

**Minutes of the Society of Environmental Journalists Board of Directors Meeting**  
January 25, 2014

Submitted by Roger Witherspoon, filling in for Christy George, Secretary of the Board, who was unable to attend.

Location: Woodrow Wilson Center, 6th Floor Board Room, One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20004-3027

**Board members attending:**

Mark Schleifstein  
Dave Poulson  
Meaghan Parker  
Jennifer Bogo  
Don Hopey  
Jeff Burnside  
Carolyn Whetzel  
Ashley Ahearn  
Douglas Fischer  
Roger Witherspoon  
Emily Gertz  
Kate Sheppard  
Robert McClure

**Not attending:**

Imelda Abano  
Christy George  
Jim Detjen

**Also present:**

Beth Parke, Executive Director

**Guests/observers:**

Tim Wheeler, former board member  
Intern – Donald Borenstein  
Louise Lief – Incoming public policy scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center  
\* \* \* \* \*

9:17 AM President Don Hopey called meeting to order

**Item #1: Minutes**

Carolyn: Motion to hold October 2013 minutes till next meeting. Revisions need to be made. Robert McClure seconds the motion.

Mark – called the question. Passed unanimously

## **Item #2 – President’s Report**

1. Welcome to new and returning members.

2. Thanks to Meaghan for putting together the Friday panel on the future of environmental issues in 2014.

3. Overview

- This is a year in which we can focus on potential new programs rather than just holding the line on budgets
- Hope to reverse the decline in membership.
- Seek to draw 1,000 or more to this year’s convention. That would include developing programs which would attract journalists who are not designated environmental writers, and working with other journalism organizations.
- Need to move forward with succession plan for Exec Director
- Have had a number of successes. Doug has commitments from U. of Oklahoma for the 2015 conference. Putting together a shale gas forum with a McCormick grant and Pittsburgh. FOI Task Force sent out well received letter critiquing CDC and EPA failures to provide timely information in the West Virginia disaster.
- Board members need to step up and volunteer between meetings.

4. Consent Calendar: Non-controversial appointments and actions for quick approval (Action item)

- FEJ Committee appointment of David Poulson (confirmation of Excom action in Nov.)
- Elections Committee reappointments (Chris Bruggers, election supervisor; Christine Heinrichs and Chuck Quirmbach)
- Appointment of Awards Committee (Beth Daley, Jim Bruggers, Jeff Burnside and Emilia Askari. Fifth member of committee to be recruited by these four and affirmed at next meeting.)
- Audit Committee: reappoint Chair Roger Witherspoon, Bruce Ritchie, add Gloria Gonzales (member)
- FOIA Task Force (reappoint Robert McClure as board liaison, and Tim Wheeler, committee chair.
- Appointment of Co-Chairs for Environmental Journalism 2015: SEJ’s 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, hosted by the University of Oklahoma, October 7-11, 2015 in Norman, OK: Nancy Gaarder and Sarah Terry-Cobo.
- Adoption of Whistleblower Nonretaliation Policy for FY 2014
- Individual board members will sign Conflict of Interest statement for FY 2014

Robert McClure seeks to add Joe Davis to FOI Task Force. Kathy Florsheim, Emily Gertz, and Ken Ward, Jr. Committee appointments should note the term of appointment. Carolyn made motion to approve with amendments.

Adopted unanimously.

5. Exec Director’s Report: Beth Parke

- As we started 2013 we didn't have locked up conference. Now we have agreements for 2014 and 2015.
- Received extensions of grants from NSF and obtained new ones.
- Do not have full complement of staff.
- We have more cash in the bank than projected.
- Membership is #1 issue for this year. If we can't reverse numbers, need to affirm who is in group, its attractions and ways to bring in new members. If they are leaving, we need to know why.
- Succession plan needs to be in place. Need an emergency plan, and a planned departure; plan work has been done, will discuss and adopt at next meeting.
- Leadership Development a priority for the new year.

#### 6. FOI Task Force Report – Tim Wheeler

- Sent letter to EPA and CDC about their lack of openness.
- Received response from CDC acknowledging they did not do as good a job as necessary and will try harder.
- Barbara Reynolds, Dir of Communications for CDC, agreed to meeting in February to discuss future interactions.
- EPA did not respond, and Ken Ward reports that they are still not answering questions regarding the West Virginia spill.

#### 7. Future Sites – Douglas Fischer

Wanted to underscore the work Beth has done to put together the conferences in Chattanooga, New Orleans and Oklahoma. Oklahoma agreement not yet signed but will be executed soon as board directed her to do, co-signed by university official not yet determined in Oklahoma.

### **Budget Items**

Carolyn makes motion to consider the budget:

- 2013 ended up better than anticipated.
  - Best source of revenue is the conference. We have opportunity this year to sell ad packages. The revenues are all towards operating income.
  - We received \$45,000 sponsorship pledge from Pew towards the New Orleans conference.
  - In past years we have had multiple budgets to deal with contingencies. This year we will have just one budget and review our income and outflow quarterly and make any needed adjustments along the way.
  - Carolyn made motion to approve the 2014 budget, with projected revenues of \$1,232,000, counting funds carried over and those projected to be received or released from board set aside in 2014. Projected expenses for FY 2014 (\$905,400)
  - Seconded by Doug Fischer.
  - Discussion
1. Beth: we have tapped in reserves by about \$100,000

2. There is about \$400,000 in reserves, with about half of that permanently restricted.
3. Proposed budget would allow ED to tap the unrestricted portion of the reserves if projected revenues do not materialize.
4. Meaghan – are these reasonable targets for our conference? Beth – last year attendance was lower than anticipated. It was more the economy than the government shutdown, and the location. Lubbock did well, partly because it was far west and Californians turned out in drove. They did not come east to Tennessee.
5. Roger – call the question.
6. Motion to approve the 2014 budget (Action item) (Whetzel):  
The board adopts the Executive Director's proposed operating budget of \$904,500 for 2014 with the following conditions:
  - 1: Grant, gift, and earned income to be carefully monitored throughout the year.
  - 2: If the organization is unsuccessful in meeting grant, gift, and earned income goals, board restricted funds currently set-side and commingled with permanently restricted funds in the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Fund Endowment account" could be tapped to achieve the executive director's goal of carrying over at least \$326,600 into 2015;
  - 3: That the organization continue work begun in 2013, to reposition SEJ and reinvent programs, publications and staffing, to increase SEJ's Viability
7. Seconded by McClure
8. Unanimous approval of the Motion.
9. Carolyn makes a motion that we adopt an endowment spending policy. This is required by the IRS, and is a Federal Accounting Board. Set fund at 5%. Mark Seconded

The Finance committee moves to set the 2014 endowment spending policy on permanently restricted funds at 5%, with the funds transfer into operating accounts based on a 3-year rolling average of permanently restricted funds of Dec 31 of FY 2011, 2012, and 2013, as calculated and established by independently audited financial statements for each of those years.

Approved unanimously.

Break for committee meetings 11:42 AM

**Future Sites: Douglas Fischer**

1. Looking ahead to 2016
2. Need to refill the pipeline and think about how to fund conferences going forward. Fixed costs run around \$200,000.
3. Committee needs to start making contacts and develop “anchor grants” of about \$125,000 to serve as starter or seed money.
4. The Norman, OK conference is not as solid as we would like. They have not signed the actual contract. They signed a letter of intent, but we need a signed contract before Beth can go and sign commitments for conference space or hotel rooms.

#### **Programs Committee:**

1. Newswire project opportunity: Majority felt as long as there is editorial control, adequate funding, and an out – a contract with a specific term – then it should proceed.
  2. Make suggestions to Awards Committee to examine the awards cash. Use it to bring winners to the conference instead of paying cash prizes. Consider whether to reintroduce student category. Board should commit to working to get more entries in this category. Carolyn – if you increase the number of categories you increase the needed staff time.
  3. Mark said we are losing something by having a separate main list serve and one for free lancers. Since most of our members are now free lancers, we should merge the two lists. It is still appropriate to have a separate list for educators.
- Doug: it was supposed to be with trade questions about what editors are good to work for, how to get insurance, etc. It was mostly about the craft. I see a need for a forum where a new freelancer could come and ask where do we go to do this.
- Emily: membership has tilted to a plurality being free lancers. There is the problem of the newbie.
- Don –40% of members list themselves as free lancers.
- Carolyn – concern is SEJ-Talk people getting overwhelmed with free lance questions and dropping out of the list. We should have the task forces poll both to gauge membership feelings about merging the list.
- Conclusion: Jeff will draft question to go to the task force chairs about merging the list.

#### **Finance Committee: Carolyn**

1. Broadening the base of donors. Developing ways to better communicate the benefits of having SEJ.
2. Want each board member to come up with the brief elevator speech about why journalists should join SEJ or why donors should give to SEJ.
3. Beth wanted to know if we could approach charitable foundation of an energy company to apply for a grant for the conference. If it is a charitable foundation, it would be the same as any other. Beth was given go-ahead to apply and we can deal with any blowback since it is an energy company. But these are foundations with 501c3 IRS status. There were no objections.

#### **Publications Task Force – Robert McClure**

1. Members are given assignments to go to other J-groups to see how they handle publications. Trying to come up with consensus statements we can agree on as to what we want and what are the purposes of our publications.
2. Website, SEJournal, WatchDog tip sheet, Twitter feed, EJ Today.
3. Perhaps we can put out periodic, special tip sheets such as a shale gas institute, or advisory of environmental lawyers, etc.
4. IRE requires panel moderators to bring tip sheets. We can adopt that model and have more tip sheets put together by members.

### **Membership - Ashley**

1. last year at January, 2013 -- 1,255; in August, 2013 -- 1,211; and Jan 21, 2014 -- was 1,184. It is slowly trending down.
2. Joe is the guy gathering all the articles daily. Recommend he has a form email and send the author that we loved your work, we circulated it, and you should consider joining. If they respond, send the correspondence to Ashley and the Membership committee for follow up.
3. At SEJ.org there is an AD above the fold. We should lower those and have house ad on what are the benefits of joining SEJ and how to join. Instead of "About SEJ" put the membership recruitment there. Somewhere prominent and above the fold. Link to Jeff's video and membership form.
4. MeetUP.com Recommendation that SEJ take up a corporate MeetUp account so that there can be unofficial SEJ gatherings by SEJ members around the country. Emily said it would be useful if we were paying the fee and giving people easy access to information. It gives organizers time to organize the event instead of spending time managing contact with writers around their region.  
Ashley made the motion that we pay one MeetUp account membership. Robert McClure seconded. Cost \$144 per year for up to 3 MeetUp accounts in different areas of the country. We agreed to fund up to 3 accounts.  
Roger moved the question: Unanimous agreement to authorize Beth to pay for 3 MeetUp Accounts.
5. Funding student travel to attend conference. Dave Poulson's idea. He can tell his students to go, though there is a problem with getting there. A regional approach where SEJ would partner with a funder to pay for students within that region.
6. Might put testimonials on the Membership Benefits page.
7. Donald Borenstein suggested giving an award for student environmental reporting. The prize would be a student membership.
8. MOM – Media Organization Membership and AIM - Academic Institution Membership. The idea has been around.  
Don—allows us to put limited resources in newsrooms where there aren't SEJ members and introduce them to the organization through their editors and allows them to experience benefits such as attending the conference at the membership rate. Why not ask foundations for support to underwrite such a program. Perhaps approach 20 newsrooms and offer free membership for a year.  
Robert – the idea needs to be fleshed out

Mark – when you are applying for awards, you are likely to join in order to get the cheaper rate. And some organizations require membership in order to apply. When we reduced the number of awards, we dropped a lure. Ask Chris what the numbers are.

9. Events –U of Wash Press had event with SEJ in which editors would listen to pitches for books. It's an example of what kinds of benefits you can give to members.

Don – GreenDrinks. If I go to one I bring conference flyers and SEJ material.

#### **Mark on New Orleans Conference:**

1. Conference is shaping up without problems. Tours and tour leaders are set. May have post conference tour.
2. Reception: celebrating New Orleans resiliency. Need help with some workshops. NOAA offered to help. Sunday – Audubon tea garden.
3. Have room for 21 – 28 panels.

#### **News Service:**

1. Beth – seeking clarity to continue discussions. About taking the lead in the development of the project, or a supporting role.
2. Editor has to be SEJ member.  
Need to be closely involved in screening and hiring editor. Editorial control issues. Need to be part of the council deciding what to cover.
3. Seeking sense of the board on working with Nexus Media to implement an environmental news service.
4. Do we want to take the step to become a news producer? discussion

Robert – Moves that we authorize Beth to continue working with Nexus Media on the development of a newswire project and direct her to bring agreements to the board as they are developed. Douglas seconded.

Unanimous approval

Jeff will draft a notice to the membership informing them that the board is considering the development of an environmental news service.

**Succession Planning:** See draft from Christy in board packet, send comments to BaseCamp.

**Next meeting:** April 12, 2014 in Sacramento, Calif. Summer meeting at end of July, could be virtual meeting because conference is early, Sept 3-7.

Jeff – motion to thank Beth and Meaghan for Friday event.

5:30pm **Adjourned**