

National Press Club
General Membership Meeting
Oct. 20, 2023

National Press Club President Eileen O'Reilly opened the meeting at 12:07 p.m. Approximately 50 members were present, including journalists and communicators, so there was not a quorum.

O'Reilly introduced Executive Director Didier Saugy, who started in the position in June, to the membership. She also noted the death in September of former President Mike Freedman, and said a celebration of his life would be held in the club soon.

Approval of minutes: Board Vice Chair Herb Jackson, acting as secretary, moved to approve the minutes from the May 12, 2023 general membership meeting. Member DJ Caulfield seconded. During discussion a request was to amend the section under Press Freedom from in the minutes to note that there had been a request for a membership vote on taking a position on Julian Assange. The minutes were approved as amended unanimously.

Membership report: Membership Secretary Poonam Sharma reported that membership was about 2,500 members, down about 30 members from the meeting in May. There are 1,284 journalist members, down 53 from May; 1,065 communicator members, up 23 from May; 276 young members, down 47 since May. Membership is down about 7 percent year-over-year. Sharma said peak membership was about 3,000.

Treasurer's report: Treasure Mike Balsamo said revenue since the last general membership meeting has been strong, with operations coming in over budget four of the last five months with losses during summer months below amounts anticipated in the budget. Cash and investment reserves at the end of the third quarter totaled \$4.5 million and the Future Fund, commonly known as the Rockwell Fund, had \$12.3 million. The club paid off debt remaining from the pandemic at the end of the second quarter. Projections for 2023 are difficult because clients since the pandemic making later decisions to hold events, with staff sometimes getting requests 10 or 15 days before an event, compared with lead times of months or more before COVID. October looks to be strong and over budget. November and December also look good, and expectations are for an operating profit for the year of \$900,000. The 2024 budget is still being developed, but it projects another increase in revenue in 2024 but higher costs partly because more staff positions are being filled. The budget calls for a modest profit of \$600,000. Challenges include filling some vacancies and a lag in membership and revenue from restaurants. This is partly because many offices are still only partially occupied downtown with people continuing to work from home. In response to a question, O'Reilly said reopening the 4th Estate restaurant is still under discussion, but the space is being used for other events and generating revenue. Renovations are also underway at the Reliable Source and there's a desire to see business pick back up there before opening the other restaurant.

Dues increase: O'Reilly said the board has approved a dues increase for 2024 of \$2 per month for members, except for young members, whose increase would be \$1 per month. O'Reilly said this was not intended to be an annual occurrence, but was considered needed now because of inflation's effect on food, drink and energy prices for the club. She noted free benefits were also being provided including coffee in the afternoon. And she noted that the restaurant will soon be open five nights a week with new equipment allowing for menu changes, and the plan is to resume free breakfast in the second quarter of 2024. O'Reilly made a motion to increase the dues. Balsamo seconded. Member Jonathan Salant raised a point of order and said O'Reilly could not preside over the meeting and make a motion. Salant made the motion to approve the dues increase. Balsamo seconded. During discussion, member Myron Belkind noted that for past increases, the lower rate provided to young members was also provided to retirees and spouses. Belkind proposed to amend the motion to include them. O'Reilly noted a quorum of the membership would be required to change the board's motion. Salant said he would accept it and amend his motion. O'Reilly, Balsamo and Board Chairman Mark Schoeff all said they accepted the amended proposal. In response to questions, O'Reilly said dues were last increased last year; that the board did not think the increase would negatively affect efforts to increase membership; and that the board and staff were trying to attract corporate sponsorship for club events and activities. The amended increase – \$2 per month for members, except young members, retirees and spouses would pay \$1 per month – was approved with one “no” vote.

Executive director's report: Saugy introduced himself to the audience, spoke about his personal and employment background. He said his impression after four months on the job is that there are many things that could be improved, especially on food and beverage. He said his goal is to make sure the 14th Floor will be a calling card for the club to attract more members. He expects to have new menus, a new wine list, and make sure there is value for members. With the resumption of breakfast, he anticipates a free menu and additional cooked dishes being available. He also anticipates setting up “chef's tables” in the 4th Estate space for more elaborate dinners and to bring back music in the Reliable Source. He said a new microbrew is being served in the bar that has no name and there will be a contest among the membership to name it. He said he also anticipates organizing cooking classes for members, showing the process on YouTube and letting people order the food from the club to cook it at home.

President's report: O'Reilly said a goal for the year was to get the club thriving again and it has been successful. Member teams are active and engaged and headliners events have been “killing it.” She cited a retirement party for former executive director Bill McCarren, book events, an event showcasing women who covered the Vietnam War and others. She also mentioned the beer-naming contest and upcoming Oktoberfest. The focus on press freedom has also continued, including efforts to keep up pressure on calling for the release of Austin Tice and Evan Gerskovich. She noted that McCarren continues to work with the club on press freedom issues. O'Reilly also said she has focused her presidency on bringing attention to news deserts. She also let the membership know she launched a task force to attract and retain younger members from diverse communities. She highlighted a recent success story in which the Press Club played a significant role: The asylum granted recently to Mexican journalist Emilio Gutierrez Soto. Finally, she said the five-year strategic plan is being updated by a committee led by Vice President Emily Wilkins that will be sending a survey to the membership.

Q&A - Holiday party: Salant objected to the decision to move the children's holiday party from a Saturday morning to a weeknight because it could interfere with homework. He also objected to the price increase and said including an open bar could expose children to drunk people. Member Alan Bjerga said the timing would also be difficult for parents who work downtown and have young children who would have to deal with traffic to get home to pick the children up and get back home by bedtime. He questioned whether the change of plan was done for the convenience of staff, or because a vendor wanted to rent the space on a Saturday so the club could make more money, and not with the members' interests taking priority. O'Reilly said staff considered the change and wanted to try something new, and a large number of people have made reservations to attend. If it doesn't work out, she said it may be changed again next year. She said the priority in making decisions about member events is always to put members first.

Q&A - recruitment: A member asked if the club is trying to recruit student members on the campuses in the region. O'Reilly said the club is interested in having young journalists get involved and tries to arrange professional development events for them. She said the club is not going out to campuses to recruit, but it does go to fairs that journalism groups have. A member noted that there are memberships for interns and his experience was students who joined that way were "wowed" by the Press Club.

The meeting adjourned at 1:01 p.m.