

Western Caucus Minutes 5/4/2026 – National Spring Meetings

1600: Western Conference called to order by Chairman Charles Schmidt, PNC, Oregon

1601: Invocation, Pledge of Allegiance, and Preamble completed.

1605: Chairman's opening remarks: Please be seated. Welcome, everyone, to the Western Caucus. Hopefully, there is some more coming, and we might even have some more guests coming in. At this time, I would call our secretary, Duane Cunningham of Montana, for the call. Thank you, Commander. How are we doing? Good. That does not sound like the West. How are we doing? Great. There we go. Alaska. Arizona. California. Colorado, here, Hawaii. No Hawaii? No Aloha? He was here. Idaho. Latin America. Here. Outstanding. Montana. Nevada. New Mexico. Oregon. Here. The Philippines, not present Utah. Washington. And Wyoming here.

1607: Chairman Schmidt: Thank you, Duane. Mr. Secretary, would you like to read the minutes of our 7 October 2025 meeting?

1607: Secretary Cunningham: Certainly. Just the highlights. All right. So, our meeting was called to order at 10-7-25 at 1430. Everyone was present except the Philippines. Chairman Schmidt led us in the preliminaries. Guest speakers started with Commander Wiley, imparting his wisdom on all of us and what he envisioned for the next 12 months. He spoke of the trips that he had been on as the leading candidate. Leading Candidate Jay Bowen from our own Colorado came up and gave us a nice rousing speech on BPOTS (Be Part of the Solution), which you will find on his Commander Polo sleeve and what that means and what it means to him. Next up was Mr. Matt Schumann of Arizona, who is running for Commander in 27/28.

Then, we had our election for Western Vice Commander. Three very good candidates, very difficult decision. And Mr. Robert Rodriguez from New Mexico is the West's nominee for 2026-2027 National Vice Commander. Congratulations to Mr. Rodriguez. Again, he will do an outstanding job, I am sure.

From there, we went into discussions on our bylaws. Mr. Jim Pisa, NEC from Alaska, gave us a brief on that. Hopefully, we will get through that either today or at the next meeting, whatever it may be. Mike Cook came up and gave us a good deal, interest in the Army-Navy game. I do not know who won that contest, but I am sure they had a good time. Being in the Navy, I do know, but I take a lot of heat for that. From there, we heard department reports. They all went well as far as what was going on, what was happening. Lots of good stuff. And then at the 1700-mark, Chairman Schmidt led us in wrapping up our fall meeting. That is your report, sir.

1615: Chairman Schmidt: I would entertain a motion to accept the abbreviated minutes. Second. We got a first from Colorado and a second from Washington. Any discussion? Hearing none, all in favor say aye. Aye. Opposed? They passed. And I think they will

probably be on our website. We have a webmaster in Arizona, I believe, and we are going to have that on the west, T-A-L, west.org website.

Financial report, please.

1617: Secretary Cunningham: Commander, no change in the last few months. Our current balance is \$4,146.47. There is a check out there that has been pending since December. At the six-month point, we will mark it as stale and move on. But other than that, sir, that is your financial report.

1618: Chairman Schmidt: I would entertain a motion to accept the financial report as stated. Nevada. Washington again. Seconded. Any discussion? Comments? If not, all in favor say aye. Opposed, nay. The ayes have it. At this time, I would like to introduce one of our own, the leading candidate for National Commander of the American Legion for 2016-2017. Let us hear it. I am sorry. Let us hear it for Jay Bowen.

1620: Leading Candidate Jay Bowen, Colorado: Thank you, thank you. The commander here was thinking about his year. He was 16, 17. You never get it out of your head. I guess not. Good evening or good afternoon, everybody. It is great to be here. I love this organization. I love being part of the West because we make that comment all the time. The West is the best, but truly, truly, I believe that. And I have had the opportunity, the privilege, and pleasure of traveling all over the country, and I have visited some great departments. In fact, some 35 or 36 departments I think I have been to, and it was just an amazing visit. I have learned a lot. I have met some great Legionnaires and family members.

Truly, West is the best. And before I go any further, Commander, I want to introduce my wife, Jackie, because Matt Schuman got on to me last time when I forgot. Welcome, Jackie. Thank you. But as I said, you know, I have traveled. I am not going to take a lot of time because I know we have a very busy schedule, and we have a lot of great people here who want to have an opportunity to speak. And I promised Matt that I would only use two or three of his minutes. So, I do not want to abuse that privilege. But I do want to share with y'all, if I have not had an opportunity to visit your department, please, please, please, please reach out to me and let us set up a visit. I

I still have about seven or eight departments scheduled to visit between now and August, the end of August when we go to Louisville. So, I do, but I do have some open time. So please reach out to me and let us schedule a visit to your department. I do want to go, but for those that have not had an opportunity to visit, and our secretary here mentioned my shirt, which I am sure everybody has gone down and bought about ten of those already, which is fine. Thank you for that, because I am going to ask him himself for a kickback on all the shirts sold. That is what they do, isn't it, Tony?

But you will notice, if you have not already seen it, on the right sleeve of the shirt is my theme, B-Pots. Be part of the solution. And what I have told people about my travels around the country is that I know you have heard most of your lie. You are either part of the problem, or you are part of the solution. Well, folks, as Paul Harvey would say-- and I know you do not know who that is. That is OK. Here is the rest of the story. If you can be part of the solution and you choose not to be, then you are part of the problem. It is just

that simple. If you can be part of the solution and you choose not to be, then you are part of the problem. So, I am asking everybody, let us work together.

to be part of the solution together. You know, this is a great organization, and I know you all know that because that is why you are here. But we can take this great organization, we can make it even greater than it already is by working together to be part of the solution. So, let us do that. Let us work together and be part of the solution and be the ones to help reduce veteran suicide. Let us be part of the solution and be the ones to take care of our veterans and their families. Let us be part of the solution and be the ones to help educate and mentor our youth. Let us be part of the solution and be the one to be the first ones out there waving that American flag and showing our true patriotic spirit. And let us be part of the solution and be the ones to advocate for very strong national security. Together, we can do it. So together, let us be part of the solution. Thank you. Applause.

1625: Chairman Schmidt: Thank you, Jay. And again, if he has not been to your department, I am sure he will welcome your invitation. It is a chance for him to see and be seen and for your members to meet our candidate, not only the West candidate, but the candidate for the American Legion's National Commander. Next, I would like to bring on another candidate for National Commander, but in a different year. Matthew Schuman from Arizona, come on down.

1625: Candidate Schumann: 2016 and 2017 are going to be a great year. It was. It was. Jay said everything that I wanted to say, so I appreciated everything. Here is the thing. Jay said the right things and following him has been such a great pleasure. Traveling this country and being able to visit the number of American legions that we have been able to visit is humbling. There are so many different cultures and so many different incredible legionnaires, so many phenomenal ideas. What we are learning, what I have learned, is that not every size fits, right? What works well in Arizona might not work well in New York City. What works well in New York City might not work well in Whitefish, Montana.

So, I am going to ask the exact same thing. Please invite me to your department. I have been hosting town halls where I get out in front of the podium, I speak for about 10 minutes, and then I open it up for Q&A. Live, real, unfiltered questions from our entire Legion family. Anything is available for conversation. And I am telling you, it is working. Legionnaires love conversation. To have the opportunity to ask what is going on, why the national organization has made certain decisions, and share ideas. So, I am going to ask you, please, to invite me to your department. Give me the opportunity to be able to meet your Legion family, to be able to meet our Legion family, to be able to talk about what is going on. We need to end veteran suicide in our country. Since I have been involved in veteran space, we have been saying the exact same number, twenty-two veterans a day, doing this.

It is horrible. Every single time in the history of this American Legion that the American Legion decided to do something about something, we have won. And we are getting serious about this. And we can do the exact same thing when it comes to veteran suicide. We can be the one, just like Jay said, we can be the one to end veteran suicide.

At a time when 60%, 6-0, when 60% of veterans who are making that bad decision is not using VA and they are not members of the American Legion, just by recruiting them, we can quite literally save their life. And we can make our American Legion better and stronger. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a win-win, easily, right? That is a win-win. So, let us do that. Let us engage them. Let us make this place better. Do me a favor. Raise your hand if you are a member of our American Legion family. Yes, okay. So, as I have been going to posts, and I ask that question. Everything with a hand goes up. Now raise your hand if you are not a dues-paying member of our American Legion family. The point of that is to show something. That if we want to recruit people who are not members of our American Legion family, we are not going to be able to do that in rooms like this.

We are not going to be able to do that in the posts that we already have. We must do that where they are. And whether that is through gaming, whether that is through hosting events out in the community, whether that is through golf exhibits, whether that is through paintball, and many different ideas. We must be willing to host events and get outside of the four walls of our American Legion. I am telling you, they are there. They are going to need the American Legion sooner than they realize. We must be able to go together. I am asking you for the opportunity to be able to come out, share some ideas, be able to learn from you, and be able to hear so that as I travel, I can share those ideas as well. Commander, thank you very much. I am looking forward to 2016 and 2017. Thank you.

1629: Chairman Schmidt: At this time, I would ask our National Vice Commander from the West for a few words, Ben Hedden from Arizona. Ben, come on down.

1630: National Vice Commander Ben Headen: Thank you, thank you. God, it is always tough. I get to follow good speakers, and then you guys get to listen to me. The West is the best, right? We keep hearing that. We keep saying that. It has been 16 years; 15 years I have been coming back here and saying that myself.

I am going to sit here and stand here as Jay and Matt have said, and really, truly say it again. The West is the best. We look at our numbers. Top five, three are out of where? The West. Five out of the top twenty are from the West. Our year is almost done. It is not over. It is almost done, but it is not over. We can get more of those numbers up there and get more of the West up there. The opportunity to travel around and visit.

I just tell you, I have been in awe. Going from my home state, who, of course, congratulations Arizona for another couple of days on top again in there. I appreciate that, and I know you guys have been working hard. But Arizona, we were on our last visit here. They get a phone call from National saying, "Hey, we're going to have to be the one trailer out there." Well, leadership is out of town, yet they get on the phone, they make phone calls, and they get individuals out at the racetrack for the Be The One trailer, and they bring and talk to veterans. Little things like that. Even having to pick up poop after chicken bingo. But that is outside the box. That is thinking of different ways of doing something.

During my last visit, I walked into a Post in Montana and saw six or seven freezers. And they opened these freezers, and they are packed from the floor to the top with nothing but meat in there. Meat donated by ranchers, meat donated by hunters that could not use it, is packaged and put into a freezer, and its meat for our veterans in need. To make sure none of our veterans are forgotten or do not have food.

Those are the things I must see and travel around. Going to Alaska and watching that and seeing the distance. We sit here and talk about windshield time. Oh my God, it is a day's travel to fly in Alaska to get from post to post to post in there. Those are the things that we struggle with.

Those are the things that we deal with. But I will tell you what each one of us deals with it. Each one of us steps up and takes that responsibility, and we do it, and I see it. We are doing it with pride, we are doing it with passion, and we are doing it with just pure energy. So, it is an honor to have served this, serving this term, and holding this position to say I represent the West. I am the National Vice Commander, but I proudly say I represent the West. And thank you very much for that opportunity. Let us keep putting those pushing out there, keep getting outside the box, keep finding a way to reach our veterans and be there for our veterans, for our families, and for our members. Thank you very much.

1634: Chairman Schmidt: Thanks, Ben, and as you travel around still, to you, Matt, and Jay, journey's blessings. We have some guest speakers here. How many are going to Louisville in August? I was thinking about it. Well, we have the convention chairman and, of course, the convention and meetings director in the house. And if I would like to ask them to come on down and tell us a little bit about Louisville, because I know we are all anxious to know. Bridget and Mike, come on down. Thank you.

1635: Conventions Chairman Mike Walton and Bridgett Robinson from National: Well, thank you for allowing us to appear today. I am glad I found out what is best, and it appears to be the West. I am from Illinois. I am out there somewhere. So, we are in the Midwest. Does that count for anything, Midwest? Just a little? You can join us, Ron. Well, we all hope you can make it to the National Convention this year in Louisville. It is really going to be a great convention. There are so many things going on for that national convention. So much to do. We are going to have a lot of junior ROTC competing there. We are going to have some bands competing again this year. And it is really going to be a good convention.

I always tell everybody to check out the national website. There is so much information on there about the national convention. And it is updated almost daily or weekly, whenever they can. But it is really going to be a good convention. And I am going to let Bridget talk more about it because she is a lot better than I am at telling you everything that has happened. Bridget? Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon, everyone. Good evening. So how many hands did I see are going to Louisville? Louisville. Louisville. Louisville.

Well, then you all can be there and make sure you pronounce it correctly. How about that? So, we are looking forward to seeing everyone there. It is going to be a great

convention. We have been to Louisville in 2009, and if you experience that kind of switch and that change when it was going to be there in 2020, so hopefully it's kind of like 15 years in the making now and culminating in 2026, so we look forward to seeing everyone. As Chairman Walton just mentioned, the band contest is returning, so we have three bands: Juliet, Band of Tonawandas, and Kansas City returning. Make sure that you are there on Saturday at 1:00 p.m. in the General Session Hall to watch the band contest. Last year in Tampa, we had twenty-four units competing. So, I cannot say that we will have that many, but we already have eight. Eight have already signed up. So please come out, watch those young people perform. They really appreciate it.

That is going to start earlier this year. It is going to start at 10:30 AM on Friday. The standard color guard competition will start at 2:30 on Friday in the General Session Hall in the Kentucky International Convention Center. So please make sure you come out with those uniformed groups. We appreciate it. On Friday, the first official day, the exhibit hall will open.

Make sure you come out saying thank you to all those vendors, those sponsors, saying thank you. We really rely on them, and they are not only just supporting us but making sure that they know that we appreciate them coming out and making an effort, having their products there, they are just providing information there, and being a part of our national convention.

Sunday is the Patriotic Memorial Service. Finalizing the choir that will be participating. So, I am hoping it is either a local school again or will be a local men's or women's choral company as well. So, we are finalizing that for the Patriotic Memorial Service and then on Tuesday for the general session. A little change that you may see. So, make sure that one, you are in your seat on Tuesday morning. You will see a little bit of a shift. And you may see that change during lunchtime. So, make sure that you are back at lunchtime. Same thing on Wednesday. On Tuesday, if you have not purchased your banquet tickets, make sure you call Ellen or see her before you leave tomorrow, because we already have a waiting list for the banquet on Tuesday. And that entertainment is Liverpool Invasion, which is a Beatles tribute band. So, it is going to be a great banquet again this year. So come out, and I have to say, we all have these.

Has anyone downloaded the app? If not, please do so because you can already see many items on the app. So, if you have not, it is updated with the 2026 information. So, the many items on there are ready. The blood drive, you can go ahead and make an appointment to donate blood in the exhibit hall. You can go ahead and reserve and sell away on the Belle of Louisville if you want. You can go ahead and purchase a commemorative of Angel's Envy. If anybody likes bourbon. Go ahead, check out that information on Sunday at 1:00 p.m. It is American Legion Family Night at Louisville Slugger Field, where the Louisville Bats play at 1:00 p.m. So go ahead, purchase those tickets. And then obviously, the Louisville Slugger Museum, there are lots of opportunities for museums and attractions in Louisville.

Known for the Kentucky Derby, which just took place on Saturday. What an event that was. So go ahead and check out everything that is taking place on the app. It is Chairman

Wilton communicated. It is updated as we get new information. So, send anything that you may need, send us an email. Consult with your department's adjutant. They will send us some information. And then the last thing is, you may see when you arrive in Louisville, an updated badge on which we are working. So, we look forward to welcoming you all. Any questions? Very good. Then we will see you in about a couple of months.

1640: Chairman Schmidt: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, and of course, we appreciate what you do and make these great events, and it is not easy. I said in their commission meeting yesterday, and let me tell you, a lot of hard work, a lot of effort, not only on their part but also those that are vying to host. So go out and enjoy it. And I remember the first national convention I went to; it was in St. Louis a few years back. Coming out of a little post in Eastern Oregon, I thought I was having all the problems. But you walk into the convention, and you will see a lot of Legionnaires. Just look at the caps. They are from everywhere. And if you happen to strike up a conversation, you will find that there is probably some commonality in some of your concerns back at your post, as there is in their post.

So, it is a good opportunity to visit and talk with other Legionnaires from other locations, but also to see how the American Legion operates at their annual meeting. Plus, you get to see and participate in the election. So, thanks again, and we will see you next year.

At this time, we are going to hear from each department, and the secretary will call the roll, and the sergeant-at-arms will walk the microphone around. Tell us what you got and what has been going on. What is something good in your department that you want to share with everybody else? First up, Alaska.

Department Reports Alaska: Pisa here, NEC. And with me, I have our past department commander, Terry Huseman.

Next up, Arizona.

Arizona. I am Andy Jaime, Department of Arizona. I am the NEC of the Department of. I want to speak about what is going on in the state and our department, and our membership. Thank you. Well, it is great to be with you here. And I do want to say that we do have some fun things going on. Like, we just hit 97% membership as of today.

The thing that is important about membership is that we are all working on this together, and I really enjoy it because I think it has made us all better to look around the western region and see how well we are really doing. So, thanks for collaborating with us on that. We will continue to reign supreme. Let me say this, for those in Colorado, and anybody else who would like to come down to Arizona on the 22nd of this month, the Diamondbacks are having a special veteran's night for Armed Forces Day weekend. Come on down and watch us beat the Colorado Rockies, right?

California. Well, good afternoon, everyone. I am happy. We have about eight members from California who came out here today. Some friendly faces. I would like to introduce them. If you, you know, it is better to stand. See their friendly faces. And if I forget anybody, well...Right off the bat, I would like to introduce our past National Vice Commander from California representing the Western States, James T. Higuera, past

Department Commander, and members from various, well, past Alternative NAC, Harvey Santos. We have Wes Sherman, Jan Summers, and Mike Smith, but I would also like to point out that your Sergeant at Arms, Ken Sutton, is also from California, donating their time.

Sadly, California lost three past department commanders and past NECs within six months. So, we made a motion that no more past department commanders could pass the legacy. It moved anyway. And we are watching everybody very closely. California is striving to get our membership up where it needs to be. It has been failing for the last couple of years. And it seems to be a trend. But we are working at it, and we have one of our candidates here from the Department of California. She has promised to make that happen if she is elected. So, I will not encourage any candidate. We do have a hotly contested race. So, no pressure. Thank you for your time.

Colorado Next up, and a rebuttal from the Colorado Rockies.

Tom Florez: Home of the Denver Broncos and Tom Bock. Thank you. I hope you can hear me without the mic. I would like to thank the Western Region. I would like to personally note thanks to all of you for your support with the Department, our challenges, and we are on board again and ready to move forward. So, we appreciate all your support, folks. Also, more importantly, our future National Commander, Jay Bowen, personally praises for your support. I would like to introduce some of our team in Colorado if you do not mind standing up. These are the main supporters for Jay, absolutely. Jackie Bowen is number one in our hearts. Greg Jackson, Gina Kipros, Deb Davis, Junior Weaver, and Rebecca. And we thank you. And a note of appreciation to all of you. I was asked to convey to you folks, Tom Bock, our past national commander, my mentor, who wanted to convey his appreciation. He said, "Hey, I won't be there." And I am sure most of you know why. Elaine Bock was a special part of our lives, and we will get there. So, appreciation for and with that. To convey what we are doing in Colorado, Deb Davis has a lot of work with our female veterans throughout the state. Colorado Springs, our team in Colorado here, not only do they support, but they also work vicariously in Colorado Springs with veterans, with veterans of war, suicide prevention commanders.

Just other things concerning, you know, things we did set in history this year that we can recall, we brought National Commander Dan Wiley, into the sea boat's frames. That was a first. We have never had a National Commander on the Western Slope forever. So, we have been struggling for 10 years to get him there. Also, Ben, Aiden, you came in and enjoyed yourself. I hope we did well. Our numbers are up. We moved from forty-seven in ranking up to the low 30's, so we are still charging and, you know, getting there further. So, not to hog all the time, I appreciate you. On behalf of Colorado, thank you for your support. Thank you for being there for us.

Idaho. Good evening, Bob Skinner, NEC Idaho. I thought Latin America said they were here. So, I have a couple of people with us this time. We have Scott Tighe and Lucky Gallego here with me today. Idaho is back on track and is hopeful that the rough patches are behind us.

Latin America. Randall Butler, NEC. Discussed the name change to Latin America and is working on opening a couple new Posts.

Montana: Lowell Long, Alternate NEC. Discussed the Western Region NVC visit to Montana, the Women's Veterans Symposium, and the first-ever Montana Legacy ride.

Nevada: Jim Stewart, NEC. Introduction of attending Legionnaires.

New Mexico: Paul Espinosa, NEC. Introduction of attending Legionnaires.

Oregon: Don Weber, NEC. Introduction of attending Legionnaires.

Washington: Introduced the attending Legionnaires. Discussed a new affiliation with the Tacoma Rainiers and veteran-centric events at the ballpark.

Wyoming. Introduction of attending Legionnaires.

1653: Chairman Schmidt: Discussed the update of the Western Caucus Constitution and Bylaws, which should be ready to go at our caucus at the National Convention in Louisville. Also discussed the selection process for the next Western Vice Commander. The Western Caucus is aligned by three groups of Departments, and up next is Group One, which consists of California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, and Washington.

Nomination packets (6 copies of each packet) from the Departments in the Group endorsing individuals will be submitted during the 2026 National Convention to Chairman Schmidt. To clarify, this would be for the year 2027-2028. So, Louisville this year. At that meeting, the Chairman shall appoint a Selection Committee. The Selection Committee will meet during Fall Meetings and report its selection to the Caucus.

1700: Chairman Schmidt: Introduced Past National Commander David K. Rehbein for a few words.

1701: David K. Rehbein, Past National Commander, discussed the importance of Departments developing future leaders and the part they play in growing and strengthening the American Legion. He noted that National has recently seen a decline in the leadership qualities of candidates for various offices and committees. He reminded the Western Caucus leadership that it is our responsibility to identify, develop, and mentor the future leaders of the American Legion.

1710: Chairman Schmidt: Thank you, Commander Rehbein. It was a great meeting today, great information and great updates. Again. Who is the best? The West is the Best. "Yes. Okay. If the chaplain would lead us in prayer as we all uncover."

1711: Caucus Chaplain: Provided closing prayer.

1712: Western Caucus Chairman Schmidt: Cover. The colors of our nation in place by the numbers. One, two. This concludes our meeting. Journey's blessings to everyone.