



Sun City Rotarian Bill Aaron, pictured, is a proud member of his small club. Club President Hollie Green calls the group “small, but mighty.” Ms. Green said the club is using creative thinking to attract new members.

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MEMBERSHIP BLUES

Clubs using new ideas to keep numbers

By Stuart J. Robinson
Independent Newspapers

Pat Densford Phillips directs or performs in five choral groups in her community and for two churches. She also is treasurer for Westbrook Village’s Performing Arts Council, as well as for her college’s alumni chapter.

“I keep busy,” she said modestly.

In an area with many retirement com-

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munities, people eventually “age out” of activities. But Ms. Phillips has noticed that newcomers are not making up for the number of members and volunteer leaders her organizations are losing.

“The baby boomers, the generation behind us, they are not ‘joiners,’” Ms. Phillips said. “The boomers are interested in other things — sports and keeping themselves fit. Individual, active pursuits.”

Community, religious and service groups are feeling the pinch.

“I think there is a little difference (in the two generations),” said Art Abrams, rabbi at Beth Ami Temple in Paradise Valley and rabbi emeritus at Temple Beth Shalom in Sun City. “I think it’s more likely for the

Fire

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tee, and they, sometimes multiple times, finalized the document before it was presented to the full board. Under the new by-laws, the budget is put together by the fire chief and finance officer, then presented to the full board. Sun City Fire District did not have a finance director until last year, when

legislation required districts to have such a position.

"None of the fire departments I talked to have budget and finance committees," Mr. Thompson said. "And they couldn't figure out why we did."

Dave Scott, board chairman, said it was not practical for the previous structure because two board members could not make decisions about the budget because any decisions requires a quorum of the five-member board.

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people from the Second World War to be members of a congregation. With the baby boomers, it's a little struggle to assimilate them."

Not every group has trouble attracting new volunteers.

"We have not had a particular problem with people aging out and not being able to replace them — either on our board or in our volunteer corps," said Daniel Schay, executive director of Peoria-based Theater Works.

The same goes for the Surprise Sundancers, who staff events at the city's Spring Training facility.

"Our volunteers are joiners, and the majority stay with us 10-12 years," said Mark Coronado, Surprise's Community and Recreation Services director. "The retirement communities north of Bell Road have a very active lifestyle."

Getting volunteers to lead

Many smaller groups depend upon volunteers for leadership and administration. For them, an erosion of leadership can become an existential problem.

"We're proud they call us the small but mighty group," said Hollie Green, who leads the Rotary Club of Sun City. "There are a small number of people who will agree to take an office, so we're all the same officers all the time. It's not fun for people who have jobs."

For decades, Ms. Phillips' alumni group has had a separate Sun Cities chapter for the catering to retirees.

"Most of our members don't want to drive into the city and don't have the energy to be out late at night," she noted.

But this year, time caught up.

"Our people are aging. Most of them are heading toward 80. They just don't have the energy to want to take over leadership," Ms. Phillips said. "We just decided it would be better to join with the Phoenix chapter so there would still be activities to attend but the leadership would be handled by young-

Also eliminated were the board's legal and insurance, fire department operations and grounds and equipment committees. Those groups were also made up of two board members each, and when called on by the chairman in meetings for reports members nearly always deferred to the chief.

"We were one of the few districts that even had committees," Mr. Scott said. "I think they were created just to give board members something to do and a title."

er people."

Developing future officers

"There is a lot of talk in these circles about leadership succession plans," said Teri Kennedy, a gerontology professor at Arizona State University's School of Social Work. "Part of it is thinking organizationally and long term about how [to] adapt."

She noted group structures must evolve. That is where the Sun City Rotarians find themselves, according to Ms. Green.

"We were founded as a lunch group. But these days, fewer companies are seeing the value of community service," she explained. "They don't like people taking an hour and a half out of every week."

She added many small businesses either cannot afford the dues or are sole proprietors for whom every volunteer hour comes at the expense of earning income.

"We're going to have lunch every other week, and on the alternate weeks we're going to have a service project or a social," she noted, events that can take place evenings and weekends.

Mr. Thompson said committees were created mostly likely for the same reason each board member had an office at the district headquarters.

"We can research and make sure we are not required to have them and deal with that later," Mr. Thompson said.

The bylaw changes were also needed to keep up with changes in state law.

"There have been so many revisions of law that the changes were necessary," Mr. Thompson said.

"Rotary attracts service-minded people; if we want younger people to be involved, we have to make it work within their lifestyles," Ms. Green said, citing past efforts to integrate spouses. "There might be fallout — people who don't like (the new) structure. But if we don't do something, our membership would dwindle to nothing."

Ms. Green puts the risk of alienating longtime members into a historic context.

"There used to be a time Rotarians were only men," she said. "Then they realized they needed the women to get things done. I think this is another of those tipping points."

ASU's Ms. Kennedy advises groups think about leadership long before it is needed.

"Create a deep bench," she said. "Actively engage the membership."

The more people involved, the more personal investment.

"I think each organization will want to understand as much as it can about what motivates people, what are their interests and how they fit in," she added. "Each person brings their own combination of history and biography."