

**FHDC Advisory Board Meeting**  
**October 13, 2025**  
**4:00 pm**  
**Blue Earth Room – Flint Hills Discovery Center**  
**315 S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street**

The following members of the FHDC Advisory Board were present: Mr. Stephen Higgs, Mr. Charles Otte, Ms. Christy Crenshaw, Ms. Jennifer Gehrt, and Mr. J.T. Lavery. FHDC Director, Mr. Stephen Bridenstine, and FHDC Guest Services/Membership Manager, Ms. Mary Hildreth, were also present.

**Welcome**

The meeting was called to order at 4:04 p.m.

**Minutes**

Ms. Crenshaw asked for corrections to the minutes. Mr. Otte moved, and Ms. Gehrt seconded to approve the minutes. On vote, the motion carried 4/0. Mr. Lavery arrived after this vote.

**Old Business**

*FHDC Outdoor Classroom Renovation Project*

Mr. Bridenstine shared that McCownGorden Construction was the single bidder for the project. They built the FHDC and we are recommending them to be the general contractor for this project and will be moving forward to present to the City Commission on the October 21, 2025, agenda. This project will be funded by the FHDC Foundation. After the Commission meeting, we will start design meetings. In March, we will present it to the City Commission again, for approvals of 70% design of the project and a GMP price. Next, we will move towards phase two and 100% of design followed by construction. A tentative October 2026 completion date will be followed by a ribbon cutting. Ms. Gehrt asked if the project came in under budget. Mr. Bridenstine said we have defined a max budget. Mr. Lavery asked when the FHDC Advisory Board members give feedback. Mr. Bridenstine said he would share details at the January meeting and advisory board is welcome to give feedback that can be considered in for the 70% mark for planning.

**FHDC Report**

Mr. Bridenstine shared a graphic of attendance for the Sunflower Summer to show the impact of the program. Sunflower Summer was only four weeks this summer. Our attendance was down in June before the program started, and we had some of the busiest summer weeks we have ever had during the duration of the program. In the end, we were slightly behind last year's attendance. We had 5,600 people through Sunflower Summer 2025. Our daily attendance was 50% higher. Our daily revenue was up 85% this year. Even though the numbers were down this year, we performed quite well. Mr. Bridenstine emphasized the importance of the program. If Sunflower Summer program goes away, our revenue will take a hit. Ms. Hildreth also shared that guests wait to renew memberships as they can use their Sunflower Summer admission dollars towards the cost of their membership. Mr. Otte shared the weather was cooler compared to 2024 and that also might be a factor in attendance. Mr. Gehrt asked if the Sunflower Summer program spent their money. Mr. Bridenstine explained he did not know but they did extend the program for five days because funds were available.

Mr. Bridenstine shared we are bringing back the immersive exhibit *Stepping into the Prairie*, and we are pairing it with *Grassland Mini Golf*. The Douglass Center owned a mini golf set, and we are repurposing it with a prairie theme. This exhibit will be open from January – May 2026. Mr. Otte asked if it is the same exhibit as last year. Mr. Bridenstine explained that we learned our guests missed the tangible component of the exhibit. Realizing we can make the exhibit more compact and add a secondary hands-on exhibit will stretch the value of the *Stepping into the Prairie*.

The *Sea Monsters Unearthed* exhibit from the Smithsonian changed the security requirements to require an attendant present in the exhibit while it is open to the public. This will cost \$9000 to staff time in the gallery. In the end, we were able to get a grant through the Smithsonian to cover this cost.

Goal is to have at least one exhibit to vote on for 2027 at the next meeting.

Builders Bash event is on Saturday, October 18, 2025, we have great partners. Midwest Concrete Materials is sponsoring FREE youth admission for day. Mr. Bridenstine pointed out that the partners at the bottom of the graphic are participating in the event. Ms. Crenshaw asked if guests need to register for Builders Bash. Mr. Bridenstine said activities are included with admission and it is a drop in event during our normal hours. Mr. Higgs asked if we have approached Home Depot or Menards for sponsorship? Mr. Bridenstine said they have not had a lot of luck with prior requests. He has better luck for businesses that can decide locally. McCownGordon is participating and a major sponsor on the *Building Buddies* exhibit.

Mr. Otte asked about upcoming exhibits. Mr. Bridenstine shared exhibits are getting more expensive, and the budget has decreased and there is no sign that the budget will increase.

### **FHDC Foundation Report**

Bison, Beef, and Bourbon is on Thursday, October 23 at the Stanley Stout Center and there are tickets available to sell. Mr. Otte asked how many tickets are available for the event. Mr. Bridenstine shared the FHDC Foundation has a little under 300 total tickets to sell. The proceeds support FHDC youth education and this year the funds will go towards the outdoor classroom project. He explained the FHDC Foundation is still selling their Kansas State tax credits. This is a great program that can raise more than \$300,000 for the project. Those that buy tax credits will receive a tax advantage on their state tax return. The silent auction will be online soon, and anyone can bid on items.

### **New Business**

2026 Budget update – Mr. Bridenstine shared the 2026 professional services are \$791,700 and have voted the cost-of-living increase was approved for 2026. In 2025, there were no pay increases. The overall budget is \$1,324,000. It has increased but some of the items we have no control over such as utilities expenses and IT expenses. The FHDC has the same amount of money to spend. The revenue expectation has remained the same. Mr. Laverty asked if the revenue expectations are the same as the admission fees increased this year. Mr. Bridenstine shared the admission budget line item and had a substantial increase from \$220,000 in 2024 to \$300,000 in 2025. This number was not touched again due to the large increase. Mr. Laverty asked if we were on track to get that number. Mr. Bridenstine stated we have not had updated revenue numbers from the city since June due to the new ERP system but from what we can see the revenue is up. Membership sales are up 11%. To achieve this number, we need the same amount of foot traffic through the door and as you can see from the attendance, we are lower than last year.

### **ASTC Passport Program**

FHDC membership program will have more changes on January 1, 2026, due to changing rules with ASTC Passport Program. They are enforcing minimum membership pricing to participate in the program. Our members get reciprocal memberships to over 350 centers and this is a powerful benefit of our program. The new ASTC guidelines put minimum membership price to quality as \$40 for individual memberships and \$100 for group memberships. We had to restructure certain memberships to fit into the program. Effective in January, the senior membership will be \$40 and adult membership for \$45. We are eliminating Dual membership and will roll them into a Dual Plus (two named adult plus one guest at any time). To add value to the Family Membership we have decided to add the Association of Children's Museums reciprocal network benefit for Family and Patron level memberships. This additional benefit offers discount admission to another 200 museums. The Family Plus membership now allows three named adults plus one guest each visit. This will also help with those wanting to add a grandparent or nanny to the membership. We will grandfather in those with Dual or Individual Plus memberships, so they comply with the current benefit structures.

Mr. Bridenstine shared that there are no residency distance rules with the ACM reciprocal program. Kansas Children's Discovery Center in Topeka and Wonder Workshop here in Manhattan both participate. Mr. Bridenstine shared ACM is a 50% discount for admission but with enough new attendance, this will boost 2026 revenue. Mr. Otte shared it is important to share the value of the ACM membership. Ms. Crenshaw asked how knowledgeable members are about this program. It was clarified this benefit is on the membership card and a QR code in the member packet. Mr. Laverty clarified that Dual Plus has the same benefits as Family Plus minus ACM Membership. Mr. Laverty asked for the logic for the additional \$50 difference between the Family and the Family Plus. Mr. Bridenstine shared you get an additional

adult plus one guest. Mr. Higgs shared the membership structure is well done. Ms. Gehrt mentioned upper-level membership. Mr. Bridenstine shared that we have administrative approval to change fees. Mr. Otte moved, and Mr. Higgs seconded to approve the changes to the membership structure for 2026. On vote, the motion carried 5/0. Mr. Laverty asked why we haven't participated with ACM in the past? Mr. Bridenstine stated we are not classified as a children's museum but with the renovated Prairie Playscape that opened in 2022, we have much more to offer kids and families.

Mr. Bridenstine noted that Mr. Laverty is coming to the end of his second term and Brad Logan is finishing his first term, opting not to reapply for a second term. Mr. Bridenstine thanked them both for their service. The Board now has two vacancies for Manhattan residents.

Ms. Gehrt asked about the photo exhibition we had a few years ago, to which she brought adult guests. Mr. Bridenstine said we always consider more mature exhibit themes and content.

Mr. Laverty asked about the bison sculpture. Mr. Bridenstine shared that the sculpture process is ongoing and no installation date has been selected so may require another extension.

**Adjournment:**

Ms. Crenshaw asked for a motion to adjourn, Mr. Otte moved, and Mr. Laverty seconded, at 5:00 pm, the meeting was adjourned.



This meeting was held in the Blue Earth Room, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor of the Flint Hills Discovery Center, at 315 S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Manhattan, KS 66502. Public participation was solicited without regard to race, sex, familial status, military status, disability, religion, age, color, national origin, ancestry, sexual orientation, or gender identity. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, persons with disabilities needing special accommodation to participate in the City Commission Meeting or access meeting minutes, or those requiring language assistance (free of charge) should contact the City of Manhattan ADA Coordinator, Deann Tiede, no later than forty-eight (48) hours prior to the meeting, at (785) 587-2442 or 7-1-1 (Relay).

Minutes Submitted by:

*Mary Haldreth*