

**Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan
Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, September 16, 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: Secretary, Jim Johnson, Treasurer, Sue Stender, Ann Diamond, Gary Goren, Brian Bartosh, Linda Baker, Ann Diamond, and Jon Gougeon.

Absent: President, Mike Beaulac, Vice President, Ashley Peterson, Beach Hall, Julie Sara Winter, Dan Florip, all excused.

Staff present: Executive Director Chris Witulski, Sarah Honeycutt, Collections.

1) Call To Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:35 pm. by Sue Stender, who was selected to run the meeting given the absence of Mike and Ashley. A quorum was noted.

2) Review August 19, 2025, Board Meeting Minutes for approval (action item)

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

3) TREASURER'S REPORT:

- a) *August monthly report.* See report on website. Admissions continued to be higher than last year. August memberships were down slightly but remain significantly above last year's level to date. There were private unrestricted donations of \$7,550 and a single donation for the lower-level project of \$5,000. Exhibit development expenses are subsiding. Split Rock was paid \$7,250 for Phase II design of the lower level and LCDs were purchased for \$850, to be used in Fishery Exhibit. There was increased advertising activity for the month; most other costs were as expected. Costs of personnel expenses and benefits continue to be higher than last year, as will be the case for the foreseeable future. August posted a loss of \$11,000.
- b) *Year to date:* See report on website. The campaign of last year is why income was higher in 2024 than in 2025.

These two reports were filed as reported. The board thanked the acting Chair Stender for the financial reports.

Finance Committee report:

The Finance Committee for the Museum was re-established during a meeting on September 12. The Committee made several recommendations for increasing revenue, including a review of admission and membership fees and structures, and regarding the 2025-26 proposed budget.

The Finance Committee recommends moving to accrual-basis reporting from our current cash basis. The accrual system provides a more accurate financial picture over time. Accrual accounting records revenue when it's earned and expenses when they're incurred, regardless of whether cash has been paid or received during the period. Cash accounting records revenue when cash is received and expenses when cash is paid. Future financial reports, on an accrual basis, will better match our accounting methods. Accrual systems take longer to report as purchases and contract billings require processing time. Therefore, reporting will be done on a quarterly basis, the first reports to come in November. These

reports will be composed of three separate reports; one showing our income, another showing the cost of goods for projects, and a third will report operating expenses. This third element of the reports will separate operating costs from project (grants etc.) costs so that we can better track efforts to close the gap between operating revenue and actual costs.

Revenue: The major controls we have over our operating revenue are memberships, admissions, and unrestricted donations. The committee looked at how we should manage those and found Besser's admissions fees are far below those of other museums. The Committee recommended raising the cost of admissions at all levels and changing membership categories and rates as well as benefits of the various categories. As always, improving marketing and donor recruitment and development is huge, but most donors want to contribute to "brick and mortar" stuff rather than the more mundane costs of payroll and operations. Besser's admission fees are SO low that it raises the expectation that the Museum has little to offer. Benefits could also be modified so that a simple admission would not give access to everything – some areas (in addition to the Planetarium) could be additional cost. A \$10 admission could increase annual revenue by more than \$30,000. Veterans get free admission presently and that should be reexamined. The senior rate at \$3 is extremely low. Free passes have no expiration date; they should have a "sunset" or expiration date. We could consider more membership levels at higher costs with different benefits for each.

Chris met with organizers for Viking Cruises. Getting on their itinerary will increase admissions and gift shop sales, as will the new Fisheries Exhibit and its grand opening next year.

Brian suggested no action at this meeting on the revenue suggestions or further discussion today other than designating an additional meeting specifically for the purpose of examining our current rates and recommending a new fee schedule. This would be a virtual meeting open to whichever members would like to participate. Director Witulski will set up a meeting for the second week of October.

Staff have prepared a handout/mailer that lays out the funding of the Museum and offers options for financially supporting the Museum, including a legacy option. The target mailing date is before the end of this calendar year.

Brian presented the proposed 2026 budget for the Committee. This budget would produce a loss of \$157,300, which can be covered by endowments and savings for now, but this is not the intended purpose of these funds and reduces accrual of interest. Our deficit has risen steadily, from \$65,000 in 2023 to \$99,000 in 2024 to \$135,000 in 2025, to an estimated \$157,000 in the projected 2026 budget.

Brian Bartosh moved and Jim Johnson seconded approving the proposed 2026 budget. Motion carried.

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 (August) rose more 33% over July of 2024. But Planetarium visits were down because the second projector failed.
2. Facility: Lower-level exhibit renovation (Phase II) - Split Rock Studios is working under contract (\$45,000) for phase II schematic design of the lower-level renovation. A first draft of the schematic plan should be available in November.
3. The planetarium's second projector has now failed. We are back to the old "Star Ball" if staff can get it back running. Staff will also work on the failed computer to see if it can be restored to buy some time.
 - a. Dir. Chris and Mike Beaulac went to Eastern Michigan University recently to inspect a Digitalis Education Solutions "Digitalium Lambda" system which comes in at around \$150,000 versus \$300,000 or more for other systems.
 - b. Eastern Michigan has given us positive reviews of the system.

4. The Besser Museum will be hosting a meet-and-greet reception for the Michigan Historical Society State Conference Friday, September 26
5. Fall Festival Day is October 4. Preparations are well underway.
6. The ED will be on vacation from September 22-October 6.
7. 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. Julie Austin has resigned from board.
- b. **GREAT LAKES FISHERIES HERITAGE EXHIBIT:**
Chinook and Katherine V Projects: (Jim Johnson report)
 Good Design Group is continuing to refine the schematic design and secure bids from subcontractors for the fabrication and installation. There have been many fisheries agencies contributing to the final editing process. The exhibit panels will take six weeks to produce.
 - Jim Johnson and Matt Klimczak hung several LCD screens up in the Chinook exhibit.
 - Matt has secured bids for rain gutters, electrical, and plumbing/water hook work.
 - Dir. Chris attended the Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Trail Conference/Meeting in Oden, MI at the DNR Fish Hatchery September 15.
- c. **DISCOVER NORTHEAST MICHIGAN HISTORY:** (Mike Beaulac)
 1. A virtual meeting was proposed by Split Rock for Nov 17, where a draft of the conceptual plan will be presented.

6) COLLECTIONS COMMITTEE: (Sarah Honeycutt):

The Besser Museum Collections Committee recommends the museum's Board of trustees accept the following items into the permanent collection:

- a) Large (~50 lb.) Petoskey Stone found on donor's property in the Oscoda area. Donated by Ken Lauben of Oscoda. It should fit in the rock display near the elevator.
- b) Collection of Boy Scout items including patches, pins, and shirts from the 1950s that belonged to Robert Smith of Alpena. Donated by Sarah Richardson (Trustee of Robert Smith).
- c) Portrait of Clem Mason, friend and employee of Jesse Besser. Donated by Patty Quinn (Clem Mason's daughter). Includes a biography.
- d) Sculpture created by Joe Donna. Donated by Joe Donna of Alpena. Joe has been exhibiting at Besser many years.
- e) Two plaid wool coats made by Thunder Bay Originals that belonged to the donor's parents who worked for the company in the 1940s. Donated by Nancy Stepanski of Alpena. In great condition.
- f) Besser Junior High yearbook 1962. Donated by Robert Gagnon of Oakland, MI.

Brian Bartosh moved that these items be accepted. Motion seconded by Linda Baker. Motion carried. For more, see the September Collections Report.

7) Facility:

- a) All the parts for the HVAC project have been ordered and will be installed in the winter months. Cost of \$ 48,995.
- b) A bid for replacing the roof of the church was sought: \$9,095. Repairs to windows also needed.
- c) It is time to start planning for a new Museum Building roof. Matt has been looking into the particulars.
- d) For more, see August/September Facility Report on website.

8) Old Business: See the Finance Committee report and discussion, above.

9) New Business: The meeting running late, "New" items, such as the Director's meeting with Jon Benson on the idea of a reception hall, will be delayed to next meeting.

10) Adjourn:

Meeting adjourned at 5:50 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Johnson, Secretary