



HBF Fall Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes October 22, 2025

In attendance: Charles Tarver, Gayle Watkins, Lindy Harrison, Bob Strickland, Jonnie Swann, Keller Torrey, Bill Bush, Lisa Armstrong, David Martin, Lisa Dailey, Linda Barlow, Tom Holmes, Karen Patterson, Jimmy Bewley, John Helmer, Kent Wittman, Amy Patterson, Jamie Creola, Julie Thomson, Maddie Wikstrom, Marissa Nieddu, and Allison Jordan (consultant).

Meeting called to order at 3:01 PM by Tom Holmes

President's Report (Tom Holmes)

Tom opened the meeting by making a motion to approve the meeting minutes from HBF's June Board meeting, motion granted - David Martin and Gayle Watkins with all in favor. He welcomed new and returning Board members, John Helmer, Jimmy Bewley, Kent Wittman, Catharine Seay, Jim Milby, and Amy Patterson.

Treasurer's Report (Bob Strickland)

Bob reported that HBF is in good financial shape with actual YTD revenues & expenses in line with projected budget and the investments accounts are up double-digit YTD and doing really well. He also noted that the Foundation had 2 expenses that were not accounted for in the 2025 budget - 20k Planning Consultant and 33k new office property expenses, totaling 53k. The budget will be monitored over the next 6 weeks to see the effect on the overall budget for the year.

Bob reported that the 2024 audit was completed with no issues and this year's process was much smoother than previous year's due to work that Jamie Creola had been doing to streamline HBF's accounting processes.

Development Committee (Keller Torrey)

Keller reported that HBF continues to successfully raise funds to support our programs and investments in research and education. We held two successful fundraisers - *Twilight in the Garden Soiree* - 47 Hosts (45 last year) and \$118K NET and *Highlands on the Half Shell* - 39



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Hosts. Jamie mentioned that expenses and revenue were still be calculated for Half Shell, however, it looks like we will exceed our revenue projections of \$32K NET.

Jamie noted that we also hosted 3 successful DAM dinners at the Sto Pavilion. She extended a big “thank you” to Lindy Harrison, Ruthie Edwards, Lisa Armstrong, Bill Bush, Martha Stibbs, Leslie Manning and Charlotte Muir for 3 successful and fun DAMN Dinners! These cultivation events brought in many new supporters to HBF.

Jamie reported that HBF was awarded 4 programming grants for outreach and summer programs. CWO and COGS were awarded at the highest funding level - a first for HBF. The Community Foundation was a brand-new grant.

- A. Friends Foundation - \$25K
- Church of the Good Shepherd (COGS) - \$5K
- WNC Community Foundation - Highlands - \$5.5K
- Cullasaja Women's Outreach (CWO) - \$10K.

Strategic Planning Committee (Gayle Watkins)

Gayle Watkins gave a brief update/recap of the Strategic Planning process, thanking the Board for their overwhelming participation in the survey (~98%) and sharing the high-level results.

Insights

- The Board is strongly committed to HBF's mission as *Education, Research and Conservation*.
- Similar to the community, there is a significant gap in mission clarity among Board members with 29% not fully understanding the mission and 100% of the Board saying that the public does not understand our mission.
- Half the Board thinks HBF needs to improve its communications with the public and its impact in the community.
- Financial stability is a major concern among Board members.
- Resource constraints (staff, funding and facilities) limit momentum.
- The Board wants clearer strategic direction and better mission messaging (not a change in mission).

Board Priorities

1. Strengthen mission clarity and messaging.
2. Improve public and donor communication about HBF's impact.
3. Stabilize long-term funding



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4. Focus strategy around mission priorities
5. Build organizational capacity.

The Strategic Plan will address these 5 priorities.

She then turned it over to Allison Jordan, consultant hired to assist with data analysis and to conduct focus groups with community members, government officials, and donors. Allison shared what had occurred thus far and was in progress:

Strategic planning - focus groups, interviews, and data collection from community surveys continued over the summer.

- 162 Online Community Surveys
- 42 Board Member Surveys – past and present
- 16 Individuals Interviewed and 3 Focus Groups
 - Community Partners & Local Non-profits
 - Donors and Funders
 - Education & Youth Organizations
 - Local Government & Civic Leaders
 - HBS Staff
- **Youth Survey in Highlands and Cashiers**
- **Focus Group with the Interact Club at Highlands School**

Allison then reported **the 2 “A Ha’s” from the community input data:**

- 1) We’re (HBF) doing great work and people want more of it and/or for it to be more accessible.
- 2) We have an active, year-round retirement community that wants to be more involved and engaged - 80% of respondents (and 80% of our population per the most recent census) do not have children living with them, permanently or even on occasion.

And then shared the **3 Main Themes:**

- 1) Environment - The Plateau has a unique environment and people care a lot.
- 2) Confusion - There is a lot of confusion/lack of clarity around HBF and HBS.
- 3) Community Hub - Nature Center/Botanical Gardens



Lastly, she shared the next steps in the process:

- Finalize data collection by end of October

Based on Community Feedback and HBF Conversations:

- Strategic Priorities - finalize
- Mission and Vision - revise
- Strategic Plan (next 3 years) and 2026 Annual Plan - create

There were various discussion around the HBS/HBF confusion and how this Strategic Planning process and the plan will help us to better define (and share with HBS) our Mission/Vision and the work we do separately and well as in coordination and support of the station. Noting that this would be an ongoing process but one that had to start with HBF being clear on its mission and work moving forward.

Buildings and Grounds (Charley Tarver)

Charley reported that work on the new office continues. This summer was spent addressing drainage issues in the front parking area as well as behind the building. The front was re-graded and graveled with new drainage installed. The AC unit at the back of the building was raised several feet and new drainage installed/re-graveled. He stated that things were now stabilized, and the focus would eventually shift to future development of the site once the Strategic Planning process was completed. He thanked the Pattersons for their generous gift.

Charley announced that after much deliberation and ongoing issues with the Sato House property (including a water line break/leak), the Executive Committee had made the decision to sell the property with the proceeds going back into HBF's main Investment Account. A discussion ensued regarding that decision and the Board's approval - David Martin noting that the Executive Committee could make the decision to explore that option and gather all the information, but that approval by the full Board was needed. Many Board members raised concern about selling the property. That while everyone agreed the house was un-livable and needed to be torn down/etc., the value of the land for future housing needed to be considered and the environmental report regarding future builds needed to be reviewed. It was agreed that the report and further consideration needed to happen with further discussion by the Board occurring before a final decision was made.



Marketing and Communications (Marissa Nieddu)

Marissa reported that the Fall Newsletter, highlighting all the amazing programs and research the Foundation funded/offered, had been sent out via eblast and SM last week and that it was posted on the website.

https://issuu.com/highlandsbiologicalfoundation/docs/fall_newsletter_2025

She updated the Board on the new summer camp platform that we would be using moving forward, which would streamline the process and provide a better user experience for our members/program participants. Jamie mentioned that HBF was also looking at a new donor platform that would do the same and combine many tasks including membership, MailChimp and volunteer management.

Marissa announced that on Thursday the Fall Campaign (digital), focusing on research, would begin. Eblast, web, and SM launch with the goal of raising \$15K.

Education and Outreach (Maddie Wikstrom and Julie Thomson)

Maddie reported that we had another busy summer season with almost 12,000 visitors from the end of May to mid-August (and almost 15,000 YTD). She gave an update on all the different programs we offered - weekly Nature at Night programs and Zahner Lectures, not to mention daily programming at the Nature Center daily - and that the Gift Shop was doing really well - almost \$49K in sales so far, a record for HBF.

Julie updated the Board on summer camps - twenty-two sessions of summer camp with over 220 campers - and our outreach efforts to date this spring and starting again this Fall (41 programs and nearly 300 program participants). Jamie thanked both Julie and Maddie for their hard work and shared the many compliments from program partners in the community.

Jamie reminded everyone of the upcoming Enchanted Forest event and asked for volunteers.

Adjournment 5:10 PM