

## Society of Environmental Journalists Board of Directors Meeting

Location: Larkspur Landing Sacramento — Conference Room

555 Howe Avenue, Sacramento, CA 95825

April 12, 2014

### Board members present:

Don Hopey, President

Jeff Burnside, VP, Programs

Ashley Ahearn, VP, Membership

Carolyn Whetzel, Treasurer

Christy George, Secretary

Jennifer Bogo

Douglas Fischer

Emily Gertz

Robert McClure

Meaghan Parker, Associate Rep.

Mark Schleifstein

Kate Sheppard

Roger Witherspoon

### Board members absent:

Imelda Albano

Jim Detjen

Dave Poulson, Academic Rep.

### Also present:

SEJ executive Director Beth Parke

Joe Barr, SEJ member

Jane Braxton Little, SEJ member

**9:11 a.m. — President Hopey calls the meeting to order.**

### **Agenda Item #1: Minutes**

Board approved Jan. 2014 minutes, and Oct. 2013 minutes, with one change subbing in “this one-time anomaly will be reported in this year’s 990.: George abstained.”

President Hopey thanks Jane Braxton Little, Douglas Fischer and Jennifer Bogo for organizing and participating in Friday night’s very successful pitch slam. Hopey thanks Carolyn Whetzel for logistical work on the meeting, and on trying to make Sacramento a future conference site. Hopey thanked ED Parke for all her fundraising that allows SEJ to be more financially stable than in recent years.

Hopey mentions agenda topics: new program possibilities, membership initiatives, future conference sites, FOI activities, 2014 board election, international outreach, leadership and succession planning.

**Agenda Item #2: Executive Director report and financial overview**

Executive Director Parke reported on the New Orleans conference “bubble,” which helped stimulate grants from Pew and others, in turn bolstering SEJ's finances, and on the buzz about the conference. Parke said our organizational stature is on the rise and that will help determine our fiscal strength. This is a year to brag about SEJ, and build relationships. Also, SEJ will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in New Orleans.

**Agenda Item #3: Development and finance, policies and discussion - (Whetzel)**

Treasurer Whetzel encouraged board members to help sell program ads, exhibitor booths, etc... Whetzel encourages board members to put their elevator speeches on Basecamp. Looking ahead, she said Sacramento would be an excellent 2016 location, and she's already getting strong local support for potential conference fundraising. Parke, Hopey and Whetzel gave new members a primer in avoiding fundraising conflicts, while still helping SEJ raise money – subjects covered extensively in the Board's Financial Policies.

**\*\*HOT\*\*** With the Gulbenkian Award SEJ won in 2012 in mind, Burnside, George, and Sheppard agreed to research other awards SEJ might be eligible to win.

Parker suggested we approach foundations and groups, and invite them to come to SEJ and tell the world about their anniversaries.

**Agenda Item #4: Project updates (Parke, others)**

Parke briefed the board on the Heinz PA collaborative reporting pilot project, which has aroused some interest in Pennsylvania (Penn State and the William Penn Foundation); Specialized Reporting Institutes, including the upcoming PA

Shale meeting at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, followed immediately by the shale trip organized by our partner, the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources. Parke also said staff (and board) is still debugging after the website's CMS update. She said SEJ supporter Elyssa Rosen died and left a bequest to support bringing mentors and their mentees together at the conference. Many applicants from all over the world. The SEJ Zine – a newsletter for “Friends of SEJ,” is coming together.

McClure questioned creating a new publication while others are still at risk.

Parke: the 'zine is a marketing tool for donors, and thus within the staff's purview.

Ahearn: the zine should be part of Publications.

Schleifstein: there's a difference between messaging to funders and members.

Parke: zine isn't original content, it's like the web, another staff driven publication.

George: is the web on Robert's Publications list?

McClure: Yes.

Parke: we're trying to harmonize.

Parke reported on the status of SEJ's pursuit of NSF grants. Our climate initiative with Michigan State University is over. NSF is now focusing on STEM learning in informal settings. Parke, Poulson, Eric Freedman (the new MSU Knight Chair) and Conference Manager Jay Letto are working on possible multi-year ask.

Parker leads discussion on what we can do with our growing international membership, given constrained resources. Parker, former board member Peter Fairley and James Fahn of Internews and the Environmental Journalism Network have been separately talking to the Pulitzer Center; the International Reporting Project; and the International Center for Journalists. (Other suggested groups are the East-West Center and Reggie Dale's Transatlantic Reporting Network.)

Goals: establish relationships; consider if we're competing for members; and exchange information. Parke suggested we do a strategic analysis of which

group does what. Parker outlined three roles to consider: fiscal sponsorships; conference travel support; and joint reporting projects. If we had the money, do a global SEJ conference.

Discussion: impact on staff time; SEJ's international agenda; leveraging grants by increasing our international presence; bridging differences. Suggestions: SEJ inventory what we offer international members, such as the chance to apply to the Fund for Environmental Journalism; consider member affiliates, or a different category of membership?

### **11:00am - BREAK**

### **Committee meetings: Programs and Finance**

### **Committee meetings: Future Sites and Membership**

### **LUNCH**

### **Agenda Item #5: Report and discussion on draft Succession Plan, potential action item. (George) – minutes of this discussion by Roger Witherspoon**

George: Staff is all Founder Staff and, after 25 years, we face the prospect of many founders – with their collective institutional memories – retiring.

It's both an emergency plan and long-term plan, and was adapted from a template used by several non-profits.

Beth described the development of the "foot locker," a file containing important items: grants that are in process; due dates on expenses, contact information for SEJ attorneys and investment counselors, etc.

Modifications were made to the draft document during board discussion.

Language governing appointment of temporary executive director and interim executive director, as well as establishing search committee to hire a permanent ED was developed by consensus.

Agreed to develop an executive search plan to accompany the transition document. Christy designated to draw up the ED search plan to be voted on at

next board meeting.

Responsibilities:

Beth will get clarification as to who can notify the bank that the signatories have changed, and find out who has authority to make changes to the account.

Mark moved motion to approve the plan as amended

Robert seconded the motion

Jeff – most of us want this to serve as a planned or unplanned succession plan  
Thanks to Christy for her work on the development of the plan.

Approved unanimously with no abstentions.

Roger out, Christy back

**Agenda Item #6: Future Sites committee report - NOLA, OKLA, and beyond  
(Fischer)**

Joe Barr of Sacramento's Capitol Public Radio: "We want a conference here."

Parke: CPR would be a pass-through in another SEJ 3.0 conference model. If we can get \$100,000 in commitments, I'm comfortable signing a contract.

Barr thinks it's possible to do that by mid-June.

Fischer: longer-term prospects include the Reynolds Journalism School at the University of Nevada-Reno; Cornell; Toronto; and Washington, D.C. – a hard and long process, would take a leap of faith, but it's a worthwhile risk. Beth might need to go to the ExCom to make a commitment with Sacramento Doubletree (hotel rooms and conference venue) before summer meeting.

Schleifstein: All NOLA tours, plenaries, concurrent sessions in good shape, focus on covering disasters, with Dart Center, Randy Lee Loftis (OK bombing, Texas explosion/fire), Ken Ward (WV toxic spill/water pollution). Bigwigs invited to opening reception. Rock n' Bowl booked, Audubon Zoo tea garden for Sunday pitch slam, etc. - need board to help hype early dates.

**Agenda Item #7: Finance committee report - (Whetzel)**

Whetzel: risks include donor stagnation; raising money for specific topics if okay?

Parke: we're competing with other entities

George: should we make a list of our priorities, BEFORE looking for project

funding? FEJ could find money with strings, then put out RFPs for those topics.

Parker: if the topic is big enough, it's safe

Schleifstein: we list topics on the website

### **3:15pm -- BREAK**

#### **Agenda Item #8: SEJ 3.0 Strategic Plan update, motion to approve at summer meeting (Parke-Hopey)**

Adopted unanimously with note on typos – (Witherspoon moves, Whetzel seconds)

#### **Agenda Item #9: Programs committee report - Awards, FEJ, mentoring (Burnside)**

Burnside: committee meeting dominated by discussion about international members. What if we create an international board seat – a bylaw change – to be voted on by all international members. Cap international board seats to one?

Whetzel: current policy limits amount SEJ covers for board travel.

Parke: What if international candidates sign a form saying they understand the travel reimbursement policy?

McClure: larger issue is if we want to push international growth? Vetting (membership status) is more complicated.

Burnside: embrace if not aggressively recruit. Issues: credit cards, vetting, partners

Fischer: how much growth?

George: Programs committee has ideas about partnering to help vet international journalists. Board seat idea addresses financial issues. It's a mission shift, maybe fundraising opportunity.

Fischer: our membership is declining. Wilson Center has brought a lot of international journalists to conferences. 30% of my audience is overseas.

Schleifstein: wrong message on many levels. We don't do it for Canada.

International board seat idea is scrapped.

Discussion continues about need to identify benefits of SEJ membership to international members, what we can/can't offer them, concerns about need for

financial assistance beyond what SEJ can provide, impact on staff time.

Suggestions: SEJ consult with other international j-groups on vetting membership status of international candidates. Ask all board candidates to sign a Memo of Understanding regarding travel reimbursement and their responsibility if elected.

**Agenda Item #10: Membership committee report, update on efforts to grow membership, retain lapsing members (Ahearn)**

Ahearn: two ideas: Don's Media Umbrella Membership

Hopey: offer individual memberships to 10 media outlets with no SEJ members – one year pilot program – 3-5 free memberships for people covering environment-science issues, to be selected by editors; and to 10 j-schools. Numbers negotiable. Journalists fill out membership applications, have full access to SEJ through conference. Do by summer meeting, addendum to policies not bylaws

Witherspoon: what about freelancers? Diversity?

Parke: we've had fellowships/scholarships

Bogo: to be measured by renewals?

Sheppard: how does picking process work?

Hopey: geographically diverse board – we all know people/target organizations

Parke: staff time involved in registering, then unprocessing

Schleifstein: mailings and journal

Whetzel: 10 copies of Journal to newsroom?

George: repeats Roger's question about freelance & diversity?

Hopey: approach City Editor

Ahearn: pick pilot newsrooms near conference locations?

Witherspoon: minority news outlets

Several people opposed.

Whetzel: track how responsive the editors are

Parke: Didn't work in past, people struggling to pay dues will be angry. If you want to allocate \$2,000/year for fellowships, board members can give money.

Ahearn: second idea: "Sustaining members" category, formalizing relationships with supporters – get SEJournal, EJToday, no vote, no list-serv access. Individuals,

not companies or 501c3s

Fischer: likes it, sustaining partners – organizations? Minimum \$500/month?

Whetzel: nothing prevents us from taking this money

Ahearn: how much do we get now?

Parke: zero. "Member" loaded. Affiliate? Supporter? Sustaining subscriber?

Parker: Circle? "Sustaining Circle" "Sustainer" "Partner"

Volley of suggestions: "Soldier in the Green Army" "Friend" "Comrade" "Angel"

Fischer: would be unrestricted money

Parke: 60-65 subscribers now

Burnside: build around 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

**\*HOT\*** - Ahearn, Bogo, Burnside, George, Schleifstein, Sheppard volunteer to serve on 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Task Force

### **Agenda Item #11: Publications & FOI Task Force update – (McClure)**

McClure: People still talking to other j-groups, so no report on where publications should go till fall. Goal is concerted publications plan, interaction between them, appropriate formats.

McClure lauds new FOI Task Force chair Tim Wheeler. Members demanding increased action. EPA letter re: WV water. EPA wants specifics on problems. Planned op-ed but one member wanted to pull out.

Hopey: employer may be nixing.

McClure: trying to ramp up pressure. (SEJ FOI staffer) Joe Davis had a productive meeting with group of groups.

Parke: Joe wants SEJ to ramp up on our own; renew McCormick Foundation grant. FOIA calendars. Concerns about how far to go – lash out on Twitter?

McClure: Congressional oversight committee – [iwantmyfoi.com](http://iwantmyfoi.com) – wiki – coalition likes group, reports from witnesses.

Parke: Tim likes idea of agency disaster response: law and best practices. We should write policies of how press offices should behave.

Fischer: let's do it, totally own it. Actual documents

McClure: hard to get members to stand behind their problems

Parke: Joe's marching orders: need protocol for crises, use social media better

**Agenda item #12: Climate Nexus (Parke)**

Parke: not much new to report – is it time to put message out to members?

Discussion. Parke will write and circulate FAQs for when the news hits.

Witherspoon: word could get out, then the New York Times will call

Fischer: a short SEJ Announce “we're in partnership and considering...” or President's column in the SEJournal (low-key venue)

Parke: mission: quality, viability, reach

**Agenda item #13: New business, motions as needed, summer Board meeting plan re date, site or online meeting – (Hopey)**

Three board members' terms up in fall: Gertz, Whetzel, Witherspoon, seven in 2015: Ahearn, Albano, Burnside, George, Hopey, McClure, Parker. Need to cultivate leadership. Brief discussion of combining SEJ-Freelance and Talk list-servs. Next meeting will be virtual, set for Saturday, July 26.

**5 p.m.** Unanimous vote to **ADJOURN** (McClure moves, Whetzel seconds)