



# Community Engagement Department Memorandum

---

**To:** Benjamin Haberthur, Executive Director  
**From:** Laurie Metanchuk, Community Engagement Director  
**Date:** 2/10/2026  
**Re:** January 2026 Report

---

Community Engagement strengthens public support for the Forest Preserve District's mission by connecting residents to their forest preserves through communication, education, and outreach. These efforts benefit the District by building public appreciation, expanding stewardship, strengthening awareness, and inspiring the next generation.

## Executive Summary

As predicted, **social media engagement was down** in nearly all metrics in January, due to the prior month's bison coverage. There were bright spots in Engagement Rate (per Impression) which was up 8% and our social media audience grew 1.5% over last month.

**Media coverage continues on the bison story**, with packages running on WTTW Chicago, on WBEZ, and in the Chicago Sun-Times, in January. In related news, On Jan. 16, Executive Director Haberthur, President Bill Lenert, and Community Engagement Director Metanchuk **met with Congressman Bill Foster** and a staffer, to show them the bison project, first-hand, at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve.

The District also had great coverage on the grant award for Muirhead Springs Forest Preserve and the Meissner-Corron Forest Preserve addition.

In the Environmental Education division, the naturalists **hosted another successful winter festival, Polar Palooza**. There were 200 guests in attendance to complete activities indoors and outside, and earn tickets to trade for prizes.

## Conferences, Meetings & Training

### Conferences

**IPRA/IAPD Conference:** Director Metanchuk was among a handful of District staff and commissioners to attend the annual Illinois Parks & Recreation Conference, Jan. 29-31 in Chicago. Director Metanchuk attended a variety of sessions on topics including: positive mindset, legal and legislative issues, naming rights, sponsorships, finding humor, digital marketing, AI tools, marketing strategies, and social media planning.

January 2026 Report

### Meeting with Congressman

**Bill Foster:** On Jan. 16, President Lenert, Executive Director Haberthur and Community Engagement Director Metanchuk met with Congressman Bill Foster and his Senior Director of Outreach Maria Manzo at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve. We showed the Congressman and his Outreach Director the bison project and talked about next steps at the site.



## Communications & Marketing

### Digital Media

As predicted, our social media channels were down in all areas except Audience Growth and Engagement Rate (per Impression), due to last month's highly engaging bison-related content.

- **Social Media Engagements:** 26,412, down 73.9% from last month's highly engaging bison content. Engagements are the number of times users engaged (clicked on, commented or reacted) with our content.
- **Engagement Rate (per Impression):** We were up 8% over last month. This metric measures the number of times users engaged with our content as a percentage of impressions. This indicates how engaged people are with our brand.
- **Social Media Impressions:** 431,922, down 75.8% from last month. Impressions are the number of times content was displayed to users.
- **Audience Growth:** +1.5% over last month to 31,526. Audience Growth is the number of users following our profile on the last day of the month.
- **Net Audience Growth:** -79.3% to 474 (Facebook +356, Instagram +20, LinkedIn +19, TikTok +74 and YouTube +5). Net Audience Growth is the number of new followers gained minus followers lost.

## Community Engagement Department Memorandum

---

January 2026 Report

- **Video Views:** Down 86% from last month, but we still had 22,597 views. We were down across all media channels except YouTube, which was up 48.8%. This is likely due to various new outlets including links to our YouTube channel and the bison video.
- **Website Traffic:** 13,000 users (-20.9% over last month) viewing 27,372 pages for the month. The top pages on the site were:
  1. Home page – 999 views
  2. District Calendar – 469 views
  3. Locations – 408 views
  4. Careers – 389 views
  5. Public Nature Programs – 317 views
  6. Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve – 268 pages
  7. Paul Wolff Campground – 216 views
  8. News – 162 views
  9. Bids & Proposals – 139 views
  10. Big Rock Campground – 131 views

### TreeLine Newsletter

Our current print subscribers total 5,430 (+3). Current email subscribers total 15,778 (+26), for a combined total of 21,208 subscribers (+29). As always, free subscriptions to *The TreeLine* newsletter are available at: [http://bit.ly/ForestPreserve\\_Email](http://bit.ly/ForestPreserve_Email).

### Press Coverage

We published the following press releases in January:

- Polar-Palooza Brings Nature-Inspired Games and Winter Fun to Creek Bend, Jan. 6
- Fall in Love with Science at EcoLab: My Chemical Romance, Jan. 14
- Forest Preserve District awarded \$600,000 OSLAD grant for Muirhead Springs, Jan. 15
- Forest Preserve District expands Meissner-Corron Forest Preserve by 45 acres, Jan. 22

### Media Coverage

#### Bison

- Bison Return to Chicago's Outskirts After More Than 200 Years, AOL, The Daily Caller & MSN, Jan. 13
- Homecoming in Kane County as Bison Are Returned to the Prairie and Their Indigenous Stewards, WTTW News, Jan. 21
- In Kane County's new bison herd, a chance for Native Americans to reclaim what's lost, Chicago Sun Times, Jan. 23
- Bison herd leads charge to restore Prairie State, Chicago Sun-Times, Jan. 23
- Bison Return to Illinois Prairie to the Sounds of Drumming After 200 Years of Absence, Good News Network, Jan. 26

## Community Engagement Department Memorandum

---

January 2026 Report

### Les Arends Forest Preserve

- Red Oak Nature Center to get new bike and pedestrian bridge over Fox River, Aurora Beacon-News/Chicago Tribune, Jan. 14

### Meissner-Corrion Forest Preserve

- DNR's 'Open Space Land' grants total \$36 Million
- Outdoor News, Jan. 20
- Kane Forest Preserve adds 44.45 acres to Meissner-Corrion in Campton Township, Kane County Chronicle, Jan. 24
- Kane County forest preserve adds 44 acres to Campton Twp. Site, Daily Herald, Jan. 25

### Muirhead Springs Forest Preserve

- Pritzker Administration awards \$36 million in grants for local park projects, RiverBender.com Jan. 15
- Suburban parks among beneficiaries of state grants totaling \$36 million, Daily Herald, Jan. 16
- Kane County Forest Preserve District Awarded \$600,000 Grant for Muirhead Springs, Kane County Connects, Jan. 19
- \$2M overlook at Kane County forest preserve will provide views of restored ecosystem, returning birds, Daily Herald, Jan. 24

### Nature Programs

- Embark on a ski adventure in northern Illinois this winter, Kane County Chronicle, Jan. 5
- Kane Forest Preserve to host Polar-Palooza event at Creek Bend, Kane County Chronicle, Jan. 4
- Organized crime, butterflies and coyotes among topics during Fox River Valley lecture series, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 6
- Polar-Palooza brings nature-inspired games and winter fun to Creek Bend, Daily Herald, Jan. 6
- Polar-Palooza Returns to Creek Bend Nature Center, St. Charles, IL Patch, Jan. 7
- Polar-Palooza being held at Creek Bend Nature Center, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 10
- Kane County Audubon Society events set for February, Kane County Chronicle, Jan. 11
- Polar-Palooza in St. Charles lets families chill out while learning something too, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 20
- Your Guide to Maple Sugaring Days, St. Charles IL Patch, Jan. 28
- Senior Stroll to be held at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve, Elgin News Digest/Chicago Tribune, Jan. 29
- Maple Sugaring Days set at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve in St. Charles, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 30

### Oakhurst Forest Preserve

- Get Ready to lace up: A guide to outdoor ice skating rinks, Daily Herald, Jan. 29

January 2026 Report

**Prairies**

- When the millennium was new: What Tri-Cities officials predicted, and what actually happened, Daily Herald, Jan. 28

**Training**

- Kane County aims to train 2,000 people in mental first aid, Daily Herald, Jan. 18

**Urban Ecology Field Station**

- Kane County Forest Preserve District moving forward with plans for nature center in Aurora, Chicago Tribune, Jan. 7

**Wildlife**

- Winter convocation: Where can you see bald eagles soaring in the suburbs, Daily Herald, Jan. 30

**Environmental Education**

*January Spotlight*



The second annual Polar Palooza was a hit! Despite frigid temperatures, we had over 200 people visit Creek Bend for nature-themed arcade-style games both indoors and out. There were 25 volunteers plus a handful of scouts to help out the naturalist staff. We couldn't have done it without them!



*Polar Palooza attendees made pine cone bird feeders*



*Warming up with hot chocolate at Polar Palooza*



*Trading tickets for prizes*

**Community Engagement Department Memorandum**

January 2026 Report

**Program Reach & Revenue Generation**

In-Person Programs	Programs Planned (Monthly)	Programs Completed (Monthly)	Attendance (Monthly)	Average Attendance Per Program (Monthly)	Programs Planned (Total FY)	Programs Completed (Total FY)	Attendance (Total FY)	Average Attendance Per Program (Total FY)
<b>Public</b>	14	12	585	49	91	86	2,490	29
<b>School</b>	5	3	36	12	52	42	1,187	28
<b>Scout</b>	0	0	0	0	1	1	20	20
<b>Community</b>	5	4	184	46	38	35	1,043	30
<b>Outreach</b>	8	8	374	47	26	26	2,879	111
<b>Learn from the Experts</b>	0	0	0	0	9	8	197	25
<b>Virtual Public*</b>	1	1	n/a	n/a	6	6	n/a	n/a
<b>Virtual School</b>	n/a	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0
<b>Program Totals</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>1,179</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>14,567</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Nature Center Attendance</b>			<b>572</b>				<b>5,428</b>	
<b>Total Attendance</b>			<b>1,751</b>				<b>13,244</b>	
<b>Revenue</b>	<b>\$205</b>							

\*Note: Only webinars have live attendees.

^Excludes LFE/KCCN partnership revenues.

**In-Person Programs**

- Public Programs** – In addition to *Polar Palooza*, we held many other public programs. In place of the hike for this month’s *Senior Stroll*, Environmental Education Manager Barb McKittrick presented a travelogue on her trip to Mexico to see the monarch migration.

Naturalist Josh Libman had 30 people turn out for his *Short-eared Owls* hike at the Brunner Forest Preserve in Dundee.

Naturalist Lisa O’Brien conducted her monthly *Twigs to Trees* program at Creek Bend Nature Center within LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve in St. Charles. This program is for kindergarteners.



*Environmental Education Manager Barb McKittrick presents her Monarch Migration Travelogue*

January 2026 Report

January's topic was owls, which is always a hit with the kids. They searched for signs of owls and dissected owl pellets.

At the *Woodchuck Watch* program at the Hampshire Forest Preserve, Naturalist Erica Lemon led the group on a hunt for woodchuck burrows. They also discussed woodchuck ecology and history. Snow and cold kept the group small, but they had a pleasant hike through the preserve.

- **Kane County Certified Naturalists (KCCN)** – Our popular KCCN program started up a new cohort, this month. KCCN program is a partnership between the Forest Preserve District, the St. Charles Park District and the Geneva Park District. This year's class has 37 participants. They have met four times so far, and will meet two more times for classes, followed by four field trips that run spring and summer.
- **School Programs** – As our *Homeschool Hikes* specialist, Naturalist Libman welcomed three homeschool networks to naturalist-guided hikes at the Campton Forest Preserve in Campton Hills, Fabyan Forest Preserve in Geneva and LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve. Topics included seasonal discovery hikes and nature trivia.
- **Community & Outreach Programs** – With winter months comes a lot of in-class visits to schools. Naturalists Erica Lemon, Josh Libman, Amber Ross and Lisa O'Brien visited seven different schools and a retirement home, and reached nearly 400 people. Topics included *Backyard Wilderness*, *Birds of Prey*, and *Nature Detectives*.

Naturalist Ross presented during the *A River Runs Through It* program series. This series highlights ecology and history of the Fox River. Naturalist Ross' program was on Sandhill Cranes. The series is a partnership between The River Corridor Foundation, The Conservation Foundation, and the St. Charles Park District.

### Nature, Virtually Everywhere! Online Programs

For patrons that can't come to the forest preserves, or choose not to gather in groups, the Environmental Education team continues its innovative work to share high-quality nature through podcasts, live virtual hikes, videos and webinars. In January, we released:

- **Tracks & Trails** - Learn tips and tricks on how to identify animal tracks in the snow or mud. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlvFNJ4\\_OaI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlvFNJ4_OaI)

January 2026 Report

## Rental Facilities

### Barbara Belding Lodge at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve

In January, the lodge hosted four meetings and one special event, totaling \$500.

### Creek Bend Nature Center at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve

In January, we hosted four Creek Bend showings to give tours of the facility for potential interested renters in 2026.

Events Coordinator Kim LoCastro also began development of a portable banner stand to promote Creek Bend at weekly showings, bridal trade shows, and special events. In addition, she is designing a condensed, user-friendly brochure for both Creek Bend and Brewster Creek rental facilities to provide visitors with a quick overview option, alongside the full rental packets.

