

Playa del Fuego Leadership Retreat 2021

Overview

Playa del Fuego (PDF) is a long-running Burning Man regional, typically held every Memorial Day weekend, put on by FirePony Creative Society, a Maryland 501(c)(3) non-profit. In 2018 & 2019 PDF was held on property in Tamaqua, Pennsylvania. The 2020 and 2021 event was canceled due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

The PDF Coordinators' retreat, held on the weekend of July 30th, 2021 at Stonehedge in Tamaqua, Pennsylvania, was intended to brainstorm what each department would need to grow PDF 2022 from approximately 800 participants in 2019 to 1,200 participants for 2022. Knowing that we could accomplish more if we were in one space than if we were on Zoom, 30 leaders and several guests spent two days outlining what resources their department would need to increase capacity in a safe and fun way.

The leaders present were:

Bear	DPW
Alessandro	Parking
Andy Wing	Participation, Advisory board & Board emeritus
Barb Wire	Parking
Bucky	City Planning
Charles	DC Regional Contact
Chef Phil	Parking
Cramer	Lamplighter
David Wilkes	BoD
Epic	BoD, represented Rangers
Fiona	Planning Committee Coordinator
Hug Inspector	Greeters
Jen Finkle	Communications
Juicy	Greeters
Kailah	WhatWhereWhen
Karnak	BoD
Maura	Participation
Mel	Signage
Pandora	Ice
Robin	Parking
Sludge Gurl	Participation
Smiles	BoD

Syphon	Lamplighter
Ursula	BoD, represented Art Grants
Zahmer	Burning Arts.



Final day group photo

Some departments were not represented as their coordinators could not make the retreat. In particular: gate, art grants, rangers, conclave, acculturation, and first aid were absent. Other participants who had background in these areas stood in for the missing coordinators.

The themes that emerged as the most important were the need for more co-coordinators in every department and the need for better communication among departments. More co-coordinators would ensure that each department is run effectively while giving all of our leaders time to relax and have their burn. Communication, while good, needs to be strengthened in several ways including procedures for emergency situations. Specific need assessments and action plans for each department are later in this report.

As an overview of the event, the working sessions took place from 10:00 am to 5:30 pm on Saturday and then from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm on Sunday. Saturday's schedule included a welcome by the owner of Stonehedge, an ice breaker activity on the principle of consent led by Juicy, and then individual brainstorming on what each leader believes their department needs to grow.

The operational departments then left to travel to Coal Creek (the site of PDF). These departments had the chance to walk the land to discuss its physical capacity for growth.

Meanwhile, the remaining departments brainstormed in small groups and then presented to each other on what their resource needs would be.

After lunch, the group who left the morning session presented on what they learned and the group from the morning updated the others about what was discussed. At this point, challenges and opportunities were brought up and cross-department solutions were suggested for further consideration.

Dinner was served and revelry began promptly at 6:00ish.

On Sunday morning the program was opened by Smiles who presented the idea of a work group to address diversity and inclusion within Fire Pony. The group conversation lasted 90 minutes and was rich, respectful and illuminating. Juicy followed that with a brief discussion on issues of consent and a commitment to bring these two topics into future meetings and discussion groups.

In closing, Ursula led a plus/delta exercise and all the leaders gave their takeaways from the weekend. A full agenda is included as an appendix.

PC Coordinator Perspective - Fiona

As the new PC Coordinator, this retreat was integral to my ability to organize the group well in the coming years. Meeting everyone (some for the first time) individually helped me to build relationships that will endure the stress that we will face next May and learning what every department does *and why*, allowed me to see the totality of what coordination has to take place to make this work. I was impressed by the wealth of knowledge among our leadership as well as their willingness to share, teach and be taught.

The lessons that I learned in terms of organizing and implementing the next retreat were that, while an agenda is good, it should be considered a guide and that if burner time is not respected, people get cranky. I also learned that we don't need to compress the entire agenda into one day because our leaders are happy to stay for the full weekend to keep working.



Fiona, our Planning Committee Coordinator Extraordinaire

Wrap-up

As a wrapup exercise, everyone was asked to reflect on the weekend, and to offer up highlights (plusses) and things that could be improved (deltas). While not an exhaustive list, the below are some of the key things mentioned by the participants.

Pluses

- Getting to see people face-to-face
- Being heard
- Feeling included as a newcomer
- Creation and staffing of a new department - Signage
- Filling of previously vacant leadership positions, particularly in Parking
- Excellent Number of Hugs that could be inspected
- Reenergizing
- Very productive way to get stuff discussed and done.
- A fabulous new location with great future potential
- Hand wash station
- The Inclusion/Diversity conversation
- The baked ziti

Deltas

- Some departments were not represented

- Need more time in total
- Need more time onsite
- No communal music
- No large burn/fire
- Would have preferred having the Inclusion/Diversity conversation earlier
- Need more structured breaks (bio breaks)
- Portos were suboptimal (placement, number, lid goes down!)
- There was occasional abrupt cutoff of voices
- Not enough coffee. Not enough ice cream trips
- Both too many and not enough clowns

Additionally, a number of ideas were floated throughout the event. These ideas are ones that, while not directly impacting the ability to grow PDF, are interesting for the overall health of the event.

Ideas

- Do a leadership retreat as an “afterburn” exercise three or four weeks after the PDF event. To get the afterburn written and to address future plans while the event is still fresh.
- Do a gathering (at Epic’s?) once every month or so
- Leverage technology/Create an onsite App. This could to cover maps, events, ranger contacts, reporting, ice sales and possibly more

Location info - Stonehedge

Stonehedge Gardens & Holistic Learning Center is a beautiful, landscaped sanctuary with walking trails, ponds, perennial gardens located in Tamaqua, in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Stonehedge is working on weaving the principles of permaculture, natural building and sustainability to create structures in a meaningful way by connecting people to the land. We were hosted by Tom Moroz, who was generous with his time to discuss the property and vision, and to open the shop for us on Sunday.

More details can be found on Stonehedge at their website <https://www.stonehedge.us/>

This was a great fit as a location for the leadership camping retreat. There was ample space to set up campsites and to gather around a communal fire. There was indoor space for meetings. Though we primarily met outside, rain did move the discussion inside for part of Sunday. There was a kitchen with a refrigerator that we were able to use, plus power with household current used by one of our campers for his c-pap machine. FirePony is looking forward to growing a relationship with Stonehedge going forward, and we are hoping to host similar events there in the future.

Financials

As mentioned above, the retreat was held at Stonehedge which provided ample space for camping. Stone Hedge charged FirePony \$10 per person per night. With th 33 attendees over the 2 nights, this amounted to $33 * 2 * 10 = \$660$

There were also 2 porta johns rented with a handwashing station, which ran \$170.

Additionally, FirePony covered the Saturday night meal, which cost \$350.44

Total cost was thus $\$660 + 170 + 350.44 = \mathbf{\$1180.44}$. The FirePony board covered these costs out of their discretionary funds.



Needs assessments and Growth Planning session 1

NEEDS ASSESSMENT BY DEPARTMENT

Specific names are **bolded** where important collaborations need to happen

Burning Arts - **Zahmer** will be organizing the artists with burnable art, coaching them on how to create it and burn it safely. She will also be managing the art on-site. Need a co-coordinator (executive secretary with good organizational skills) for off-site meeting planning with the artists, closer collaboration with **Bucky**/City Planning, more burn pads, more sober fire perimeter volunteers, collaborate with **Maura and Sludge Gurl** to have the spinners work the perimeter after they finish, more wood (fuel) for burning art, 5' to 6' stakes to create a higher perimeter during set-up

City Planning - There is more land available for parking and car/RV camping, We can possibly move parking to the open camping and move open camping to the space beyond the temple, need administrative support to communicate with TCOs and RV applicants off-site, need a few volunteers but they need to be able to take direction and be very reliable, entire department needs to be on-site earlier

Ideas related to early theme camp entry to explore - Create an artist village to keep the effigy and temple builders in one place, change the lease to Monday access,

Communications - Updated Website, Co-Coordinator, Content from each department to promote through the BPE (Burning Pony Express), Email addresses for each department's volunteers for targeted emails, all cords and co-coords need to be on Slack (if possible)

Department of Public Works (DPW) - ALL departments need to submit a list to DPW with their infrastructure needs (tents, tables, chairs and lighting) by January, need a work weekend, Sparkle Pony Blvd needs to be dried out, landowner agrees to mow before the event (not just brush hog (?)), visit site 1 week before the event to check the land and see if it was mowed. If mowed we may be able to stake out the city but we shouldn't plan on it,.

Radio discussion - 5-Channel MURS-based system would need an upgrade, we need more (cheap) radios and a repeater which would need to be programmed on-site OR we can lease a full set of everything which comes with a tech to set it up for us but it costs more. This project needs its own logistic coordinator

Gate - There was no formal rep from Gate. However, parking conversation led to a larger conversation about gate closure - should participants be allowed to come in and leave their car in camp to move in the morning or "unload at parking - park - drag gear to site" or be told where there is a Walmart parking lot or local motel until the morning? All options are on the table but gate HAS to close on-time

Greeters - Need more parking spaces at the greeter station for cars to pull out of traffic to be greeted, move at least one port-o-potty closer to the greeter station, more greeters scheduled at the heaviest traffic times, increase coordination with **city planning/rangers/parking** to have access to the list of who gets to park on-site and what to write on the windows (besides penises), a large (at least 18"x24") laminated map of the city

Ice - Would like 2 ice chests instead of one but there may not be enough electric to support it, possibly allow participants to buy ice with their tickets to speed the ice pickup and make ordering more accurate, we can get more frequent deliveries but the overall cost of ice for the org should be lower this year, the board should take over the on-site payment system for the ice so that if one coord doesn't come, there is a sustainable way to collect the payments, need data on ice sales from 2019

Parking - Increased need for space, the option to park across the street and use a shuttle was pushed back to another year, recruited Robin, Alessandro, Barb Wire, Chef and George - need

more co-coords and shift leads, should be 6-7 people on every shift, need more deliberate training, dedicated golf cart, gates need to close on-time

Participation - Need to create lead shifts for the PS, further integrate volunteer sign-ups with the ticket sale platform, work with the theme camp organizers (TCOs) to organize theme camp takeovers of different stations, get the Standard Operating Procedure manuals (SOPs) for all departments so that they can recruit more targeted leads and co-coords, an instruction book, "Dharma Guide", which is a 1-page handout for each departments' volunteers should be created by each department to be distributed at PS as a quick training guide.

Rangers - (**Epic** represented the rangers at this event) Safety concerns regarding expansion are low but having campers past the temple provides low-visibility - may be a place to put family camping instead of open camping, creating zones of blue or pink light "cornerstone camps" could increase participants' access to help when needed - these camps could encircle the burn field. These camps could also have a radio or we could use the app to create a quick way to call a ranger in an emergency.

Staffing/training challenges among regional burns - we need one training standard for emergency protocols, FirePony needs its own manual between PDF and Constellation, Role playing/Scripted Shenanigans would be very useful for impromptu training sessions for new rangers, need more leads, ranger exchange program needs to be strengthened

Some ideas for tech solutions to safety concerns included using the app to submit a ranger alert, hanging QR codes around the playa for people to scan when they need help which would send an alert to the ranger team.

Sanctuary - Total of 4 co-coords and leads to work off- and on-site, **Serenity** will be organizing pre-event classes in holding space and harm reduction for volunteers so will need to communicate with **Maura and Sludge** to promote the trainings, one 10x20 or 10x30 tent for a quiet space and a dome tent for group things, move away from center camp to a quieter location - possibly where the corn field was

Signage - **Mel** agreed to be the Signage Coordinator! We need content from each department as to the signs needed, collaborate with **Bucky**/City Planning on the different ways that physical signs would be posted (in the ground vs. in the air vs. on a tent), a laminator and markers for signs "on the fly", power for the laminator, Wren Spencer and Ian Broverman could be helpful here. **Karnak** - can Mel get their contact info?

What Where When (WWW) - Collaborate with **Hatter and Whiplash** on getting the content on the web, work with Acculturation for content in the guide, possible increase in budget to print more guides, Can we use a mobile app for the WWW?

The mobile app evolved into a larger concept as we realized that more and more important things could be put on a PDF app.

60 day ACTION PLANS

All coordinators have agreed to:

- Work on their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) by October
- Get a list of the infrastructure needs to DPW by January
- Update all contacts for co-coords

Burning Arts - Continue holding “build a Burn” workshops, recruit an executive assistant, schedule a meeting with City Planning and All Safety Departments

City Planning - Create new map of the land and recruit co-coords

Communications - Work with Hatter on the website, updating the structure, meet with the radical inclusion and consent committees

DPW - Announce event to load equipment out of the storage unit and separate gear between PDF and Constellation, work on buying a container and getting it to Tamaqua, research a new radio system

Lamplighters - More lamps. Also need to coordinate with Bucky/City Planning on how many more spires we need and work with Mel/signage to know where the road signs will go and whether they will be hung on the spires. Solar lighting was discussed with other brighter options for safety

Greeters - Update the Dharma into a short handout, need to recruit two leads for shadowing, will map the greeter area, create a list of supplies for the station, schedule painting parties for the new canvases, work with Acculturation

Participation - collect the SOPs from all departments, get a list of theme camps and who the TCOs are from Miles (?)

Parking - Alessandro will begin their Dharma Guide, they will get info/input from Brutal about where things need to go next, contact previous volunteers to hustle up leads

Rangers - Epic will communicate with Wax and work on recruiting leads, update safety sphere guide

Sanctuary - Recruit co-coords and leads

Conclusion

In this being the first coordinator retreat in recent memory, we were a bit unsure of how it would play out. It turned out that this was one of those rare events where everything came together. The participants universally worked to support the common goal of growing Playa del Fuego. Participants were focused, engaged, and generous with their time and thoughts. The

weekend strengthened bonds, energized our leadership base and commitments, and identified key items needed for the next few months as we plan PDF 2021.

In the future, we believe we will have more of these events. We feel that these sorts of gatherings are exactly what we need to do to further FirePony Creative Society's vision of *Attract, inspire, and nurture a diverse community to celebrate and encourage experiments in the creation of art, a culture of play, and the collective sharing of ideas and skills.*

Appendix 1 : Agenda

Friday July 30

1:00 Arrival starts

Participants arrive for setup and mingling

Saturday July 31

MORNING SESSION: 10:30 am – 12:30 pm

10:30 – 11:00 am Introductions and Stone Hedge overview

11:00-11:20 Ice breaker facilitated by Juicy

11:20 - Operations and Logistics depart for site Location.

DPW - Mutant Vehicle Registration - Leave No Trace - Ice Sales - Essential signage -
Theme Camps and Placement (City Planning) - Sound. Also represented Gate, Rangers

11:20 am – 11:45 am “Sphere” Brainstorming and Comparing Notes

Art Grants

The Front Door

Ticketing - Greeters - Parking

Volunteer Recruitment & Management

Communications

Website - Newsletter & Media - WWW & Survival Guide - Acculturation

Safety

Perimeter - Conclave - First Aid - Rangers - Sanctuary - Lamplighters

11:45 am – 1:00 pm

Sphere Presentations to the entire group

1:00 Break for lunch. Operations returns

AFTERNOON SESSION: 2:00 pm – 5:30 pm

2:00 pm to 3:00pm - Report out of what was seen on site

3:00 pm to 4:00pm - Report out of what was identified as needed for growth

4:00 pm to 5:30pm - Collaborative sessions and brainstorming

Sunday August 1

10:30 am – 12:00 pm Diversity and Inclusion discussion

12:00 pm - 12:30pm Conduct and Consent discussion

12:30 pm – 1:00 pm Wrap up and Plus/Deltas

3:00 pm Event over, all participants clear from site