

Visitors Promotion Committee
Meeting at Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
June 5, 2025
MINUTES

In Attendance: Jeff Barclay, Dave Derbin, Sean Flowerday, EK Franks, Jason Hoehne, Tara Knuth, Todd Ogden, Tim Savona, Bennie Shobe, Riley Slezak, Aaron Stitt and Bryan Sullivan

Guests: JJ Yost, Denise Pearce, Ken Dobbs, Joe Shaw, Matt Anderson, Brett Boller, Dave Breetzke, Claire McDermott, Cheryl Sykes, Jarod Smith, Kelly Frank, Michael Kucera, KC Sohl, Andy Peterson, Michelle Casanova and Dr. Susan Weller

Absent:

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

Call to Order and Introductions:

Chairman Aaron Stitt called the meeting to order at 12:04 p.m. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending this important meeting. 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 Stitt let everyone know he would need to leave at 2:30 and Tara Knuth would be chairing the meeting after that. Also, Knuth and Tim Savona will excuse themselves from the room when their grant requests are being discussed. Dave Derbin collected initial scoring results and notes to help in the discussions. Maul thanked Derbin and Saige Walker for their work in the scoring process. Derbin commented the scoring was best out of 5 and was broke out by categories and done so there would be no surprises at this meeting. Maul said the voting was just for the seven voting members of the Committee. He said we have requests for \$594,870 and have \$750,000 available; therefore, at the end of this process, we will have a good amount remaining in the fund. He said there was only one applicant that didn't meet requirements and was denied because it was a for-profit business. Maul said each presenter will have 25 minutes, 12 minutes for their presentation including Q&A. We will attempt to push our discussion to the very end, and he encouraged the group to ask specific questions from the presenters.

Priorities were discussed. Everyone represents something to better the community and bring in visitors. We need to see what each of them will bring in. Also, the ROI of lodging tax needs to be considered in each request, they said.

Pinewood Bowl:

Chairman Stitt welcomed the first group of presenters and Tim Savona, JJ Yost and Denise Pearce presented their request to the Committee. They requested \$82,870 for backstage and front of house improvements, including four concrete pads, that Savona said will help accommodate the touring artists as well as enhance safety and security. The front-of-house improvements include concrete pads for food and beverage tents on both side of the guest chairs along with a concrete entry area at the premium entrance area. In the back, Savona said they want to add concrete to the driveway where the large vehicles enter. He said this will enhance the guest experience and add safety features. In Q&A, Jason Hoehne asked for the number of shows and guests a year and Savona said 10-12/year. Last year they had 14 and they averaged about 3,000 guests/show. Jeff Barclay asked about the operating budget, do you break even or is there a

loss? Savona said it wraps into the budget with Pinnacle Bank Arena. Stitt asked how do you decide what shows you invite to the two venues. Savona said they invite performers who are out on tour and have to compete to get them. Noise is a consideration at Pinewood, he said, but it is a special place with a certain vibe like no other venue in the country. Stitt asked about maintenance and JJ Yost said the Parks & Recreation department does the upkeep and takes care of the power, etc. Stitt thanked them for their presentation.

Lincoln Children's Museum:

The second to present was Ken Dobbs and on behalf of the Museum requested \$100,000 for their project of a Tween Discover Space for 9–11-year-olds to engage them with S.T.E.A.M experiences that foster creativity, learning and exploration. This would help capture families with children in both age groups so there will be no more “one-kid boredom”. He said they currently serve children 0 through age 8, with developmentally appropriate exhibits and experiences for each age group. They have exhibits like Grow Zone with a safe, sensory play area for infants and toddlers as well as hands-on items for the older kids that are more challenging through engineering, arts and STEM. The goal is to strengthen repeat visitors. Looking at the numbers, he said from 2022 to 2024 the total attendance grew by 20%. They are now going to be open on Mondays and believe that will bring in 18,000 more guests in 2025. The Museum had just under 115,000 in 2024 with about 43.5K from outside Lancaster County. Dobbs said the projection for 2025 is close to 119,000 and 44.5K from outside the county for a 2% increase. The economic impact for 2025 will be \$103,875 nationally, \$583,366 regionally and \$711,954 locally for a total of \$1,399,195. Next, he talked about the project budget. The design cost is \$20K, demo and construction is \$170K, programmatic materials are \$10K for a total of \$200K. They do have half of that funded by Jim and Susan Clifton. The new space would be 1,000 sq. ft. In the follow-up discussion, Tim Savona said this is a brilliant strategy. Maul said the museum keeps things new with new exhibits. Knuth said they do track the “stay time” at each exhibit to see if one is getting stale. Stitt asked what the museums in the Midwest are doing, same as ours, and Knuth said yes, it’s the same nationwide. We want to provide a space for the older kids. Stitt thanked Dobbs and Knuth, and they stepped out of the room. The group asked Dave Derbin for a list of what had been given in grants in the past years. He said the last project funded has to be completed before the entity is allowed to ask for more grant money. Stitt said he liked that they did their homework on what this would do, and this new exhibit would expand their audience.

Lux Center for the Arts:

The next group to present, Lux Center, had Joe Shaw speaking to the Committee. In addition, Joe Shaw was joined by Andy Petersen and Michele Casanova. They requested \$25,000 to be used for their EMERGE LNK Mural and Street Art Festival. Shaw said they want to revitalize Uni Place and increase the foot traffic, which is their program overview. The goals include promoting small and local businesses, increasing pedestrian traffic, attracting local and out-of-town guests and growing the Uni Creative District. Shaw talked about milestones and achievements through the years. In 2021, they had their inaugural festival with seven murals and over 2,000 attendees. In 2022, they had new creative businesses add to the mix and distributed their mural maps across Nebraska and in 2023, they added three new murals by Nebraska artists for their festival and had over 1,500 attendees. They also created the Uni Place Creative District that year partnering with LUX, City of Lincoln, NWU, Blixt Art Space and First United Methodist Church. He said many new businesses were added as well. In 2024, they were awarded the Tom Lorenz Tourism Development Award and in 2025 (to date) the Maker’s Market resumed in May with 800+ visitors so far. The City of Lincoln announced the University Place Subarea Plan with improvements to sidewalks, banners and signage. Shaw said the 2025 Festival is scheduled for September 21 and they are anticipated to have 3,000+ attend and will have three new murals by nationally recognized artists. He said they have applied for grant funding from the City, too.

Shaw explained their impact and reach with 11-14,000 visitors/year from every zip code in the county and

many states all across the nation. He presented a projected cost and budget for the project showing the expenses for the new murals and the festival. Part of the total of \$38,000 would be offset by funding from Black Hills, Lincoln Community Foundation and Ayars and Ayars, leaving \$25,000 from the Visitor's Promotion Center grant.

In Q&A, Hoehne asked what specifically the \$25K will cover and Shaw said to pay the artists and for music, admin fee for the LUX Festival and for marketing. Stitt asked how long the murals last, and Shaw said around 20 years. They asked where and he said on along 48th Street on Mojave, the Masonic Building and Leighton Retail & Apartments. Barclay confirmed the other funding they have received. Stitt thanked him for being there. In the follow-up discussion they said they talked about their low impact score because it was hard to calculate the ROI on revenue and heads in beds. Derek Feyerherm said 24% of the cell phone pings come from visitors outside the area and 76% come from within the county according to the Zartico tracking software Visit Lincoln uses. Maul commented that this gives visitors something to do when they're here. There was a question about paying the artists in their budget and is that salary? Dave Derbin said no since it is not Lux Center staff who are being compensated which would be against the guidelines.

Branched Oak Observatory:

Chair Stitt had the next group introduce themselves and Matt Anderson and Brett Boller spoke to the group about their request for \$100,000 they would like to use for a newly constructed gift shop/admissions building to improve the visitors experience and provide a means of additional income streams through ticket sales and gift shop purchases. First, Anderson gave background information about the observatory, established in 2014 and NW of downtown Lincoln near Branched Oak Lake. He said the funding this Committee granted them last year was used for an addition of the Miller Astrophotography Research Center with the addition of two world class telescopes and twin domes. Boller talked the group through pictures of the previous project and said everything went smoothly and the project has been a huge success. The National Science Olympiad hosted their welcome reception there and the kids loved it! They also began charging admission as the group advised last year, he said. Anderson said their hours are Thursday – Saturday 6-11pm and 11-5 on Sunday. Anderson said the new building would also be used for special events, corporate events, retreats and school outings. The goal is to have it complete by September 27 for a StarBQ, if funding is granted. Anderson thanked the Committee for their trust and support.

In Q&A, Todd Ogden asked where the admission dollars go, and Anderson said operating expenses and insurance. Hoehne asked about their marketing plan, and he said they hand out flyers to everyone at the Branched Oak Lake when they buy a park sticker. Also, they advertise through social media, TV, radio and they have a billboard. Stitt asked for the projected revenue from the gift shop, and he said \$65-100K is projected in 2026. Stitt asked what they sell – logo merchandise, STEM kits, ice cream. Feyerherm then thanked them for hosting the Science Olympiad and said it was a big deal; and the guests were very impressed. Maul asked if the new building would give them plenty of additional space and Anderson said yes, for a laptop to gather guest data as well as being large enough to last 4-7 years. Stitt asked if there are restrooms on-site, yes. Ogden asked how they compare to Hyde Observatory in Lincoln. They said in town there are more lights that impede the view some and BOO is the only observatory with an actual lunar rock. Maul complimented them on their hard work and said they are not done – they continue to grow. Bryan Sullivan said they have partnered with UNL for 11 years and asked if UNL provides support – Anderson said they maintain that relationship for the students. They do have funding from other foundations, he said, too, both local and national. The total cost of the project would be \$115,000 and they are asking for \$100,000. Stitt thanked them and excused them for follow-up discussions.

Stitt next asked if the Committee would like to vote on the Pinewood Bowl and Lincoln Children's Museum before he had to leave. Savona excused himself from the room for the Pinewood Bowl discussion

and vote. Barclay asked if the facility was for-profit and on whose budget would the \$82,870 go. He was assured the project qualifies as it is publicly owned by the West Haymarket JPA. Barclay said he was all for approving it and thinks it will be an improvement that enhances one of Lincoln's great attractions. Sullivan agreed it's not a direct economic impact, but the improvements will enhance and benefit the city. Stitt said he liked how they broke the project down and asked for just part of the project. Sullivan asked if we set a precedent by giving all the requested amount and Hoehne said the full amount could be given because the fund is full and will keep growing with attractions like this. Jason Hoehne made a motion to grant the Pinewood Bowl \$82,870. Stitt seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, so Stitt called for a vote. Stitt, Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Ogden and Sullivan voted yes. Savona abstained. The motion carried.

Savona returned to the room and Tara Knuth excused herself for the discussion and vote on the Lincoln Children's Museum grant request. Hoehne began saying he liked their research and believed in the project saying it is a niche market. Ogden made a motion to grant the Lincoln Children's Museum \$100,000. Barclay seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Stitt called for a vote. Stitt, Barclay, Hoehne, Savona, Ogden and Sullivan voted yes. Knuth abstained. The motion carried.

After that vote, Bennie Shobe left the meeting, and Stitt gave his final comments on the remaining requests. On the LUX request he said he is torn because it does beautify the city but he's not sure about ROI. He said he would be okay with giving less than requested. He also voiced concern about the Lincoln Sports Foundation wondering if they've made improvements and how does it look now after their prior grant funding. Sean Flowerday said he was out there just three weeks ago and attested it looks great, and you would be pleasantly surprised. Stitt said the Malcolm Youth Sports project concerns him about heads in beds when they're 20 minutes away. Flowerday said the funding granted to them in 2019 was not used as it was granted and the Consultant took the money and left town. Stitt then left the meeting, and Knuth took over for the remaining grant discussion.

Lincoln Sports Foundation:

Next, Knuth introduced Dave Breetzke and Claire McDermott from LSF, and they presented their grant request of \$100,000 to the Committee but first thanking them for the previous grant which they used for soccer fields seeding, aeration, weed control and irrigation which has really improved the fields ultimately bringing in more soccer tournaments and teams. Some numbers of attendance – 250K in 2024 with 10K being from out of state. 135K to date in 2025 and estimating 400K. Breetzke said they are hosting 31 different sports and activities. They said their next push, with this grant and private funding they've already received, would be inside the facility and will include six new hardwood courts, drop-down basketball hoops, protective floor coverings and partition curtains. The courts will accommodate six basketball courts or can re-configure into ten volleyball courts. Breetzke said they need bleachers and relocatable poles for the nets along with more score tables and chairs. They did have HUDL donate three cameras/court, he said.

In Q&A the VPC asked why a wood floor and Breetzke said it's a better bounce for the ball and athletes prefer it. Hoehne asked about marketing. McDermott said they partner with Factor Sports and other companies. They are also working with Malone Center and the northern Lincoln neighborhoods. Barclay asked who owns LSF. McDermott said it is privately owned non-profit with a five-member board of directors and three staff members. Sullivan asked if they were getting any funding from Abbott Foundation or any other Foundations. Breetzke said no, but they are raising money and do have other funding set up. It was confirmed that grant money of \$100,000 would be used for spectator bleachers, tables & chairs, and relocation and installation of additional volleyball sleeves and other court infrastructure. Knuth then thanked them for their time and presentation.

Malcolm Youth Sports Foundation:

The next group to make a grant request was from MYSF and Michael Kucera spoke to the group to request \$100,000 for their complex so they could add bleachers for safer seating, a shade canopy over the bleachers and an electronic scoreboard. He said last fall the Malcolm parents, MYSF and the Village of Malcolm, northwest of Lincoln, improved the complex with a new grass infield, LED lighting, new fencing, dugouts and bullpens. They've also added concrete around the facility. This is giving them one baseball field and two softball/youth-sized fields. They were able to host the High School District Tournament - Class C - and had five teams there for four games over two days. Over 500 attended, he said. They will be hosting the Legion Junior State Tournament in July 2025, he said and an expected 1,500-2,000 in attendance. Kucera detailed the request showing the breakdown of costs for each of the items as well as other funding they've collected through donors, fundraising and grants.

In Q&A, Sullivan asked if this would co-op with the Sandhills Youth Complex in northwest Lincoln, and Kucera said yes. Sean Flowerday asked them to talk about what happened with the previous grant they received from the VPC. The group said they used it to build the other two softball/youth ball fields. Hoehne asked if they are able to host tournaments. Kucera said yes and the new baseball field will be very beneficial. Maul added that it is a nine-minute drive from their complex to the SHYC. There was a question on how this will be used for tourism in Lancaster County. Kucera said they will keep doing what they do with the fields which will bring in players, teams and families to buy gas and food and stay in hotels. Hoehne asked what kind of games are being played there. He said youth and softball mostly. Knuth thanked them for their time and excused them.

Star City BMX:

Knuth next welcomed KC Sohl and he requested \$50,000 in a grant for Star City BMX. He gave a little background of BMX, the 1,000+ foot dirt track. It is made up of four straights and three banked turns. Bikes and helmets are available for new riders, he said, free of charge, and they have about 30+ new members each year. The younger riders use strider balance bikes and currently average five participants per race. One thing they would really like to build is a pump track. He said they are non-racing tracks that are built in small areas and used for riders to increase their skills. They are a circuit of rollers, berms, and jumps that loop around so the riders can keep going. Phase 1 would be \$80K and would include the asphalt surfaced track and signage. Phase 2 would be \$8-10K for fencing. Phase 3 would be \$50K and for landscaping and a shelter. What they are asking for, Sohl said, is \$12K for Sgorz Timing, \$18,300 for lighting, \$10K for the berm, \$4,500 for lights, box and cylinder and \$5,200 for bleachers. A pump track will improve the chance to secure a BMX National Tournament, and the electronic timing system is required. He said, they hosted one in 2020, and the economic impact was over \$305K for one weekend. Knuth opened up for Q&A. Hoehne asked what the chance is we could get the National event. Sohl said he applied for 2026 and thinks we have a 20% chance of getting that one, but with the Sgorz timing, the chance would greatly increase for 2027. He believes we could get a regional next year with 200 riders. Savona asked if the work could be done by the end of 2025 and Sohl said it would be next year. He added that they want to grow, be compliant and get competitions back to Lincoln. They do have some other funding from private donations, Kidwell Electric and Gravel Worlds. Hoehne asked when it's used, Sohl said daily. Maul said this is a family sport and people love it! Sullivan asked what we need for nationals and he answered, the timer and the lights for sure which would cost \$20-30K. Hoehne asked what the economic impact would be from hosting a Nationals and Feyerherm said a half a million dollars.

Morrill Hall:

Next, Knuth invited Dr. Susan Weller to present, and she requested \$37,000 for Morrill Hall to be used for the Marx Discovery Center renovation. It would be used for the beaver engineers learning play area, one of the four core areas in the renovation. They already have funding of \$102,880 secured, she said. Key features include a sound station, videos, animal track and scat ID area and a crawl space in the beaver dam.

The 2019 Cherish Nebraska renovation resulted in a 15% increase in visitors, Weller said, and they project a 10% increase due to this project and a total estimated economic activity of \$1,408,815, an ROI of 121%. She said they have close to 95K guests each year and 60% are from out of the county. She talked about other funding sources and who they partner with, including Lincoln Literacy and the University. Weller thanked the Committee for the opportunity and took questions. Hoehne asked if and how they track the visitors. She said from their license plates and just asked. Hoehne asked if they had the funding secured for the rest of the project and Weller said, yes the other roughly \$132K is secured.

The guests left the room, and the Committee began discussing the remaining six grant requests beginning with Lux. Savona said a good portion of that request is not allowed per the budget requirements and some of the request would need to be deducted. They are asking \$25K and need to remove about \$5K, he said. Sullivan said this is not an overnight generator. Barclay said 10 or 15 years from now it could become that. Flowerday said the area is nice and Knuth said it is a feature of Lincoln and something for guests to do while in town. Savona said we should help support it and made a motion to grant the Lux Center for the Arts \$20,300 which deems the covering of applicable items. Barclay seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, so Knuth asked for a vote. Stitt was absent. Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Motion carried.

Next up for discussion was the Branched Oak Observatory. Todd Ogden made a motion to grant the Branched Oak Observatory the full amount of \$100,000. Savona seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Knuth called for a vote. Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Stitt was absent. Motion carried.

The Lincoln Sports Foundation was up next. Hoehne said it's great that they have private donations and partnering with Kinetic and Speedway is good, too. Barclay asked if they could turn private and was told they won't by Maul and Knuth. Ogden said to do what's best for the community. Barclay made a motion to grant the Lincoln Sports Foundation the full amount of their \$100,000 request. Hoehne seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Knuth called for a vote. Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Stitt was absent. Motion carried.

Next up was the Malcolm Youth Sports Foundation. There was quite a bit of discussion amongst the group in seeing the overnight impact from this project. Barclay asked if it would be used in coordination with the Lincoln complexes and was told in some cases, yes. Hoehne asked about the scoreboard and would that really bring in overnight stays. What would help, he wondered. Savona said the complex is good for their community and wondered if a grant amount for the bleachers should be considered. Hoehne asked if there would be hotel rooms from a junior's tourney and Feyerherm said the last time we hosted a junior legion about 170 rooms were reported picked up by hotels but that may not be the final total amount used. Barclay mentioned waiting a year and see if there is any progress or results – could they play baseball with what they have? Hoehne thought maybe they could have small tournaments. There was a discussion about what happened with the last grant the VPC gave them and there was some consternation. Hoehne made a motion to grant the Malcolm Youth Sports Association \$41,144.79 that would cover part of their request. Knuth seconded the motion. Sullivan reiterated there is no economic impact to justify \$50,000 and Barclay again suggested waiting a year. After those comments, Knuth called for a vote. Hoehne and Knuth voted yes. Barclay, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted no. Stitt was absent. Motion denied. Sullivan made a motion to deny the grant request from the Malcolm Youth Sports Association. Barclay seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Knuth called for a vote. Barclay, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Hoehne and Knuth voted no. Stitt was absent. Motion carried.

Star City BMX was up next. Feyerherm said every year we bid on Nationals of BMX because it is so popular. National events happen around the country in more than one location, and we want to host one of

them in Lincoln. The economic impact would be around \$487K, Feyerherm said. Hoehne asked who owns the land and Maul said the city. Barclay said people love the location. Ogden made a motion to grant Star City BMX \$50,000. Sullivan seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Knuth called for a vote. Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Stitt was absent. Motion carried.

Next up was Morrill Hall. Barclay made a motion to grant Morrill Hall the full amount of their request of \$37,000. Sullivan seconded the motion. There being no further discussion, Knuth called for a vote. Barclay, Hoehne, Knuth, Odgen, Savona and Sullivan voted yes. Stitt was absent. Motion carried.

That was the final grant to be reviewed and there was no other business.

Adjourn:

Knuth thanked everyone again for their attendance and adjourned the meeting at 4:24 p.m.