating with just one of its two projectors.
  - a. Eastern Michigan University recently installed a Digitalis Education Solutions “Digitarium Lambda” system which comes in at around \$100,000 versus \$300,000 or more for other systems. This is the same system used at Bay City’s planetarium, which the Fishery Heritage Trail annual meeting experienced a few years ago with positive reviews.
  - b. Mike Beaulac and the Executive Director will travel to Eastern Michigan University to meet with Norbert Vance and see how the Digitalis Education equipment works and if it will be a good fit for the Besser Museum.
5. Gary Goren continues to work hard on the Planet Walk project. He applied to the Youth and Recreation Grant program for \$34,479 and is working with staff on the signs.
6. The Besser Museum will be hosting a meet-and-greet reception for the Michigan Historical Society State Conference Friday, September 26
7. Harvest Day is October 4. Preparations are well underway.
8. The EC will be on vacation from September 22-October 6.

9. Angela continues to upgrade and update the web site and our Facebook page – check them out!

**5) AD HOC COMMITTEES:**

- a. **GOVERNANCE REPORT:** (Dan Florip) No report.
  - b. **GREAT LAKES FISHERIES HERITAGE EXHIBIT:**  
*Chinook and Katherine V Projects:* (Jim Johnson report)
    - i. Jim Johnson and Lauren Holbrook (Hammond Bay Biological Station) continue to develop and fly spec the information panels. The Sea Lamprey portion of the display has been moved up and will be installed this year instead of next year. Installation remains on schedule: August/September.
    - ii. Bid are being prepared by potential vendors for printing signage and banners.
    - iii. Other elements being bid are finishing electrical circuits and lighting, running water to the vessels (so we can start the engines), painting the *Chinooks* cabin exterior, bird-proofing the buildings, and acquisition of LCDs.
  - c. **DISCOVER NORTHEAST MICHIGAN HISTORY:** (Mike Beaulac)
    1. The contract for schematic design has been completed.
    2. Meanwhile we are working on an outline of the stories to be told based on resources and artifacts we have or could obtain. John Schmitz with Alpena Montmorency Conservation District, Brad Jenson, Director of Huron Pines (and Maddie Khuri); and Tim Kent are advising on early settler stories and supporting artifacts we have or need; plus, other advisory/planning sources are being recruited.
    3. Met on August 6-7. All day brainstorming session and visioning session. Inventory of what artifacts and resources the Museum already has, including the Tim Kent collection.
    4. This will be about the same size in area (3,000 sq ft) as the Discover project.
- 6. COLLECTIONS COMMITTEE:** (Sarah Honeycutt):
- a. Committee did not meet, No committee report.
  - b. Sarah reports that the total number of items in permanent collection is 36,529
  - c. Staff and volunteers cataloged 926 artifacts and inventoried 792 this month.
  - d. Many public inquiries have been fielded.
  - e. Also, Collections staff assisted with field trips as needed.

**6) Old Business:** On June 23, Gary met with Youth and Recreation Committee regarding funding the Planet Walk.

**7) New Business:** The agreement with Split Rock was approved (see above).

We need to remove Mischelle Miller as signatory for our account at Niclolet Bank and add Mike Beaulac. Ann Diamond moved we do so; Ashley (seconded). Motion passed.

Sara's father wrote a book about Thunder Bay that will be carried in the book store.

**8) Adjourn:**

Brian moved, and Ann seconded, that the meeting be adjourned. The meeting was adjourned at 5:44 pm

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Johnson, Secretary

