



HBF Winter Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, December 10, 2025 at 3:00 PM

Virtual via Zoom

In attendance: Tom Holmes, Alex Smith, Gayle Watkins, Jim Landon, John Mitchener, Kent Wittman, Leslie Manning, Lori Heys, William Bush, Amy Patterson, Jennie Stowers, Lisa Armstrong, Karen Patterson, Jim Milby, Catharine Seay, David Martin, Melinda Harrison, Jonnie Swann, Lisa Dailey, John Helmer, Jamie Creola, Marissa Nieddu, Maddie Wikstrom, and Allison Jordan

Meeting called to order at 3:03 PM by Tom Holmes President

Last Minutes

The board revisited the previous meeting minutes, during which Amy Patterson questioned why the organization was \$53k over budget between consultants and maintenance/repairs, given the original \$29k maintenance budget. Jamie explained that the original, budgeted consultant line was for \$5k for an animal ambassador consultant. The overage expense includes 2024 fees from Winter Gary's transition work and an unbudgeted \$20k strategic planning consultant fee (of which, \$14K has been paid, \$6K pending completion). She also explained that the ~\$33K overage for maintenance/repairs are for unbudgeted expenses related to work (tree removal, irrigation, bridge/deck work) for the new office. The budgeted \$29k is for regular maintenance/repairs - contracts for all properties that HBF owns. The minutes were not approved, and Tom indicated the board would follow up on the overages separately before moving forward.

Treasurer's Report (Jamie Creola Executive Director & Bob Strickland Treasurer)

Current Budget

Jamie provided an overview of the current budget as of December 4th. End-of-year giving is still arriving, with the team hoping to reach \$220k in individual contributions. The Soiree met its revenue goal, and the Half-Shell fundraiser brought in close to \$36k. Major increases in consultant expenses and maintenance/repairs were noted, with the latter currently at \$37,881 and expected to rise due to ongoing work and Sato House improvements. The Gift Shop has strong sales but significant expenses from inventory and tariffs, and the organization is shifting its POS system from Square to Clover to reduce fees and align with the bank. The organization anticipates ending the year approximately \$71k in the negative, though this may be softened by additional donations.

Amy requested a Balance Sheet to gain a clearer understanding of assets, and Jamie and Bob confirmed one would be sent at the end of the year. Jim Landon noted that shifts in assets may make the deficit feel less concerning.



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2026 Budget Proposal

Income largely mirrors last year's budget with some adjustments. Individual contributions remain set at \$220k until strategic planning concludes. A significant increase is allocated for technology upgrades. Grants remain around \$60k. Program revenue is adjusted due to community feedback: camps will shift to a unified schedule for both age groups and are projected at \$42k. Gift shop revenue is projected at \$55k based on stronger data. Soiree revenue is adjusted slightly downward to reflect realistic capacity. Total projected income is \$538k (up from \$517k). Jamie explained ongoing work to improve accounting accuracy after recent audits revealed inconsistent use of restricted funds; the organization will now draw from restricted accounts appropriately and take quarterly distributions from investments only when needed.

On the expenditure side, this will be the first year with four full-time staff members fully supported by the operating budget. Salaries were increased for education specialists and marketing/communications to move closer to industry standards. Additional seasonal staffing (1 PT, May-Aug) for the Nature Center is planned. Food and beverage costs have decreased, while professional services, insurance, and software subscriptions have modest increases due to improved operational systems (UltraCamp, ADP, Clover, etc.). Grants & Awards remain consistent with MOU obligations and research support. Total expenses are projected at \$670k (up slightly from \$666k). Amy requested last year's budget vs. actual for comparison, and Bob acknowledged the need for greater clarity moving forward.

There was discussion about the scholarship investment account, valued at \$250k, and how the MOU structures shared responsibility between HBF and HBS for supporting GIA awards. Additional clarifications were offered by Karen, Jennie, and Jason. After discussion, Jim Landon moved to approve the 2026 budget, John Helmer seconded, and the board unanimously approved it.

Development Committee (Jamie Creola)

Jamie reported that work continues on the Soiree and Half-Shell events, with Soiree details expected to be finalized soon and Flat Mountain Farm as the likely venue. The Patron Party will be hosted by David and Elizabeth Martin on June 17. End-of-year giving is in progress through mailed letters and email communications.

Strategic Planning Committee (Gayle Watkins, Jamie Creola & Allison)

Jim requested an update on the process. Gayle explained that the board may approve the updated vision, mission, and priorities now, while goals still require development. She thanked all committee participants for their work. Gayle reviewed the year-long planning process, including focus groups and data collection across various community segments.



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Allison presented the current drafts:

Vision Statement

A community that understands, values, and actively protects the extraordinary biodiversity of the Highlands Plateau.

Mission Statement

The Highlands Biological Foundation inspires environmental stewardship and conservation of the Highlands Plateau by providing exceptional nature education, supporting scientific research, and fostering community connection through engagement with the natural world.

Values

- Learning – We foster curiosity and understanding that encourages responsibility and meaningful action.
- Community Connection – We engage people of all ages and backgrounds in meaningful nature experiences.
- Scientific Integrity – We honor research as the foundation of our knowledge and work.
- Collaboration – We build partnerships that drive shared purpose and lasting impact.
- Stewardship – We inspire the community to protect the unique biodiversity of the Highlands Plateau.

Strategic Priorities

- Clarify and Communicate HBF's Identity
- Build Organizational Excellence and Sustainability
- Strengthen Community Presence and Accessibility
- Champion Environmental Stewardship on the Plateau

Gayle explained that these priorities advance impact, visibility, and sustainability. The committee also introduced a Decision-Making Matrix to guide future planning aligned with mission, vision, and values.

Reminders & Next Steps

Board members should submit comments and questions by January 15. The committee will continue developing goals and an action plan. Gayle encouraged members to view this plan as a way to attract like-minded supporters and better communicate HBF's role in the community.

A discussion followed about terminology, particularly "Highlands Plateau," with board members raising alternative geographic references. Suggestions included "mountains," "in and around the Highlands Plateau," "Western North Carolina," and "Southern Blue Ridge." Gayle noted that the committee will continue reviewing language as revisions progress.



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Operations & Education (Jamie Creola & Marissa Nieddu)

Jamie announced that education specialist Julie Thomson has accepted a position at a Virginia state park and that Alex Waite, a former summer naturalist, has been hired as her replacement and will be starting sometime in January. Marissa shared an update on new platforms launching in the new year: UltraCamp for summer camp and Nature at Night registrations, Bloomerang CRM and Bloomerang Fundraising to replace NEON, and Bloomerang Volunteer for the new volunteer program. She also reminded the board about End-of-Year giving efforts, encouraged holiday shopping at the Nature Center Gift Shop, and promoted the December 11 IE student presentations.

Highlands Biological Station Report (Jason Love - Associate Director)

Jason reported that research remains strong, with a paper on atmospheric microplastics submitted and under review, a red spruce paper with IE students accepted, and additional collaboration with Mainspring Conservation Trust. Staffing shortages continue due to a hiring freeze following the departure of two employees (Business Manager and Horticulturist). They are hoping to hire a Horticulturist in the new year. Facility updates include significant deterioration in the Nature Center's back wall; construction documents have been reviewed by the state, but repairs cannot be completed in winter due to sealant requirements. A meeting is scheduled for Dec. 12th w/WCU, HBS and HBF to determine the best timing to minimize disruption, and funding uncertainties remain.

Other Business

Amy shared that she is seeking professional input regarding the potential of the Sato House property. Jamie reminded the board that ongoing plumbing and remediation work is already in progress and that Maddie will be moving in come January.

Adjournment 4:45 PM

Upcoming Meetings and Events:

December 22 - January 1 – HBF Office Closed