

Presidents Report: Past, Present, Future

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I. Purpose of this Report

On **May 15, 2020** the MetroWest Chess Club board of directors passed the following motion:

- **To Suspend Physical meetings of the club indefinitely and terminate our rental agreement with St. Paul's church**

The church has released us from our agreement with no penalty and we are leaving on very good terms. We have expressed our appreciation to them and the hope that we will be able to return at some point in the future.

The purpose of this report is to present the contributing factors that went into this decision and where it will lead us.

There are many details and explanations provided in this report. The intent is to capture in one place the key information that will serve as a starting reference point for future discussions and decision making and to answer questions that may arise among our members.

The ordering of the sections is reversed from telling a start-to-end story. This was done to present the most critical information first to allow you, the reader, to decide how deeply you want to go into the details.

II. The Future

A. Our most recent past

- We have just completed our first year at our current location, St. Paul's Church
- We have been operating at a loss for a year
- We anticipated running at a loss for our first 8 months
- We believed we would eventually surpass our old 12 year average of 84 players per month
- Our attendance did not improve and in fact was less than before our move
 - Our average for the preceding 12 months was 55 players per month

B. Our immediate concerns contributing to our decision

- Prior to the Pandemic we were already losing money and still declining in attendance
- Prior to the Pandemic
 - We had started to consider the idea that we may need to move prior to our three-year agreement with the Church if our attendance did not improve.
 - We were in the process of starting a series of activities to promote the club to both current USCF players and the non-club playing general population.
 - Our plan was to make a concerted effort and see what we could accomplish by the end of our second year at the church
 - We realized that we would continue to be losing money each month
 - We would likely have to start looking at options regarding moving or trying to negotiate the rent down if things did not improve by the end of our second year at the church.
- After the Pandemic we felt that the chance of our attendance growing would be significantly delayed as our current pool of players would likely be cautious in returning.
 - We have no basis to predict when people would feel it's "safe" to be among everyone else,
- If people believe that it is the young and the older population who are at greatest risk then:
 - 42% of the players in the last year were Youth
 - 24% of the players in the last year were 60 years old or older
 - These two groups add up to **66%** of our players.
- If the church were to decide that groups can once again safely meet before we feel we are ready to resume play, they may well expect us to resume our monthly payments.
 - Our agreement states that we must give 90 day notice for termination of our agreement, we would potentially need to pay out 3 months rental if we were to choose to terminate or resume payments regardless of our using the facility as we wait till we are ready.

C. The Plan

The Club will:

- Go into a state of “Hibernation” of all physical activities
- Shall release itself from its site rental agreement
 - To avoid being forced to pay when we are not yet playing
 - To free us to move to a smaller and cheaper venue without 3 months’ notice
- Re-examine locations that were passed over for consideration when researching our previous move because they didn’t have capacity for 80 players
 - **If we are really a club of an average of 60 players, then a much wider set of locations and lower rent becomes available to us to consider.**
 - Three of top candidate sites that we passed on would be able to fit us in comfortably if our average were 60 players and each had a rent that was much more reasonable than what we are paying now. Each site had some flaws, so none would be ideal.
- Start “working the numbers” on what rent, entry fees and prizes would work if we were to consider ourselves a club of 60 players.
- Observe and continually revisit our estimate of when we feel everyone will feel it is safe to attend activities such as a chess club.
 - Chess players must feel safe
 - The general public must feel safe
 - New to chess players are an important part of membership replenishing and growth

How might we determine when our players and the chess community feel it’s safe? I propose that we will ask you. When we have enough people to sustain meeting again, we would proceed with plans to play again.

I envision issuing a survey to our players periodically to gauge what players are thinking. The survey may look as follows:

If the club has just announced that it will re-open in **two-months**:

- Do you feel it is not yet safe enough for you to resume playing at our club again?
- Do you feel that you are no longer interested in over the board chess?
- Would you plan on playing in the very first event when we re-open?
- Do you intend to play regularly at the club?
 - Define “regularly” to mean that you would be strongly attempting to play at the club most of the months over the course of a year
- If you see yourself playing only occasionally at the club, how many times per year would that be?
- Prizes are likely to be reduced from where they were before. We may or may not be able to also reduce entry fees.
 - If entry fees remained the same but prizes reduced from where they have been, would this reduce the likelihood that you would play at the club Regularly (see previous definition)?
- Would you be in favor of an approach of “Lowest possible entry, Lowest possible prizes”
- What is your rating “range”, e.g. 1200, 1300,... 1700, 1900, 2200 etc.

III. The Present

At the time of this report, the state of Massachusetts is just beginning to relax Pandemic restrictions for businesses and groups in a very controlled manner. The states intent is to see what happens and adjust course accordingly.

The pandemic has been devastating to chess clubs and organizers around the country. Each week, chess organizers are announcing cancelations of events that are scheduled three or more months out.

Our club last played a face to face round of our monthly events on **Tuesday, March 10th**. In the weeks just prior, cautions about the not yet termed "Pandemic" had been increasing and resulted in our decision to temporarily suspend in person activities of the club for March. We then extended this to April and then May. The church was kind enough to temporarily suspend our rental agreement for these months.

Social distancing for a rated Chess club like ours is just not feasible. Of course, wearing masks and gloves are possible.

Attributes of playing over-the-board chess are:

- Players face to face between 2 feet (leaning in to think) and about 4 feet away
- Players handling the same pieces as you
- A clock that must be reachable by both players
- Players sitting side by side as opposed to being the only person at a table (six feet separation)
- Avoiding being in close proximity with others as you move about the room, enter or leave the facility, enter or leave the bathrooms, register, ask questions, require a TD, breath the same air.
- but it is the concern and fear level of people participating that will impact participation.

IF None of the above are Prohibited by Law **AND** None of the above are a concern **by enough** of our players **THEN** we can consider resuming play

IV. The Past

A. Our Attendance:

Start/Ending Year	Years	Time Control	Average Monthly Attendance
2003 - 2014	12	40/90, SD30; d5	84
2015-2018	4	G/60; d5	72
2019	1	40/90, SD30; d5	62

See: How Many Play: http://www.metrowestchess.org/Community/Demographics/Collection/MCC_Player_Attendance.PDF

B. What we expected when we moved in 2019

- We spent 4 years looking to relocate the club so we could return to our traditional “long time control” of 40/90; SD/30; d5.
- The club had confidently expected that our membership would return to our 12 year average of 84 players every month and in fact we believed we would do better due to increased space
- During the four years prior to our move the attendance dropped. The last year, 2018, and into the first few months of 2019 we saw record low attendance weighting down our yearly average and indicating a low continued attendance.
- After relocating to St. Paul’s, we expected a steady increase in our attendance to our former average in the 80s but knew we would be running at a loss through the end of 2019

C. General Relocation considerations

The parameters that need to be considered for any location break down into these primary categories:

Parameter	Descriptions	Major Factors
Average Attendance	This is a key number: We have to predict this based on many factors	Existing vs future pool of players, Player capacity, Player comfort in the facility, Parking, Traffic
Rent	Initial rent and expected increase over several years	Terms of agreement for rent increases Years in the initial agreement Options for extension of years
Facility Overhead costs	These are costs not necessarily covered by the Rent.	Electricity, snow removal, cleaning
Membership	Will players join and play regularly	Entry Fee, Membership fee, Prizes
Stability of the Facility	Our estimate of the landlord desiring to exercise their option to terminate our agreement	Non-business landlord: How often do the decision makers change? Business landlord: Are we just a stop-gap for them till a better opportunity arises?

D. **Past history of moves and how it impacted attendance**

Note: Dates are rounded off to nearest year

1983 – 1995: Original Site, VFW on Pearl St., Framingham

When a club relocates the result of all our previous estimates turns into an actual result.

1995 – 1996: Basement of the old Framingham Senior Center under the Danforth Museum

When the club relocated from its original location on Pearl St, in 1995 to the Framingham Senior Center only blocks away, we saw an initial surge in membership after several years of steady decline. The surge did not last as our move was out of desperation at the time and we had to take what we could find. The conditions at the new location were awful. Capacity was low, space was uncomfortable, and we could not guarantee the door would literally be left open for us when we arrived to play. The average attendance for that year was essentially the same as the previous year, 23 players.

We continued our search and were fortunate to find the Natick Senior Center.

1996 – 2011: Natick Senior Center on Rt. 135

At that time the Senior Center was an old elementary school that had been repurposed. We had use of a main room that would accommodate 80 players and a skittles room that accommodated 10 boards. Parking was good and we had keys to building. In the span of two years our attendance shot up to the 50s and remained there for about five years. Having moved closer to the 128 belt the club our demographics showed that while we lost some members from the West we gained more than we lost from the East. The club was more accessible to those using the 128 belt and those inside it.

2011 – 2013: Natick Senior Center on Rt. 9 at Oak St.

The club moved with the Senior Center to this temporary location while the town began construction of new facility. This location was also old Elementary school. During our time here our attendance remained the same in the 80s. Parking however was tight when there was snow and during the spring and summer due to sharing the parking with people playing at the sites recreational fields. We had to park on every bit of free lawn including between trees in the back.

2013 – 2019: Natick Community Center on Rt. 135

We once again moved with the Senior Center but the Senior Center was now a tenant of the new Community Center. The Community center was located on the site of the original Senior Center so for our members, it was a return to the place as before but with a new building. As before we continued our attendance in the 80s. There was a noticeable change in our fitting into the facility however. There was no easy access to a reasonable sized skittles room that could accommodate people staying to go over their games and hang out. We rented a separate room on the lower level but the Community Center in quick succession raised our rent significantly twice which made renting that mostly empty room (till games finished) an expensive proposition. In addition, the Community Center really did not want to rent us that room anymore as they wanted to be available for others to rent, even though we were renting it. For the first time since 1995 we had to raise entry fees and decrease the prize fund.

In 2015 the Community Center required us to be out of the building by 10:00 sharp. Despite our efforts we could not change this rule. As soon as this happened, we began an intensive search to find a new location. We examined over 70 sites in the Natick and Framingham area and surrounding towns. Our primary criteria was that we need parking for at least 80 cars. Without that we could not consider a move. This severely limited our options.

While we looked for a new facility, the longest time control we could accommodate was G/60; d5. Initially we lost about 10 regular adult attendees and saw a short burst of adults who preferred short time controls. We also started to accumulate new attendees, scholastic players, as the earlier guaranteed ending time of 10:00 PM became much more attractive than our possible 11:30 pm finish. Our attendance dropped to a fairly stable average of 72. We considered this a very workable and reasonable number. This four year period of G/60 resulted in a demographic in one of our long time numbers, namely we went from 20 percent of our club players being scholastic players to a solid 40% average with a few events at 50%.

2019 - 2020: St. Paul's Church on Rt. 135, Natick. ½ mile from our previous location

Our time at this location was very nice. Lots of space, clean, comfortable, skittles room, tables for parents to sit, room for expansion and free parking. The only problem at this site was that we simply did not see our attendance go up and therefor our rent became a problem. We have no indication that our site or the club itself was a problem keeping players away. With the longer time control, as we knew from many years at this time control, scholastic age players dropped back to a much lower percentage of our players due to it being a school night. Many masters who used to attend regularly were now unavailable to play making the Open section very small. Without a steady pool of masters playing less high rated players, of which there are already a disproportionately low number of compared to the general chess population, are less motivated to play.

E. Lessons from moves

When you boil everything down, the greatest factor indicating the success of the entire plan comes down to: How many people show up to play. Once we sign an agreement, the cost numbers solidify.

From our past experiences and our demographics, it has been for this reason we had limited our search for a new location to be primarily to the Natick and Framingham area. A move to these two towns would keep us in a “sweet spot”, not too far and not too big a change for where players are coming from. Moves in any direction around these two towns results in an predictable number of our players being lost but opens the door to more players from that direction. The demographics of USCF players in Eastern Mass. shows that moving East or North would move closer to more players than West or South. However, we did consider several locations in the Lexington and Burlington areas. Our analysis showed:

- Those locations could expect a possible attendance in the 80s
- More than a majority of our current members would likely not play there due to traffic and distance compared to what they have now.
- We would essentially be building the membership from scratch, thus a new club, not really the club we are now.
- That the Natick / Framingham area would then be ripe for a club of 40 to 60 players to open up.

The conclusion was we are in the right spot for a club. Opening a club somewhere would be starting a new club from scratch.

*** End of this Report ***