

Minutes of the Ecological Advocacy Committee (EAC) of May 11, 2026

Members present:

Lori Checkley
John Hamilton
Clay Kusbach, Chair
Andrew Tucker
Brian Will

Others present:

Maddie Bush – Horticulturist, VPA
Garry Harrington – VPA, Director of Rum Village Nature Center
Barbara Kirby, South Bend Office of Sustainability
John Martinez – VPA, Facilities and Grounds
Mary Wojcik – Horticulturist, VPA

I. Call to Order – Meeting at Rum Village Park Nature Center at 8:30 a.m.

II. Approval of Minutes – Andrew Tucker moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Brian Will. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Old Business

- a. Park Department Updates – Patrick Sherman, project manager for VPA, updated the EAC on plans for \$135 million in design and construction in the parks. This includes the Kennedy Park construction of a new pool (to open in summer 2027), play area, parking lot, pavilions, and an oak grove path. A number of trees (5 trees) will be removed for this project, and Mr. Sherman noted that new tree plantings will be occurring. Other projects include the river walk near Howard Park which will be closed for renovation for the summer of 2026. Walper (Walker) Field will see its tennis courts removed and replaced with a tree grove. Potawatomi Park will see trees removed to build a parking lot as well as construction of a playground and splash pad. MLK Center will be installing solar panels on the main roof.
- b. Risk Assessment process – EAC members suggested to Mr. Sherman that it would be preferred that VPA involve the EAC earlier on when projects are being considered so that ecological aspects of a project can be discussed before plans are finalized.

- c. John Hamilton distributed his written thoughts about the proposed Rum Village Master Plan (included with these minutes). Unreviewed by EAC committee prior to distribution.
 - d. Mary Wojcik reported that 6,100 native plugs have been planted along Northside Blvd near the riverbank. There was a suggestion to consider finding a way to calculate and report on the ecological impact of the native plants (e.g., carbon sequestration, storm water retention).
 - e. Barbara Dale reported that construction on the Half Moon Nursery has been completed and 3,000 socket pots have been placed in the nursery. A ribbon cutting is planned for June. A fence may be added to the nursery as at least one tree has been stolen already. Ms. Dale also reported that the Office of Sustainability gave away free trees and shrubs for Arbor Day. An Indiana University Environmental Resilience Institute intern will be starting with the Sustainability Office on May 18.
- IV. **Miscellaneous** – Garry Harrington reported that Diana Zebroski, a new student member to the EAC, has been approved by the VPA commissioners but that we are waiting for her to accept her appointment.
- V. **Privilege of the Floor** – Sue Kesim of South Bend encouraged the EAC to consider working with the city to adopt empty lots and grow native plants on them. Ms. Kesim has also encouraged Wild Ones and other environmental groups to do the same thing.

The next meeting will be held on Monday, June 22, 2026, at 8:30 a.m. at Rum Village Park Nature Center.

The meeting adjourned at 9:55 a.m.