

RECOM

Retired Employees City of Mesa

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RECOM Executive Board

Inside This Issue

- *Message From the Board*
- *Speaker*
- *Benefits Task Force*
- *Meetings*
- *Announcements*

Message From the Board

The RECOM Board is pleased to announce that Sam Halverson has been appointed by the City of Mesa to the Employee Benefits Task Force. Sam will be filling the position recently vacated by the resignation of John Oliver. The Board voted unanimously to recommend Sam for this position.

While John's excellent service on the Task Force leaves some mighty big shoes to fill, we think Sam is more than qualified for this position. Sam retired from the Fire Department in 2006 after thirty years of service. During much of his career he held the position of Captain, and for the last thirteen years served as Battalion Chief. Sam was also elected by the sworn personnel of the Fire Department on the local board of Public Safety Retirement System for twelve years until his retirement.

Sam, who represents the public safety retirees, will join RECOM's "civilian" member of the EBTF, Barb Seperich, who has served for the past five years. Together, I feel they will provide truly excellent representation for RECOM members (and all retirees) in an area that is so very important to all of us.

John Gendron, President.

Speaker

Our speaker for September was Johann Zietsman, Executive Dir. Mesa Arts Center (MAC), and Director of the Arts and Cultural Department. He's been with our city for just over one year. But talk about not homegrown! Most recently he's been at the International Society of the Performing Arts in NY for six years, but originally he is from South Africa where he trained as an architect. He worked for a number of years in various countries in Africa, then came to America, and the rest is history as they say. He did say he was a bit worried about his accent.

Mr. Zietsman is the Director of the Arts and Cultural Dept. – that includes the Arts Center, the Arizona Museum for Youth, the Arizona Natural History Museum, and the Contemporary Arts Gallery which is on the campus of the MAC. His philosophy is that the arts and cultural institutions should reflect **everyone** in the community – because after all, they were built and are operated with money from **all** the taxpayers. (OK, I'll keep that in mind when I can't figure out the significance of an oversized chair with spikes coming out of the seat, as well as when I'm enraptured by the sugarplum fairy.)



Johann Zietsman

On one recent Friday night there were as many as 9,000 people on the campus of the MAC enjoying the free samplings by the SW Shakespeare Company, the Mesa Youth Theater, the Orchestra of the SW and the ballet inside the theater as well as the Low Rider Car show outside. And there were not just mature people like the readers of this newsletter, but also young families. The idea is to present programs that provide a new and different experience that may not be your thing, but you recognize that it's a quality program. So – the writer may still not go out and get a tattoo (even in an invisible place) but at least she knows more about the skill and art involved in it.

The MAC staff never takes audience support for granted. They monitor attendance, take surveys and measure in other ways. And they pay attention to who can afford to come to performances, who can afford to rent space, what school & community groups can afford to use the MAC. More on that later.

And then there's the building itself! Took a long time to get it, but guess what, now it's on every advertising brochure and publicity flyer for the City, and a group from Calgary, Canada has been here four times to study the building and the programming.

Normally, the writer wouldn't spend much time on the intricacies of the finances of the Arts & Cultural Department, but it's such a big issue in Mesa, So, if you're not interested in money– this would be the part to skip.

OK, what about the money?

Why don't we sell the MAC to a private group? Not realistic

Community arts centers are community amenities – but not cash cows. For that you need huge theaters, and blockbuster acts – such as Broadway musicals. No one is standing in line to buy this or any other **community** arts center. But that doesn't mean the MAC (and the museums) don't have an economic impact. They do, and not just by accident.

For example:

- Dinner and a show package – a partnership with downtown restaurants who will benefit from the partnership
- MAC Fest (more about that later) will be a catalyst for all the downtown businesses.
- Blockbuster museum exhibits – fabulous shows guaranteed to bring in the crowds

Last year the MAC, and the three museums brought in 440,000 people to downtown Mesa. And for the first time ever, the Arizona Natural History Museum crossed the \$500,000 mark in revenue. Altogether the Arts and Cultural Department brought in \$6 million dollars last year.

So – how did we pay for this building?

The MAC was built with a ½ cent Quality of Life sales tax passed by Mesa voters in 1986. It expired 8 years later and had earned \$94.5 million. The Arts & Entertainment Alliance raised another \$4 million in donations for furniture and equipment - most successful capital campaign in Mesa history. And, we're unusual to open the building paid for – no bond debt, no other debt --- that's not the case anywhere else.

For \$100 million we got –

4 theaters,
14 art studios,
an art gallery,
and a beautiful campus.

Just for comparison - in Philadelphia it cost \$200 million for a 1,500 seat auditorium, a little “black box” theater and a small lobby, and that’s for the world famous Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra!

How do we pay for ongoing operating expenses?

A ¼ cent sales tax funds 50% of operations. The MAC earns about \$3.5 million or about 50% of the total operating expenses through arts classes, ticket sales, grants etc. (25% self funding is the norm in other cities.) There is also a 501 3c organization that contributed \$333,000 last year. That money supports education programs, Youth Theater and arts programs in conjunction with the schools. And there’s more – but suffice it to say that while Mr. Zietsman and the Arts Center staff, the Arts & Cultural Alliance and the 501 3c have a soul for the arts, they have a head for figures and making the numbers work.

Welcome back to those who skipped the numbers part.

Remember when we talked about the arts activities maybe getting too pricey for people? Well **Target Stores** have sponsored **Free Sundays at the Museums**. You get to go to the Arizona Youth Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Contemporary Arts Museum for free on the **first Sunday of the month** – and Target will reimburse the museums for your ticket! Is this cool or what? Of course now you might have to come up with a reason why you aren’t taking the grandchildren to the museums.

If you’re not sure if you really want to go to a particular show, check out the “interactive brochure” on your computer. It’ll give you a small taste of the sound of a performer, or a scene from the play, or a sample of the art. The website is mesaartscenter.com.

Some of the blockbusters that you really do (or did) want to see are the Hensen Exhibit at the Arizona Museum for Youth and the Feathered Dinosaurs currently running (so to speak) at the Natural History Museum. Both very expensive to bring here. But, because the Arts & Cultural Dept. have engendered so much trust (Did you skip the money part above?) with the numbers people in city management, the City paid for the shows up front and was reimbursed after the shows from ticket sales. And there was money left over for the department!

And finally, (I can hear you sighing!) finally – don’t miss the **MAC Fest every Saturday** from 10:00AM to 4:00PM through May. It’s an art fair for local artists.

You can rent a space on the sidewalk in the downtown area for \$15.00. Call the box office for more details if you want to display your **original** arts and crafts. And if you’re not an artist – then come and enjoy the displayed works!



Johann Zietsman answering questions from the audience

Editor’s note: Mr. Zietsman, your accent was delightful, and we had no trouble understanding it at all!

Reports

Benefits Task Force

Open Enrollment Oct 20- Oct 31, at 5:00PM

OK – if you are absolutely, positively, 110% sure that you don't want to make any changes in your insurance coverage then you don't need to re-enroll during open enrollment. You will have the exact coverage for 2009 as you did for 2008. Plans and premiums remain the same for retirees. However, there is an online survey that asks about how happy you are with your benefits, customer service, etc. If you don't re-enroll (even without any changes), you don't get to express your opinion.

But be aware, you can't change your mind on October 31 at 5:01 PM . What you've got then, you've got for 2009. So, if there is the slightest chance that you might want to add or drop a spouse from coverage, or that you might want to change plans or anything like that, please go into the www.mesachip.org website and, review your file and make changes. If you change your mind again, you can do so up until Oct. 31, at 5:00PM. Might be a really good idea to just review what you've got now anyway, don't you think? Be aware that the site will be really busy with lots of other procrastinators on the 31st –and you might not get through at the last minute. And Donna and Jody said they're making no exceptions for latecomers – just sayin'!

You know what they say about “get it in writing”? Well, get it in print! If you've made any changes to your plans, spousal coverage etc, hit that **print button at the end**, and if there's any problem afterward – you've got proof. Because, as we all know – computers are not perfect.

Oh, one more thing. Your **password** is: The first four letters of your last name and the last four digits of your social security number. So for example, the writer's password is: sepe 1234 (You didn't really think I'd tell you my social security number did you?!!) And there are instructions for folks whose last name has only three letters, or begins with Mc, or O' etc. etc.

If you want to make changes, and if you are going to be out of the country and will not be able to get to a computer, email Jody Topping (jody.topping@mesaaz.gov) or call her at 644-3009 or Jeanne Young (jeanne.young@mesaaz.gov) at 644-2660 **before** you leave and plead your case.

Did you get the “For Your Benefit “Flyer? Key info in the letter for retirees:

Retirement Age

The IRS ruling regarding retirement age that was mentioned in the last newsletter has gone to a congressional subcommittee with much input from corporations, public employers and pension funds. The IRS declared itself to be unaware that this ruling would affect 18 million people (imagine that!) and is now moving back the effective date to January 1, 2011. This according to IRS Notice 2006-69.

Premium Comparison

The Benefits Department has done another comparison of premiums with cities across the valley. A brief version of the report will be available for viewing at the October RECOM membership meeting. The difficulty in comparing cities remains that premiums don't tell the whole story. You need to look at deductibles, co-pays coverage and a variety of other criteria. And remember, some cities have fiscal years starting July, some September – so their premiums might have recently changed.

But the good news is there is NO CHANGE in premiums for City of Mesa retirees for 2009.

Inquiries

There was another recent inquiry from a RECOM member regarding the City possibly dropping retirees from health care benefits. The question surfaces every now and then, so I spoke to Donna Salemi again on Sept. 23. She said that a report had forwarded to Chris Brady that recommended that **current retirees and current employees** remain on the City's health care plans. **New hires in the future** may not have retirement coverage or more stringent conditions may apply to them, but that hasn't been determined yet.

Permanent Benefit Increase

In light of the events of the last couple of weeks, this is probably not a burning issue. But, an inquiry was made regarding why ASRS participants were not receiving a PBI – Permanent Benefit increase in their pension. Here is a brief answer, but it was probably more relevant a couple of weeks ago.

The PBI is determined not only by how much money ASRS's investments made, but by "the overall **actuarial** value" of the money pool. That basically means how many people are being paid and how many people are **no longer** being paid.

The numbers crunchers take the money made from contributions and investments over a ten-year period and plug it into an actuarial formula – and that determines whether we get a PBI. Averaging the income over ten years rather than calculating it every year" minimizes excessive increases or decreases in the contribution rate." If you are still fascinated by this in spite of the recent stock market events there is a Q&A section on the ASRS website that discusses it.

Announcements

Free Flu Shots

Board member, Jo Ferguson, reports that if you have City of Mesa Insurance, you get free flu shots at the Art Mollen Clinics in the various grocery stores or at the Mollen Immunization Clinics from now through November 25th. Be sure to bring your COM insurance card. For times and specific locations you can check two websites: www.mollenflushots.com or www.flushotsusa.com.

City Email change

On Oct. 1, the City's email address changed to: www.mesaaz.gov. City employees can be reached at john.doe@mesaaz.gov. The Mesa Arts Center will remain at: www.mesaartscenter.com

Social Security Calculator

If you aren't already receiving a social security check, and you'd like to know what it will be, Social Security has an online benefit calculator. The website is www.socialsecurity.gov

Meetings:

Meetings are held at the fire station at First St. and Mesa Drive on the third Wednesday of each month at 9:00AM

October 15 - Speaker: Jody Topping, City of Mesa Benefits Dept. This is Jody's annual visit. She'll answer questions of a general nature regarding COM benefits.

November 19 - Speaker: Representative from the Mesa Genealogy Center

December 17 - Annual Christmas Social