HUMANITIES MONTANA
BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING MINUTES

May 29–30, 2026

Montana Heritage Center - Ponderosa Room
Helena, Montana

Board of Directors Present: Ray Ekness (Chair), Glory Blue Earth (Vice Chair), Sara Bruya, Slaven Lee, David Cates, Karen Reiff, Tim Wilson, Beth Sullivan, Daniel Charlton
Present via Zoom: Precious McKenzie (Saturday only)
Excused: Jennifer Corning
Staff: John Knight (Interim Executive Director)

FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2026
Executive Board Session Session

At 2:02pm Ray Ekness welcomed the Board to the 2026 Spring Humanities Montana Board Meeting. Following board introductions, facilitator Mary Callihan Baumstark, led a strategic envisioning session focused on Humanities Montana's future direction, organizational strengths, and long-term priorities.

Baumstark opened the session by inviting board members to reflect on why they serve Humanities Montana and what distinguishes the organization within Montana's cultural landscape. Directors shared personal experiences that brought them to the organization and discussed the role of the public humanities in fostering curiosity, civic engagement, lifelong learning, and meaningful community dialogue.

Throughout the conversation, board members repeatedly returned to Humanities Montana's strength as both a statewide convener and connector. Discussion highlighted the organization's ability to bring together libraries, schools, museums, presenters, cultural organizations, and community members while creating opportunities for Montanans to engage with history, literature, culture, and one another. Directors noted that many communities first encounter Humanities Montana through local partnerships and programs and emphasized that these relationships remain central to the organization's statewide impact.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on rural Montana and Humanities Montana's longstanding commitment to serving communities regardless of size or geography. Directors reflected on the importance of ensuring that residents of small and remote communities continue to have access to high-quality humanities programming and noted that Humanities Montana often creates opportunities for conversations and learning experiences that might not otherwise occur.

Through a series of facilitated exercises, Baumstark guided the Board in identifying Humanities Montana's core strengths and underlying value beyond individual programs. Directors consistently highlighted storytelling, community connection, civic dialogue, public learning, and statewide outreach as defining characteristics of the organization. Members discussed Humanities Montana's ability to help communities understand their own histories while creating opportunities to encounter perspectives different from their own and engage with questions of identity, belonging, history, democracy, and civic responsibility.

During a small-group exercise focused on the question, “What is Humanities Montana best at?”, directors emphasized the organization's ability to cultivate opportunities for communities to share stories, histories, and civic experiences across geographic and cultural boundaries. The session concluded with discussion of Humanities Montana's future during a period of organizational rebuilding and reduced federal funding. Directors emphasized the importance of remaining focused on the organization's core strengths while ensuring that future growth and opportunities remain aligned with available resources, organizational capacity, and mission.

The Executive Board Session concluded at 3:30pm.

SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2026
OPENING REMARKS & ACTIONS

Ray Ekness called the meeting to order at 9:01am. An invitation for public comment was offered at 9:03am. No public comment was received. With a quorum present, the meeting proceeded. Ray noted that the consent agenda included the February Board Meeting Minutes; Executive Committee Minutes; Finance Committee Minutes; Governance Committee Minutes; Programs and Outreach Committee Minutes; the Interim Executive Director's Report; and the Program Development Director's Report.

Ray Ekness called for a motion to approve the consent agenda and meeting agenda at 9:04am. Tim Wilson made the motion; David Cates seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

John Knight presented the Interim Executive Director Report at 9:05am, providing updates on statewide outreach, fundraising, audit preparation, organizational stabilization, and federal funding developments.

John reported on outreach efforts across Central and Eastern Montana, including visits with libraries, educators, donors, community leaders, and program participants. Discussion focused on the continued demand for humanities programming in rural communities and the importance of maintaining strong relationships with local partners throughout the state. Directors discussed Humanities Montana's unique ability to serve communities with limited access to cultural programming and emphasized the value of documenting impact through storytelling and community engagement.

John also reviewed recent federal funding developments and the broader landscape facing state humanities councils. Directors discussed planning amid ongoing uncertainty and emphasized the importance of maintaining strong reserves, diversified revenue sources, and disciplined financial management. Board members expressed appreciation for the organization's continued progress in rebuilding operations and maintaining programming during a period of significant transition.

John concluded with a brief fundraising update, reporting on recent grant awards, pending proposals, and individual donor engagement efforts. Discussion focused on strengthening donor relationships, communicating organizational impact, and building long-term sustainability through both institutional and individual support.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR REPORT

At 9:25am, the Board viewed a prerecorded Program Development Director Report from Jenny Bevill. Jenny provided updates on One Book Montana, Great Reads from Great Places, the Democracy Project, the Montana Poet Laureate Program, and the emerging Our Montana Voices initiative. She discussed ongoing efforts to rebuild and strengthen relationships with libraries, schools, museums, and community organizations throughout Montana.

Following the report, directors engaged in a lengthy discussion regarding staffing capacity and organizational priorities. Members acknowledged the significant responsibilities currently being managed by Humanities Montana's small staff and discussed the importance of aligning future growth with available resources. The conversation focused on balancing ambitious programming goals with realistic expectations for staffing and operational capacity.

Board members also discussed social media, communications, and public visibility. Directors encouraged continued efforts to share stories from programs and communities throughout the state and emphasized the importance of demonstrating Humanities Montana's impact to donors, partners, elected officials, and the public. Discussion included opportunities to strengthen digital communications, highlight participant experiences, and increase awareness of Humanities Montana's statewide work.

Mission Moment:

At 9:40am, Mary Jane Bradbury presented the Mission Moment through a condensed version of her Humanities Montana Speakers Bureau program portraying Jeannette Rankin. Bradbury reflected on her experiences presenting throughout Montana and discussed the ways in which humanities programming encourages civic engagement, historical understanding, and public dialogue. Through historical interpretation, she demonstrated how stories from the past can provide contemporary audiences with opportunities to explore questions of citizenship, democracy, leadership, and social change.

The presentation concluded at 9:57am. John Knight and Mary Jane Bradbury departed the meeting at 10:00am.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The Board entered Executive Session at 10:04am to discuss personnel matters related to the Executive Director position and to receive the recommendation of the Executive Director Search Committee.

During the Executive Session, members discussed organizational leadership, continuity, succession planning, and the future direction of Humanities Montana. Search Committee members reviewed the process undertaken by the committee and discussed the factors that informed their recommendation. Discussion centered on organizational stability, leadership during a period of transition, fundraising progress, operational improvements, and relationships with communities and partners throughout Montana.

Ray asked for a motion to appoint Interim Executive Director John Knight as Executive Director. Slaven Lee made a motion and Sara Bruya seconded. No further discussion occurred, and the motion was approved unanimously by the board of directors at 10:19am

The Executive Session concluded at 10:23am.

John Knight returned to the meeting at 10:24am. The Board informed John that the Search Committee had unanimously recommended his appointment as Executive Director of Humanities Montana. John accepted the appointment and thanked the Board for its confidence and trust during a challenging period for the organization.

FINANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

At 10:26 Beth Sullivan reported that the Finance and Audit Committee had reviewed the Budget-to-Actual Report, Profit and Loss Statement, and Balance Sheet prior to presentation to the full Board.

John Knight provided an overview of Humanities Montana's current financial position and discussed audit progress, reserve levels, spending trends, and organizational planning assumptions. Discussion focused on the organization's ability to maintain stability despite ongoing uncertainty related to federal funding. Directors reviewed year-to-date performance and discussed how current spending patterns compare to budget projections.

Between 10:39am and 10:49am, board members asked questions regarding budget categories, reporting practices, and financial assumptions. Discussion included clarification of several line items, review of current grant revenue, and examination of budget-to-actual variances. John Knight and Beth Sullivan emphasized the importance of maintaining consistent financial reporting as Humanities Montana continues rebuilding organizational capacity and public trust.

Ray Ekness called for a motion to approve the Budget-to-Actual Report, Profit and Loss Statement, and Balance Sheet at 10:50am. David Cates made the motion; Glory Blue Earth seconded. Motion carried unanimously at 10:51am.

Following approval of the financial reports, the Board reviewed the Financial Policies and Procedures Manual. Discussion focused on internal controls, accountability measures, compliance responsibilities, and audit readiness. Ray Ekness raised questions regarding the compliance officer role and associated responsibilities. This prompted a broader discussion of governance practices, whistleblower protections, and the historical development of the manual. Directors discussed the importance of maintaining strong internal controls and ensuring that policies remain consistent with best practices for nonprofit financial management.

Ray called for a motion for approval of the Financial Policies and Procedures Manual at 11:04am. Beth Sullivan made a motion for approval and David Cates seconded. David expressed gratitude to John and Beth for all of the work accomplished with the manual. Motion carried unanimously at 11:05am.

Beth Sullivan departed the meeting at 11:05am.

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

At 11:08am, Karen Reiff provided a brief update from the winter Governance Committee meeting, including the committee's recommendation of Daniel Charlton to the full Board. She noted that the next Governance Committee meeting would take place in July. John Knight added that the committee would begin planning for 2027 board recruitment and discuss committee appointments for the coming year. John also confirmed that he had spoken with the Lieutenant Governor's Office and verified that Glory Blue Earth remains an appointed member of the Board. He noted that additional gubernatorial appointments are expected later this summer.

PROGRAMS AND OUTREACH COMMITTEE

The Programs and Outreach Committee met beginning at 11:08am. Discussion focused on donor engagement, communications priorities, statewide outreach, and resource development. John presented Humanities Montana's evolving case for support and reviewed efforts to strengthen fundraising messaging and organizational storytelling. Directors discussed ways to better communicate the impact of Humanities Montana programs and explored opportunities for increased board involvement in donor cultivation and stewardship activities.

Board members also discussed strategies for strengthening relationships with supporters throughout the state and creating more opportunities for community engagement. Conversation emphasized the importance of connecting fundraising efforts to program outcomes and demonstrating the value of humanities programming in communities across Montana.

Slaven Lee asked for a motion to appoint Daniel Charlton to the Programs and Outreach Committee at 11:16am Karen moved to appoint Daniel Charlton and Sara Bruya seconded. The Motion carried unanimously.

A break was taken at 11:16am. The meeting reconvened at 11:24am.

NEH & FUNDRAISING DISCUSSION

At 11:24pm John Knight provided an update regarding recent developments affecting federal funding for state humanities councils and discussed Humanities Montana's planning assumptions moving forward. Directors reviewed potential funding scenarios and discussed the organization's ability to remain flexible while continuing to provide meaningful programming throughout the state.

The Board then engaged in a broader fundraising discussion focused on donor cultivation, stewardship, and long-term sustainability. John Knight reviewed current fundraising activities, pending grant opportunities, and recent successes. Directors discussed opportunities to increase individual giving and considered ways to leverage personal and professional networks in support of Humanities Montana's mission.

At 11:44am, the discussion turned to the possibility of hosting donor cultivation gatherings and community-based fundraising events throughout Montana. Board members discussed how such gatherings might strengthen relationships with supporters, increase visibility, and create opportunities for deeper engagement with Humanities Montana's work.

EXECUTIVE BOARD SESSION

The Board entered another Executive Session with Mary Callihan Baumstark at 11:51am to discuss organizational leadership, strategic priorities, board development, and future planning. The discussion built upon themes identified during Friday's envisioning session, including Humanities Montana's role as a statewide convener, the importance of storytelling and community connection, and the organization's responsibility to serve communities throughout Montana regardless of size or geography. Directors reflected on Humanities Montana's strengths in building relationships, fostering civic dialogue, and creating opportunities for Montanans to engage with history, literature, culture, and one another. The session also centered on how the organization can continue strengthening its statewide presence while remaining focused on its core mission and areas of greatest impact.

Board members also discussed organizational capacity, future staffing needs, and the importance of aligning growth with available resources. Directors emphasized the need to balance ambition with sustainability and reflected on lessons learned during the previous year of organizational rebuilding.

Precious McKenzie departed the meeting at 12:22pm due to a prior commitment.

The Board reconvened at 12:52pm and engaged in a question-and-answer session with John Knight regarding organizational priorities, fundraising goals, communications, and implementation of ideas generated during the board envisioning session. Discussion focused on opportunities to strengthen Humanities Montana's visibility, deepen engagement with communities across the state, and continue building on the progress made over the past year. Directors also discussed priorities for the coming year and emphasized the importance of ensuring that future growth remains aligned with the organization's mission, capacity, and long-term sustainability.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:57pm.