Nebraska Tourism Commission Meeting Minutes

August 6, 2026 9:00am MST
Location: Legacy of the Plains Museum
2930 Old Oregon Trail
Scottsbluff, NE 69341

Commission Chair David Fudge called the meeting to order at 9:00am.

Commissioners present: John Chapo, Courtney Dentlinger, David Fudge, Roger Kuhn, Rachel Kreikemeier, Maureen Larsen, Barry McFarland, Robert Sabin, David Wolf

Commissioners absent: Darrin Barner, Ashley Olson, Paul Younes

Public Meeting Notice was published in the Lincoln Journal Star on July 30, 2026.

David Fudge welcomed attendees and encouraged Commissioners present to introduce themselves to the group.

Barry McFarland motioned for approval of the meeting agenda at 9:02am. John Chapo seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

David Fudge opened public comment period at 9:03am. With no members of the public coming forward, public comment period was closed.

Roger Kuhn motioned to approve May 13, 2026, meeting minutes at 9:04am. Rachel Kreikemeier seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Commission Chair Report

David Fudge noted an informal round table discussion regarding LR 310 will take place October 16, 2026, from 1-4:30pm at Mid-Plains Community College in North Platte. The intent is to examine the structure, duties, and potential consolidation of the Nebraska Tourism Commission within the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

Visit Nebraska Director's Report

Jenn Gjerde noted Visit Nebraska has recently completed a relocation of staff office spaces from the Nebraska State Office Building to 500 S. 16th Street, Suite 200 in downtown Lincoln. A new staff member has joined the team, Emma Ebito is settling into her new role as Industry Relations and Education Coordinator. Recruitment for the vacant Marketing Manager position has begun and the listing is posted on the Nebraska State Government job site as of last week. Staff members recently attended Destinations International Convention in Portland, Oregon and look forward to gaining further industry insight at the upcoming US Travel Association ESTO conference later this month in Philadelphia. Both workshops provide valuable educational training, networking opportunities, and marketing insights to propel the agency forward within the tourism realm. As agency head, Jenn is increasing director outreach via meetings within the state as well, targeting partnership building with leadership representatives across the state.

Visit Nebraska Program Updates

Jenna Bartja shared details regarding the upcoming 2026 Nebraska Agritourism and Adventure Travel Workshop which will be held October 19-21 in Scottsbluff. Registration will open later this month, and the industry newsletter will announce additional information.

Heather Hogue provided highlights of the upcoming proposed grant cycle, noting the goals of the program involve a move to simplify application processes, target funding towards impactful projects, consider the demands of the industry and current trends, while intermingling opportunities for applicants to receive funding assistance for participation in additional Visit Nebraska programs. Jenna Bartja spoke about a new directed-marketing opportunity that will be included this year involving destination planning assistance for applicants. Guidelines will be reduced to one document, rather than 2 separate grant programs, while continuing to include statutory requirements for the use of state aid. The merger will allow interested applicants to request funding for a variety of components within one single application.

The proposed grant cycle timeline:

October 13, 2026, opening date of the cycle, guidelines become available. December 16, 2026, deadline for applications. Awardees would be announced February 16, 2027.

Roger Kuhn motioned for approval of the proposed FY2026-2027 grant cycle timeline at 9:23am. Barry McFarland seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Commission Committee Reports - Marketing Committee

Jenn Gjerde provided marketing result statistics from FY2025-2026, and the group discussed the ever-changing impacts of AI. The social media impact of Visit Nebraska's marketing effort is showing growth. Upcoming buy-in programs will have tiered pricing with Trip Advisor and Google Search through a Co-Op Program and a Destination Optimization program. Opportunities will also be highlighted within the agency's grant program. Monthly public relations efforts were also shared. Annual contracts with Miles Partnership for content publishing and advertising and media buying, and Turner PR (Shipyard) for public relations services will be sunsetting at the end of this fiscal year on June 30, 2027. To seek requests for proposals, Visit Nebraska staff would partner with the Department of Administrative services for the process which takes several months to complete.

John Chapo motioned to begin the discussed Request for Proposal process in the fall of 2026 at 9:40am. Dave Wolf seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Commission Committee Reports – Finance Committee

Rachel Kreikemeier provided an overview of the agency financials, including spending authority, cash balance, budget status reports, general ledger reports for May, June, and July along with lodging tax deposits and spring/summer 2026 advertising costs.

Barry Mcfarland motioned to approve the May, June, and July 2026 general ledgers at 9:49am. Courtney Dentlinger seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Travel Counselor Program

An overview of total visitor counts for all facilities staffed with paid travel counselors from 2018 to date was provided, the group discussed the impact of the program and cost. Current 2026 summer budget for the program is $207,436. Centers are operated Mid-May through Labor Day, with part time staff members stationed across the state to assist with promoting Nebraska to the traveling public. A July 2026 request from the State Budget Administration requires all agencies to submit plans for fiscal restraint and spending reductions by not less than 5 percent. Visit Nebraska is formulating future initiatives for a modern transition of the Travel Counselor Program to become more self-sufficient, potentially to involve a partnership with the Department of Transportation to utilize QR codes to direct visitors digitally to online information. A video concierge program was discussed along with implementation and costs to be further researched. In addition to program costs and the need for regeneration of the effort, the applicant pool for the seasonal positions has declined severely in recent years, which may potentially be related to safety concerns in the locations of the centers along busy roadways.

Maureen Larsen motioned to discontinue the Travel Counselor Program for upcoming spring/summer of 2027 at 9:57am. Robert Sabin seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

FY2026-2027 Working Budget

Jenn Gjerde provided budget detail comparisons from prior fiscal year to current. Due to the need for budget reductions, the National Western Stock Show booth and travel/staffing expenses has been removed for winter 2027, however Denver marketing efforts will continue this fiscal. The group discussed impact of group tour sponsorships and marketing efforts, Jenn Gjerde noted the American Bus Association costs will be greatly reduced for 2027. Rachel Kreikemeier provided the cash flow projection report as a monthly spend indicator.

Barry McFarland motioned to approve the FY2026-2027 Working Budget as presented at 10:17am. Courtney Dentlinger seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

FY2027-2029 Biennial Budget Request

Jenn Gjerde provided an overview of the required Enterprise Issues involving public servant salary increases and health insurance premiums for each year of the upcoming biennium. The group discussed current budget, spending authority, and PSL levels and noted once again the fiscal restrain memo recently sent to all agencies from State Budget.

Robert Sabin motioned to approve the FY2027-2029 Biennial Budget request with increases only to include the required Enterprise Issues at 10:26am. Dave Wolf seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Commission Committee Reports – Strategic Plan Committee

Commissioners were encouraged to complete the recent surveys sent to tourism industry members, which is part of the feedback being collected for the formulation of the next agency Strategic Plan. The Department of Economic Development will be partnering with Visit Nebraska to formulate the plan, at a cost of approximately $15,000 as noted by Maureen Larsen. The additional research and data collection will be provided by Visit Nebraska via contractors/subcontractors to include within the plan. The October Commission meeting will be a working session to review draft plan components with the plan to execute the plan in the coming calendar year.

Upcoming meeting will be held:

October 15 near Beatrice at Homestead National Park.

John Chapo motioned to adjourn the meeting at 10:37am. Rachel Kreikemeier seconded.

Roll call vote – Commissioners in favor: Chapo, Dentlinger, Fudge, Kuhn, Kreikemeier, Larsen, McFarland, Sabin, Wolf. Opposed: none. Abstain: none. Not present: Barner, Olson, Younes. Motion carried with 9 in favor, 3 not present, none opposed.

Respectfully submitted by Heather Hogue.