

Wisconsin Waterfowl Association
Board of Directors Virtual Meeting – Wednesday, August 27, 2025

Board Members present: Mike Depies, Dave Elwing, George Ermert, Joe Gonyo, BJ Grassmann, Scott Hamеле, Connie Markham, Kim Shady, and Bruce Urben

Staff Members present: Kelcy Boettcher, Bruce Ross

Guests in Attendance: Shawn Gibbons

Unable to Attend: Todd Schaller and Pat Smith

Agenda:

- **6:37 PM – Meeting Convened by President Urben**
- **6:38 PM – Financials (Executive Director [ED] Ross and Director of Administration [DA] Boettcher)**

DA Boettcher forwarded July's budgetary spreadsheets and a summary of budget activities to all Board members prior to the meeting. Finances remain on budget, but in the red with expectations to be in the black by the end of the fiscal/calendar year. ED Ross noted that Expo 25 funds intended for use by WWA have not been received yet, but that when they arrive, finances will look significantly better.

- **6:40 PM – Approve July Board Meeting Minutes (President Urben)**

Director Elwing introduced July's minutes. Secretary Elwing motioned that the minutes be approved as written. Director Grassmann seconded. July's Board minutes were unanimously approved as written.

- **6:42 PM – Grant Updates (ED Ross)**

ED Ross reported that the Association received (2) US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) grants for contracted service management. One is a renewal of the Partners Program which DA Boettcher has managed for roughly 8 years; that grant is valued at \$49K. A new grant for invasive species management at Horicon Marsh, valued at \$48K, was also received. Of note, the federal de minimis rate increased from 10% to 15%, allowing WWA to charge more for administrative services, resulting in \$14.5K in anticipated revenue from these two grants.

- **6:48 PM – ED Hiring Update (President Urben)**

President Urben began the discussion by reviewing the ED hiring process. Seven applicants applied for the position. Phase I's applicant review team (President Urben, ED Ross, Vice President [VP] Schaller, DA Boettcher, Treasurer Shady, and Secretary Elwing) assessed each candidate's qualifications against a standardized scoring sheet, examining individual skills regarding leadership of nonprofit organizations, financial development and grant application/management, mission focus, communications and media skills, and several other categories. Four candidates moved to Phase II (zoom call interviews). The Phase II interview team (President Urban, ED Ross, VP Schaller, and Secretary Elwing) asked each candidate a series of scripted questions that were provided to the candidates in advance and several unscripted supplemental questions intended to explore strengths or weaknesses in the candidate's responses. Interviews were timed to further assess each candidate's time management and response to deadlines. Phase II yielded one ED candidate, Brad Heidel, that was significantly more qualified than the others. Brad Heidel was invited to conduct a face-to-face interview with President Urben, ED Ross, DA Boettcher and Secretary Elwing on 26 August. In preparation, he was asked to prepare a 90-day priorities list and a draft strategic vision. The interview team unanimously agreed that Brad Heidel was the correct pick and that his resume, 90-day and draft 3 to 5-year strategic view should be presented to the Board.

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Following a general discussion about qualifications, President Urben asked the Board members if they had any questions regarding Brad Heidel and the recommendation that he become the Association's next ED. Director Ermert asked if salary had been discussed and whether Brad Heidel was comfortable with the salary. President Urben confirmed that Brad Heidel was comfortable with the compensation range and with no benefits. President Urben also informed the Board that he contacted each of Brad Heidel's references and several others whom he knew would also know Brad Heidel. Furthermore, President Urben asked VP Schaller to conduct a DNR records check record which came back clean other than a citation for running without boat lights and an expired vehicle registration citation when Brad was in his 20s. To ensure full transparency, ED Ross informed the Board that Brad Heidel was let go from his previous position within Delta Waterfowl due to a long-standing personality conflict with the newly appointed CEO. Director Ermert asked if Brad Heidel indicated how long he intended to stay in the ED's position. President Urben relayed that both he and Secretary Elwing intended to ask that question during the interview process, but that time ran out. Secretary Elwing injected that by looking at Brad Heidel's resume he is not a "jumper." ED Ross stated that he believes that Brad Heidel will remain in the ED's positions for the foreseeable future based upon his statement about not really looking for high levels of compensation but rather rewarding work. Sean Gibbons highlighted Brad Heidel's Expo management background from both the Delta Waterfowl and from on our own Expo steering group; he further stated that his (Shawn's) belief is that Brad Heidel's experience far exceeds the knowledge and skills of any of our current Board members. ED Ross highlighted one risk factor in hiring Brad Heidel - he is used to working with a number of full-time teammates and subordinates. WWA's organizational structure is much flatter, requiring the ED to do many concurrent tasks by himself or with little help.

Secretary Elwing motioned to extend an offer letter to fulfill the position as WWA's Executive Director to Brad Heidel. Director Grassmann seconded the motion and the Board unanimously voted in favor of the motion.

Director Ermert asked if a press roll out had been drafted. President Urben responded that one had not yet been created. Director Ermert suggested soliciting Shawn Gibbons's assistance and volunteered to also assist. Shawn Gibbons agreed, and President Urben asked Director Ermert to draft the announcement.

- **7:22 PM – Expo Update (ED Ross & Shawn Gibbons)**

Roughly 9.3K people (and 600 dogs) walked through the Expo doors; 1.7K of them attended the event on Friday afternoon. Revenues were up ~50% over 2024 due to adding a second day, better marketing, more vendors and great weather. A full financial report was not yet available, but ED Ross stated that he anticipates the Expo ending \$100K in the black. When asked, every large vendor stated they had good sales and that they planned to return in 2026. Several of the larger vendors (Banded, Rig 'em Right, Vortex, etc.) extended future discounts (20 – 40%) when WWA orders merchandise. Secretary Elwing asked if the discounts would flow down to the chapters to save overhead and increase the amount of hunting gear offered at banquets.

Friday night's banquet was seen as "good enough" for a first-time event with an expected intake of up to \$10K. Vendor and carver donations greatly helped to offset overhead costs; the decoy auction grossed roughly \$5.6K. Areas noted for improvement included better timing (banquet started before the expo closed) and stronger marketing to get more "butts in seats."

Expo achievements included stronger political awareness and WWA brand recognition. One state senator, NRB representatives, and a regional DNR official attended and spoke with ED Ross and others about multiple topics ranging from WWA's wetlands projects to the rationale behind

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seeking sandhill crane (SHC) hunts in Wisconsin. More WWA merchandise was sold at this Expo than ever before, and more attendees were noticed wearing WWA apparel than in previous years. The SHC hunt advocacy booth was a success for terms of gaining recognition of WWA's efforts amongst Wisconsin hunters and increasing political awareness through the number of letters to state senators and representatives generated through the "QR code active emailing" at the booth. As an aside, SHC results were only achieved when passers-by were actively engaged and WWA's advocacy was explained.

President Urben closed the Expo discussion by asking what the deadline for submitting the WI Department of Tourism grant report was. ED Ross responded that it needed to be in by the end of September. Shawn Gibbons noted that the Expo planned steering group planned to apply for another grant for the 2026 Expo.

- **8:02 PM – SHC Advocacy Update (Director Ermert)**

Director Ermert noted a number of recent positive SHC hunt developments. The SHC booth, as noted above, succeeded in generating between 450-500 emails to senators and representatives across the state urging them to SHC hunt support legislation as it moves forward. The SHC coalition (hunting and farming members) will launch another email and social media-based rallying call to action. The coalition is seeking a SHC hearing in the October/November timeframe. Senator Stafsholt agreed to amend the draft bill and to put his name on it to move it forward; Senator Stafsholt chairs the Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage. His support is a major milestone in moving forward, and is primarily the result of WWA's lobbyist, Joel Kleefisch's work and personal connections. Director Ermert noted that coalition partners need to be given advance awareness about the amended draft. President Urben asked if the Board could also receive a copy of the draft. Director Ermert acknowledged the possibility, but cautioned that due to sensitivity, he could only display it visually during a future Board meeting.

Director Ermert encouraged the Board to reconsider his July suggestion to develop a means for WWA to capitalize (fiscally) on the SHC successes being made on behalf of Wisconsin's waterfowlers. Director Hamele asked what the purpose for raising funds would be. ED Ross asked about "how" to pitch the request. Director Elwing reminded the Board that the discussion was tabled previously because of cost, and a lack of effective messaging. Will funds be used to offset lobbyist costs? Will they be applied to fund mission work, in general? What is the compelling reason that people should send money? Director Ermert emphasized that the request needs to go beyond WWA's normal mailing lists and should include agricultural partners and asked Shawn Gibbons to comment on the returns on investment of digital blasts vs direct mailings. Shawn responded that, as discussed previously, a one-time mailer has little chance of success and recommended using a digital (email & social media) outreach. A tentative \$5K expenditure was mentioned, but not discussed or approved.

Presuming the target date is to engender support prior to the upcoming legislative session, ED Ross suggested an ad hoc committee stand up to identify the message and then to develop a plan to sell the message. ED Ross, Directors Ermert and Hamele, and Shawn Gibbons volunteered for the committee. President Urben suggested seeing if SHC call and decoy makers would lend support considering the possibility of opening a new market to them. Director Ermert suggested asking Brad Heidel to come onboard with the committee. (President Urben discussed this with Brad Heidel after the Board Meeting and Brad expressed a strong desire to engage on this matter)

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- **8:10 PM – Recap and Action Items (President Urban)**
 - The Board unanimously approved July's Board minutes.
 - The Board unanimously voted to extend an offer to Brad Heidel to join WWA as the Association's incoming ED.
 - The Board received an initial report on Expo 25.
 - An ad hoc committee will explore means to capitalize on the success and momentum of the SHC hunt movement.
- **8:13 PM – Meeting Adjourned**

Next BoD meeting will be a virtual meeting at 6:30 PM on September 17th.