

**Minutes of Society of Environmental Journalists board meeting** – January 24, 2015,  
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor Board Room, One Woodrow  
Wilson Plaza, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Washington, D.C. 20004-3027

Board members present: Ashley Ahearn, Jennifer Bogo, (First Vice Pres. & Programs Chair), Jeff Burnside (President), Douglas Fischer (Future Conference Sites Chair), Christy George (Secretary), Lizzie Grossman, Don Hopey (Treasurer & Finance Chair), Robert McClure, Susan Moran, Meaghan Parker (Rep. for Associate Membership), Dave Poulsen (Rep. for Academic Membership), Mark Schleifstein, Kate Sheppard (Second Vice Pres. & Membership Chair), Roger Witherspoon.

Board members absent: Jim Detjen (Founding President), Robert McClure

Guests present: Gloria Gonzales, Elizabeth McGowan, Dhara Vala, Tim Wheeler, Carolyn Whetzel

Staff present: Executive Director Beth Parke, SEJ Watchdog Editor Joe Davis

President Burnside gaveled the meeting to order at 9:12 EST.

He began by congratulating Meaghan Parker, Douglas Fischer and Carolyn Whetzel for organizing a terrific event at The Wilson Center.

**Agenda Item #1: Motion to approve Consent Calendar** (excluding the Diversity Task Force):

- Re-appoint FEJ Jury: Tim Wheeler, Sharon Oosthoek and Peter Thomson, Dave Poulson alternate
- Re-appoint Elections Committee Chris Bruggers, elections supervisor (paid) and volunteers Christine Heinrichs and Chuck Quirmbach
- Re-appoint Audit Committee: Chair Roger Witherspoon, Bruce Ritchie and Gloria Gonzalez
- Re-appoint FOI Task Force (Robert McClure board liaison, Tim Wheeler, chair, Joseph Davis, WatchDog Director, ED to affirm action decisions.)
- Individual board members resolve to sign Conflict of Interest statement for FY 2015
- Affirm Whistleblower policy for FY 2015
- Appoint 2015 Awards Committee

Roger Witherspoon moved adoption. Don Hopey seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

**Agenda Item #2: Executive Director's Report** Parke reported on the state of SEJ's resources and capacity, noting that it's the Board's job to build money and membership. We lost some members this past year, and might want to set goal of getting back to 1300 members in the coming year.

SEJ assets include volunteers and members; increased earned income; amazing programs. SEJ's auditors called SEJ a "going concern."

Liabilities include dropping membership, and the loss of longtime staffer Linda Knouse, who's retiring after 12 years. Knouse is training her replacement, Lisa Cosgriff on all aspects of the job.

Sheppard asked if SEJ's only fulltime employees are Knouse and Parke.

Parke – Yes. We passed a random IRS audit about whether part-time contract people should be staff.

Witherspoon asked how succession planning is going.

Parke: Staff is working on lists. Transition is likely a 3-5 year process.

**Agenda Item #3: Round robin on board members' goals:**

Hopey: Raise \$25,000 in new money

George: Reinvigorate volunteerism

Ahearn: Organize regional get-togethers

Witherspoon: Get more blacks to join SEJ; build ties with NABJ (National Association of Black Journalists)

Davis: Create a membership category for friends of SEJ to increase fundraising

Fischer: Get action on conference sites for 2017 and 2018

Bogo: Help identify new funding sources, conduct cosmetic overhaul of website, fund travel fellowships, and recruit new members from new outlets like Vox, Buzzfeed, etc

Gonzales: would love to help Bogo

McGowan: consider something like the National Press Club's communicator group to help secure funding

Schleifstein: Revitalize SEJ-talk, reach out to cross-beat reporters who cover environment sometimes, tap the wealth of potential new members

Moran: take on early career journos and people who see SEJ as an advocacy group

Grossman: figure out how extend SEJ community to cross-beat journalists, university writers and others who are ineligible to join

(Dhara Vala joins meeting)

Poulsen: Help SEJ return to Michigan State University

Sheppard: Grow membership beyond 1300, and expand diversity - racial, ethnic & type of media outlet, such as filmmakers, multi-media journalists, etc...

Parke: Help everyone meet their goals, especially in membership & in terms of SEJ's reputation and profile.

Burnside: Help everyone with goals, use anniversary year to achieve fundraising goals, membership, awards, maybe endowment, elevate stature & awareness, get a new poster into newsrooms, and use social media

Parker: Help associate people become members, reframe & market SEJ. I used to say the next time I run, I want a competitor, but I take that back. I want more international members, forge partnerships with other organizations, land a DC conference and regionals, including with DC science writers, increase the number of members who are/want be Wilson Ctr scholars

Break

#### **Agenda Item #4: Approval of minutes.**

Vala: adds her goal – to know more about SEJ, help with Strategic Plan.

George will seek help reconstructing questions from the membership meeting in New Orleans.

Witherspoon moves adoption of minutes, Sheppard seconds and minutes are approved unanimously

#### **Agenda Item #5: Budget & Finances**

Parke: The 2014 conference cost slightly less than budgeted, hotel costs lower because of hotel mistakes in room allocation and audio/visual services. A \$45, 000 unrestricted grant from Pew also helped enormously.

Parke gave newer board members an historic view of cash carryover. Explained how grantmaking community has changed its focus from large, multi-year unrestricted grants to funding specific projects with measurable objectives and very little funded overhead.

Parker: How much money do we need to raise before we can add staff?

Parke: would like to see another \$100,000 raise, could also work with restricted grants. Possibly could tap unrestricted board set-aside money if pending grants made us feel safer in future.

Former president Hopey cautioned that despite a rosier budget picture, SEJ is still not that flush.

Brief discussion about specific grant prospects, earned income and how board members can help identify funding sources for potential new programs.

Parke talked about major gift fundraising, perhaps finding a donor to “sponsor the SEJ Awards or other programs.

Moran asked if we could go to umbrella groups of funders?

Parke: Yes, would like to see that. The Fincom is going to reinstitute the fundraising subcommittee. Depending on finances, it’s possible SEJ might be able to bring on a Development Director at some point.

**Action Item:** Motion to approve endowment spending policy for 2015

Hopey: In a phone meeting, the Fincom recommended that the board authorize up to a 5% annual drawdown on SEJ’s permanently restricted fund: about \$12-13,000. This is required by law.

Motion: The board moves to set the 2015 endowment spending policy on permanently restricted funds at 5 percent of the total of permanently restricted endowment funds based on a three year average of fund totals for 2012-2014, as calculated and established by SEJ’s financial audit statements.

Sheppard moves, Fischer seconds. Motion passes unanimously.

(Carolyn Whetzel arrives)

**Action Item:** Motion to approve proposed 2015 operating budget. Witherspoon moves, Hopey seconds.

Discussion.

Fischer: If we decide to take money out for staff, etc, would we amend the budget?

Parke: Yes, also if the Programs Committee wants to increase spending.

The motion passes unanimously.

The Board formally thanks Whetzel for her work organizing for Wilson Center event and she thanks Parker and Sheppard.

## **Agenda Item #6: 2016 Sacramento conference**

Whetzel: We have tremendous community support, including from UC Davis, Capital Public Radio and especially News Director Joe Barr, and Development Director Craig McMurray. Will

do a town hall meeting April 17, at the Sierra Foundation to showcase upcoming conference and get people involved.

Brief discussion about Sacramento's potential as a great site, the third-party conference fundraiser model first pioneered in Chattanooga in 2013.

## **Two rounds of committee meeting breakouts, followed by committee reports**

### **Bogo: Programs report:**

- need to expand Fund for Environmental Journalism juries for grants & fellowship travel to conferences
- proposal to fund travel for Native Americans
- proposal to fundraise from tribal councils
- proposal to support beat reporting within FEJ
- proposal to support young journalists

Brief discussion about the SEJ Zine – should it be shorter? aimed at just members? or just supporters?

### **HOTSHEET – Ahearn and George to discuss/evaluate what's needed**

Bogo: evaluation of Watchdog program and survey members in general on programs. Should we limit access to Facebook page to members only?

Parke: update on FEJ grant - member notification not written yet, will share with Excom and tell members. Discussion of how best to proceed.

Burnside: Send press inquiries to Parke

George: Can we create FAQs for board and members?

### **Future Sites report**

Fischer: focus on 2017-18, including possibilities in DC, University of Louisville (Jim Bruggers is point person); Seattle, where Denis Hayes might help land Bullitt Foundation funding; Minneapolis, where the Walton Foundation is interested in the Mississippi River issues (Mark Schleifstein, who worked with Walton on New Orleans conference, is point person;) Michigan State University in Lansing, where our ace Carnegie-Mellon point person Chriss Swanney now works. We also have nibbles from Colorado State; and Vancouver, BC. Will put out calls on SEJ-talk & university list-servs.

## **Membership report**

Sheppard: ideas to deal with drop in membership:

- reduce barriers to entry;
- improve retention at the moment of lapsing;
- increase minority membership from 7% now to 10%;
- expand diversity of age, media outlet, geography, etc...

Sheppard asks board members to have an event in February to celebrate SEJ's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday; and.  
– proposes that every board member give out two free memberships to people who meet our membership criteria, and do so in time to register for 2015 conference at member rates.

Burnside so moves.

Discussion on goal (to recruit new members, and to measure how many of these recipients continue their SEJ membership on their own in the future) and fiscal impact (added staff time to process the applications). Motion is amended

MOTION, as amended: To provide to each board member the authority to grant two complimentary memberships in SEJ to worthy journalists, students, academics or others who would meet our membership criteria, who have not already been a member, and who do not have the same employer as the recommending board member. These two membership shall be offered in time for the recipient to register for the 2015 conference discount rate. Each recipient's application shall be reviewed using the regular process. Each board member is urged to give priority to under-represented members, and to recipients who might not normally intend to become a member or attend the conference. Each board member is asked to help integrate their recipients during the year.

Hohey moves, Witherspoon seconds.

Discussion centers on about impact to SEJ systems.

Motion passes unanimously.

## **Finance report**

Hohey: Only action item is a proposal to appropriate \$50,000 for Parke to use at her discretion for additional staffing. The goal is to land big donors, but Parke should have flexibility on how best to spend the money.

Hohey moves, Burnside seconds.

Discussion centers on the source of the money, and how Parke would use it.

Parke: I would probably hire contract help to work on funding projects; could rebalance staff.

Hopey: My original thinking was to provide seed money for a hire who could potentially fill a more permanent niche, ease someone into permanent staff.

Ahearn: Why not use the money to get more members?

Sheppard: agrees any new hire should be devoted to membership because it's our biggest issue.

Parke: What work would a membership director do?

Ahearn: I did a job description for membership director.

Sheppard: One person should administer the SEJ Facebook page.

Ahearn: This person should be a self-starter, younger, more social media savvy, and should be approaching graduate school programs.

Parke: Could be done by a member-volunteer.

Fischer: Our needs are significant and outweigh the need to hang onto the financial cushion. I don't want to encumber the language and restrict Beth. I don't want to micromanage this transition, whether Parke hires a development director or a membership director.

Ahearn: I'm not saying this money should go to membership; perhaps first find a funder for a membership director.

Parke: I think of it as capacity-building. Programs bring in members.

More discussion centers on the board's confidence in Parke's ability to manage the money as she sees fit.

Fischer proposes amending the motion to make it mandatory that Parke spend the full \$50,000 this year, and Hopey accepts the amendment.

DH: revised Motion: to designate \$50,000 this year for Executive Director Beth Parke to use at her discretion to do additional development work in consultation with the Executive Committee.

Motion passes unanimously.

### **Agenda Item #6: SEJ@25**

Hopey describes the SEJ25 fundraising campaign, to roll out on Valentine's Day, and says board members will get sample letters

Discussion centers on naming categories.

Schleifstein: Cupid for \$25,000, Going steady \$5,000.

Grossman: Having been through my own Kickstarter, why not bundle?

Parke: How about for organizations, to buy a “congratulations SEJ” ad in the SEJournal or a full page ad in the 2015 conference program?

Parke says if we can raise \$250,000 by year’s end, she’ll put \$100,000 of it into the SEJ endowment.

More discussion, on category amount details; rollout; publicity; possible gifts (“We love SEJ” mugs); webpage design; doing a meet-up at AAAS on SEJ’s February 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary; events at SEJ’s conference; founder memoirs; video of SEJ history; testimonials from members, funders, past university hosts.

(Freedom of Information Task Force chair Tim Wheeler joins the meeting)

#### **Agenda Item #7: FOI TF briefing on the U.S. Forest Service fee issue**

Burnside thanked Task Force members and Joe Davis for their work.

Wheeler briefed the board on the FOI TF’s pushback against the USFS attempt to levy fees from journalists in exchange for permits to do reporting on public land.

Davis: Oregonian reporter (and former board member) Rob Davis wrote a piece about the USFS charging for access to wilderness and other public land. The head of the USFS talked to Tim Wheeler and promised to abandon the policy, but we pointed out that the agency didn’t change the wording. The USFS convened public meetings in DC and Oregon, explaining it had interpreted a law passed by Congress saying there should be no commercial activity on public land to mean that also restricted/precluded news and documentary coverage.

Davis: We’re still struggling with the issue of news documentaries, and not-so-newsy documentaries, like the [Ken Burns/PBS] documentary on national parks. We submitted lots of legal comments. The rule is still not out.

George: State park recreation fees are an issue, too.

Davis: Seventeen news organizations said we don’t like this, fix it. ASNE & RCFP have lawyers on staff.

George suggests FOIA-ing whether the Hollywood film Wild paid fees to shoot in national forest land.

Wheeler said you can still find old language on various websites.



Davis: We are still wrestling with the Environmental Protection Agency.

Wheeler: SEJ had a big fight with EPA in the wake of the West Virginia chemical spill. Call with Tom Reynolds, who said his primary job is represent the White House and the administration. EPA had a recent teleconferences with no notice.

Grossman: EPA is also holding more 9am eastern press conferences, which isn't good for those of us on the West Coast.

Discussion continued about the possible impact of the new incoming Congress on EPA.

### **Agenda Item #8: New business**

Discussion centered on the Alicia Patterson Foundation, which just got endowed and earmarked some money for science and environment projects: books or films; a search to find a donor to endow SEJ's Awards; this year's Stolberg Award; and the need to develop an action plan to increase SEJ diversity.

Burnside: Thanked Hopey, George and Wheeler for guidance on presiding. Next board meeting is April 16-17-18 in Sacramento, and asks for a motion to adjourn.

Fischer moves, Schleifstein seconds.

The motion passes unanimously and the meeting is adjourned at 4:45pm EST.