

## Aransas Pathways Steering Committee

**Minutes of April 7, 2026 Regular Monthly Meeting at 3:00 P.M. at the Aquarium Education Center located at 706 Navigation Circle, Rockport, Texas, 78382**

### 1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 3:00 P.M. by Co-Chair Rich Connell.

### 2. Roll Call and Confirmation of Quorum

Members present: Commissioner Pat Rousseau, Rich Connell, Dr. Rebekah Rylander, Jatin Bhakta, Councilwoman Mary Ann Pahmiyer, Steve Ferguson, and Jim Farnsworth,

Members absent: Andrea Hattman, Pam Stranahan, and Shelly Stuart

Staff: Rene Butler and Leah Medado

Guests: Earl Matthew, Nanette Eiland, Dana Justice, Pat Cruz and Bill Burge

A quorum was present.

### 3. Citizens to Be Heard

The consent agenda, including approval of previous meeting minutes, was presented and approved.

- a) Approval of March 3, 2026 Minutes
- b) Minutes from the March 2026 meeting were presented.
- c) Motion to approve was made and seconded.
- d) No discussion or objections.
- e) **Result:** Approved unanimously.

### 4. Steering Committee Co-Chair's Report Rich Connell

- a) Welcome remarks were provided.
- b) **Financial Update:**  
Approximately **\$75,000–\$78,000** remains in capital funds, with about **\$1.17 million** in restricted Pathways funds. Funding continues to grow alongside active project implementation.
- c) **FY2027 Budget Planning:**  
Budget development begins in **June** with Commissioners Court and Rene Butler. Members are encouraged to submit ideas and project needs.
- d) **Water & Site Improvements:**  
Ongoing efforts to restore water access, including irrigation at the History

Center and well water improvements, are showing positive results, with improved vegetation and increased bird activity.

## **5. Subcommittee Reports-Commissioner Pat Rousseau**

- a) **Murph Park Review:**  
Increased interest in Murph Park and shoreline protection due to its cultural and historical significance, particularly related to early Indigenous presence.
- b) **Site Assessment:**  
A site visit is scheduled with an archaeologist and geologist to evaluate how to preserve, protect, and responsibly utilize the area moving forward.
- c) **Best Practice Reference:**  
A comparable model is being considered from Jesse H. Jones Park & Nature **Center** in Harris County, Texas, which successfully balances public access with historical preservation.

### **5.1 Birding – Rebekah Rylander (c/o Leah Medado)**

- a) **Aransas Bird Days Update:**  
Planning is progressing well, with strong community interest and tours filling quickly. Volunteer support and coordination efforts were acknowledged.
- b) **Event Readiness:**  
Final preparations are underway, including the installation of bird feeders at Linda S. Castro Nature Sanctuary and Connie Hagar Cottage Sanctuary.
- c) **Water Feature Considerations:**  
Suggestions were made to temporarily supplement water features during the event (e.g., manual filling or simple catchment systems) to support bird activity during migration. These may also serve as educational demonstrations for visitors.
- d) **Site Improvements:**  
Positive feedback was given on recent enhancements at Linda Castro, particularly pond restoration and vegetation management, with visible improvements in habitat conditions.
- e) **Seasonal Observation:**  
Spring migration is underway, with **increased bird activity** observed, reinforcing excitement for the upcoming event.

### **5.2 Kayaking – Jim Fansworth**

- a) **Little Bay Trails Project:**  
Approved by Commissioners Court and submitted to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Review is underway. Updates for the existing trail have also been submitted for website integration, with a preview expected soon.
- b) **Linda S. Castro Sculpture Installation:**  
Installation scheduled with artist Kirk Seese. Site preparations, including base and railing, have been completed. Installation will take place Saturday morning with support from county staff.
- c) **Installation Details:**  
Sculpture installation is expected to begin shortly after 9:00 AM, with preparatory framing already completed. County staff will assist with placement and stabilization, including the initial concrete setting, with final finishing work to follow.
- d) **Site Impact & Future Opportunities:**  
The sculpture site offers strong visual value overlooking the park and pond areas, enhancing overall visitor experience.
- e) **Funding & Grants:**  
Upcoming opportunities include Texas Parks and Wildlife Department park grants, which may support enhancements at Murph Park and other Pathways sites.
- f) **Coastal Management Program (CMP):**  
Additional funding avenues through the Texas General Land Office were discussed following a recent CMP workshop. Potential projects include coastal protection and site improvements.  
An **early June deadline** requires timely identification and prioritization of projects, with the option to phase implementation starting with planning.
- g) **Kayak Launch Enhancement:**  
The current launch area is functional but rough. Improvements such as a **topper and potential ADA-compliant kayak launch** are being explored in coordination with the Navigation District, which has expressed interest in partnership.
- h) **Eco Summit & Program Alignment:**  
Aransas Pathways has been invited to participate in the Eco Summit on June 19 hosted by the Cultural Arts District, with potential involvement in a panel and exhibit table.
- i) **Event Integration:**  
The Kayak at Sunset event is proposed for the same day, aligning with the ecotourism theme and offering a complementary experience for visitors.
- j) **Scheduling Consideration:**  
June 19 falls on Juneteenth (federal holiday), presenting an opportunity to attract visitors for extended stays; final scheduling will be evaluated.

## 5.2 History – Pam Stranahan (Presented by Co-Chair Rich Connell)

- a) **History Center Updates:**  
A traveling exhibit is currently on display at the History Center, highlighting recent improvements and ongoing work.
- b) **Upcoming & Current Programs:**
- “*Vaquero Talk*” – April 19 at the History Center

- Aransas County Historical Commission program on historical markers – April 22
  - Texas Maritime Museum exhibit “*Tides of Freedom: Spain & the Battle for American Independence*” – opens April 23
- c) **Rio Grande Valley Historical Society program** – April 29
- d) **Exhibit Context:**  
The Texas Maritime Museum exhibit is part of the Texas America250 initiative, commemorating the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026.
- e) **Research Update:**  
A request has been submitted to the Texas Railroad Commission regarding oil and gas activity in the Copano Cove Ranch area; status pending.

### 5.3 Copano Cove Ranch/Land Use Sub-Committee -Steve Ferguson

- a) **Overview:**  
The subcommittee is in the early stages of the project, emphasizing research, collaboration, and shared understanding through document review and on-site assessment.
- b) **Subcommittee Composition:**  
Members include Bill Burge, Charlie Belaire, Maureen Crocker, and Chad Kacir (retired from the Natural Resources Conservation Service), bringing expertise in wetlands, conservation, and land management.
- c) **Working Approach:**  
The group is engaging in collaborative discussions and evaluation, working through differing perspectives as part of a science-based planning process.
- d) **Conservation Framework:**  
A key priority is understanding governing documents and conservation easements to define project opportunities and constraints.
- e) **Planning Direction:**  
The subcommittee is defining the desired end result, beginning with a draft table of contents for the final report to guide deliverables.
- f) **Consultant & Planning Strategy:**  
The committee is evaluating private consultants and public agency support, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Gulf Coast Joint Venture.  
Considerations include cost, expertise, and project fit.

**g) Engineering Requirement:**

The Texas General Land Office requires the engagement of an engineering firm as part of grant compliance, despite cost considerations.

**h) Consultant Criteria & Partnerships:**

The subcommittee emphasized selecting firms with ecological expertise, noting that engineering firms may partner with specialists to meet project needs.

**i) Procurement & Process:**

Questions were raised regarding county procedures for engaging external consultants, with guidance to be coordinated with leadership.

**j) Current Actions & Collaboration:**

Initial on-site assessments have been conducted, with plans to engage community experts, Master Naturalists, and partner organizations in the process.

**k) Next Steps:**

- a. Strengthen coordination with the **North American Land Trust**
- b. Refine project scope and assignments
- c. Develop and issue an **RFP within 4–6 weeks**

**l) Meeting Schedule & Timeline:**

The subcommittee will meet biweekly at the Aransas County Airport (Contract 132), targeting an internal deadline of March 31 to meet grant timelines.

## **5.5 Trails—Rich Connell (Pam Stranahan)**

**a) AVA Trailways Program:**

Aransas Pathways continues collaboration with the American Volkssport Association and the Texas Volkssport Association under the existing Rockport Trailways program.

**b) Upcoming Trail Event (June 6):**

In celebration of National Trails Month, a new event “Pathways in Motion” will be launched as a soft opening of expanded trail offerings.

**c) Fulton Harbor Walk Expansion:**

A new trail route will be introduced in collaboration with Jatin Bhakta, highlighting the Fulton Harbor area.

The event is planned to start at the Fairfield Inn & Suites Rockport (Fulton side).

d) **Program Development:**

This initial launch will serve as a pilot, with the goal of developing a sanctioned AVA event later in the year (targeting cooler months).

## 5.6 Marketing – Jatin Bhakta

a. **Trail Event Launch:**

June 6 will serve as the launch of Aransas Pathways trail events under the “Pathways in Motion” initiative.

b. **Marketing Initiatives:**

Continued development of marketing tools and digital platforms to support event promotion and outreach.

c. **Meeting Schedule:**

The Marketing Committee meets monthly on the second Tuesday of each month to coordinate campaigns, events, and budget planning.

## 5.7 Facilities- Rene Butler

**All activities reported were at Linda Castro Nature Sanctuary.**

a) **Site Monitoring & Protection:**

Signage will be installed to deter unauthorized vegetation cutting. A solar camera system is now in place to support monitoring and visitor safety.

b) **Site Enhancements & Installations:**

Binocular installation is scheduled, supported by steps constructed from repurposed shellcrete stone from the Aransas County Courthouse project.

c) **Signage/billboards** are in production and targeted for installation prior to upcoming events at Tule East and Linda S. Castro Nature Sanctuary.

d) **Habitat & Vegetation Management:**

Cattail removal was conducted using best practices to improve visibility and habitat conditions while minimizing ecological impact.

Exploration of alternative native grasses is underway to balance habitat health and site aesthetics.

e) **Water Management & Sustainability:**

Work has reached the **water table**, improving water retention at Linda Castro. Consideration is being given to installing a well system to maintain a consistent water source. Temporary water support (e.g. stored water supply) will be used during events as needed.

- f) **Wildlife Impact:**  
Increased activity from birds and other wildlife (including deer and small mammals) has been observed, indicating positive habitat response.
- g) **Maintenance & Partnerships:**  
Road & Bridge Department was recognized for significant improvements, including the enhanced parking area, which supports future events. Continued support from partners such as AEP for trail and vegetation clearing was acknowledged.

## 5.8 Events –Leah Medado

- a. **Acknowledgment:**  
Appreciation was extended to Niccolette Stehling (Admin, AC Facilities), for providing administrative and printing support for ongoing events (Aransas Bird Days) and operations.
- b. **Event System Development:**  
Aransas Pathways is implementing a standardized event management system to better organize increasing programs and partnerships. The system includes an event framework and assessment tool to guide planning and decision-making.
- c. **Event Categories:**  
Three types of events have been defined:
- Major Events: Planned 9–12 months in advance (e.g., Aransas Bird Days)
  - Mid-Scale Events: Planned within 3–6 months
  - Pathways-Initiated/Office Events: Short-term or rapid deployment
- d. **Platform & Process:**  
Eventbrite continues to be used for public registration, with additional internal controls and evaluation tools being developed.
- e. **Partnerships & Collaboration:**  
Ongoing collaboration with partners such as Texas Sea Grant and regional organizations supports expanded programming across birding, kayaking, and trails.
- f. **Program Growth:**  
With increased visibility and engagement through organic social media outreach, Aransas Pathways continues to receive growing public interest and inquiries.
- g. **Planning Ahead:** Aransas Bird Days 2027 is tentatively targeted for the first week of April to avoid overlap with competing regional events.

Future events will follow the structured system to ensure feasibility, impact, and sustainability.

h. **Key Message:**

Emphasis was placed on intentional event planning, noting that successful programming requires structured management rather than reactive execution.

**Next Regular Meeting**

The next regular meeting is scheduled for May 5, 2026, at 3:00 P.M.

**Adjournment**

A motion to adjourn was made and passed. The meeting adjourned at approximately 4:00 P.M.