

Newcomer Task Force Meeting

Jan. 5, 2023

Chairs: Melanie Sowa and Phyllis Atkins

Members present: Judy Gechman, Kathy Bratcher, Jayne Marx, Louise Godici, Viviane Moskowitz, Pam Shetler, Jo Ann Smith, Melissa Lee, Carol German

Members absent: Tricia Kenyon, Trish Hardy. Member Susan Oliver resigned due to time constraints

The chairs opened the meeting with a recap of the Task Force history. The Task Force was formed last April to identify solutions for perceived problems within the club due to size. At that time, the club had more than 430 members. The Task Force met 3 times in the spring, twice in person and once on ZOOM. The problems identified included

- Strain on activity chairs and difficulty in having enough room for those who wanted to participate in various activities
- Difficulty in finding venues large enough to accommodate the number of people wanting to participate in general meetings, luncheons, and whole group parties
- Strain on those handling the administrative duties of the club, with particular emphasis on our treasurer and our communications volunteers.

The chairs recapped some of the research completed by the Task Force as a result of the meetings in 2022.

- Collected information on what makes a good social club, with special reference to size and activities
- Vetted other Newcomer clubs from southern California and similar states to learn how they deal with size and activities, and whether they have time limits on length of time people can stay in the club
- Brainstormed possible ways to lessen the impact of the three main issues identified above.

As a result of our work in the spring, it was decided that we should survey all members of the organization to see what their perceptions are, and to get a better idea of what they wanted to see the club look like going forward. The anecdotal comments of respondents were emailed to the Task Force members one day before this meeting. At the meeting, the aggregate data from the survey was distributed. We were then broken into small groups and given time to discuss the data presented. 168 of 392 members responded to the survey.

The survey was only as a tool for the Task Force. It is not a binding vote by the membership. The Task Force has been asked to identify a path for the future. The club will vote to accept or reject that proposal.

We were reminded that our main stated mission currently is to welcome people new to our membership area, and those going through major life changes. Our goal is to help them make friends and learn about our region, and we were asked to keep that in mind as we examined the data.

Small Group Observations from the Data:

- **The problems originally identified were smaller than it appeared in the spring.** We discussed the fact that, because of our efforts in the spring, some of the issues had been addressed, and were no longer overwhelming. The communications team has been greatly expanded so no one person is responsible for more than a couple of website tasks. The pause on new members combined with the natural attrition from those who did not renew membership dropped our numbers below 400, the ceiling the board had set for membership. The addition of PayPal and Venmo options on the website has eased the strain on our treasurer. We have identified Stagecoach Park as a venue for our General Meetings and have found a few locations able to accommodate 90-100 women for luncheons if desired. The small dues increase, combined with the fact that during the COVID gathering pauses we did not host large gatherings, has left us with a treasury able to handle rents on the venues so far identified.
- **Activity chairs, with a very few exceptions, did not feel the strain.** Most said they were able to accommodate most of the people interested in participating. The biggest issue is still people who sign up, then cancel very close to the activity date or simply fail to show up, causing the chairs to constantly rearrange groups, carpools and numbers reported to docents and guides.
- **On the survey, the response on the question to keep the club as is or to divide it into smaller groups was fairly evenly split. Further, there would be significant discord on how to split.** The groups all agreed to take splitting the club off the table for the year at least. We want to focus on solutions that have a chance of being accepted by the membership without causing major discourse. After all, we are a social club and want to foster friendships with everything we do.
- **The pause in accepting members is in conflict with our main mission as currently stated.** Particularly if the pause is lengthy, we agreed that we need to resolve that conflict as part of our solution.
- **The comments themselves, while interesting, need to be taken in the context that many were based at least partly on misconceptions.** For example, some believed that by splitting the club by length of time involved would result on all older aged members being moved out, which is not the case. We have members in virtually all of our age decades in both the over 5 year and under 5-year membership groups. Others believed that the longer-term members carried most of the burden of the club. Actually, half of the board and activity chairs have been members less than 5 years. Therefore, most of the groups chose to focus on the aggregate data presented at the meeting

- **Inactive members are not an issue.** They only become a problem when they want to attend large group activities. They do however count in our maximum of 400 members that leaves less spots for new members.

Brainstormed solutions on the future design of our club:

- **For now, splitting the club will be off the table.** Task Force members are afraid that the vote will be so evenly split that we may do not achieve the goal even if we tried one of the splits.
- **Maintain the status quo.** Continue the club with a 400-member cap and admit new members as space permits. One suggestion is to admit at the beginning of the fiscal year. We will know by July 1 how many members do not renew, and at that time we could admit new members on the waiting list in the order they applied. They would not lose their eligibility based on the 2-year deadline so long as they were on the wait list within the two years. Those on the wait list would know when they might join. Should the time seem too long to wait, they would still be presented with other options open to them within north county. We were reminded that while we would like to meet everyone's needs, that is not possible, and we are not the only club in the county.
- **Change our mission statement to become simply a social club.** Those interested in a true Newcomers Club could assist in the formation of a new club focused only on Newcomers.
- **Raise dues.** Currently, our dues are much lower than many other clubs in our area, making it an easy decision to join or to continue membership even if uncertain about how much they want to participate. After discussion, we agreed that raising the dues to \$60 might encourage those only minimally interested to not renew, making room for new members.
- **Form a subgroup for new members and perhaps those in the club less than two years should they want to participate.** This group would function much like the old Welcome Wagon and traditional Newcomers groups have in the past. They would have lunches and perhaps some Wanderers type activities to help them assimilate into our membership area. They could learn about ways to get involved in the county and be introduced to the richness around us. At the same time, they would be in a smaller group where they would get to know each other well. We are doing some of this type of activity currently through invitations to new member coffees and the Big Sister program.
- **Ask inactive members if they are willing to give up membership.** After discussion, this did not feel much like a solution. How would we determine who is truly inactive? Is regular participation in only one activity enough to be considered active? Why do inactive members maintain membership at all? We had more questions than answers about this group, and it fell out of favor as a solution.
- **Form a subgroup for potential members on the waiting list.** A committee of active members who are interested in helping people assimilate into our county could meet regularly with the ladies who are on the waiting list. They could hold coffees, perhaps lunches, and share information about activities around the county and opportunities for involvement. These ladies

on the waiting list would not be official members of our club and would not be able to take part in any of our club activities unless and until they became members. The purpose of the group is to provide a chance for new people to meet new friends and learn about the area while they wait for membership to open.

- **Have tiered memberships.** This was not fully discussed, but it was reported that some other similar clubs have several levels of membership based on either length of time in the club or involvement level. To be a viable option, we would need to explore this one more fully.

Wrap up

As a final activity for this meeting, we held a forced vote on some of the solutions to get a better idea of the direction the Task Force members are learning at this point. Since we all agreed that raising the dues should be one of our recommendations, that option was not included in the forced vote. Each member was asked to identify their first choice from the listed options. The potential options which included a sub-group for new or potential members were combined for this vote. We explored three options:

- **Form a sub-group for new members, or a holding group for potential members** (received 7 votes), allowing new members to the club annually after we see what our attrition rate is.
- **Change our mission to become a purely social club with new members forming a separate club** (received 2 votes)
- **Maintain the status quo** (received 2 votes)

A follow-up meeting was set for Wednesday, Jan. 11 at 10AM again at Phyllis's home. Members were asked to keep all conversations about the Task Force work within the group, as we are not ready to make a recommendation to the general membership yet. Per request of the president and her board, the Task Force recommendation will be the one put to a vote for general membership. When the recommendation is made, all records of the Task Force, along with all survey results will be posted on the website and will be available for all members to review before they vote.