

HEARTLAND LIBRARY COOPERATIVE

GOVERNING BOARD

Lake Placid Public Library – Meeting Room

1069 US Hwy. 27 N., Lake Placid, FL

Minutes to the November 16, 2025 Meeting

CALL TO ORDER:

The Meeting was called to order at 10:36 a.m. Invocation and pledge was led by Jeannie Palacios.

ROLL CALL:

Jeannie Palacios Chair Hardee County; Commissioner Judy Schaefer Vice-Chair DeSoto County; Commissioner Brad Goodbread Treasurer Okeechobee County; Lauri Benson Desoto County; Garnett Ahern Glades County; Nicole Drake Hardee County; Sue Rood Highlands County; Nancy Griest Okeechobee County; Vikki Brown Coordinator Heartland; Sonya Chapa Assistant Coordinator Heartland

Also Present: Iris Perkins Librarian Glades County; Linda Waters Librarian DeSoto County; Regina Ussery Librarian Hardee County; Ann Burford Okeechobee County.

Absent: Ann Ryals Desoto County; Commissioner Hattie Taylor Glades County; Terri Moorehouse Glades County; Commissioner Kenny Miller Hardee County; Commissioner Arlene Tuck Highlands County; Denise Whitehead Okeechobee County.

ROUTINE BUSINESS:

Notice of Public Meeting: Notice was properly given.

Additions to Agenda: Vikki Brown informed the Board that the financial statement has been added to the informational section.

Approval of the Agenda: Lauri Benson moved to accept the agenda with changes, seconded by Judy Schaefer; unanimously passed.

Approval of Minutes of Previous Meeting: Judy Schaefer moved to accept the minutes of the previous meeting, seconded by Lauri Benson; unanimously passed.

NEW BUSINESS:

CONSENT AGENDA:

Lauri Benson moved to accept the consent agenda, seconded by Judy Schaefer; unanimously passed.

- I. **Approval of State Aid to Libraries Grant Agreement**
- II. **Approval of Certification of Hours**
- III. **Budget Amendment 25-02 (Wrap-up of FY25)**

ACTION AGENDA:

- I. Approval of the Coordinator & Assistant Coordinator Evaluations.**
 - a) Eligible for up to a 3% increase.**

Linda Waters provided the Board with the evaluation scores for the Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator, informing the Board that these evaluations are done by the Librarians at the request of the Board. Nicole Drake expressed some confusion on the scoring; Linda explained the scoring rubric by stating that the numbers represented the number of Librarians who gave that score. Linda stated that the Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator are both excellent and received great scores and comments. Vikki Brown and Sonya Chapa thanked Linda for all of her hard work on processing the evaluations. Garnett Ahern asked how the Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator were selected. Vikki Brown explained the hiring process stating that she and Sonya Chapa applied and were approved by the Board; Vikki also explained that the positions must be held by a full-time Librarian at one of the Heartland Libraries. Lauri Benson asked about the percentage increase for last year and what is the max percentage; Vikki stated that it was a 2% increase last year as the Cooperative was unsure of future funding at the time but a 3% merit increase is the max approved by the board for these positions. Nicole Drake recommended that the historical information on previous years' evaluations be provided in future presentations to the Board; Vikki said this will be included in the future. Lauri asked about salaries on average across the state; Linda informed the Board that the HLC cooperative is well below the state average for salaries. Lauri asked if 3% is a comfortable budget to provide; Jeannie Palacios stated that the Cooperative now has a comfortable nest egg with Vikki stating that the Cooperative has almost two years in reserve. Jeannie stated that this has been growing exponentially in the last five years and the Cooperative is now in a comfortable position to provide these increases within the budget. Lauri Benson moved to approve a 3% merit increase for the Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator; Judy Schaefer seconded. No further discussion; unanimously passed.

Linda Waters recommended a change in the evaluation rubric to add a Leadership component to better evaluate the Coordinators. Linda included it in the evaluation this year as an unscored component and it has been positively received by the Librarians. Linda would like to revise the evaluation form and present the updated format to the Board for future use. Jeannie Palacios thanked Linda for her thoroughness.

INFORMATIONAL:

- I. Library Statistics**

Vikki Brown informed the Board that the full statistics for Fiscal Year 25 have been provided for the Board's perusal in the meeting packet. Vikki stated that these are the same statistics submitted for State Aid and reflect the hard work that everyone has been doing. Jeannie Palacios asked if we can provide a the previous year's comparison; Vikki stated this can be done and provided for the

next presentation to the Board. Nicole Drake asked about the Little Free Library statistics; Vikki stated that each county provides their own data for this category as they are all tracked differently, but this data can be included if provided by each county. Jeannie asked if there are any increases within the statistics; Vikki stated that for most of the statistics there are increases, with just a few decreases on very specific collections, but overall everyone has successfully increased with a huge increase overall in programming statistics. Jeannie reflected that the Cooperative appears to be finally getting to a steady pace in data post-covid where the Cooperative is able to project an increase from year to year. Vikki stated that the Cooperative Libraries are all maintaining the patron audience that were brought in post-covid. Sue Rood asked if there are statistics for e-books; Vikki stated that we do track this data and can provide those as well. Sue asked if ebook statistics are increasing; Vikki stated that statistics are increasing on all e-services that the Cooperative is offering right now.

II. Member Updates

Commissioner Brad Goodbread informed the Board that the Okeechobee Music Festival is returning in March, with an anticipation of about 40,000 people attending, doubling Okeechobee's population. Commissioner Goodbread also recommended that everyone come to Okeechobee to view the Christmas light installations, which are providing through a joint effort by Okeechobee County, Okeechobee City, and local corporate donations. Sonya Chapa commented that the parks are always full of families and greatly enjoyed by the community. Okeechobee's official tree lighting will be held December 2, 2026 and the lights will be up through the end of December with more installations to be added soon. Commissioner Goodbread asked about the reactions to the Cooperative doing away late fees and fines two years ago. Vikki Brown reported that the response has been very positive with a lot of patrons coming back to the Library, borrowing more items, and returning more items. Commissioner Goodbread wished everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy Thanksgiving.

Commissioner Judy Schaefer informed the Board that Desoto has had a Rembrandt statue donated to the county to be displayed publicly; this large statue has been displayed in the city at the tree of knowledge. Commissioner Schaefer wished everyone a Happy thanksgiving and Happy Christmas and new year.

Vikki Brown introduced Deb Downing as a guest for Highlands county who is interested in joining the Heartland Governing Board. Deb Downing introduced herself as a volunteer for the Highlands County Libraries and is a member of the book club and hopes to join the board. Deb stated that she has worked as a social worker, Deputy Director of Family Services, and brings a wide background of knowledge to her volunteering duty.

Lauri Benson welcomed Deb Downing and thanked Vikki Brown and Sonya Chapa for doing a great job. Lauri wished everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy Thanksgiving.

Linda Waters informed the Board that DeSoto Library has set a goal for 2026 for 100,000 patron visits and was happy to report that the DeSoto had over 98,000 for 2025; Linda is excited to be offering services to that many people in Desoto. Linda also informed the Board that SouthWest Florida Library Network now has their official physical address at the DeSoto Library; the library is happy to be hosting the organization to continue serving the state's Library communities. The Cooperative is reaping the rewards of being a SWFLN member and is having a lot of fun with the technology and other services provided them.

Garnett Ahern informed the Board that Glades County will be hosting the fundraiser Art in the Park in February, and invited everyone to attend this beautiful event. Glades County also has a new elementary school that is almost ready to open, with funds provided by a grant for 37 million for the new school. Garnett also informed the Board that Glades County is hosting the Chalo Nitka Festival, one of Florida's oldest annual festivals in partnership with Brighton Reservation.

Iris Perkins informed the Board that the Art in the Park event will be held on February 14th on Valentine's Day. Iris also informed the Board that the judging will occur for students Art around the Lake will take place at this time, and that the competition will be open to students from all counties around the lake and will be offering prize money; advertising will be sent out soon for interested contestants. Iris also informed the Board that she was able to attend the Emerging Leaders conference at Florida Gulf Coast University with a grant provided by SWFLN.

Nancy Griest stated on Kresta King's behalf that the Coordinators are both doing a great job. Nancy informed the Board that the Okeechobee Library continues to grow in attendance and remain busy with programs and donations. Nancy also wished everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Regina Ussery informed the Board that the Hardee Library was able to receive more capital improvement funding which will be used to get new circulation desks. Regina also stated that more funding has been received to further improve the children's area and will be used to purchase a new durable and toddler-safe kitchen set to replace the well-loved set already in use.

Sue Rood informed the Board that Sebring has more new books for the community and is running out of room on the shelves. Sue also commended the Sebring staff for doing such a great job decorating for the holidays.

Nicole Drake stated that the Hardee Library is doing a great job. Nicole also informed the Board that the Friends of the Hardee Library has opened the bookstore downtown and is happy to report it is thriving with over 600 books sold. Nicole is happy to have another location related to the Library that is open after-hours and is able to showcase the Hardee Library and its services to the community.

Sonya Chapa stated that the Okeechobee Library is very busy and has increased its programs and attendance. Sonya highlighted a new author visit series at the Okeechobee Library, stating that the four author programs in October and November brought an audience of 130 patrons compared to an attendance of three for an author program in 2020. Sonya also stated a successful partnership with the Parks & Rec department for the Annual Floating Pumpkin patch where the Library handed out over 300 goodie bags within 20 minutes. Sonya also informed the Board that the Friends of the Okeechobee Library has provided \$2,000 to provide free book gifts for children at the Holiday event at the Library in partnership with the Education Foundation of Okeechobee. Sonya stated that even more programs are coming to the Library with a family-friendly Mardi Gras event in February, an Easter Spring event in April, and an upcoming Winter-Spring concert series. Sonya was also happy to report that the Library continues to provide much needed services for the community, with Library patrons collecting over 1,500 pounds of food for the Salvation Army in October. Sonya stated she was very grateful for the hardworking Okeechobee staff and was thankful to be part of a great group in the Heartland Cooperative.

Vikki Brown thanked everyone for the kind comments and thanked Sonya Chapa for her work behind the scenes. Vikki thanked the Librarians who gave kind comments to the coordinators. Vikki stated that the Coordinators have worked hard for these positions and are doing a great job. Vikki informed the Board of the new policies and rules in Highlands County that enhances the code of conduct with clear guidelines and consequences to violating them to ensure staff and patron safety. Vikki informed the Board that the procedures to remove items in Highlands county has changed to make the process easier and more efficient which will help make room for the new books in the Highlands Libraries. Vikki stated that December is a very busy month for the Highlands Librarians. Avon Park will be having a Holiday Party on December 9th in partnership with the Rotary Club. Sebring will be hosting the 4th Annual Library after Dark holiday event. This event is open after hours with Santa, therapy dogs, cupcake decorating, face painting, and a gift shop where each kid gets a ticket and gets to 'shop' for presents that will be gift wrapped to take home. This event usually has 300-400 people in attendance but the hoping for 500 - 600 this year with the goal of being a fun event for the community to make memories at the Library. Lake Placid will be hosting a Breakfast with Santa event where the community will get free pictures with Santa and a book gift to take home. Vikki informed the Board that all of the Cooperative's events are posted to the Heartland website.

Jeannie Palacios informed the Board that Hardee Library is also having a Santa at the Library event. Jeannie stated that the Friends of the Hardee Library group does not currently have a director and Regina Ussery has taken on more of a role in the large events and has done an excellent job preparing for these events. Jeannie stated that the Friends bookstore is a success and has been great at advertising for the Library. Jeannie wished everyone a Happy Thanksgiving.

Next Meeting is **Wednesday, February 18, 2026**, at 10:30 a.m.

ADJOURNMENT:

Jeannie Palacios adjourned the meeting at 11:39 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sonya Chapa