

Visitors Promotion Committee
Meeting at Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
June 5, 2024
MINUTES

In Attendance: Jeff Cunningham, Jason Hoehne, Tara Knuth, Tim Savona, Aaron Stitt, Dave Derbin, Bennie Shobe and Rick Vest

Guests: Ken Dobbs, Dan Lesoing, Claire McDermott, Sam Lesoing, Roger Lempke, Liz Shea-McCoy, Matt Anderson, Michael Sibbernsen, Brett Boller, Kevin Sander, Tim Matthews, Wendy Van, Josh Wall, Randy Gordon, Susan Larson Rodenburg, Karen Nela, Chad Hansen and LeRoy Sievers

Absent: Jeff Barclay, Bryan Sullivan and Riley Slezak

Staff Attending: Jeff Maul, Derek Feyerherm, Diane Pryor and Katie Bohlmeier

Call to Order and Introductions:

Chairman Aaron Stitt called the meeting to order at 12:12 p.m. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for taking the time to review these requests. He asked the attendees to introduce themselves and for that to serve as the roll call.

Stitt and Jeff Maul explained the afternoon schedule and asked everyone to be thoughtful and concise with their questions and comments. There will be ten applicants which will in total surpass our available funds of \$500,000. He asked everyone to take notes for a short discussion following each presenter, and the final discussion and allocation decisions would be made after everyone had made their presentations and requests. Maul said each presenter will have 25 minutes to talk so be tactful and timely as we have a tight agenda. There was a discussion on how to ask certain questions and to keep in mind the return on investment (ROI) and how the project will bring folks from outside of Lincoln into our community.

Lincoln Children's Museum

Chairman Stitt welcomed the first presenters and Ken Dobbs spoke to the Committee with their request. Dobbs said they impact not just the kids but their parents and grandparents through their exhibits and experiences. He talked about the different groups that come in including CLC's and field trips, not just from Lincoln daycares and schools, but from across the state and surrounding area.

They requested \$100,000 to use for a Luckey Climber structure. It is a 36' tall, net-enclosed climbing structure. There are venues in surrounding cities with them, but this would be the first in Nebraska. He said it would promote health, wellness, risk-taking and exploration in children. Dobbs said the cost is \$464,000 and they have raised \$347K through three donors. The following questions and discussions talked about placement, safety, age and weight limitations and insurance liability. Knuth said it would be wheelchair accessible. Stitt said he appreciates that they have raised \$347K already and that it can be paid out over time. Ken Dobbs thanked everyone for the opportunity and left the meeting. Knuth then left the room while the group had a discussion. Stitt said it was a good discussion on the funding of the project and that it is a good staple of Lincoln.

Lincoln Sports Foundation

The second group to present included Dan Lesoing, Claire McDermott and Sam Lesoing and they

requested \$97K. Dan spoke first and said they were in front of the group 4 ½ years ago and showed pictures of the changes they've made with the funds granted them back then. The transformation of the fields was great. They have about 300K visitors a year, he said, and host 21 different activities. They've completed field improvements including irrigation pipes, new motors, computers, pumps, a new seeder and turf on the championship field and still hope to purchase a new, larger mower with a roller to keep the fields smooth. Lesoing said they host NWU tennis and improved their indoor facilities, too, with bathroom updates. He then asked for questions. Jason Hoehne asked if they had any other funding. Dan said they have a Sting contract that pays them \$20K/month for six years and they have other sponsors. Bison donated benches and some signs. Stitt asked what the money would be used for. Lesoing said to improve the fields. He said their partners have let them know they want LSF to be able to host regional and national tournaments. To do that, Lesoing wants to complete work and renovations on fields 1-4 and 16-19. The cost of everything proposed would be \$97K. Hoehne asked how they market themselves to maximize exposure. Lesoing said word spreads. If the fields are great (or bad) the coaches and clubs talk, and word gets around. Stitt thanked them for coming saying we appreciate them and their drive. After the group left, a discussion ensued. Knuth asked if they do their own fundraising. Maul said they are working on naming rights/sponsorships. Bennie Shobe asked if it's a problem they aren't closer to hotels and restaurants, but the group said that doesn't really matter for their "clientele". Rick Vest asked if there is another venue offering what they offer. Derek Feyerherm said Speedway Sports Complex does.

State Historical/Pershing Mural

Stitt welcomed the next applicant and explained the process. Roger Lempke and Liz Shea-McCoy thanked everyone for this opportunity and explained what they want to do with the funding, if they were to receive it. Roger said Wyuka already has historical attractions – including the Holocaust Memorial, the 911 Memorial and Home of the Friendless - and this would be a great addition. He said they are redoing and upgrading the pond/lake and the mural would be next to it near a newly planned amphitheater. Lempke said they have the mural removed from the old Auditorium and are in Phase 2 which is restoring and mapping the mural tiles and preparing the grounds. They are requesting \$100K to help finish the work they are now doing. Shea-McCoy said the mural is a historic landmark and will bring people into Nebraska and Lincoln. She said they received \$170K through Give to Lincoln and are getting support from private donors as well as having applied for a lot of other grants. Maul confirmed they are a non-profit organization. Hoehne asked how they'll track out of state groups. Lempke said the mural will be on a list of where to go in Lincoln and through social media. Shea-McCoy said they'll work with the Passport Program to track it as well. Lempke said they are on a time schedule that is critical and need the funding at this point. After the couple left the meeting, Knuth said the payout would be in 2025 and wondered what funding we would have available then. Stitt said perhaps they could come to us next year with a request. Hoehne said we need to look at the ROI and that this is a unique project. Savona said this one inspired him and he thinks there is a group of people that seek out educational opportunities and would find this of great interest. Maul added that it is nostalgic.

Lincoln Children's Zoo

Stitt welcomed the next group and explained the process. Evan Killeen and Sarah Wood presented to the Committee requesting \$100K for a new light feature at the Children's Zoo as part of their annual winter attraction Zoo Lights Powered by LES. Killeen said they had 72K go through in 2023. They are working with a planning firm to see who comes through by tracking on attendee's cell phones' mapping. People come from Kansas City, Des Moines, Sioux Falls and western Nebraska, he said. They try to have something new each year to get return visitors. The feature they are wanting to create is a fountain of lights similar to the Bellagio in Vegas. "It will be three times larger than any other in the country", said Killeen, as he explained the building of it with metal plates and swaying lights. Hoehne asked if there were any other features like this and Killeen said it is being designed and will be built in-house. Stitt asked if they

would have it every year and Killeen said for 7-10 years from Thanksgiving to New Years. Jeff Cunningham asked what the Zoo Lights money is used for, and he said for upkeep and supplies for the zoo. Bryan Sullivan asked if LES sponsors the light show and Killeen said they are the only sponsor, but that doesn't cover all expenses. Savona asked about a patent and Killeen said not now. Next, Savona asked if they could do the feature without the grant and Killeen said no as they aren't looking at other grants or other funding. After the presenters were finished and left the meeting there was a discussion about the zoo's last grant issued that is still being paid, at request of the VPC.

Branched Oak Observatory

Stitt welcomed the next presenters and explained the process. Matt Anderson, Michael Sibbernsen and Brett Boller made a request for \$68K to be used for the construction of a new observatory building. Anderson thanked the Committee for the opportunity and said they have grown in the last ten years with half a million in inventory and thousands coming to visit. Boller said Tom Miller, who ran the Miller Observatory for 20 years, has donated two domes and telescopes to the Branched Oak Observatory. This is over \$300K in equipment, and we would like to build a structure to use them on/in, he said. Hoehne asked about attendance at the observatory, and he said they have had great numbers already in 2024, partially due to the Northern Lights recently visible to us, and because of increased viewing hours in the summer. Stitt asked if they could let their guests know about the Observatory and send them there, and Anderson said absolutely. Cunningham asked what the off-season is, and Anderson said Labor Day to Memorial Day. Savona asked about parking, and they said the property could hold 250-275 cars and they partner with Branched Oak Lake for additional parking when needed. They discussed how this additional observatory could bring in even more and increase hotel nights and revenue for the community. Hoehne asked the cost of admission and Anderson said they don't charge but operate from donations, private events and income from gift shop. In follow-up conversation, the Committee appreciated that they already have \$313K and only need \$68K.

Museum of American Speed

Stitt welcomed the next group and explained the process. Kevin Sander and Tim Matthews made a request for \$100K to be used to build out a 2,000 sq. ft. BMX exhibit that will open to the public in January 2025. Total expenses are \$231,857 and the total economic impact based on the formula will be \$674,500 annually. The exhibit will take guests through BMX culture, tell stories, preserve speed and inspire the next generation, Sander said. Features will include 100+ bikes, a bike shop, display cases and pedestals, interactive slides and video monitors and signs as well as a start gate. He said it will draw people from all over. The benefits will be a new group of attendees including racers, history buffs, collectors, families, recreational visitors as well as those in town for meetings and conferences. They will have bike shows for those to display and see the others on display. We plan to partner with auto and racing, BMX and donor, visitors and friends, he said. There were questions for the presenters in a Q&A. Vest asked if there are in-town facilities for BMX racing. Sander said yes, Star City BMX where they hold national events. Maul added that entire families ride in BMX, and it has a large following. Derek Feyerherm said Visit Lincoln partners with them to host groups to Lincoln. Stitt asked about donations and funding and Sander said they have a good network across the country. Hoehne asked about outreach and marketing and Matthews said it's done on their website.

Foundation for LPS

Stitt welcomed the next group and explained the process. Wendy Van and Josh Wall talked about their project and said they are requesting \$100K to help LPS build championship athletic fields for soccer, softball, tennis, football and baseball at the two new high schools, Standing Bear and Lincoln Northwest. She said in 2020 LPS, through a \$290M school bond, provided the infrastructure for the facilities but there was no funding for the fields which could now cost up to \$40M. The funds from this grant would be used

specifically for concessions, restrooms, a press box and a multi-purpose facility at Standing Bear High School. They said formal bids will be secured when they have 100% of the funding pledged and 50% in hand. The fields would be good for individuals, families and the community. She said other cities have better and more facilities than Lincoln does, and we are losing money because of it as the average family spends \$1-2,000 annually on youth sports. Next, Van talked about numbers. She said they have a \$1M challenge match in hand but still have a ways to go as the total expense is \$2.5M. Hoehne asked who would be able to use it, and she said clubs could rent it and that they are working with the YMCA to help. He asked about sponsors for naming the facilities, and she said they would like a \$1M name sponsor to have the name for 20 years. After the presenters left, there was discussion about the facility being used by the community, not private, and how they could work with the other sports facilities in town.

Germans from Russia Museum (AHSCR)

The next presenters were unable to attend the meeting but had sent in their application ahead of time and had discussions with Jeff Maul. The AHSCR is a non-profit organization that collects, preserves and shares cultural heritage and information about German settlers in the Russian Empire. They have several buildings making up their museum south of downtown Lincoln. They requested \$16,500 to use for a planning study to produce a list of potential projects to modernize and improve the facility. Stitt asked if they had very many room nights and Feyerherm said they do hold an annual convention but can't guarantee a ROI. Rick Vest said they are planning to use a Lincoln firm to do the study. The Committee wondered if the investment could be for nothing if they find through the study that it wouldn't be prudent to move forward.

South of Downtown Park

Stitt introduced the next presenters and explained the process. Randy Gordon, Susan Larson Rodenburg and Karen Nela explained their project and said they are requesting \$100K to make South Haymarket Park into an urban park with many features including a commons, community building, restrooms, trails, skatepark, playground, shade structure and parking. The skate park would be the largest of its kind between Denver and Des Moines. They would like to make it 50/50 with a bowl and a curve and the other half being the streets and stairs. It could be used for competitions, jams and demonstrations as well as for beginners and recreation. They said they are ready for construction in 2025. In Q&A, Hoehne asked if they had an estimate of the number of events they think they can attract. Karen said they are working with the Bay to schedule a possible tour and plan to create their own events. Des Moines is excited about this possibility, she said. Stitt said how do you compare size-wise? Karen said we have 25K sq. ft. and they have 75K. She said they want to include bleachers, lights and a sound system in the future. Savona asked if the Do Tour will give input, and she said yes, they'll use a design specialist. Stitt asked what specifically will the \$100K be used for, and Susan said to build the skatepark and Mike Smith would program it and educate on how to use it. Stitt said could we do it in 2025, and they said we need to have our funding to the city before the contract can be signed. Hoehne asked if there would be liability for the city and Karen said there are already two parks so shouldn't be too much of an increase. Savona said this is a \$25M project and have \$9-10M committed now. The group said yes, they need \$25M in cash and pledges for the contract to be signed. Hoehne asked about their timeframe in getting the other \$15M. Susan said they are meeting with private donors now. They thanked the Committee for the opportunity. Post discussions said they seem to be quite a ways from their ultimate financial goal and wondered if there was a time limit the grant dollars would have to be used by and Dave Derbin said yes, there are terms in the agreement. Stitt asked when there would be more grant money, and Derbin said next fiscal year and that they would re-evaluate at the end of the year.

Optimists Youth Complex

Stitt introduced the next presenters and explained the process. Chad Hansen and LeRoy Sievers spoke to

the group. Sievers gave the background of the Foundation saying it is a 501(c)(3) and said they do several activities in their existing fields including Homer Heroes, Pitch Hit & Run, Childhood Cancer Campaign and Star City Youth sports. They have made exceptional improvements over the years to their facility that is in operation near the West Bypass. Hansen talked about their request. They are asking for a grant of \$96,620.33 to fund additional wiffle ball/micro field/warmup areas with turf, hitting stations and wiffle ball fields in the open area near the concession stand. It would also include expansion of the fields and parking. The project will start on June 15, 2024, and be completed by September 1, 2024. In Q&A Hoehne asked who they partner with. Hansen said they work with the other facilities in Lincoln. He asked about the engineering. Hansen said they have looked at the grading and drainage as they sold 30 acres and used the funds for the previous improvements and upkeep. Stitt asked for a breakdown of their request. They said the engineering would be approximately \$4,800, the wiffle ball would be approximately \$72K and the warm-up area approximately \$21K. They also said lights would be in the next phase. Maul gave them kudos for what the Optimists have done as they serve the community. Hansen said he appreciated that and next year is already booked every weekend but two.

Discussion of All Grant Requests:

The Committee took five minutes to review all the grant requests themselves and come up with a preliminary rating and recommendation for each. When they completed that process, they began discussing the requests one by one. First was the Lincoln Children's Museum and Knuth stepped out of the room for that discussion. Stitt began saying he likes their project and finds it sustainable. He voted to give the full amount requested. Hoehne said he liked the fact that it is a year-round attraction and would bring in out-of-town guests. He also voted to give the full amount. Stitt added that he liked that they had already raised other funding. Savona agreed and suggested giving them \$80K to spread the available funds around to more requests. Cunningham said he would give a partial amount to them since we have so many grant requests and voted to give them half.

Lincoln Sports Foundation was discussed next with the entire group. Stitt said this one was difficult for him as it was for mainly maintenance and grass seed and nothing tangible. He wondered about 50% or less. Knuth said perhaps 50%, too. Hoehne said he feels it is a little more long-term on who's using it and how it's used and voted for 80-100%. Savona had similar thoughts and said 80% or maybe slightly less. He said they are one of the leaders in ROI. Cunningham had no comment on this request.

Next, they discussed the Pershing Mural. Hoehne recommended they do not grant their request. He said he didn't see any ROI with this one. Stitt thought they made a great presentation and hoped they could incorporate the mural in with already existing attractions they have. He recommended 50%. Knuth recommended 100% saying the younger generation likes education attractions and thought this was a good one. Cunningham agreed saying this is a good part of our history and thought we should give them a portion, but not the full amount they requested. Savona recommended 25% as he felt they were a long way from their financial goal.

Next, they discussed the Lincoln Children's Zoo. Stitt said this would be an amazing attraction and felt people would really come into town to visit that light show. He also said it is one that would be there for 7-10 years. He recommended 100%. Hoehne agreed saying they need it all and voted to grant them 80-100%, Knuth agreed with 100%. Cunningham said he thought we should not grant their request since the attraction is already established and very successful. Stitt recommended giving them the full amount.

The Branched Oak Observatory was reviewed by the group next. Savona said he'd give \$68K because he feels like they have not asked for much and it was well thought out. Stitt liked that they already had \$313K and this was just to finish the job. It's unique and would be exciting to send hotel guests there, he said. Stitt

voted for \$50-\$68K. Knuth said zero because not good ROI. Cunningham voted for \$50K saying he would like to see better marketing and a charge for admission. Hoehne thought they should be in the range of 50% of the request. Since they don't do much marketing and don't charge admission maybe it wouldn't be right to give them the full grant but thought we should do some portion.

Museum of American Speed's request was discussed next. Cunningham recommended zero. Hoehne said he could see some value since BMX is so well-known and a niche market. He recommended half. Stitt also voted for half the request saying this does bring in a lot of guests. Knuth said the full request as they have more reach than we know. Savona wanted to give them \$35K because they have a lot of other funding, and we need to look at the ROI.

Next, they talked about the Foundation for LPS. Knuth suggested since it's a public school project, we don't grant them any of their request. Savona said the same. It is too undefined as to how and by whom it would be used. He said maybe we can do something for them down the line. Stitt suggested giving them 50% as he didn't feel it was going to be able to be utilized by the public enough. Hoehne said there is a gap of how the public would be allowed to use it so he didn't think it was a project that should be funded with this grant, but he hoped they would receive the funding elsewhere to complete the project. Cunningham said he thought it should be funded by a bond issue and recommended we don't grant the request.

Germans for Russia was discussed next with Savona saying he'd recommend the full request, 100%. He thought it was different and unique. Hoehne voted 0% and said he agreed it's unique, but this request was for a study and nothing tangible. He said maybe they could help when the project is ready to begin and something real. Stitt agreed with him and said we could possibly help in the next phase. Both Knuth and Cunningham said zero as well.

The South of Downtown Park was up next. Knuth said 0% as did Hoehne, adding that they have a large gap to reach their financial goal and perhaps the grants should be for people closer to having their funding. Stitt thought 50% and Cunningham said 0% and that it will be great when it's complete but too far away to fit within time constraints.

The final discussion was on the Youth Complex grant request. Savona recommended giving the full amount, adding that it brings in people and has great takeaways. Cunningham said 100%, it is a good project and they had a very professional presentation and request. Hoehne said perhaps just the 72% for the wiffle ball fields. Knuth said 72-100% and Stitt agreed with the 72-100% saying he appreciated that they gave a breakdown.

The group decided to review the projects and look for a consensus of any kind. Knuth stepped out for a bit as they discussed the Lincoln Children's Museum. The group looked at various options and dollar amounts. Knuth returned to the room for further discussion on how to grant the available funds among the various requests. They discussed how each person rated the various potential attractions and the best way to utilize the fund.

Knuth made a motion to deny the grant request from the Foundation for LPS. Stitt seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Hoehne made a motion to deny the grant request from the Germans from Russia Museum. Cunningham seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Savona voted no. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Cunningham made a motion to deny the grant request from the South of Downtown Park. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth and Stitt voted yes. Savona voted no. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Savona made a motion to grant the Lincoln Children's Museum \$90,000. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Knuth abstained from the vote. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Savona made a motion to grant the Lincoln Children's Zoo the full amount of \$100,000. Stitt seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham voted no. Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Savona made a motion to grant the Optimists Youth Complex an even \$96,000. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Savona made a motion to grant the Lincoln Sports Foundation \$75,000. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Stitt made a motion to grant the Branched Oak Observatory \$50,000. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Hoehne made a motion to grant the Museum of American Speed \$50,000. Knuth seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham voted no. Hoehne, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

Knuth made a motion to grant the State Historical Society/Pershing Mural \$39,000. Cunningham seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Cunningham, Knuth, Savona and Stitt voted yes. Hoehne voted no. Jeff Barclay and Bryan Sullivan were absent. Motion carried.

That was the final grant to be reviewed and voted on. Stitt thanked everyone for their time and commitment to this Committee and to this fund. Everyone knows attractions such as these discussed today are vital to our community and help us thrive.

Parting Gift for Jeff Cunningham:

Jeff Maul presented a parting gift to Jeff Cunningham as this was his last meeting serving on the Committee. They thanked him for his many years of service and Cunningham said he enjoyed his time with the group.

Adjourn:

Stitt thanked everyone again for their attendance. He adjourned the meeting at 5:57 p.m.