



Report on the Financial Status of Fox Valley Nature Centers

Submitted by Dave Horst, 6/22/2020

This report presents an analysis of the financial situation faced by area nature centers, as described by their executive directors or chief naturalists. They face major financial challenges because they rely so heavily on program revenue and special events, which have had to be canceled because of the COVID-19 threat. The responses have ranged from reduced employee hours, to tapping into reserves, to rethinking how they offer educational experiences (backpack rentals at Navarino, a virtual annual banquet and “Trail Tales” at Brillion Nature Center and online programs at 1000 Islands).

Brillion Nature Center

Independent nature center in Brillion

Louie Lecker – Naturalist

Brillion Nature Center is on the verge of serious financial difficulties. Its nature center building is closed, so it is not getting any revenue for school or public programs. BNC gets about half of its annual revenue from a spring auction event, which had to be canceled. They substituted an online event, which raised more than they expected, but \$10,000 less than the live event was expected to raise. BNC’s fiscal year ends June 30, at which time they expect to be in deficit by \$15,000 to \$20,000. They have a reserve fund equal to nearly one year’s budget, but once depleted it will be difficult to replace. Louie Lecker is BNC’s only full-time employee. She has not yet been asked to take furlough days. Trail usage continues to be well above normal, and it is growing with the warmer weather. BNC can’t charge for trail use because it is located on state land. It can and does put out donation boxes, without much response. The nature center has been getting requests for virtual nature programs from summer schools, but it has no fee structure for that. It also is going to offer “Trail Tales” – stories on signs that people can read as they walk around the nature center. It also only gets revenue from donations. Louie summed up the situation as: “It’s been tough.”

Gordon Bubolz Nature Preserve

Independent nature center in Grand Chute

Randy Tuma -- Executive Director

Randy reported the nature preserve was on strong financial footing going into the shutdown, so it was surviving okay until recently as the financial drain just went on too long. July 1 they will be reducing staff hours and pay. They plan for that to continue for six months. They have started a soft re-launch of event hosting and program offerings, following CDC guidelines. The nature center remains closed to the general public. Trail usage continues to be high. With it has come more vandalism and two cases of theft from vehicles in the parking lot. Bubolz also lost its caterer when The Marq shut down. They have been

interviewing potential replacements and plan to offer the services of as many as five vendors, rather than the exclusive arrangement The Marq had. Virtual programming is not considered an option because they lack the technology and probably don't have enough of a market for it to pay off.

Heckrodt Wetland Reserve

Independent nature center in Menasha
Tracy Koenig – Executive Director

The HWR staff has returned to the Nature Center on a full-time basis after nine weeks working from home. The building is closed, and a three-phase reopening plan based on the Badger Bounce Back Plan is being implemented. Tracey Koenig said it has experienced a total loss of earned income since mid-March. They are brainstorming on how to reinvent Heckrodt's programming. The nature center's position is somewhat improved by the existence of endowment funds at the Community Foundation.

Mosquito Hill Nature Center

Outagamie County park
Mike Hibbard – executive director

As an Outagamie County park, Mosquito Hill has been able to avoid severe budget cuts so far. It has resumed programming for groups of 10 or fewer, which Hibbard said will not fully make up for lost revenue to date. Spring revenue overall was down 50%. The annual fundraiser put on by Friends of Mosquito Hill is expected to be canceled. Hibbard, like most of his counterparts elsewhere, doubts virtual versions of their programming would command much in fees and therefore doesn't feel it's worth the investment to try. Planning programming either in person or online is difficult when school districts haven't decided whether they will hold classes live or online. A capital campaign for new exhibits is on hold. The only positive is that the staff has been able to catch up on maintenance.

Navarino Nature Center

Independent nature center in Shawano County
Tim Ewing – naturalist

Navarino has gotten by and avoided furloughs by successfully applying for the Small Business Administration's federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) , and a gift from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago (which donated through the Bonduel State Bank) for a total of \$24,000. Ewing is the only full-time employee, with three others totaling 1.1 FTE. The nature center was closed March 20 through May 26. All spring and early summer programs were canceled. Currently, the lobby and restrooms are open to a maximum of 10 people, with hand sanitizer and personal protective equipment available. Ewing polled Navarino's member and past banquet attendees, who recommended holding a virtual auction and fundraiser. The staff is exploring options to provide fall educational programs in the schools and for the public, depending on school district policies in the fall. Trail use has been heavy but has reduced somewhat as programming is again available.

1000 Islands Environmental Center

Kaukauna city park

Deb Nowak – Director/Naturalist

1000 Islands appears to be in the best position of the nature centers contacted. Its budget as a city park was already locked in for the year, but Deb Nowak said she has serious concerns for 2021. Its “Friends” group had to cancel its major annual fund-raiser, the Spring Art Fair. The Kaukauna nature center is the only one that’s back to operating with its full staff on site, and Nowak is the only leader fully embracing alternative means of delivering programming. They have been creating programming through the 1000 Islands Facebook page and started the summer programming in an online or self-guided format. Nowak said that though they aren’t replacing lost revenue yet, they are keeping in contact with their supporters and users. 1000 Islands also has stepped up its efforts to encourage donations from trail users.

Fallen Timbers Nature Center near Seymour, operated by the regional public education group CESA 6, and Calumet County’s Ledgeview Nature Center in Chilton chose not to participate.