Enthusiastic Group Enjoys Annual Meeting

Chris Smith, Friends of the Nature Center President

The annual meeting of the Friends of the Nature Center was held with an enthusiastic crowd on a warm and sunny July 15 at the Hardwicke Interpretive Center. Past President and Governance Chair Marty Leonard kicked off this year’s meeting, announcing election results, introducing new board members, and acknowledging outgoing board members.

The following 2017-18 board members were elected: Joe Gearheart, Cathy Mueller, Kristy Odom, Bob O’Kennon, Bill Richerson, Lydia Saldaña, and Gabriel Sustaita. Outgoing board members—Lynn Fortenberry, Dagmar Higgins, Elaine Petrus, and Michelle Schneider—were thanked profusely for their
service and honored with lifetime Friends memberships and bison wood carvings created especially by Nature Center Manager Rob Denkhaus.

President Chris Smith acknowledged the many volunteer efforts of board members, committee volunteers, and others who help the Friends succeed. She then thanked Marty Leonard for providing boxed lunches for this year’s annual meeting and Rob Denkhaus and his family for providing the beautiful setup, which included matching linens and wildflower table centerpieces.

The President’s 2016–17 Year in Review highlighted:

- **Membership**: Levels remained steady; however, equipped with new demographic data and ideas from new Board Membership Chair Katie Owens, the board plans to increase not only numbers, but also diversity in age, race, ethnicity, and membership type (e.g., family vs. Prairie Dog levels) going into the next fiscal year.

- **Development**: A comprehensive report from an outside consultant hired during the last quarter provided an assessment and roadmap for increasing fundraising and improving strategic planning efforts. Details about these efforts will be forthcoming in future issues of *Bluestem News* and informational emails.

- **PR/Communications**: Under the guidance of *Bluestem News* Editor Sharon McKone, the newsletter moved to an electronic format. In addition, the newsletter now includes combined content from both the Nature Center and Friends in an effort to expand outreach and better inform our target audiences. Also new this past year was the first-ever Friends podcast produced by Lydia Saldaña. She and her husband, Bill Orcutt, also are producing a Buffalo Boogie video for promoting next year’s event. Media relations efforts paid off with online, print, and television news coverage. Communications Chair Cathy Mueller continues to reach our social media audiences through our website, Facebook, and, with the help of her daughter Sarah, Instagram. Finally, we are fortunate to have Rita Short as our new board photographer along with Michael Shepherd, our photography database manager.

- **Gift Shop**: Sally McCoy’s merchandising efforts continue to assist Friends fundraising. This year’s sales greatly exceeded projections, and, as always, Friends were reminded that a 10% gift shop discount is part of the perks of membership.
• **Finance**: New Friends Treasurer Pete McKone reported that revenue still exceeds expenses and reported $169,220.82 cash in the bank. Pete also acknowledged the efforts of part-time consultants Lucinda Lewis and Christi Stinson, CPA, who assist in financial management of the Friends nonprofit.

Nature Center Manager Rob Denkhaus then presented a State of the Nature Center report, including:

- Acknowledgement of Nature Center staff efforts for another successful year.
- Current trends of increasing attendance, revenue, program participation, and city and community support.
- A briefing on the National Trails Grant and how it will help enhance Greer Island and the surrounding area.

Finally, Board Member George Bristol, an esteemed author and longtime conservationist, provided an update on parks funding after the recent Texas legislative session and captivated attendees with the story of Glacier National Park, featured in his new book, *Glacier National Park: A Culmination of Giants*. After the program, George graciously signed copies of his book.