

Approved 8/27/2026

University of Illinois Extension Council Minutes

Unit 24 – May 28, 2026 – 5:30pm Saline County Extension Office

Welcome

The Unit 24 Extension Council meeting on May 28, 2026, was called to order at approximately 5:37pm.

Council Members Present

Norman Hill Jr., Amanda Courson, Connie Gibbs, Debbie McVey, Joe Zieren, Randy Drone, Robin Pyle, Macey McKenzie, Jamie Byrd, and Rachel Lands.

Staff Present

Angie Messmer, Lizz Cooley-Questelle, Bronwyn Aly, Lindsay Adams, and Sheila Stamer.

Approval of Minutes from January 22, 2026

The minutes from the January 22, 2026, meeting were reviewed by those present. A motion to approve the minutes was made by Randy Drone and seconded by Joe Zieren. The motion carried.

Fiscal Reports - Trust Account – 2nd Quarter

The Fiscal Report was provided to those present by Sheila Stamer. Debbie McVey asked Sheila about the negative line items in red. Sheila explained that these were credits to the account. A motion to accept the Fiscal Report was made by Amanda Courson and seconded by Randy Drone. The motion carried.

Updates from County Director

- **Health & Community Wellness Positions:** Angie Messmer said that these positions were added after looking at the budget and reviewing the needs assessment. These positions will fulfill needs in our counties and will have a different focus than the SNAP program.



- **Sol Systems Grant:** Angie Messmer said that the team is involved with the Sol Systems Grant. They are planning to write another grant proposal that will be a continuation of the previous one but more in depth. The Sol Systems Grant is in association with the Eldorado Impact Project, and the focused on Saline County.
- **Hamilton County Office Support Assistant Position:** Angie Messmer said that this position will be posted on May 29, 2026, but the application is open. She requested that if any council members present are interested or know of others who are that they contact the Extension Office. This position is full time.
- **DSAC Housekeeper Position:** Angie Messmer said that the previous housekeeper resigned. A new housekeeper was hired as extra help, but the housekeeper position is going to be advertised as a permanent position. The current housekeeper will need to reapply if she wishes to have the opportunity to continue in this position, but the application is open to the community as well.
- **FY27 Budget Submitted:** Sheila Stamer and Angie Messmer have been working on the budget. They are also looking into making a two-year plan of searching for grants.
- **CPR & First Aid Class for the Unit:** Angie Messmer said that she is working on a partnership with Southeastern Illinois College to provide a CPR and first aid class open to those in Unit 24. SIC needs a full class of eight to provide the service. Angie asked members present to let her know if they would like to participate by May 31, 2026. Angie said that eight participants will require one instructor, but sixteen participants will require two instructors.
- **Century Soil Project:** Angie Messmer told the council that many years ago, soil samples were taken throughout the state, and tests were conducted on the samples. The University of Illinois wants to revisit some of the sites where soil samples were taken one hundred years ago to see how the soil has changed over the past one hundred years. There are five sites in Gallatin County, three sites in Saline County, and one site in White County. Some farms have already been re-tested, but the remaining farms will be asked if they are willing to participate. Angie said that she may be reaching out to council members when more details are available. The farmers will not be required to collect the soil samples themselves. They will be connected with researchers on campus. Randy Drone said that it would be interesting to know how many times the land has changed hands over the past one hundred years.

Updates from Educators

Bronwyn Aly:

- Bronwyn gave a report on Stewardship Week which she helped plan in conjunction with Lindsay Adams. Stewardship Week has been an annual event at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center since 1990. It has always been the third week of April and is for students grades K-6th and is conducted over the course of three days. There were just under 1200 participants this year with 34-35 different educational stations. Students can rotate between five to seven different stations during the day. Since 1990, there have been 77,849 students in attendance. A packet was given to those members in attendance that provided additional details about project accomplishments and highlights along with the participating presenters/organizations, student participation totals over the years, and a thank you to all the individuals and organizations who provided support for Stewardship Week. Bronwyn said that the program is stressful because of the uncertainty of the weather, but the week is always good. She already has the dates for next year's Stewardship Week. Registration goes out the first of January after the schools are back in session. Norman Hill Jr asked if the new building at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center could possibly hold presenters/students if there was inclement weather. Bronwyn said possibly, but they would need people-haulers. Bronwyn also said that one station required microscopes to look at tardigrades and they were able to pivot from outdoors to setting up in the classroom due to the chance of rain. She also said that the forestry service is the biggest supporter of Stewardship Week facilitating stations and providing monetary support.
- The Summer Twilight Series kicked off on May 18, 2026 where they visited Flower Girls (a greenhouse and floral design farm). The next meeting is June 22, 2026 at Edmison Acres in Johnsonville where they raise highland cattle. The following meetings are on July 20, 2026 at Pink Tiger Farm (growers of ginger and turmeric) and August 17, 2026 at Friendly Farms (growers of mums and pumpkins). Bronwyn also passed out a flyer with information about the Summer Twilight Series. She said that the events are free, but registration is required.
- Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC) is having a Field Day on July 14, 2026 from 5-8pm. The Field Day will highlight local foods, forestry, animal science, a tick display, and more. There will also be a farm-to-table dinner with beef and vegetables from DSAC. Registration will cost \$5 per person. Those who register by June 15, 2026 will have the option of purchasing a t-shirt for \$20. Registration can be done online or by calling DSAC. Everyone is welcome to attend and the USDA, NRCS, and FSA will be there as well. Bronwyn provided a flyer with additional information.

Lizz Cooley-Questelle:

- Lizz commented on the new Health and Community Wellness positions. She said that it is a team of two – Lacey Barnhill and herself. They are in a transition phase right now. Lacey is training and doing community outreach.
- Lizz gave a report on the hydroponics programing that she and Bronwyn collaborated on. These hydroponic towers were purchased through funding provided by Sol Systems. The program wrapped up with a field trip to DSAC in May. There were 115 students in total with fourth grade classes in Harrisburg and third grade classes in Eldorado participating. Lizz said that they have received strong positive feedback about the program and plan to continue programing in the two schools next year and hope to expand to other schools as well.
- There will be School Lunch Rocks food service training workshops conducted this summer with the first one being on August 3, 2026 at John A Logan College. Registration closes for this workshop on July 20, 2026.
- Illinois Junior Chef will still be held this summer through the new Health and Community Wellness positions in collaboration with the youth gardening classes at DSAC. Youth will be able to use the produce harvested from the gardening class in the Illinois Junior Chef program immediately following the gardening class.
- SNAP listening sessions will take place across the state. A report will be made and sent to the governor's office and to Chicago. Community members or providers associated with SNAP will have the opportunity to meet in-person or virtually to discuss the effects of how the change in SNAP rules have impacted them. There will be an in-person meeting at the Egyptian Health Department on June 26, 2026. Lizz said that she hopes there is a good turnout for the meetings. She and Angie Messmer also clarified that these meetings were not to sign up/enroll people in SNAP or Medicaid, but just to discuss the effects of the policy changes.
- Lizz said that the Food Security Summit is coming up on September 1, 2026 at John A Logan College and invited members present to attend.
- She also said that Lacey and herself will be at the Eldorado Farmer's Market with taste testing and recipe sampling. Lizz said that book walks will be continuing this summer. Lizz provided a couple of flyers detailing the above information.

Lindsay Adams: School programing was finished up last week and she is now transitioning to fair season and summer programing. Lindsay provided a packet detailing updates from all the counties in Unit 24 and a copy of the new newsletters from White, Hamilton, and Saline Counties.

- **Hamilton County** – The year long LEGO program at Mercy Heights concluded with a LEGO project exhibition that highlighted creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving skills developed during the programing sessions. Summer gardening classes are

already underway where participants are learning gardening techniques, plant care, and responsibility. Hamilton County also hosted Safety Day on April 10, 2026 for 3rd, 4th, and 6th graders in Hamilton County with 239 youth in attendance. Students rotated through a variety of educational safety sessions presented by community partners and safety personnel where they were provided with hands-on learning experiences. The event focused on personal safety, agricultural awareness, and emergency preparedness while strengthening partnerships between the U of I Extension, schools, and local organizations.

- **Pope and Hardin Counties** – EPC Abbey Reeves completed a six-session *Health Rocks!* program with all 4th grade students in both counties which focused on substance abuse prevention, healthy decision making, communication skills, and mental health awareness. Both counties also wrapped up the school year with the *Little Roots* gardening initiative for kindergarten students where every student received a tomato plant, pepper plant, seed packets, and a take-home gardening kit that included a summer gardening calendar, daily and weekly care checklists, and simple science activities families can complete together. The goal of this program is to encourage family engagement, responsibility, and hands-on science learning throughout summer months. Hardin County Teen Teachers concluded their year with a pizza party and summer planning session. The group will continue to meet during the summer as they begin preparing leadership activities and outreach opportunities for the upcoming school year. This year the group grew to 21 members, with 3 leaving, but new members coming on. Fifth-grade students in Pope County participated in the *Rockets to the Rescue* engineering program where youth designed, built, and launched rockets while learning about physics, aerodynamics, and problem solving through hands-on experimentation. Both counties are also preparing for their county fair events scheduled for early June at DSAC.
- **Saline County** – Extension staff visited 4th grade classrooms in Eldorado, Galatia, and Carrier Mills to introduce students to virtual welding simulators and welding career pathways. The virtual welders were purchased at the end of March. Extension staff are hoping to get more schools involved next year. Extension also plans to revisit these students next school year to gauge interest in joining the Welding SPIN Club hosted through Southeastern Illinois College. The Saline County Welding SPIN Club completed a successful six-session program. Due to the hands-on nature of welding instruction and the desire to maintain small instructor-to-student ratios for safety and quality learning experiences, enrollment capacity remains limited. Seven youth signed up for the Welding Club, and some had no experience.

White County – White County youth recently completed another successful season of Cloverbud workshops designed by older 4-H members for younger 4-H members. These workshops provided hands-on educational experiences focused on creativity, teamwork, and positive youth development. White County is also preparing to host a workforce and leadership opportunity for older youth through the upcoming *ServSafe Manager Certification Course*. The program is designed for teens interested in culinary careers, entrepreneurship, leadership roles, and resume building opportunities. The course will be offered free of charge for 4-H members ages 15-19 and will provide participants with the opportunity to earn a nationally recognized food safety certification.

Civil Rights Discussion

The Civil Rights Discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

Next Scheduled Meeting

The next scheduled meeting of the Unit 24 Extension Council will be held on August 27, 2026, at 5:30pm at the Saline County Extension Office where the annual dinner will also be provided. Angie Messmer asked if there were any requests for what should be served for the dinner. Robin Pyle asked for a birthday cake. Sheila Stamer said that they would probably order food from Sherry Chrisman.

Comments and Discussion

- Norman Hill Jr said that the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center (DSAC) looks different now with the trees cut down around the building. Angie Messmer said that the Master Gardeners could come down and see what to do with the now vacant space.
- Norman Hill Jr asked how the new building at DSAC is coming along. Angie Messmer said that \$1.6 million doesn't go very far. The estimate for the whole project was over \$5 million, so Angie was forced to scale back her plans. She assured those present that there will be something there, but she is not sure what it will be yet. She said that if the budget/funding was below \$250,000 then she could have consulted with local contractors instead of campus ones. Connie Gibbs asked what the function of the building would be. Angie said that her goal is to put in the infrastructure for a three bay greenhouse and install one bay. This way the other two can be added when additional funding is received. She is also hoping to build a pavilion with a preparation area for vegetables harvested from the high tunnels for gardening classes. She is hoping the pavilion will be equipped with a bathroom as well. Angie apologized and said that she is disappointed that the original plans did not turn out, but assured members present that there would be something built and that the main goal is to get the infrastructure established.

Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Joe Zieren. The motion carried and this meeting was adjourned by Norman Hill Jr at 6:30 p.m.

Minutes Taken and Submitted By:

Rachel Lands