

Summary of comments made at the Burns Dinner Debrief, February 27th, 2010.

In general, the evening went very well and in particular it was noted how close it came to meeting its scheduled timing.

- 1) Bar opening at 5.45pm, with people seated at their tables by 6.45pm. was felt to be fine and should not be changed.
- 2) Dress code was discussed, and it was agreed we should not change our expectations as reflected in the wording on the Ticket Request Forms or on the Tickets themselves. Members who “sponsor” tables do have a responsibility for ensuring the dress requirements are known to all their guests. David Hood and the “dress police” do a great job in a diplomatic way in checking what people are wearing and taking any needed action – many thanks to you all!!
We should look at the table photographs and identify those people who did not fully honour the dress code and apprise them of this and then possibly in future, to assign them tables nearer the back of the hall.
- 3) The issue of chatter and noise was raised, - how to ensure quiet when events, performances, speeches etc. are happening at the front of the hall. Expectations should be clearly and firmly laid out by the MC in his opening remarks. It was suggested that we bring back the gong and use it as necessary – I understand it is with Jim Osborne. Is the sound system good enough for all parts of the hall – can everyone hear everything? Is there an adequate linkage between the main system in the hall (Evolution) and the one Jason Wright uses? Would the result be better if both Video and Audio services were performed by Evolution – although there would be a cost increase to do this. Is there anything that can be done to improve to improve the main sound system?
- 4) As well as hearing what is happening, can everyone see what is going on? Are the two large TV screens positioned optimally? Review the table plan on the floor – should the front row be shorter than the other rows so that the end tables are not right under the screens? Members are normally assigned tables in the front half of the hall across the full width – perhaps the outside rows should be assigned to non-members. This would mean of course, that the member’s tables would extend further back into the hall. Some judgment is called for here.
- 5) The lack of a bottle of Scotch on each table seems to be a concern still – but with fewer people now. It seems to be generally accepted that current regulations prohibit bottles of spirits on each table and also require that staff do all serving of spirits. The solution this year of a pre-poured 3 ounce measure for everyone in the commemorative glasses seemed to be an acceptable compromise. Again, addressing this in the MC’s remarks may be worthwhile one more time. (Incidentally we are told that the Edmonton Dinner did the same as us this year). The possible use of miniature bottles of Scotch for everyone was suggested as an alternative (1 or 2?) and the ramifications of this should be looked into – including the cost.
- 6) Several ways of reducing ticket costs were suggested:
 - Eliminate the salmon course from the meal

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- Reduce the size of the haggis served at each table
- Reduce the size of the other meal portions – smaller beef servings (and better quality), smaller bowls of trifle, and improve the quality of the Cock O’Leekie soup
- Find a cheaper source of the commemorative glasses – possibly eliminate them?

After some discussion it became apparent that the Members had a real concern about eliminating anything – they would like to keep four courses for the meal as well as the Scotch and the commemorative glasses, but did encourage us to see where costs could be reduced. Follow up is needed with the Convention Centre over the size, quality and cost of the meal, with McEwan Meats over the size and cost of the haggis and with the finding of a new supplier for the glasses.

- 7) One way of reducing ticket costs is to “downsize” the evening and find another venue, however no consensus emerged following more discussion about this. It appeared that most members were comfortable with 750-850 guests, although going above 850 did not get much support. Cutting the number of attendees drastically – say to 500/600 – would change the character of the event and also cut out a significant number of people who have supported us in the past. There seemed to be an underlying concern that downsizing the event would “cheapen” it and possibly make it a less desirable event for attendees. It was also pointed out that the Convention Centre’s staff did well by us, accommodated our requirements and took on their shoulders a lot of the detailed planning and organizing.
- 8) The balance of activities for the evening was touched on. The actual dinner itself (see above), the ritual speeches – Removes, Address to the Haggis, Immortal Memory, and the Toasts as well as the entertainment provided – the Singers, the Pipe Band and Dancers, poems etc. It was suggested that over the years the character of the evening had evolved from that of a dinner with speeches and some entertainment towards more that of a show with dinner being served. Perhaps the evening should be called the “Annual Burns Celebration”? These latter suggestions were not popular and the balance of activities in future should reflect “A Burns Dinner”. (We should change the title in the Formal program etc to Burns Dinner from Burns Banquet?)
- 9) The traditional ritual speeches should not be tampered with – the Grace, the Address to the Haggis, the Loyal Toast, the Toast to the Lassies and the Toast to Absent Friends should remain very much as they are.
The Removes are very popular and should consist of some comments about the course to be served together with some humour – but not too long!! They can be delivered by one person but consideration should be given to using two – or even four – different speakers.
This year showed that the Immortal Memory could be moved up in the program to straight after the intermission. Consideration should be given to keeping it in this place even though it was observed that some 79 patrons left after the guest speaker finished, and did not return.
- 10) The entertainment component of the evening dictates when the event will finish. It seems desirable that the evening ends somewhere between 11.15 and 11.30pm – so the entertainment should be set up to allow for this. The points discussed were:
 - The Singers. How many songs should be sung? It was felt that the march off at the end of the

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first half was well received. Adopting the “Auld Scotland” kilt worked well – but what do we do about new singers in the future? Could rentals be made available?

- Staples in the entertainment have been the Pipe Band and Dancers and the Calgary Fiddlers, but this year the latter were unavailable. Both of these are popular but maybe we don’t need both every year, although having some Piping and Dancing seems to be mandatory!! If that is the case, as an alternative to the Fiddlers in some years, some winners from the Kiwanis contest could be featured, or some of the young dancers from the Springbank (or other) school of dancing could appear. Several people commented that we should try and involve younger performers, and try to ensure a visual as well as an audio component to the performances.

- 11) A point about the Head Table in the second half of the evening was raised. With the microphones on the stage it is important that the cables don’t become a hazard for people on the stage. This should be part of setting up the Head Table during the intermission.
- 12) At the end of the debrief, Jim Hutchens indicated that Joe Dundas was not planning on making the Burns Statuettes in future. He has done this on his own for many years and they are much sought after by attendees, and the Club owes Joe a tremendous debt of thanks for all his efforts in the past!! It was strongly recommended that a way be found of continuing to have the statuettes available (one per table). Although it was suggested we investigate local commercial possibilities this would add costs to the evening at a time we need to reduce costs, so I believe we should look inward to the Club members and put a small group together who would take over the function from Joe.

Many thanks to those who took the time to attend this “post mortem” and to provide their valuable feedback, and thanks also to the Legion for providing the breakfast service. That brought the debrief session to a close – I trust these notes accurately reflect the comments and suggestions that were made – please advise me (Tony Grace) of any omissions, corrections or other comments.

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Annual Dinner Debrief follow up actions:

- Check table photographs for any major dress concerns, violations.
- Who has, and where is the gong – need to get it to the Storage
- Discuss the sound system with Evolution and Jason to see what improvements can be made
- Future floor plans – consider screen locations and reduce width of first (and second?) row of tables
- Look at using miniatures of Scotch – source/cost and discuss with Mark Dunlop re implications
- See Convention Centre re size of portions/elimination of salmon course and impact on cost
- See McEwan Meats re size/cost of haggis
- Find a new, cheaper source of commemorative glasses – quality and cost
- Tickets and Request forms to reflect “Burns Dinner”
- See Jim Osborne re possibility of providing “Auld Scotland” rental kilts
- Get familiar with possibilities of using Kiwanis winners and Springbank Dancers
- Get a group of volunteers of members (3-4?) to prepare the Burns Statuettes
- Ensure Convention Staff/Jason “clean up” microphone cables on stage when setting up for the second half of the evening