

**Kickapoo Reserve Management Board
Meeting Minutes for August 21, 2025**
Kickapoo Valley Reserve Visitor Center

Board members present: Travis Downing (Chair), Kjetil Garvin, Bill Quackenbush (via Zoom), Kelly Rueckheim, Barb Sarnowski, Damian Thundercloud, Lyndsey Winchel (via Zoom), Luke Zahm (via Zoom)

Board members absent: Joel Charles, Scott Lind, Reggie Nelson

Staff members present: Jason Leis, Amy Dvorak, Jackie Yocum, Jesse Haney, Amber Burch

Others in attendance: Lonnie Muller (Episcope), Jen Oium, Karen Theis, David Theis

Chair Downing called the meeting to order at 6:01 PM.

Downing read the Land Acknowledgement Statement.

Sarnowski made a motion to approve the amended agenda. Garvin seconded the motion. The motion passed with all ayes.

Leis confirmed the amended agenda was properly posted.

Downing announced the two new board members: Damian Thundercloud and Kelly Rueckheim. Thundercloud introduced himself. He has been working with the Ho-Chunk Nation for the last 15 years and was newly elected to the Ho-Chunk Nation Legislature for District 2. The KVR is within this district. Thundercloud is the cultural resources representative. Rueckheim is currently a high school science teacher in the West Salem School District. He is very excited to be part of the board. Rueckheim is the education representative, residing outside of the watershed. All board members and staff members in attendance introduced themselves to Thundercloud and Rueckheim.

Sarnowski motioned to approve the minutes from the July 2025 meeting, and Rueckheim seconded. The motion passed with all ayes.

Chairperson and/or Executive Director report:

Downing did not have a report.

Leis said we recently received over 3" of rain. Some very high winds really impacted the trails on the Reserve, especially County Road P to the west through Weister Creek. The West Ridge Trail off Weister Creek Road near Campsite P goes through a pine plantation, and nearly every tree in the plantation is snapped off about 15' up. Staff have been working hard to clear the trails. There are still some trails to clean up. There was some minor flooding with the 3" rainstorm. Landing 12 and Old Highway 131 Trail south of Rockton were underwater.

Three summer field crew members are leaving this week: Colene, Macey, and Danae. They are going to college.

Leis made a statement on the ad hoc committee for the Prairie Springs buildings. He said the board has decided to form the committee in order to draft a letter asking the State Building Commission (SBC) for an exception to the state statute, which says we must request the SBC sell the building(s), and the SBC can put it up for sale in an open and transparent process. The exception is asking the SBC to either transfer the building(s) or sell for a nominal fee to one entity. Leis does not agree with this. The rules are rules, and when everyone asks for an exception, pretty soon there are no rules. Leis understands there were extenuating circumstances about how the buildings were acquired, but he believes when they were acquired, everyone knew who was going to own them and who was going to use them, which hasn't changed. The KVR still owns them, and the Kickapoo Valley Forest School (KVFS) can still use them. Leis is not in favor of the ad hoc committee and believes it looks bad on the Reserve to ask for the exception. However, if the board asks for the exception, he will be behind them.

Quackenbush requested to address Leis' comments regarding the ad hoc committee. His comments are listed here for continuity, but they occurred after the Friends of KVR Update. He asked what the ad hoc committee is supposed to be addressing that can't be addressed at the board level. Downing said during last month's board meeting, the topic of the Prairie Springs buildings was discussed. The idea was to have board members and the public on a committee to draft two letters: one to the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) and one to the SBC because right now, we can't give the buildings away and we can't sell them without an open and transparent process. A few board members wanted to have an ad hoc committee to draft letters to sway the SBC to donate or sell the buildings to the KVFS. Downing said we've sent two letters to the State of Wisconsin before, which came back with the same result that we have to do the open and transparent sale process. Winchel said it was also to open it up to the public because the KVFS seems to be saying that they don't feel like this has been a transparent process, and this allows them to be part of the process. Quackenbush said he now understands.

Quackenbush said when the board was formed, it was clearly known especially to the Ho-Chunk Nation that everything is done in a public format. If the public has concerns, they can come to the monthly board meetings. Hearing from the public makes the board more informed.

Quackenbush said he doesn't support the creation of the ad hoc committee, but he supports informing the public that the board meetings are public.

Friends of KVR Update:

Karen Theis provided an update from their last meeting on August 12, 2025. The FKVR are having a new website designed. Several volunteers used to lead the newsletter, but they retired. For now, they will piggyback on the KVR newsletter as an insert. The Garden Walk was in July and was very well attended. The FKVR held a staff appreciation cookout on August 6, 2025. The photo contest starts on September 1 and goes until October 17, 2025. The Pasta Supper will be held on Friday, October 3, 2025 before the Dam Challenge on October 4, 2025. Volunteers are needed. The next meeting is on September 10, 2025.

Public appearances:

None.

Formation of Ad Hoc Committee for Prairie Springs:

Downing said the ad hoc committee was requested last month, and the committee is open to anyone who wants to be part of drafting the letters to the State of Wisconsin asking if we can donate or sell the Prairie Springs buildings to one entity. It is up to the board if they want to form the committee, how it will operate, and how many people should be on the committee.

Rueckheim asked for background information on the topic. Downing explained where the two buildings are located (one to the south of the Visitor Center and one to the east). He said funds were donated for the buildings to be used by the KVR and the KVFS. The KVFS used the buildings for four or five years. The KVR also used the buildings. The KVFS didn't renew their lease of the buildings this year. They would like one or both of the buildings to be transferred to them because some of the donors believed the money they donated for the buildings was for the KVFS only, not the KVFS and KVR. The buildings are property of the State of Wisconsin and currently can only be sold per Wisconsin State Statute.

Thundercloud asked why the lease wasn't renewed. Downing said the KVFS wanted a third building between the two current buildings. The board decided the buildings would be moved to Reserve property on Corps Road, and the third building would be built there. It was the board's decision that they didn't want another building at the Visitor Center site. An ad hoc committee was formed to discuss where the KVFS could relocate on the Reserve. In March or April, Downing received an email from the KVFS indicating they would not renew their lease. Thundercloud asked if the board approved a third building by motion. Downing said no, but they could build a third building on the Reserve at another site if they got the funds for it. The third building would hold two classrooms, some office space, a basement, and a kitchen. The cost was \$1.3 million to build it.

Thundercloud asked what impact the school had on the Visitor Center. Leis said there was a lot of impact to the land because they used the same spaces every day, rain or shine. There were impacts to the offices because they initially used the library as their office. They also rented a classroom inside the Visitor Center, so the Reserve had a lot less space to host other groups or hold our own education programs. The prior five-year management plan indicated the Reserve needed more space, but we got less space in the last four years. Leis said the buildings don't have their own bathrooms, so students come in to use the bathroom. Downing said when the third building was discussed, it was going to be too much strain on the Visitor Center.

Thundercloud asked what the initial intention of the school was and how they were going to grow. Sarnowski said it was initially approved for pre-kindergarten, and each year, it was expanded a grade. Leis clarified the initial plan was only to grow up to second grade. Since then, they expanded to third and fourth grade. Winchel asked how many students were approved to attend. Leis said 16 per grade.

Rueckheim asked if the buildings were initially built for the school. Leis said the KVFS held their classes in the two buildings and in the classroom in the Visitor Center.

Thundercloud asked if there were any motions made by the board to have the KVFS vacate the buildings. Downing said no. Jen Oium, an audience member, interjected that in June 2023, the board made a motion indicating the KVFS was to vacate by June 2025. Downing said it was to vacate the Visitor Center location by June 2025. Thundercloud clarified that this was likely the reason they didn't renew their lease. Leis said yes, because they didn't want to move the buildings and build the third building in another location.

Leis said the Friends of KVR took in all of the donations for the two buildings. The Friends of KVR built the buildings, then gifted them to the Reserve. The KVFS did not want to do this again and wanted to own the new building even though it was on the Reserve property, so there were a lot of unknowns.

Quackenbush said the cost to build the third building by and move the two existing buildings to the maintenance building was in the millions of dollars, which was why the discussions about moving the buildings ended.

Quackenbush said there was no indication in 2004 when the Visitor Center was built that other buildings would be allowed on the site. He said the Nation was ill-informed of the process of creating a school on the property. He said it has taken away from the original intent of the Reserve. Quackenbush said the Nation cannot put a structure on the 1,200 acres they manage. He said this topic has taken up several years of needed time that the board could have spent on other topics.

Thundercloud asked if the Paul Fleckenstein Foundation gave money for the buildings for the Reserve educational purposes or if it was for the KVFS. Quackenbush said he wasn't clear on that. He said the master plan never intended for the Reserve to turn into a school. How it came to be now was a long slow process that caught everyone off guard. Quackenbush felt the Nation was not properly informed of the KVFS.

Rueckheim asked if the buildings would have been built without the school being here. Leis said staff talked about needing more space including a kitchen facility, and there were discussions about remodeling or adding onto the existing Visitor Center. He said there was a need for more space, but building the Prairie Springs buildings was not necessarily what was decided to remedy that. The buildings became necessary when the KVFS was allowed to be on the Reserve.

Winchel said it was her understanding that the buildings were 100% funded by donors, whether it was monetary funds or volunteer time, specifically for the KVFS. Leis said it was never only for the KVFS. The buildings would belong to the Reserve. The Reserve would use them for our programs, such as summer camp, Dam Challenge, and Winterfest, and would rent them to the KVFS for the school year. He does not believe they would have been allowed to be built at the Reserve if they were solely for the KVFS.

Audience member Oium interjected and asked if the Paul Fleckenstein Foundation would agree. Leis said they should. Oium said there has been very little opportunity to collaborate. She said there are two sides to the coin. Oium said if there were questions for the KVFS, she would be happy to answer them because what she is hearing doesn't align with their experience of the way

things happened. Downing said when coming to a meeting, you are supposed to be on the public appearance portion. Oium said requests are supposed to be made three days before a meeting, but the agenda was not out three days before the meeting. Leis said it was posted four days ahead of time. Downing said the amended agenda was a little more than 24 hours before the meeting, but the amendment was regarding the easement. Downing said if she wants to speak at the next meeting, she needs to send an email to him or Leis.

Rueckheim said he understands the law is the law, so he respects Leis' opinion on that, but he also feels it's important to be good neighbors and foster good relationships with the community.

Zahm said the board chair has the authority to determine who is on the ad hoc committee, what the scope is, and if there is a deadline. He asked Downing if he had answers to those questions. Downing said the idea was anyone wanting to be on the committee just needed to email him. He said the board needs to decide how many people they want to allow on the committee.

Thundercloud said he agrees with Quackenbush that we shouldn't have an ad hoc committee to draft the letters. He spoke with Senator Brad Pfaff and Representative Tara Johnson's office, and it seems like they can't do anything until the board makes a decision on what we want to do. For example, if the board decides we want to transfer the buildings to the KVFS, then the SBC can review the request and make a decision on it. He said the ad hoc committee would just be creating a letter but won't get a response back until the board makes a decision.

Quackenbush motioned that based off further discussion, he would like to remove the creation of the ad hoc committee from the agenda. Thundercloud seconded. Rueckheim clarified that the board will decide if we want to transfer the buildings or not rather than using the ad hoc committee. Thundercloud said yes, because the ad hoc committee can't make that decision. Winchel said the ad hoc committee was an opportunity to allow community input. Downing said anyone who wants to come to a meeting can contact him or Leis to be put on the public appearance portion of the agenda and have a voice.

Leis said right now, the state says we cannot transfer or give the buildings to anyone, it is not within the board's authority. We can request the SBC go by the Wisconsin State Statute and sell the buildings. Thundercloud said he understands there is a statute, but they could make an exception. He suggested making a formal request to the SBC to give the buildings to the KVFS. If they come back and say no, then we would only have the option to keep or sell the buildings. Downing and Thundercloud discussed what that would mean.

Quackenbush interjected and requested to address his motion. He restated his motion, which is to remove the ad hoc committee discussion off the current agenda. All ayes except Sarnowski, who said nay. The motion carried.

Quackenbush said the board should make another motion to consider creating a letter concerning the future of the structures. He said he would not make the motion. There was a discussion about whether the board is allowed to request to transfer the buildings to the KVFS.

Winchel motioned to have public input on this topic at the next meeting, and before the next meeting, all board members, especially new board members, should get copies of what was sent to the state and what was received from the state regarding the transfer of ownership of the buildings. Zahm seconded the motion.

Quackenbush noted the discussion took place a few months ago when the donors and the public made comments to the board. Rueckheim said he would like to hear more before making a decision. Leis clarified if Winchel intends for the public input to be during the regular public appearance portion of the agenda or if it should be an open forum where it is the only topic to be discussed. Downing said it would have to be in the public appearance section. Sarnowski said there will need to be a time limit. Thundercloud suggested the public provide impact statements for the board to read. It was decided each person will get two minutes. It will be on the agenda.

Downing reviewed the motion from Winchel. The motion passed with all ayes.

Discussion and action on request for Permanent Limited Easement on STH 131 from WI DOT:

Leis said the request went through the Land Management Committee. State Highway 131 from La Farge to Ontario will be repaved next year. Prior to that, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) is doing culvert work. They found one of the aprons on a culvert needs some work on the end where the water comes out. They don't have right-of-way to do work on it. They are asking for an extension, or permanent limited easement, on their right-of-way to do the work. It is 20' wide and 50' long. It is on the west side of State Highway 131 north of Star Valley Road. They are offering the Reserve \$500 for the easement. A map of the current easement and new easement was shown on the screen.

Quackenbush made a motion to approve the permanent limited easement on State Highway 131 to the Wisconsin DOT. Sarnowski seconded. Rueckheim asked if the easement was near a wetland. Leis said it goes into a dry ravine. The motion passed with all ayes.

Education and Tourism Committee:

Sarnowski said the last meeting was on August 14, 2025. There were 16 summer camps with good enrollment. The best enrollment is with the younger children. Program fees will be discussed after more research. The fee structure for schools was discussed, and it may be necessary to increase the fee from \$4 per student to \$5. We currently have an exemption of fees for the La Farge School District and Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton School District. The committee will discuss whether this should be continued. The draft of the master plan was reviewed with some minor edits. The campsite booking website is going well. We are looking for volunteers for the Dam Challenge and Pasta Supper.

The next Education and Tourism Committee meeting is scheduled for October 9, 2025, at 5:30 PM at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Visitor Center.

Finance Committee:

There was no committee meeting since the July 2025 board meeting.

The next Finance Committee meeting is scheduled for September 22, 2025, at 9:00 AM at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Visitor Center.

Land Management Committee:

There was no committee meeting since the July 2025 board meeting.

The next Land Management Committee meeting is scheduled for September 16, 2025, at 5:30 PM at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Visitor Center.

Thundercloud asked if board members are supposed to attend all of the committee meetings. Downing said no, board members can join a committee if they want. Thundercloud said he would be on the Finance Committee. Rueckheim said he would be on the Education and Tourism Committee. He said he would think about the Land Management Committee. Winchel is on the Land Management and Education and Tourism Committees.

Board Member Matters:

Zahm said the new board member onboarding processes should be reviewed. He wants to make sure board members are given all the necessary tools to fulfill their roles and make informed decisions. Leis said new board members received a packet of information including the administrative rules, memorandum of understanding with the Ho-Chunk Nation, open meetings guidance, and other documents.

Request for future agenda topics:

Winchel asked to make a motion to contact the state to do a budget presentation. Leis said the Wisconsin Department of Administration Bureau of Financial Management (DOA BFM) helps us with our budget. Zahm said it is a good idea. The Finance Committee was revived about two years ago. He agreed it would be helpful for everyone to understand how the money flows in and out of the Reserve. Zahm believes members of the Finance Committee, Leis, and Dvorak could make the presentation to the board. Leis said he could go in depth about the accounts, but he could also ask the DOA BFM to do a presentation at the Finance Committee meeting on September 22, 2025, and then the Finance Committee could give a presentation at the October 2025 KRMB meeting. Winchel said that would be great.

Adjournment:

Thundercloud made a motion and Zahm seconded to adjourn the meeting. It passed with all ayes. The meeting adjourned at 7:44 PM.

The next meeting is scheduled for September 18, 2025, at 6:00 PM at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Visitor Center.

Minutes transcribed by Amy Dvorak, Executive Assistant