



History of the Rotary Large Club Conference

Each July 1st a new Rotary year begins and a new president takes over the leadership of his/her club. Just as the club needs the best person for that responsibility, that person needs the benefit of receiving the best information and training possible before filling such an important pair of shoes.

It was not until 1959 when the first conference of large Rotary clubs was organized that an incoming president had an opportunity to share information and experiences with other large Rotary clubs in a formal meeting. This first conference was for eastern clubs and was organized by Paul Armstrong, Executive Director of the Rotary Club of Cleveland, and Jim Morgan, Executive Director for the Rotary Club of Rochester. Five clubs attended that first conference in Cleveland: Rochester, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Cleveland. From that meeting, the need for the exchange of information concerning the organization and the administration of large clubs became apparent.

The second conference was held in 1960 in Cincinnati with Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, Rochester, St. Louis and Houston represented. Dick Proctor, Executive Director of the Rotary Club of Houston, recalled, "The representatives met in a large hotel suite and chatted about Rotary for hours without a formal agenda. They sat on the floor, ties undone and sleeves rolled up, discussing all the administrative and organizational concerns of the various large clubs represented. The discussion lasted into the wee hours of the night. All were eager to gain knowledge and exchange ideas and information."

In 1961 the conference was held in Rochester. Adding representatives from Columbus, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Toledo and Toronto to the previous year's group resulted in twelve clubs represented. The only "western" club in attendance was Houston. Houston's Dick Proctor would be instrumental in starting a western meeting the next year.

At the annual meeting of the Club Executive Directors held during the Rotary International Convention in 1961, Dick Proctor was elected Chairman of the Executive Conference. Feeling strongly about the concept of the Large Club Conference being held yearly in the Eastern Division, he organized a Western Division Conference.

The Rotary Club of Denver hosted the first Western Conference, led by Dan Paxton, Executive Director, in 1962. Clubs represented at that first western conference included Dallas, Denver, Fort Worth, Houston, Portland, San Antonio and Seattle. Paul Armstrong, Rotary Club of Cleveland, attended as an advisor. Paul would remain the coordinator and secretary of both Eastern and Western Conferences until his retirement in 1977. Dick Proctor asked Ed Pitcher, Rotary Club of Oakland, to host the 1963 conference. Oakland rose to the call to service with great success. That year the Western Conference added attendees from Kansas City, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Strategy on location became very important. The 1964 meeting was held in Kansas City, the eastern area of the Western Division. In 1965, Houston was chosen from the southern area. New attendees included

Oklahoma City, Wichita and three Eastern Clubs—Cleveland, Indianapolis and St. Louis. After the 1965 meeting, Clubs committed to attend on a regular basis and to include the conference in their budgets.

The beginning meetings were for clubs of 400 or more members, despite clamor by others wanting to attend. Everyone was so pleased with what they gained from these meetings that they began discussing whether these meetings should occur prior to the organization of their administrations. These discussions became a reality in 1962 when the meetings were scheduled for the spring.

Primarily due to geographic travel issues, the Eastern and Western Large Rotary Clubs have each held their own separate conferences. In 2008, the Rotary Club of Sacramento chose to return to a combined East/West Large Club Conference, initiating a trend that continued with Oklahoma City in 2009, Birmingham 2010 and San Diego hosting 2011.

Many factors have contributed to the success of these Large Club Conferences since that first one in 1959. Paul Armstrong was certainly the beginning factor. Since that time, the Executive Directors have served as vehicles to their boards, acting with their approval to contribute to the conference. They maintain continuity within the conference year after year, advising the host club. Over the years there have been various combinations of leadership committees formed. During the 2010 Birmingham Executive Directors' business session, an Executive Committee comprised of the current conference host Executive Director, three upcoming conference host Executive Directors and three Executive Directors elected at large was formed. This seven-member group provides council to the club preparing to host the next conference, sees that the large club conference website is maintained, controls the LinkedIn Association of Rotary Club Executive Directors group and administers the funds collected through the nominal annual dues paid by each Executive Director.

This is a once-a-year opportunity for Executive Directors to meet with peers for the purpose of motivation and exchange of ideas. Additionally, the Presidents-Elect have an opportunity to exchange their ideas, plans and goals for their year as President. And throughout the conference, the Executive Director and President-Elect staff/volunteer team for each club has the opportunity to strengthen their partnership as they prepare for the Rotary year ahead.

In recent years, Rotary Districts required all Presidents-Elect to attend President-Elect Training Sessions (PETS). Therefore, the emphasis during the Large Club Conference has focused less on material covered during PETS and more on challenges unique to large clubs who employ staff, organize large volumes of committees, operate local foundations and conduct highly professional weekly meetings. While clubs of 200, 300 and 400 or more members are a rarity in the world of Rotary, our clubs continue to make the conscious choice to remain large clubs. Our day-to-day operations may be more complex than the average Rotary club; however, we all remain solidly committed to supporting Rotary International and The Rotary Foundation projects and programs with our time, talent and financial resources.

Regardless of whether the Large Club Conference continues as a joint conference of the Eastern and Western Large Rotary Clubs or moves back to separate conferences, it is not difficult to analyze the success of these conferences. In fact, there are hundreds of large Rotary club Presidents and Past Presidents who will attest to their value. There was a need when Paul Armstrong called the first meeting; there is a need today; and there will continue to be a need tomorrow.

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