



Community Engagement Department Memorandum

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

Executive Summary

Community engagement activities, last month, reinforced relationships with key stakeholders and community partners. Leadership met with staff from Senator Tammy Duckworth’s office to discuss the bison project and potential grant funding opportunities. Staff also hosted members of the Kane Forest Preserve Foundation at the District’s turtle lab, and showcased the endangered Blanding’s turtle head-start program, a program supported by donor engagement through the Foundation’s Adopt-a-Turtle initiative. Planning meetings also advanced future community-focused projects such as the Urban Ecology Field Station, a key commitment of the 2024 Land Acquisition & Preserve Improvement Referendum.

Communications and marketing efforts continued to expand public reach. Website traffic increased significantly in February, reflecting growing interest in District programs, preserves and employment opportunities. *The TreeLine* newsletter now reaches more than 21,000 subscribers through print and digital distribution, serving as a key communication tool for promoting programs, conservation initiatives and upcoming events.

Environmental education programs remain central to building community appreciation for local ecosystems and conservation. In February alone, the District delivered 31 programs reaching 1,324 participants, with additional visitors visiting with the Creek Bend Nature Center. These experiences inspire residents of all ages to connect with and care for Kane County’s natural landscapes. Outreach programs also extended the District’s reach into schools, libraries and community organizations, ensuring that conservation education remains accessible throughout the county.

Collaboration with the American Indian Center of Chicago is laying the groundwork for joint programming exploring the ecological and cultural importance of bison, while staff participation in regional conferences—such as the Climate of HOPE Conference—expanded the District’s educational influence among educators and community leaders.

Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how robust community engagement, effective communications and impactful environmental education programs strengthen public understanding of the District’s work. By connecting residents with nature, highlighting conservation successes and building meaningful partnerships, the District continues to cultivate strong community support for protecting and enhancing Kane County’s forest preserves.

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Conferences, Meetings & Training

Meeting with Senator Tammy Duckworth's Office: On Feb. 3, Executive Director Haberthur, Director of Planning & Land Protection Jennifer Rooks-Lopez and Community Engagement Director Metanchuk met virtually with staff from Senator Duckworth's office. The group discussed the new bison project at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve as well as potential related grants.

Turtle Field Trip: On Feb. 9, Director Metanchuk and other District staff met with the Kane Forest Preserve Foundation Board at the District's turtle lab. The District is giving endangered Blanding's turtles a head start in captivity, so they can grow and stand a better chance of surviving in the wild, once they're returned to their home preserves, later this year. Wildlife Biologist Bill Graser and Wildlife Technician Sadie



Dainko explained the turtle program, and answered questions for nearly an hour. The Kane Forest Preserve Foundation raises funds to support the Blanding's turtle research and habitat through the Adopt-a-Turtle program. For more information, visit <https://kaneforestpreservefoundation.org/adoptaturtle>

Urban Ecology Field Station Meeting: On Feb. 23, Director Metanchuk and fellow staff met with the team from Wight & Co. to hear updates following the planning session for the Urban Ecology Field Station. The station was one of the promises made as part of the 2024 Land Acquisition & Preserve Improvement Referendum. Wight is working on the community engagement part of the project, prior to design.

Wind Phone Meeting: On Feb. 27, Community Engagement Director Metanchuk, Operations Director Jeremy Jensen, and Facility Maintenance Supervisor Ken Darby met with Geneva residents on a potential wind phone at Gunnar Anderson Forest Preserve. The group plans to purchase a District memorial bench, and then have the wind phone installed. Director Metanchuk is working on a memorandum of understanding.

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Communications & Marketing

Digital Media

While our social media metrics were down with the exception of slight bumps in audience and net audience growth, our website traffic was up.

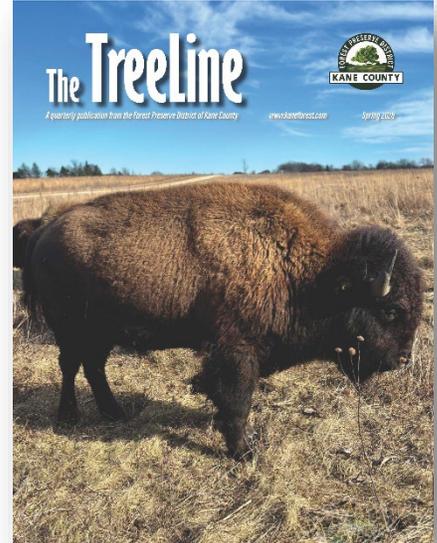
- **Social Media Engagement:** 18,608, down 29.6% from last month. Engagements are the number of times users engaged (clicked on, commented or reacted) with our content.
- **Engagement Rate (per Impression):** Engagement was at 3.8%, down 38.5% over last month. This metric measures the number of times users engaged with our content as a percentage of impressions. This indicates how engaged people are with our brand.
- **Social Media Impressions:** 494,351, up 14.5% from last month. Impressions are the number of times content was displayed to users.
- **Audience Growth:** +1.5% over last month to 32,106. Audience Growth is the number of users following our profile on the last day of the month. We gained 482 new followers in February.
- **Net Audience Growth:** We were up 1.7% (Facebook +411, Instagram +36, LinkedIn +19, TikTok +6 and YouTube +10). Net Audience Growth is the number of new followers gained minus followers lost.
- 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:** 17,302 users (+32.95% over last month) viewing 33,788 pages (+23.44% over last month). The top pages on the site were:
 1. Home page – 5,150 views
 2. Careers – 3,412 views
 3. Locations – 2,120 views
 4. Public Nature Programs – 1,331 views
 5. Paul Wolff Campground – 1,061 views
 6. Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve – 937 views
 7. Big Rock Campground – 714 views
 8. Bids & Proposals – 575 views
 9. LeRoy Oakes FP – 479 views
 10. Volunteer – 479 views

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TreeLine Newsletter

The Spring 2026 edition of The TreeLine is out. Check out the current issue for details on bison returning to Kane County, Maple Sugaring Days, Earth Day, Kids' Summer Camps, nature programs and more. Our current print subscribers total 5,431 (+1). Current email subscribers total 15,814 (+36), for a combined total of 21,245 subscribers (+37). As always, free subscriptions to *The TreeLine* newsletter are available at: http://bit.ly/ForestPreserve_Email.



Press Coverage

We published the following press releases, last month:

- Celebrate Birding Culture and Conservation at “A Day with the Birds” Exhibit, Feb. 3
- Forest Preserve District Announces Spring Birding Programs, Feb. 13
- Kane Forest Preserve Foundation Hosts Annual Native Plant Sale, April 25, Feb. 18
- Learn from the Experts: Promise or Peril? Annual Spring Bird Count & the Health of Illinois’ Birds, Feb. 24
- Registration is open for Forest Preserve District Summer Camps!, Feb. 26

Media Coverage

Bison

- Sneak peeks of new bison in Kane County Forest Preserve sell out fast, but more events on the way, Shaw Local, Feb. 15

Forest Preserve District of Kane County

- Kane County Board Member Recognized for Climate and Conservation Leadership, Kane County Connects, Feb. 20

Nature Programs

- Kane County Forest Preserve to offer chemical romance program Feb. 14, Shaw Local, Feb. 1
- Learn about spring bird count, bird health at forest preserve program, Daily Herald, Feb. 25

Environmental Education

February Spotlight: Preparations are underway to install a new traveling exhibit at Creek Bend Nature Center. “A Day with the Birds” highlights avian conservation and citizen science efforts and aims to inspire admiration and stewardship for regional birds. The customized collection of specimens, artifacts, murals and artwork was curated by the Kauffman Museum at Bethel College in Kansas. This free, family-friendly exhibit is presented in a bilingual English/ Spanish format and will celebrate its grand opening at Creek Bend Nature Center at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve in St. Charles on March 16. To complement the exhibit, the naturalists will be leading a series of bird-focused nature programs, in the field and in the classroom, for all ages and birding abilities. *Spring is for the birds!*



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	14	312	22	100	2,802	28
School	6	101	17	48	1,288	27
Scout	0	0	0	1	20	20
Community	2	23	12	37	1,066	29
Outreach	5	190	38	31	3,069	99
Learn from the Experts	3	142	47	11	339	31
Virtual Public*	1	n/a	n/a	7	n/a	n/a
Virtual School	0	0	0	0	0	n/a
Program Totals	31	768	26	235	8,584	38
Nature Center Visitors		556			5,984	
Total Attendance		1,324			14,568	
Revenues[^]	\$1,699					

*Note: Only webinars have live attendees ^Excludes LFE/KCCN partnership revenues

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Testimonials



"Today's program was excellent. Our presenter, [Naturalist Lisa O'Brien] was very informative and top-notch. She gave a great overview of Illinois geology with just the right amount of detail and history to make it interesting and relevant. I'm very grateful for this class."

-- "Dirt on Dirt: Illinois' Geologic Past" program participant

"[Naturalist Amber Ross] has amazing energy and was terrific. She's super knowledgeable and relates to people of all ages"

-- "Evening Owl Stroll" program participant

"[Cindy Crosby, invited speaker] was excellent. Secondly, I can't believe that if you're interested in nature why would not want to attend."

-- "Bison Tales & Tallgrass Trails" program participant

Public Programs

Each season, the Environmental Education team custom-curates timely new programs that interpret our local ecology, with the goal of inspiring connections with nature. Of the three new programs presented this month, highlights included:

- **Evening Owl Stroll:** Naturalist Ross welcomed 24 patrons to Campton Forest Preserve in St. Charles to learn about our local owls. During the stroll, she explained the cultural history, anatomy, and lore of these impressive birds.
- **Beaver Tales:** Beavers have been called nature's engineers, and Naturalist O'Brien shared the adaptations they rely on to build dams and lodges. The 15 participants were able to discover the work of beavers along Ferson Creek at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve.

Program Series – 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 hikes to look and listen for birds. The program also covers basic bird-identification skills. In February, 16 attendees joined him at Buffalo Park Forest Preserve in Algonquin. The highlight of the walk was spotting large numbers of Common Goldeneye on the river.
- **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. Walks are designed to nurture the mind, body and spirit. February's program, with 19 patrons, was at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve.

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- **Senior Stroll:** One of our longest-running public programs, *Senior Stroll* draws a large and devoted group of active adults. In February, Naturalists Erica Lemon and O'Brien welcomed 39 participants to LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve to learn about wildlife winter adaptations. The group enjoyed social time with light refreshments, after the stroll.
- **Trek with a Naturalist:** Environmental Education Manager Barb McKittrick designs and leads this monthly program for those who like active hiking, all year long. We visit different preserves each month, with February's at Glenwood Park Forest Preserve in Batavia, for 48 attendees.
- **Little Saplings:** This monthly program, developed for 3-5 year olds by Naturalist O'Brien, explores seasonal themes in the natural world using a combination of stories, nature hikes, songs, games, and/or crafts. For February's *Sweet & Sappy* theme, children and their adults learned how trees make sap and we make syrup, enjoyed a sugarbush story, observed sap dripping out of tapped trees, tasted real maple syrup and created a maple leaf craft.
- **Twigs to Trees:** For children in kindergarten to 2nd grade, Naturalist O'Brien, extends our popular *Little Saplings* program. This month, eight children gathered at Creek Bend Nature Center for a focus on *Native American Maple Sugaring Traditions*. They learned the source of maple syrup, tapped trees and collected sap, played a relay game to make glucose, and tasted sap and syrup!
- **Yarn Art:** Naturalist Lemon invites crafters of all ages to bring their own yarn art project to work within a group of fellow yarn enthusiasts. Yarn Art meets at Creek Bend Nature Center.
- **StoryTime at Creek Bend Nature Center:** Patrons join a librarian from the St. Charles Public Library for read-aloud stories, finger plays, and songs. They stay to enjoy the interactive exhibits in the Nature Center, following the program. We welcomed 45 folks in February.



Winter is the perfect time for families to join a StoryTime at Creek Bend Nature Center and then explore the nature-themed exhibits.

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. Both of the community programs this month were led by Naturalist Ross for adult special needs groups from NISRA agencies. The 23 participants joined her to learn about *Trail Safety* when hiking. Outreach programs are given at public schools, day care centers and libraries. The five

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February outreach programs included four *Traveling Naturalist* programs for 175 students at schools in D300 and D303, with themes of *Nature's Superheroes*, *Insects*, and *Nature Detectives*. These were led by Naturalists Lemon, Libman and Ross. Environmental Education Manager McKittrick presented a *Best Spring Hikes for Ephemeral Flowers* program at the Town & Country Library.

School Programs

For the middle school crowd, Environmental Education Manager McKittrick welcomed the GeoAdventure Club of Wredling Middle School (D303) to Fabyan Forest Preserve in Geneva. She led a *Hike though History* field trip, starting with the deposition of dolomite bedrock more than 400 million years ago. The group traveled forward in time to the establishment of Col. George and Nelle Fabyan's *Riverbank* retreat and the creation of Fabyan Forest Preserve.

Naturalist Libman led *Homeschool Hikes* for 91 students representing five different homeschool networks. Field trip themes included *Bird Olympics*, *Great Backyard Bird*

Count and Discovery Hike. The hikes were held at Fabyan, Fox River Bluff (St. Charles), Jon J. Duerr (South Elgin), Campton and Burnidge (Elgin) Forest Preserves.



Middle schoolers enjoyed visiting the "secret" spots of Fabyan Forest Preserve, including the tunnel under Route 25 and the grotto cave near the Bear Cage shelter.

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

The naturalist staff closed out the classroom portion of the *KCCN Class of 2026* in February. Session 5 was devoted to Prairies and Entomology, while Session 6 addressed Phenology/Climate Change and Herpetology. The class of 37 students will move into their field trip experiences in April.

We presented three LFE classes, last month. During the *Winter Tree ID LFE* at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve, Environmental Education Manager McKittrick helped 30 attendees learn the secrets of appreciating trees without leaves. Well-known speaker and author Cindy Crosby joined us to present *Bison Tails & Tallgrass Trails* to 55 patrons at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve in St. Charles, while Fermilab Restoration Ecologist Wally Levernier shared an *Ecology of Fermilab* presentation with 57 attendees at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve.

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Nature, Virtually Everywhere! Online Programs

For patrons that can't or choose not to gather in groups, the Environmental Education team continues to offer high-quality nature programs via live virtual hikes, videos, and webinars. In February, we released: **"A Day with the Birds" Exhibit** – A new traveling exhibit is coming to Creek Bend Nature Center in March! Get a sneak preview here: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/lhr112wpYWo>

Partnership Events: Internal and External

Environmental Education Manager McKittrick joined colleagues from multiple District departments, as well as architects from Wight & Company, to progress plans for the Urban Ecology Field Station in Aurora.

The entire Environmental Education division traveled to the Chicago headquarters of the American Indian Center of Chicago (AIC) to make plans for joint nature programming centered on bison ecology and the cultural significance of bison to Native Americans. After a tour of the AIC, all of the partners gathered for a session about indigenous culture and history. Initial ways of working together were decided. Members of the AIC team are planning a visit to Creek Bend Nature Center in March to further these plans.

Continuing Education

Naturalist Ross was a featured speaker at the *Climate of HOPE* Conference held this month at Downers Grove North High School. She presented two, hour-long sessions of *"Tracking and Acting: How to Respond to Climate Change in Your Backyard"* and engaged with many teachers at a table promoting our program offerings for students and schools. Nearly 300 local teachers attended the presentations and tabling events during this full-day conference. Naturalist O'Brien and Environmental Education Manager McKittrick also attended the conference.

Rental Facilities

Barbara Belding Lodge at Brewster Creek Forest Preserve

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

Creek Bend Nature Center at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve

In February, the Events Coordinator and an Events Assistant started prepping materials to host a table at Maple Sugaring Days in March. Weekly showings were also hosted for potential renters.