



Community Engagement Department Memorandum

To: Ben Haberthur, Executive Director
From: Laurie Metanchuk, Community Engagement Director
Date: 1/13/2026
Re: December 2025 Report

Executive Summary

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.

The bison project has drawn a unprecedented interest in a District project. On Dec. 15, Director Metanchuk joined District President Bill Lenert and Executive Director Ben Haberthur to provide a tour of the bison project to State Representative Jeff Keicher. We also set District social media records in all categories, we:

- **Quadrupled engagements to 63,832, a 409.8% increase.**
Engagements are the number of times users engaged (clicked on, commented, or reacted) with our content.
- **Grew impressions to 601,653, an increase of 136.3% over last month.** Impressions are the number of times content was displayed to users.
- **Nearly tripled post link clicks at 2,823 for the month, a 279.4% increase.**
- **And boosted our engagement rate per impression to 10.6%, an increase of 115.8% over last month.** Engagement rates per impression are the number of times users engaged with content as a percentage of impressions. This indicates how engaged people are with our brand.



We also garnered bison coverage on various media outlets, both online, on radio, on television and in print, **including both a favorable editorial and a front-page article in the *Chicago Tribune*.**

Other Community Engagement highlights include:

- Our environmental educators reached **889 individuals through December programs and nature center visits**
- Our naturalists work to mesh environmental education concepts with specific school curricula. In December, Naturalist Josh Libman went "the extra mile," for Rotolo Middle School in Batavia (D101). He **adapted a *Traveling Naturalist* program to compare the landscape history of Illinois to that of the Yellow River region of Ancient China!**

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Communications & Marketing

Digital Media

Our social media channels set records in all areas, due to widespread interest in the bison project, with multiple posts that would be considered “viral,” with more than 100,000 views in a short time.

- **Social Media Engagements:** more than quadrupled to 63,832, up 409.8% over last month. Engagements are the number of times users engaged (clicked on, commented or reacted) with our content.
- **Social Media Impressions:** 601,653, up +136.3% from last month. Impressions are the number of times content was displayed to users.
- **Top Facebook-Specific Content by Views:**
 - 12/8: *Press Release: Bison make a return to Kane County prairie, after 200 years:*
 - **1,080,340 views to date!** (through Jan. 5, 2026)
 - 71,466 engagements
 - 20,134 reactions
 - 1,750 comments
 - 2,158 shares
 - 12/8: *Video: Bison enter the Kane County prairie for the first time in 200+ years*
 - **257,073 views to date!** (through Jan. 5, 2026)
 - 11,308 engagements
 - 9,771 reactions
 - 676 comments
 - 861 shares
 - 12/12: *Graphic: Bison for the first time on Kane County prairie in 200 years*
 - **163,115 views to date (through Jan. 5, 2026)**
 - 9,760 engagements
 - 3,455 reactions
 - 184 comments
 - 357 shares
- **Follower Growth:** +8.2% over last month to 30,885
- **Net Audience Growth was up 1,087.2%** to 2,220 (Facebook +1,753, Instagram +5, LinkedIn +25, TikTok +430 and YouTube +7)
- **Website Traffic:** 16,000 users (up 50.3% over last month) and 28,000 page views (up 23.5% over December)

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TreeLine Newsletter

Our current print subscribers total 5,427 (+1). Current email subscribers total 15,752 (+24), for a combined total of 21,179 subscribers (+25). As always, free subscriptions to *The TreeLine* newsletter are available at: http://bit.ly/ForestPreserve_Email.

Press Coverage

We published the following press releases in December:

- Bison make a return to Kane County prairie, after 200+ years, Dec. 8
- Find Calm and Renewal at "Winter Solstice Mindful Movement," Dec. 20, Dec. 8
- Forest Preserve District Presents Polar-Palooza Winter Festival, Dec. 11

The following items garnered press coverage in December:

Bison

- Bison make a return to Kane County prairie, after 200+ years, Kane County Connects, Dec. 9
- Bison reintroduced to Kane County Forest Preserve, Shaw Local, Dec. 10
- American Bison Make Return to Kane County Prairie, St. Charles Patch, Dec. 10
- Bison make incredible return to Kane County prairies after centuries, NBC 5 Chicago, Dec. 11
- 'Hundreds of years in the making' Bison reintroduced to Kane County Forest Preserve, Daily Herald, Dec. 11
- American Bison return to Kane County after 200 years, WGN Radio 720, Dec. 12
- Bison return to Kane County: Inside the 200-year restoration effort, Chicago LIVE, Dec. 16
- Editorial: Give us a home where the bison roam, Chicago Tribune, Dec. 18
- Bison return to Kane County after 200 years, Chicago Tribune, Dec. 25

Nature Programs

- Find calm and renewal at Winter Solstice Mindful Movement Dec. 20, Daily Herald, Dec. 12



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- Kane County Forest Preserve District plans Polar-Palooza in St. Charles, Chicago Tribune, Dec. 12
- Kane County Forest Preserve District presents Polar-Palooza winter festival, Daily Herald, Dec. 15
- Kane County Forest Preserve District to offer wellness program Saturday, Shaw Local, Dec. 18

Environmental Education

December Spotlight:

Our naturalists strive to bring the joy and wonder of nature to people of all ages, in all types of settings. Sometimes, they need to be very creative in delivering on that mission. A perfect example of this creativity involves a decades-long partnership with Rotolo Middle School in Batavia (D101) where we have been presenting a *Traveling Naturalist* program about landscape history to the entire 6th grade on a yearly basis. As school curriculum and standards have evolved, so has our teaching style and content. This December, Naturalist Josh Libman adapted the program to compare the landscape history of Illinois to that of the Yellow River region of Ancient China. While the specialized topic required much advanced planning, Naturalist Libman seized on the opportunity to influence 240 students in a meaningful way in line with our Division's goal.

Program Reach & Revenue Generation

Programs	Programs Completed (Monthly)	Attendance (Monthly)	Avg Attendance Per Program (Monthly)	Programs Completed (Total FY)	Attendance (Total FY)	Avg Attendance Per Program (Total FY)
Public	9	110	12	74	1,905	26
School	5	56	11	39	1,151	30
Scout	0	0	0	1	20	20
Community	4	52	13	31	859	28
Outreach	3	338	113	18	2,505	139
Learn from the Experts	0	0	0	8	197	25
Virtual Public*	1	n/a	n/a	5	n/a	n/a
Virtual School	0	0	0	0	0	n/a
Program Totals	22	556	26	176	6,637	39
Nature Center Visitors		333			4,856	25
Total Attendance		889			11,493	
Revenues [^]				\$279		

*Note: Only webinars have live attendees

[^]Excludes LFE/KCCN partnership revenues.

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"These types of programs are wonderful. [We] enjoy learning about the different species of birds we share our environment with. The program informed as well as provided opportunity to experience the bird in the wild. The instructor [Naturalist Josh Libman] was full of energy and enthusiasm about the subject and exhibited a genuine love of the environment and the wildlife."

-- "Chipper Chickadees" program participant

"Amber [Naturalist Amber Ross] was friendly and knowledgeable, and I thoroughly enjoyed the program. The only downside was the weather, but Amber was fantastic in spite of it! Will try to attend another when it's a little warmer."

-- "Evening Owl Stroll" program participant

Public Programs

Each season, the naturalist team custom-curates timely, new programs that interpret our local ecology, with the goal of inspiring connections with nature. Of the four new public programs launched this month, of special note was a novel one: *Winter Solstice/Mindful Movements*. The Winter Solstice marks the shortest day in the year and many cultures consider it to be a day of hope for the new year. Naturalist Ross co-led a program with a local yoga instructor to help participants end 2025 on a de-stressing, restorative note during a mindful movement session at the Barbara Belding Lodge at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve in St. Charles.

To attract return patrons and build a loyal following of citizen conservationists, we offer several series of programs that meet on a recurring basis. All are popular, and together this suite of serial programs serves a wide range of target audiences:

- *Bird Watching Walks*: Naturalist Libman's monthly walks celebrate the changing seasons as he leads patrons on a hike to look and listen for birds and covers basic bird identification skills. In December, 8 attendees joined him at Hampshire Forest Preserve.
- *Senior Stroll*: This series began at Tekakwitha Woods Forest Preserve in St. Charles, decades ago. It is one of our longest-running public programs and draws a large and devoted group of active adults. In December, it was all staff on board for the annual Holiday Potluck party, with a *Year in Review* presentation, plenty of nature Pictionary, and a shared meal at the Barbara Belding Lodge.
- *StoryTime at Creek Bend Nature Center*: Our patrons join a librarian from the St. Charles Public Library for read-aloud stories, finger plays, and songs, staying to enjoy the interactive exhibits in the Nature Center following the program. We welcomed 35 folks in December.
- *Little Saplings*: This monthly program, developed for 3-5 year olds by Naturalist Lisa O'Brien, explores seasonal themes in the natural world using a combination of stories, nature hikes, songs, games, and/or crafts. For



Look out for Bobcats! "Little Saplings" students learn about the natural world using all five senses and creative play.

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December's *Busy Bobcats* theme, children and their adults learned about bobcats, played a pouncing game, made bobcat masks then hiked to look for tracks at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve.

- *Nurtured by Nature*: Naturalist O'Brien invites adults to experience the healing effects of nature. During this monthly series, she incorporates gentle stretching, deep breathing and a focus on awareness during hikes designed to nurture the mind, body and spirit. December's program was at Hannaford Woods Forest Preserve.

Community & Outreach Programs

A significant portion of the naturalist team's efforts involve traveling to and educating community groups, school classes and partner library patrons. Community programs are given at or for private organizations like garden clubs, service organizations, church groups, private school/day care centers and senior centers. All four of the community programs given in December were led by Naturalist Ross for adult special-needs groups from the Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association (NISRA) and Giant Steps agencies. A total of 52 participants joined her to learn about *Nature's Superheroes*, *Birds of Prey* or *Natural Ornaments*.

Outreach programs are given at public schools, day care centers and libraries. Of the three December outreach programs, of special note was the *Traveling Naturalist: Landscape History* program mentioned earlier. Naturalist Ross also led a *Traveling Naturalist: Nature's Superheroes* program at Norton Creek Elementary in West Chicago (D303) for 60 students, while Naturalist Lemon traveled to Perry Elementary in Carpentersville (D300) for a *Traveling Naturalist: Nature Detectives* program for 38 students.

School Programs

For the middle school crowd, Naturalist Libman welcomed the GeoAdventure Club of Wredling Middle School in St. Charles (D303) to LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve in St. Charles for a *Discovery Hike* field trip. Naturalist Libman also led *Homeschool Hikes* for 47 students representing four different homeschool networks. Field trip themes included *Tracks & Trails*, *Discovery Hike* and *Nature Trivia* and hikes were held at LeRoy Oakes, Les Arends (Batavia) and Jon J. Duerr (South Elgin) Forest Preserves.

Kane County Certified Naturalists (KCCN) and Learn from the Experts (LFEs) Programs

Registration opened for the KCCN Class of 2026. The class has now completely filled (37 students) and we are preparing to launch the first session in January.

Nature, Virtually Everywhere! Online Programs

The Environmental Education team continues to offer high-quality nature programs via live virtual hikes, videos, and webinars. In December, we released:

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- *Creek Bend Feeder Watch* – A cozy new spot has arrived at the Nature Center! Grab a seat, flip through a bird guide, and enjoy the activity at our feeders just outside the window.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwHkZTJUZlw&list=PLzZ5U3f-FxWDr-joJhD1VsJKVNxD8f3s>



Partnership Events: Internal and External

Environmental Education Manager McKittrick joined colleagues in Community Engagement for the Marketing Retreat held at the Santori Public Library in Aurora. She also represented Environmental Education at the seed team potluck celebration at Mill Creek Greenway Forest Preserve.

In preparation for the arrival of bison at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve, Environmental Education Manager McKittrick attended an on-site planning meeting with District colleagues and partners from the American Indian Center and Ruhter Bison.

Naturalist O'Brien represented the District at the Mighty Acorns partnership meeting at Chicago's Field Museum. The team is currently developing curriculum for teaching climate change to 3rd-5th grade students, which we intend to roll out in some form during 2026.

Rental Facilities

Barbara Belding Lodge at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve

In December, the lodge hosted three meetings and two special events, totaling \$1,075.

Creek Bend Nature Center at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve

In December, we hosted three Creek Bend showings to give tours of the facility.