

MINUTES

ABSF Board of Directors Meeting

Tuesday March 24, 2026

3:00 PM

Birkie Office

Board Members Present: Paul Eckerline, Mike Mandli, Tom Duffy, Andy Ubel, Chris Morley, Jeff Olson, Kris Bjerkness, Karen Manske

Electronically Present: Mike Cleary, Marit Ross-Sonnesyn, Kathie Pautsch, Bill Brown, Sue Scheer (Emeritus)

Absent: Jan Guenther, Yuri Gusev (Emeritus)

Staff Present: Mike Brown, Ben Popp, Matt Hewitt, Kristy Maki, Jeff Tumbleson

Guest: James Tenorio (Birchleggings Club)

Approval of Agenda: Duffy move. Morley second. **Approved.**

Approval of Minutes from January 26, 2026 meeting: Ubel move. Bjerkness second. **Approved.**

President's Comments: Paul Eckerline

- Reminder that board meetings have been changed to the fourth Monday of the month. Next meeting is Monday April 27.
- A matter regarding the trail was discussed in Executive Session.
- Reminder that Birkie staff and board members must remain non-political during Birkie events and activities. Athletes eligible for prize money must abide by FIS rules and regulations.

Executive Director's Comments: Ben Popp

- Junior Nationals went very well despite some challenging weather conditions. The economic impact was great for the community with \$1.1M in direct spending and \$1.5M overall.
- UW River Falls is conducting an economic impact study of the Birkie and related events. Results should be available next month.
- Staff are working on several grants as well as an appropriations request from WI legislature.
- Telemark Northwoods Lodging (TIOA) will meet again in April regarding their need for green space, which remains unresolved.
- Nordmor Road issue is also unresolved.
- The Telemark Capital Campaign has less than \$500K to raise. John Higgens recently donated \$225K for the pedestrian bridge at MTV. A second large donation is anticipated for the downtown International Bridge.
- Matt Hewitt, our new Trails and Facilities Director, was introduced. He started this position in early February and has hit the ground running and is doing a great job.
- Ben Popp and Mike Brown attended the World Cup races in Lake Placid. They obtained some good ideas from this incredible event. They saw a lot of Birkie branding there.
- A five-year strategic plan is being developed by the Leadership Team. This will include a new position for a Sport Development Director.

Staff Update: Mike Brown

- The annual 2-day staff retreat is scheduled for the second week in April at the Chicago Club. This will focus on improving leadership skills and team building.
- Grace Hoins is relocating; her last day will be in April.
- A more complete financial update will be presented at our next meeting.

LWC Update: Mike Brown

- LWC ticket sales are very strong. Charlie Berens is announced as Wednesday night entertainment. LWC is expected to become a separate 501©(3) organization in 2027.

Committee Reports

Finance: Mike Brown and Kris Bjerkness

- The Finance Committee met prior to this meeting. Next month Kris will be attending remotely. The committee will meet at 1PM prior to the April Board meeting.
- Staff are working on the 2026-27 budget. The initial draft will be completed next week. In mid-April, Ben and Mike will complete departmental reviews, after which the draft budget will be shared with the board. The final budget will be presented at our May Board meeting.
- As of the end of February, the organization is in the black. However, there are many Birkie receipts and other factors pending.

Telemark Capital Campaign: Bill Brown

- The Development Committee was originally set up to focus on fundraising for all ABSF needs. Over the past several years, it has

primarily been focusing on the Telemark Capital Campaign. As that campaign draws to a close, we need to reset back to fundraising for the entirety of ABSF.

- Louise Dressler is working with Bill Brown and committee members to help define the future goals and strategies for the committee. They would like to have 3 board members along with several outside committee members. They are also looking at strategies for long-term giving.
- Several grant requests are in progress including a DNR grant for \$100K and an appropriations request for \$1.5M through MN and WI delegations. (Please let Bill or Louise know if any board member has any connections with delegators.)
- Snowmaking remains high on the list of priorities for fundraising. Decision on burying water lines is not yet determined. Snow storage is being looked at closely. Snow made in the winter could be stored at the competition stadium for use in the following fall/early winter. This would require an investment in snow blankets. More to come on this soon.
- Pledges/commitments to the Telemark Capital Campaign are coming in.
- There are 3 remaining projects to be completed in the Telemark Capital Campaign:
 1. Museum - \$3K left to complete.
 2. Biathlon Range - \$27K left to complete (concrete work primarily).
 3. Snowmaking - \$600K remaining.
- ABSF Membership opens on 4/1/2026 with auto-renewal possible this year. ABSF members will have their names on their Birnie Bibs. Membership numbers have been falling over the past 4 years. The membership drive will place strong focus on supporting our organization.

- Kristy Maki discussed pricing and budget for next year's events:

Staff are working on budget with the goal of no significant price increase. There has been feedback that the Prince Haakon race is too expensive. The U-20 skiers do get a discount. A good number of Prince Haakon skiers register later in the season when fees are higher.

The Korte has the most potential for growth. Currently we have about 3K skiers with potential for 7K. Moving the event to Friday has helped. Staff are looking at ways to better market the Korte as a great event on its own. There is a significant market opportunity for high school teams. Plan is to reach out to high schools and teams and perhaps create a Team Challenge, and to inform that there is a price break for juniors.

- Jeff Tumbleson discussed Junior Nationals:

This event was very successful and a lot of work. Parking was the main issue. Otherwise, the event went very well despite challenging weather conditions. The trail crew did a great job maintaining a great racecourse. The recent improvements to the venue were very helpful. Volunteers were incredible. The economic impact of the Junior Nationals was great for our community with \$1.1M in direct spending and \$1.5M overall economic impact. The Cable Chamber of Commerce was very supportive of this event. This event rotates venues, so it will likely be about 15 years before we can host again. We are hoping to host the JNQ's again next year.

Birkie One: Chris Morley

- The ski program with LCO was very successful. This was our fourth year; the enthusiasm with the kids improves every year. Sustaining this event is a priority and will require increased community and staff involvement.
- Sport Development at the leadership level is part of the 5-year strategic plan.

Documentation: Andy Ubel

- There has been no progress with Nordmor Road concern. Further meetings are being set up.
- Andy has been working with Ben and Kristy on updating our waivers so that they are pertinent for both bike and ski events and apply to our ski trail passes. The website needs to be updated to be ADA compliant.

Team Birkie: Marit Ross-Sonnesyn

- The entire team competed at the Super Tour finals in Craftsbury this past weekend. Karolina Kaleta chose to wear her Team Birkie team suit (vs her Poland Team suit).
- Team Birkie continues to work on its rebrand and has hired a professional company for this effort. Hoping to have this finalized by May 1.
- Position for a High-Performance Coach has been posted (to work with athletes at the National and International level).
- Working on obtaining more Trustees for financial sustainability.

Birkie Green/Birchleggings Club: James Tenorio (filling in for Paul Thompson)

- James introduced himself as secretary for the club and a 46-year Birkie finisher.
- The Birchleggings Club has 363 members. There were 110 in attendance at the award breakfast on Sunday after the Birkie.

- Several fundraisers are scheduled for this summer including the Third Annual Golf Tournament (7/23/26), the Dakota Trail Bike Ride (8/13/26), and a new Summer Fitness Event at Minocqua Winter Park (June 5-7). The annual meeting is scheduled for September 25.
- The League of Wisconsin Conservation Voters made a video of Birkie 2026 which focused on how climate change is affecting the future of cross-country skiing and the need to preserve our winters. Paul Thompson hosted a presentation on Climate Change at the World Cup in Lake Placid.

New Business:

- Our next meeting is Monday April 26, 3PM, at Birkie Headquarters.
- **Motion** to adjourn: Duffy move. Meeting adjourned at 4:30 by acclamation.

Addendum:

- On April 1 an on-line meeting board meeting was held to discuss snow storage (blankets) which is a very efficient and economical mechanism for snow making. Finland has been using this method for 30 years, in addition to 61 other sites in Europe. The purchase of 24 snow blankets would allow us to store 9000 cubic meters of snow. This would allow one location for snow guns and less urgency to bury water lines, as well as significant savings in time and labor. Snow in the early ski season would be guaranteed.

This is a time-sensitive issue as there are currently extra blankets available that are heavily discounted from retail price of \$250K to \$150K. There is a donor through the MTV Capital Campaign who wishes to donate to this cause as well. After discussion the following motion was made.

Motion: Move to purchase Snow Blankets for \$150,000 of which \$100,000 will be offset by a marketing “donation” from the supplier. Scheer move. Manske second. **Approved** unanimously.

- Ben also provided a brief camping update. A contract with Ben and Pat is progressing with the help of Attorney Rasmussen for a one-year lease on a camping cabin at MTV. They will incur the \$28K cost to build the cabin. A revenue share of approximately 7.5% will be part of this agreement. Ben will share the contract with board members upon completion.
- On March 25 the following motion was made via e-mail as the donated Lot 40 (2.35 acres) of Telemark Hills Development was ready to be sold to the purchasing donors. Selling price started at market value of \$74,900; it sold for \$87,650.
Motion: Move that ABSF BOD approves to move forward with the sale of donated Lot 40 of the Telemark Hills Development for the selling price of \$87.650.
Pautsch move. Cleary second. **Approved** unanimously.