

FirePony Creative Society

Board of Directors 2022 Retreat

The FirePony Creative Society Board of Directors held a retreat/planning session on Jan 21-23, 2022. This retreat was at a house in Rehoboth, Delaware. 7 of the 8 board members were present. In attendance:

- Ursula Sadiq – President
- Christopher “m4” Venghaus - Vice President
- Miles Miner - Treasurer
- David “Karnak” Dugard
- Bryan Boru “Soapbox” Straube
- Diana “Smiles” Svendsen
- David Wilkes

Before arrival, the board members were asked to familiarize themselves with the previous retreat report to prepare for comparing then versus now. Each board member was asked to prepare 3 short sentences to describe the current state of the organization, as well as come prepared three top organizational priorities. Each was also tasked to come prepared to discuss their committee’s goals for the coming year.

Friday night was arrival, settling in and socializing time. It had been years since the board met in person, and for some board members this was the first time they met in real life. The evening was a time of connecting, team building and discussion.

Saturday was a very long day as the meeting went from 9am-11pm. A 14 hour day is not an ideal way to meet, however there were a lot of topics to cover, and limited time. Sunday was a wrap-up, review, LNT sweep of the house and departure at 11am.

One lesson for next time: figure out how to extend the meeting so there is not another 14 hour day. One possibility is to rent the house for Sunday night too, so it can be a working day even if we don’t sleep over. Another thought is to do it over a holiday weekend so it can be 3 days.

Retreat Notes

Welcome / Kickoff

The meeting started with reviewing the Burning Man meeting facilitation guidelines found in appendix A. After some housekeeping on time and agenda, the meeting started in earnest.

As a kickoff, each board member shared their path to the board and why they were willing to dedicate their time to FirePony efforts. This gave each board member the opportunity to learn more about their colleagues and share their own motivations.

The motivations expressed included:

- I want to give others the same opportunity I did to change.
- I want to fix the broken systems that were holding this event back.
- I want to contribute to the Burning Man ethos.
- I want to facilitate others' creativity and artistic experiences.
- I want to help stabilize our event's future.
- I want to fix our logistics.
- I want us to be more of a culture of "yes"

Strategic Goals and Priorities

With the above motivations discussed, the board moved on to reaffirming the current VISION and MISSION statements.

VISION: 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.

MISSION: We build an interactive, experiential, sustainable environment that encourages a culture of play, artistic creativity and freedom of expression.

It was decided that this established Mission and Vision was still relevant and doesn't need to be changed. The board did discuss adding "inclusive" to the statement, but decided this was not the best window to make that change.

Discussion then turned to the challenge of being a board member. There continues to be an issue where the board is backfilling for coordinators. Many of the board members came up through the event coordinator ranks and find it difficult to step away, especially when a replacement is not readily identified. Unfortunately, this results in the board not having the bandwidth to consider other projects and longer-term planning. With the bulk of the focus on immediacy, the ability to address strategic issues is limited.

And yet, the board recognizes that the events are paramount to the success of FirePony. However, this does not mean a board member should fill coordinator roles. They should be support staff, recruiters, cheerleaders - while making space for the community to take over running the event. Over the past few years, there has been a fair bit of progress towards the board stepping down from coordinator roles, but there is still a ways to go before the transition is complete.

The board reflected on its current state. By and large, our goals are much the same as last retreat in 2019: event success, year round efforts outside the events, land purchase, strong organizational governance, toolsets and financial footing.

It was recognized that pandemic has significantly affected the board with "pandemic ennui". Lack of events made it difficult to recharge and recruiting of leaders has been extremely challenging. There does appear to be light at the end of the tunnel. With planning for the spring PDF event underway, there is renewed energy. There

are still leadership recruiting challenges, and figuring out how to capture this energy is one of the tasks in front of the board.

A number of board members believe the board needs to spend more effort on things that are not the events for our community. There should be more things like small gatherings, social connections, and outreaches to other burner events and the BORG. FirePony should work more on community building year round. The board decided to put more work into our social media presence as a step in this direction.

Next there was a discussion about where we are with our R.I.D.E (Radical Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity) efforts. The board recognizes that FirePony does not have a spotless record in this space. The past cannot be changed, but the organization can move forward and help people understand that there is a commitment to doing better. With the R.I.D.E effort underway, the community can recognize that the organization is open and willing to work in this space to increase diversity and inclusion.

Committee Updates and Discussion

Conduct Committee

FirePony conduct committee is in place to address conduct violations at FPCS events. There is one pending case that has been stalled since February 2021 awaiting responses from a plaintiff. The conduct committee currently has 3 sitting members: a board member and 2 former board members who stepped down in 2021. There is also a community member who has offered to step up if there is a new case.

The conduct committee, when reviewing a case, will eventually decide what recommendation to bring to the board. This recommendation can be do nothing, a temporary ban, a permanent ban, a ban with recommended conciliatory paths, censuring, or other options as the conduct committee sees fit.

Historically, only the conduct committee members had access to the Ban list. This was reconsidered, and it was voted to give all board members access to this list. Ursula was tasked with contacting the previous keeper of the list so that it can be shared with the rest of the board.

There was also discussion on what needs to be done to improve access with respect to conduct reporting. It needs to be made clear to event participants how to submit a conduct complaint whether during an event or after. Additionally, there are some procedures that need to be codified and published, among these are the repercussions of being evicted, banned or censured. There needs to be clarity on what the path to reconciliation is for people who had conduct decisions made against them.

Finance Committee

The Finance and Governance committee is in place to keep tabs on the accounts, the governmental obligations, budgets, bylaws, records and the like.

One topic of discussion was simplifying accounting and budgets. In particular, at the behest of the treasurer, the board agreed to change the administrative fee charged to events to a flat fee (previously it was a percentage). Also, it was decided that instead of balkanizing the funds in various allocations buckets, we would

simplify this to be more of a board discretionary approach. Any excess funds from an event would be available to be spent by the board as it sees fit. Exact details on what this looks like will be discussed and developed and ultimately voted on in the upcoming months. Also along these lines, the funds invested with FSA are currently commingled arts, land and rainy day funds. It was decided to split these into sub accounts for simplicity and clarity.

There was some discussion about art at events, and how to change funding models. Ultimately it was decided that the event can and should be in charge of its own art funding models. If an event wants more art, then it needs to fund it from ticket sales, donations or other fundraising. The board will support these efforts as much as possible.

Constellation Committee

Constellation Burn is FirePony's regional burn that happens in October in Elkins, West Virginia. Due to the pandemic, the last Constellation was in 2019.

Recently both producers who were leading Constellation stepped down. With this gap in leadership, recruitment is a high priority. Discussion covered how to potentially change roles to put less burden on the one or two producers and spread the effort more to sphere leads.

Another thing that the board is keeping an eye on is that the site (Pegasus) continues to be up for sale and the risk that imposes on the Constellation Burn event. The potential sale from the past summer/fall has fallen through. There are concerns that the current owners are having health issues and are struggling to maintain the land. The board brainstormed on what could be done to facilitate land maintenance, with the expectation that investments from FirePony would result in lower rental costs.

Community Art and Civic Engagement Committee

The board, especially some of the newer members, were reminded that the CACE committee is more than the community art grants program. It was created as the umbrella to cover almost all activities outside FirePony's two hosted regional burn events. As such, R.I.D.E, VDF, Art-o-matic partnership, Burner banter hours -- these all also fall under CACE. The original CACE funding came from Art-o-matic, and is maintained by a small tax from event ticket sales.

It is recognised that with the current reduced board staffing, there isn't the manpower for administering the CACE art grant program. As such, it was decided to suspend the program temporarily. Instead it is planned to set up the CACE grant program on an as requested basis. These changes will be reflected on the FirePony website.

R.I.D.E. Sub Committee

In 2021 FirePony kicked off a subcommittee¹ for Radical Inclusion, Diversity, & Equity (R.I.D.E). This subcommittee meets regularly to discuss what FirePony can do to forward R.I.D.E in the community. The

¹ R.I.D.E., as a year round effort is considered a subcommittee of C.A.C.E.

subcommittee is currently on defining its scope and mission. One goal is to address the perception and past experiences of FirePony and FirePony events.

The board sees this committee as a tent that needs to be kept up and open. The message needs to get out clearly and often to the community that despite errors, omissions or missteps in the past, the FirePony organization is committed to R.I.D.E. and the board recognizes that there are always new things to learn. For example, at the meeting it was suggested that West Virginia (where one of FPCS 2 annual events is held) in general, may not always be welcoming to Black or LGBTQ+ burners.

Some tactics to support R.I.D.E. include getting together a self-identify survey of leadership to measure current diversity and continue census of the events to measure diversity; and training in diversity and sensitivity for the board of directors, leadership, and volunteers.

Land Search Committee

The desire to purchase land for FirePony events has a long history. A decade or so ago, collection of funds started for land purchase. Over time, this land fund has grown to over \$450,000. This is both a large, and not so large sum, depending on needs. Owning land would give FirePony ways to support the community year round in a number of ways from storage, artist support, training grounds and more.

The board recognized that there continues to be uncertainty around the assurance of availability of the locations where the burn events are currently held. The Tamaqua, Pennsylvania property is unreliable due to conflicts with owners' potential use of the land during the event time frame. And the Elkins, West Virginia property has an aging owner who is currently attempting to sell the property as he struggles to maintain it.

So the two main reasons to buy land are 1) Guarantee to be able to hold events and 2) Community obligation.

The conversation then covered some recurring topics around "what does owning land look like?". What would be done on the land when the FirePony events aren't happening? What does offseason liability look like? Should there be a partnership with other burns or entities? What model will be in place for sustainment and maintenance? What guarantee can there be that local law enforcement doesn't interfere?

All these questions and more tend to stall the land search process, and this has been the pattern for years. What is different this time is there is a roadmap and timeline being driven by board member David Wilkes. There is hope that the structure he has put in place will help get FirePony away from the question churn and produce forward movement on land purchase. The phase of land search is kicking off, with hopes for some offers to be tendered as soon as this summer. Some board members expressed that this is particularly aggressive, but there was support that the effort should go forward with all due haste.

There is a land search committee made up of interested community members. However, it is on the FPCS board to set framework and parameters. The board did nail down some parameters as follows:

- Participant size 3000. Or up to 5000 with hired support.
 - Car parking needs to be available for event of this size
- Ability to have loud music and otherwise make lots of noise
 - This mean a remote location
- Ideally within 2-3 hours of Philadelphia and/or Washington D.C

- 4-5 hours also acceptable
- 6 hours is pushing the limit.
- Self-sustainable

The board discussed what tactics could be used to promote good relations with the local community. Some ideas raised were to track economic impact, and to discuss techniques for this with other burner teams that own land. In a previous Land Search meeting, a representative from a California burn group discussed their purchase of land in the Mojave desert. One of his tips was to *not* try to fly under the radar, but instead invest in forming connections to the local community entities and politicians. Though while there is no guarantee that such efforts will be 100% successful, these are ways to mitigate the risk.

Playa Del Fuego Planning Committee

The Playa del Fuego 2022 event is the next event upcoming on the FirePony calendar. After two years of event cancellations, there appears to be a lot of excitement and energy building around this burn.

The coordinator team is largely staffed, with just a few gaps that the team is working on filling. There are some changes of note around the safety sphere. These teams are moving to targeted volunteering. What this means for rangers is that there will be few rangers on call during the day, and a greater focus on overnight staffing. For first aid, there will be medical professionals on call at all time, but no staffing of a first aid tent. There will be a minimal band-aid station for self service. Resources will be targeted towards sanctuary, as it has been noted that many “safety” calls are ultimately sanctuary visits.

The COVID-19 policy for PDF 2022 has been finalized by the board. Attendees must be “[Fully Vaccinated](#)” and “[Up to Date](#)” as of 14 days before the start of the event. This also will mean that no children under 5 will be allowed (confirmed in a discussion Sunday morning). As the event approaches, the board reserves the option to also put testing requirements in place. At this time there is no foreseen need for masking, but individual theme camps will be able to set their own policies in that regard.

Some budgetary points were highlighted. Tickets will not be tiered; all tickets will cost the same. The amount charged for administration will go to a flat number instead of a percentage of sales at the request of the treasurer. Art grant funding will change to a 20% of current sales model instead of the existing funding by 15% of previous years’ sales model. Final budgets for each department are coming in from the coordinators. With this in mind, ticket prices will be calculated. This turned out to be \$90 per ticket.

With the existing leadership base and expected demand, the ticket cap was set at 1,100 by the board. This number includes the rolled over tickets from 2020, volunteer reserves, leadership reserves and artist reserves. Expectation is that tickets will be in high demand and sell out. A higher number would only be supported if the planning committee came to the board of directors with a plan. It was recognized that this means there will be pressures on parking, city planning and potentially filling shifts.

There was a brief discussion on the ticketing system. FirePony uses a home grown ticketing system that needed some revamping. The technology committee reported that they have this well in hand. The discussion of using a 3rd party system was floated, but these are expensive. Though with the rising ticket prices, it might be time to revisit that option.

Technology Committee

FirePony does a whole lot of its own technical support, resting on the shoulders of just a few board members and a handful of other key contributors from our community. The Board discussed the need to change internal dependencies so that the board is not responsible for highly technical responsibilities.

This would mean moving to 3rd party applications when possible. For things FirePony maintains, more time needs to be spent in developing a volunteer base.

One of the key inhouse systems is the ticketing system. There is effort underway to rewrite ticketing with modern underpinnings, which hopefully will be ready for Constellation 2022. A patch of the existing dated system will be used for Playa del Fuego 2022. With prices going up, it becomes more plausible to move to a commercial ticketing system.

Communications Committee

Discussion around the communications committee was focused on social media and how to use it to better engage our community. There was agreement to reinvest in FirePony's social media properties as well as start up new ones (like Discord) as appropriate. It was also agreed to spread the responsibility to all board members to post once or twice a month to keep the social media properties active and relevant.

Safety Committee

The safety committee was put in place to help the board stay informed about the safety plans in place for events. In the dearth of events over the past few years, the committee has not been active. It was agreed that this needs to be reactivated.

Adjunct to the Safety Committee is the Ranger Council. The council was initiated in 2018, but has yet to fulfill its promise of being a standard bearer for mid-atlantic event rangering. There are a number of people who express the importance of rangering and how there is a great opportunity to strengthen the East Coast ranger community, share best practices, and enhance ranger bench strength. However, progress has been slow. The board expressed disappointment in this, and would like to see the council become more active.

Discussion returned to event staffing, and how thin the bench is when it comes to fire safety personnel. There was some brainstorming on how to address this. The idea to engage local firehouses was floated. As always, there is a reluctance to engage those outside the community. There are concerns that local firefighters would act as judgemental spectators, and could bring negative opinions of the event back to the local community. Ultimately, it was decided to take a wait and see approach, and to engage with the land owner and his local connections, if needed.

End of Day Check-In

The day wrapped up with reminders that every board member pledged to FirePony certain commitments.. Board members need to continue to be present and engaged in their committee obligations.

It was a very long day. Meeting was adjourned at 11:14PM

Sunday Morning Recap

On Sunday, the board recapped the meeting with “Plus/Deltas”. This was a listing of highlights, and listing of what could have been better.

Under Plusses:

- Good to see everyone on the same page for the vision of the organization
- Lots of good collaboration within the group; not too much discourse;
- Kept focus;
- Our time was well-spent.
- Good collaboration and creation of action plans.
- Everyone was respectful.
- Great to connect with and meet other BoD members for the first time.
- Good opportunity to learn about our events.
- We knocked out everything that was holding us back for PDF.
- Stayed true to the strategic planning goals for the weekend and was open to discussion about ideas for the organization’s future, including its future events.

Under Deltas:

- We need more time; We need an additional day.
- Wish all the BoD could have been here
- Hard to go home.
- Should push to get the “homework” out earlier.
- Need to work on better food portioning.
- We should have cleaned the coffee pot.

Finally, the meeting wrapped with a review of some key action items.

Action Items

- All - Freshen our image on social media.
 - Get everyone in the slack channel.
- Dave is in charge of Land and that is his priority
- Smiles needs help with PDF
 - Miles to help with hardship applications / budget
- Miles needs to get the budget / IRS / tax situation resolved
- Constellation needs an ultimatum
 - We need action to get the event going *now*
- Karnak needs to work on logistics and recruiting
- M4 needs to work on PDF website / ticketing
- Soapbox should work on getting the Safety Committee spurred into action

Appendix A: Burning Man Meeting Facilitation Guidelines

- Leave No Trace
- Speak from your own perspective
- Have fun
- Listen generously
 - Don't leap to judgment
 - Don't just wait for your turn to speak, listen to the speaker
 - Your attention is yours to give
- Share the air
 - Everyone gets room to speak
- Be on time
- Be present
- No cell phones or laptops
- No intoxicants
- Keep this confidential
- Advanced notice of recordings
- Snaps for support
- Raise hands; Use double hands judiciously
- Take responsibility for the outcomes
- One conversation at a time
- Don't use the time to repeat something

Appendix B: FPCS 2022 BOD RETREAT AGENDA

Friday		
Arrival		4pm Check In
Happy Hour/Meet n Greet/Conversation		5pm - 7pm
Dinner		7pm(ish)
Games & Conversation		8:30pm - Until
Saturday		
Breakfast		8am - 9am
Welcome / Kick-off / Review agenda and timeline		9am - 9:15am
Meeting Protocols and Best Practices		9:15am - 9:25am
Icebreaker		9:25am - 9:40am
The FPCS Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board Handbook Summary (Mission, Vision, etc.) 		9:40am - 10:45am
Mid Morning Break		10:45am - 11am
Where are we now <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and discuss Action Items and Accomplishments from 2019 Retreat • Current Strengths / Opportunities / Weaknesses / Threats 		11am - 12:15pm
Lunch		12:15pm - 1:30pm
Strategic Goals - Organizational Priorities / Values		1:30pm - 3pm
Mid-Afternoon Break		3pm - 3:15pm
Conduct Committee Update		3:15pm - 3:45pm
Governance & Finance Committee Update		3:45pm-4:30
Constellation Event Management Committee Update		4:30-5:00
Community Arts & Civic Engagement Committee Update		5:00-6:00
Dinner		6:00-7:00pm
Land Fund Committee Update		7:00-7:45pm
PDF Event Management Committee Update		7:45pm - 8:30pm
Technology Committee Update		8:30pm - 9:15pm
Communication Committee		9:15pm - 10:00pm

Safety Committee Update	10:00pm - 10:45pm	
Wrap up/End of Day	10:45pm-11:14 pm	
Sunday		
Breakfast	8am - 9:30am	
Recap and Action items	9:30 - 10:00	
Cleanup, Photos and MOOP sweep	10am - 10:45am	
Depart by 11am		

Appendix C: Before Retreat homework

This is the to-dos sent to all board members before the retreat.

- **Complete all To Do's highlighted in green in the agenda and the below**
 - **Review Board Handbook**
 - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l-J2uCzdVJmxAE4UidiSJ2k30Z6_dxCCJR3e1ddOT7c/edit
 - **Review 2019 Retreat Report**
 - <https://docs.google.com/document/d/10lh0Az2A1QgoPsASEOT-IZ7K2CmtiAsx/edit>
 - **What jumps out at you? What should we continue to do? Change? Still Needed?**
 - Current Strengths / Opportunities / Weaknesses / Threats
 - **TO DO: Come prepared with 3 short sentences to describe the current state of the organization**
 - **Organizational Priorities / Values**
 - **TO DO: Please come prepared with short descriptions of your top three org priorities / values. High level.**
 - *Will re-visit as part of strategic planning. Will review, categorize and prioritize.* **Complete the following questions for leadership activity**
 - *What does "being present" mean to you?*
 - *What does "good communication" look like to you? What is your communication style?*
 - *What hopes do you have about others communicating with you?*
 - *What does productive conflict look like to you?*
 - **Committee Updates**

*Please come prepared to discuss where things are now, as well as a general overview of **your three to 12 month goals for your committee**. What resources (time, tools, extra hands) do you think you need to achieve the goals you've identified? Any particular challenges you'd like to discuss? 20-25 minutes each. Topics that require more discussion could be put in the parking lot and discussed Sunday morning, or at the next BOD call*

Appendix D: Tactics/To dos

- SOPs are super important to make it easier to step into a role. Make sure this are a priority
- Social media
 - posting effort spread to everyone
 - Spin up Discord
- Bringing a 'How to submit a conduct report' How-To in the WWW. (CONDUCT)
- (re) Create the BAN list (CONDUCT)
- Put a note on the website to indicate CACE hiatus: include email to contact for more information. Set up CACE as “we have money. Ask for it and we’ll consider giving it to you.”
- Fake incident training for rangers up from dirt rangers to kakki and higher. (PDF)
- Shorten ranger shift to encourage volunteers/prevent burnout (PDF)
- Blue light camps to support safety sphere. (PDF)
- Add pronouns to BOD profiles (RIDE)