

HUMANITIES MONTANA

Board of Directors Meeting - October 2-3, 2026

Northern Hotel - Enterprise Board Room
Billings, Montana

Board of Directors Present: Ray Ekness (Chair), Glory Blue Earth (Vice Chair), David Cates, Daniel Charlton, Jennifer Corning, Mark Johnson, Sabre Moore, Esther Beth Sullivan (Finance Chair), Tim Wilson

Present via Zoom: Sara Bruya, Precious McKenzie

Excused: Slaven Lee (Programs and Outreach Chair), Karen Reiff (Governance Chair)

Staff: John Knight (Executive Director), Jenny Bevill (Program Development Director)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2026

Opening Remarks and Actions

At 2:00pm, Ray Ekness welcomed the Board to the 2026 Fall Humanities Montana Board Meeting. A quorum was present, with eight directors attending in person and Sara Bruya and Precious McKenzie participating via Zoom. Jen Corning was excused from the Friday Meeting. Roll call occurred at 2:03pm with all staff and attending board members introducing themselves.

- At 2:03pm, Ray invited public comment; no public comment was received. He then asked for any membership updates to be discussed. Ray announced that he would step down from the board at the end of the year.
- Ray reviewed the meeting agenda and consent agenda, which included the May 29-30 Board Meeting Minutes; June 26 Special Board Meeting Minutes; Executive Committee minutes from June, August, and September; Finance and Audit Committee minutes from June and September; Governance Committee minutes from July, August, and September; and Ad Hoc Programs and Outreach Committee minutes from June, July, and August.

At 2:15 pm, a motion was made by Sabre Moore and seconded by David Cates to approve the meeting agenda and consent agenda. With no further discussion, the motion carried unanimously.

Executive Director Report

At 2:17 p.m., John Knight presented the Executive Director Report.

- John described Humanities Montana as moving beyond the crisis-response period of 2025 and into a period of more intentional planning. He provided updates on federal funding, the recently completed NEH site review, improvements to the organization's financial systems, fundraising, and the continued rebuilding of statewide programming.
- He reported that Humanities Montana has \$687,618 available through NEH awards extending through April 30, 2027. He discussed the current federal appropriations environment and emphasized the importance of continuing to diversify revenue while planning around funding already known to be available. He then reviewed the August 27 NEH site review, which included conversations with staff, board members, and community partners. Directors asked

about the purpose of the review, changes to the process following staffing reductions at NEH, and the broader federal funding outlook.

- John also highlighted growth in One Book Montana, the Democracy Project, Great Reads from Great Places, and Our Montana Voices, as well as plans to relaunch Speakers in the Schools. He reported continued growth in individual giving and discussed the September house party in Arlee as a model for future donor cultivation.
- David Cates asked John to describe his vision for Humanities Montana as the organization moves beyond the recent period of crisis. John described a more nimble organization that can respond to community interests, develop partnerships, test new program models, and diversify funding while remaining mindful of staff capacity. The Board discussed Humanities Montana's historic role, the balance between academic and public humanities, and the importance of strategic planning as the organization determines its future direction.
- Tim Wilson asked about opportunities to learn from other state humanities councils. John discussed his work with the Federation of State Humanities Councils and other council directors. Beth Sullivan noted that councils operate in different funding environments, which influences their programs and organizational structures.

Program Development Director Report

At 2:39 p.m., Jenny Bevill presented the Program Development Director Report, highlighting recent program activity and statewide outreach.

- Jenny discussed the continued growth of One Book Montana and Great Reads from Great Places, including recent events with Montana authors Robin Kolb and Nick Triolo. Jenny also provided updates on the Democracy Project, Our Montana Voices, and preparations to relaunch Speakers in the Schools.
- She discussed her upcoming statewide outreach trip through eastern and north-central Montana. She described the trip as an opportunity to meet directly with libraries, schools, cultural organizations, and other community partners, strengthen existing relationships, and better understand where Humanities Montana can provide support.
- The Board discussed the importance of maintaining a statewide presence and building relationships in rural communities as Humanities Montana continues to expand programming. Jenny and John emphasized that these conversations help inform future programs and partnerships while ensuring growth remains manageable for staff.

The Friday board meeting adjourned at 3:08pm following the Program Development Director Report. Board members then visited the Western Heritage Center for an introduction and tour with Executive Director Becky Jeter, followed by the scheduled board dinner at Walkers Restaurant.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2026

Opening Remarks & Executive Board Session

Ray Ekness called the Saturday meeting to order at 8:36am. Jennifer Corning was in attendance; Tim Wilson and Precious McKenzie were excused from the Saturday session. Sara Bruya continued to participate via Zoom. The Board entered Executive Session at approximately 8:39am for the Executive Director performance review and discussion of compensation and health benefits. Staff were not excused from the session.

- At 8:39 a.m., the Board entered executive session to discuss the Executive Director's performance review and compensation. Staff were not excused from the session.
- The Executive Committee reported that John Knight had exceeded expectations in his performance review, particularly in the areas of fundraising and outreach. The Committee recommended a 10% salary increase and, based on changes in the health insurance market, following the FY27 budget recommendation to increase the monthly health insurance stipend from \$1,500 to \$1,800.
- The Board expressed no concerns with the recommendations. The executive session concluded at 8:43 a.m.

Finance and Audit Committee

At 8:43 a.m., Beth Sullivan opened the discussion on the Finance and Audit Committee report.

- John provided context for newer directors on the financial uncertainty of the prior year, when the Board had been working from multiple budget scenarios because federal funding was unknown. He noted that the current financial reporting and operating structure provides a much clearer basis for board oversight.
- At **8:53 a.m.**, John reviewed FY26 budget metrics and financial statements through July 31. The revised FY26 operating budget projected approximately \$584,000 in revenue and \$539,000 in expenses, with a projected year-end surplus of approximately \$44,000. Cash on hand as of July 31 was approximately \$543,000. John noted that subsequent NEH drawdowns were not reflected in the July statements. The Board discussed NEH reimbursements, restricted and unrestricted funds, and improvements to financial reporting.
- John then presented the FY26 Budget to Actual, Profit and Loss, and Balance Sheet reports through July 31.

At 9:05 a.m., Daniel Charlton moved to approve the FY26 Budget to Actual, Profit and Loss, and Balance Sheet reports through July 31, 2026. Glory Blue Earth seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

At 9:10 a.m., John presented the proposed FY27 operating budget, reviewing revenue assumptions and the changing mix of federal, foundation, and individual support.

- He discussed continued NEH funding, grant carryover, and efforts to increase general operating support. The Board discussed the importance of developing unrestricted funding, including recent requests to the Heyneman Foundation and support from Headwaters Foundation. John also discussed the Clemente Course in the Humanities as a potential future partnership with universities and community colleges.
- John reviewed personnel expenses and contracted support. Directors discussed staffing capacity, benefits, and the possibility of future budget amendments as additional funding becomes known. He then reviewed operating expenses, including changes intended to more clearly distinguish general staff travel, program travel, and professional development.
- John finally reviewed program expenses and proposed increasing support for Montana Conversations and Speakers in the Schools. The Board discussed program demand and staff capacity to administer additional bookings. John and Jenny emphasized the importance of growing programs at a manageable pace. John also discussed Big Sky Reads microgrants as a measured step toward returning to grantmaking.
- The Board discussed adding funding for a one-year strategic planning process. John explained that the organization had received consultant proposals of approximately \$20,000 and that the

planning process would help establish a clear direction for Humanities Montana as it moves beyond the recent period of organizational and federal funding uncertainty. Directors discussed the value of investing in planning now while recognizing that the budget could be amended again as funding and organizational needs become clearer.

- John also recommended amending the proposed FY27 budget to add \$40,000 for Montana Conversations and Speakers in the Schools and \$20,000 for strategic planning, increasing projected expenses by \$60,000.

At 9:54 a.m., Mark Johnson moved to amend the proposed FY27 operating budget by adding \$40,000 for Montana Conversations and Speakers in the Schools and \$20,000 for strategic planning. David Cates seconded. The motion carried with no opposition.

- Directors asked additional questions about development and printing expenses and the ability to amend the budget later in the year. Beth reminded the Board that it was approving the overall budget and that individual lines could be managed within that approved total, subject to board policy and future amendments as needed.

Ray Ekness moved to approve the FY27 operating budget as amended. Sabre Moore seconded. At 10:05 a.m., the motion was carried unanimously. Beth Sullivan and Glory Blue Earth recognized John's leadership and the improved readability and usefulness of the budget materials.

At 10:07 a.m., John presented the TY24 Form 990, noting that it corresponds to Humanities Montana's FY25 audited financials and had been reviewed by the Finance and Audit Committee and submitted by the September 15 deadline. No additional Board action was required.

At 10:08 a.m., John reviewed updates to the Financial Policies and Procedures Manual Addendum and the related RACI matrix.

- He explained that the updates clarify responsibilities for financial review, documentation, approvals, and segregation of duties following the FY25 audit, the addition of fractional CFO support, and the transition to Lemeza Bookkeeping.
- The Board discussed the need for a broader review of financial policies, including records retention requirements that no longer reflect Humanities Montana's current staffing capacity. John noted that this work would continue through the Finance and Audit Committee during the winter.
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At 10:12 a.m., the Finance and Audit Committee report concluded and the Board took a break.

Governance Committee

At 10:25 a.m., the Board reconvened and John presented the Governance Committee report on behalf of Governance Committee Chair Karen Reiff. He reviewed the leadership and committee succession process, including the summer board survey and follow-up conversations with board members.

- John presented the proposed 2027 Board leadership based on the Board Committee and Leadership Survey sent to the full Board in summer 2026 and subsequently reviewed by the Governance Committee. With Ray Ekness completing his service as Chair at the end of 2026, the Governance Committee recommended Beth Sullivan as Chair for a one-year term and Daniel

Charlton as Vice Chair. John thanked Glory Blue Earth for her willingness to step out of the Vice Chair role to support the leadership transition.

- John then presented the proposed 2027 committee leadership and membership. Karen Reiff would continue as Governance Committee Chair, David Cates would serve as Finance and Audit Committee Chair, and Slaven Lee would continue as Programs and Outreach Committee Chair. John also reviewed the proposed membership of each committee.
- Beth reminded the Board that, under the bylaws, Board leadership must be elected by anonymous paper ballot and receive approval from a majority of the Board.

At 10:32 a.m., the Board voted by anonymous paper ballot on the proposed 2027 Board leadership and committee structure. Sara Bruya, participating remotely, submitted her vote separately. The proposed leadership and committee structure received the required majority and was approved.

- Directors thanked Beth for agreeing to return to the Chair role and Ray for his leadership during a period of significant organizational transition.

John then reviewed the proposed 2027 Board meeting schedule: a virtual winter meeting February 19–20, a spring meeting in Havre May 21–22, and a fall meeting in Missoula October 1–2. The Board discussed using the Havre meeting as an opportunity for additional engagement with rural constituents and community partners.

Mark Johnson asked about the timeline and process for adding new Board members. John clarified the current recruitment and appointment process and anticipated timeline through the end of the year.

- John noted that the application period for vacancies is currently open and appointments should be voted on by the full board by the end of the year.

Ad Hoc Programs and Outreach Committee

At 10:43 a.m., John presented the Programs and Outreach Committee report on behalf of Committee Chair Slaven Lee who was excused from the meeting.

- He began with an update on fundraising and development. John reported that individual giving had increased approximately 30% over the prior year, with year-end fundraising still ahead. He also discussed continued efforts to diversify revenue through foundation support and individual giving.
- John also highlighted the September house party in Arlee as a successful small-scale donor cultivation event and discussed plans to continue using gatherings of this kind to introduce supporters to Humanities Montana's work. Ray Ekness asked how Humanities Montana tracks individual donations and donor engagement. John explained the organization's use of Bloomerang to maintain donor records and track giving and donor relationships.
- Jenny gave an update on the Outreach event in Roscoe at River Arts and Books, noting it was a successful community event.
- John also discussed foundation fundraising, including the recent \$75,000 general operating support request to the Heyneman Foundation, as well as the possibility of additional grant opportunities through the Federation of State Humanities Councils and Mellon Foundation. He then provided an update on programs and statewide outreach; highlighting the continued expansion of Our Montana Voices, which had reached approximately 60 programs statewide, along with growth in One Book Montana and Great Reads from Great Places. He also

discussed the planned return of Speakers in the Schools, supported in part by a \$20,000 grant from the Washington Foundation.

- The Board discussed the importance of maintaining a visible statewide presence and building relationships in rural communities. John and Jenny highlighted recent and upcoming travel across eastern and north-central Montana and discussed how statewide outreach supports programming, partnerships, and long-term development efforts.

Strategic Planning

At 11:14 a.m., John introduced a discussion of strategic planning for FY28. He reviewed the proposed approach of developing a one-year strategic plan during spring 2027, followed by a period of implementation and organizational preparation before the plan takes effect with FY28.

- Jennifer Corning and Beth Sullivan asked whether Humanities Montana needed a new one-year strategic plan or whether the existing plan could be revised. John explained that the organization has changed substantially over the past year and needs a guiding document that reflects its current identity, capacity, programs, and funding environment. Rather than revisiting the recent period of crisis, he recommended a forward-looking process focused on where Humanities Montana wants to go next.
- Sabre Moore expressed support for the proposed timeline. Ray Ekness discussed the opportunity to think about Humanities Montana as an organization entering a new period of growth, including how resources should be directed as funding and programming expand. Glory Blue Earth reflected that the changes forced on the organization over the previous year had also created an opportunity to reconsider how Humanities Montana works. John noted that the organization can now move beyond managing immediate crises and make more intentional decisions about its future.
- The Board discussed priorities that should inform the planning process. David Cates emphasized strengthening partnerships, including relationships with organizations and institutions around the state. Sara Bruya discussed the importance of building statewide support, while Glory Blue Earth suggested using future gatherings, including a Helena house party, to bring together representatives and supporters from across Montana. Directors emphasized that the planning process should remain grounded in Humanities Montana's statewide mission and relationships with communities.
- John explained that the proposed process would develop the one-year plan from approximately February through May 2027, followed by a period from June through October 2027 to prepare for implementation. The new strategic plan would take effect with the beginning of FY28.

At 11:39 a.m., David Cates moved to affirm the proposed direction and timeline for development of a one-year FY28 strategic plan. Glory Blue Earth seconded. The motion carried with no opposition. Board members expressed appreciation for John's work and confidence in the direction of the organization.

- Before adjournment, Ray reflected on his years of involvement with Humanities Montana and his appreciation for the organization's work. He expressed confidence in the staff, Board, and programs and described the current moment as an opportunity to rethink how Humanities Montana works, grows, and moves forward. Ray thanked Board members for their time, effort, donations, and continued commitment to the organization.

At 11:42 a.m., the meeting adjourned.