

# **ELHS Elections**

## **or**

### **So...what do you have against the Board?**

We are certain many members are asking what we have against the Board. At least those that have given it any thought at all. The short answer is nothing. In fact all in all we feel that the ELHS Board of Directors has done a creditable job over the years and we certainly acknowledge the time, effort and dedication of all the current and past members of the Board and their service to the Society.

"If that's true, why do you want to dump the Board?" No doubt that is the conclusion that some will draw; nothing could be farther from the truth. Elections by themselves will remove no one from office, certainly not the proposition that we are asking be put before the ELHS membership. Now that the most likely fallacies have been exposed, let's get down to the real motivations behind this effort.

The ELHS like almost all rail historical and modeling societies faces an uncertain future. The next several years will in large part, determine if there is a viable Erie Lackawanna Historical Society a decade from now. This challenge is very real and cannot be ignored. Look at what is occurring with other long established historical and modeling societies. Look at the National Model Railroad Association; look at the National Railway Historical Society; an aging membership base with either no growth or a declining membership. The most noticeable result of this is increasing dues just to maintain the status quo.

The greatest challenges to the ELHS and most similar organizations will be retaining current members and attracting new members. Without the latter the best that can be hoped for is a slow decline. This is the reality of the situation we as a Society face.

What does all of this have to do with an elected Board of Directors? The authors, who collectively have been actively involved in volunteering for the ELHS, firmly believe that it will help to infuse the leadership of the Society with a new creative outlook on how to meet the challenges that face the ELHS. It will help to encourage more people to become active participants in the Society rather than sitting passively on the sidelines, feeling they do not have a say in Society matters.

For those who are not aware of how the Board works, here is a brief overview: Currently the Board is a self-sustaining entity. When a vacancy opens on the Board, the Board themselves choose someone they feel is worthy and qualified to fill that vacancy. This structure was set up as has been explained, to prevent someone from commandeering the leadership of the Society and taking it down a path that would lead to ruin. There may well have been justifiable historical reasons for putting such a self-sustaining structure in place, although a strong set of bylaws or constitution arguably could have achieved the same effect.

Now 23 years after the fact, it is time to reassess those decisions. Few other historical societies have followed the self-sustaining model; almost all have open elections for their officers and directors. While searching for other historical societies that have a self-appointed structure, the only one found was the society that served as the model for the ELHS. Additionally, it was found that several societies that previously had a self-sustaining board, reorganized to an elected board

structure. Certainly this would overwhelmingly suggest that an elected governing body is a viable solution.

No one is trying to suggest that changing to an elected Board is a magical solution to all of the challenges that face the Society. We do however believe it will help in two primary ways: First, it generates a sense of being a participant in the ELHS by all of the membership. It gives everyone an equal voice and a choice to participate in the Society rather than simply feeling like a subscriber to a publication. For those who choose not to exercise their vote, that is their choice, but at least they have the opportunity to make that choice.

The second benefit would be to give those individuals who believe they have something worthwhile to contribute to governing the Society, an open opportunity to run for Board membership and office. Currently if you are not in some way "known" to or by the Board, you have no chance to serve on the Board. To place some sort of litmus test on who is and who is not worthy to serve on the Board based on criteria set by the Board members themselves is simply wrong. Study upon study shows that under these sorts of conditions people will select others most like themselves. An unintended result is to perpetuate the status quo by selection of someone who shares a similar point of view as the Board majority. This results in a limited perspective of possible solutions to any given problem and potential stagnation of the organization as a whole.

Is the status quo such a negative? It may have been an acceptable way to proceed in the past, but the challenges of the present and the future make it essential to find fresh, creative methods to make ELHS membership more attractive to potential new members. Even for those members that prefer to remain passively involved this is an important issue. A larger membership base defrays the costs to produce the publications across a broader group, which in turn helps keep dues increases to a minimum.

Something worth keeping in mind is that the number of potential new members who experienced the Erie Lackawanna, DL&W and Erie first hand shrinks with each passing year. We as a Society must make membership attractive to a whole group of people who will never have first hand experiences. We have to provide them with a compelling reason to join a society for railroads that they will only ever know from a historical perspective. Yes it will be difficult, but it certainly is possible. The Ontario & Western Railway Historical Society is an excellent example of what can be done. Here is a railroad that was abandoned in 1957 and most of its members never had a first hand encounter with it. Yet O&WRHS membership continues to increase. Certainly the O&W was an interesting railroad in its own right, but no more so than the Erie, the Lackawanna or the Erie Lackawanna.

In summary, what we are requesting is as follows:

- That a proposition be presented to the general membership of the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society which asks if the current Board of Directors structure should be changed from a self-appointed, self-perpetuating body to a Board and officers (president/chairman, vice president/vice chairman, secretary and treasurer) elected by the general membership with each member in good standing having one vote.

- That the bylaws of the ELHS are changed and a constitution instituted to reflect the new Board structure and member voting rights.
- That 2 to 4 new director positions be added to the current number on the Board.
- That two or three year terms be established for all members of the Board.

Should the proposal be adopted, a phased in transition could be implemented, as the general membership deems acceptable. The new Board members would be elected in the year the proposal is adopted. Current Board members would not stand for election until the second year after adoption, with one half (rounded up) of the current members standing for election in the second year and the remaining Board members due for election in the third year. If two-year terms are instituted, this could be modified as appropriate.

## **Questions and Answers**

**Q.** Come on now, isn't this really all just a personal vendetta?

**A.** No. Although some might wish to characterize it that way, none of us involved with this effort have any personal issues with any of the Board members. As we have said before, we all feel that the membership owes a huge debt of gratitude to the members of the Board that are currently serving and to all those that have done so in the past. In fact we look forward to showing our support by being able to vote for the Board members. We do believe however that the membership of the ELHS is entitled to have a voice in the selection of their officers and Board members.

**Q.** I'm a member of the XYZ Railroad Historical Society and the same people are re-elected all the time anyway. So what difference would it make?

**A.** That may well be the case, but at least the membership of XYZ has the opportunity to make that choice. Currently, ELHS members have almost no say in how and who governs the Society. The only vote presently available to members is to vote with their feet (leave the ELHS). We can ill afford that sort of vote.

**Q.** Isn't this all because you want to be on the Board?

**A.** I cannot speak for others but your author has stated publicly and to the members of the Board that he has no ambition or desire to serve on the Board of Directors. I believe I can serve the ELHS in other capacities more effectively.

Does that mean no one involved with this effort has such aspirations? Frankly I hope some of them do. These are people that care a great deal about the future of the ELHS and I believe many of them would serve the ELHS and its members to the Society's advantage.

**Q.** So how is having an elected Board going to solve all of the problems ahead?

**A.** It won't. Anyone that believes it is a solution to all of the potential problems needs to reassess their position. What we believe it will do is to encourage greater member participation in the affairs of the Society through a sense of ownership rather than simply feeling like a magazine subscriber. We also believe that it will allow talented people that may or may not be known to members of the Board to contribute to the governance and the direction in which the ELHS proceeds into the future.

**Q.** But the Board is doing a great job! We now get *The Diamond* four times a year and the ELHS has a web site.

**A.** Yes, a quarterly *Diamond* is a good thing. But keep in mind that the decision to go quarterly is also intended as a way to retain current members and make it more attractive for new members to join the ELHS. It is not a decision without considerable risk. *The Diamond* is an expensive publication to produce. Now too, we are more exposed to cost increases with Andover Junction doing the layout and the printing where once the layout work was done by volunteer labor. Is it worth the gamble? We hope so since all members benefit if it works out. Will a dues increase be imminent if the anticipated membership increase doesn't materialize? We feel that depending on merchandise sales to make up the difference is risky at best.

As for the web site, some members felt the ELHS should have an official web presence for many years and expressed that to members of the Board. The Board finally agreed that it was desirable and voted to fund the project. A welcome situation, but it was members outside of the Board that kept pushing for this project and arguably it would not have come to fruition otherwise.

**Q.** Everything is fine, why should we upset the apple cart?

**A.** A static membership does not translate to everything being fine. Indeed if the ELHS does not increase membership by attracting new members, there is only one direction to go. We as a Society are at a very important threshold; We have to begin the process of passing on our first hand knowledge of the Erie, DL&W and Erie Lackawanna to a generation which never knew them except in pictures, books, models or from a web site. They will ultimately be entrusted to carry forward our knowledge and legacy into the future and it will be up to this next generation to keep the ELHS viable and strong. Expanding the Board and providing an opportunity for new members to participate will help that process along, while retaining the continuity with the present and the past.

**Q.** I'm a member of XYZ and they have elections. Compared to the ELHS they sure are a mess.

**A.** Again, elected boards and a voting membership is not a silver bullet. There are examples of poorly run societies that have elected boards just as there are superbly run societies with elected boards. One of the major advantages of societies with elected boards is, should the membership feel their society is being run inappropriately, they can express their feelings by voting for individuals they feel best reflect their interests.

We are not suggesting that the ELHS is not a reasonably well-run organization, but the argument that changing to an elected structure will surely lead to ruin is simply false. A strong set of bylaws and a sound constitution will all but prevent that possibility.

The primary authors of this proposal, with much input from current, former and potential members, are:

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Co-sponsoring members, in alphabetical order are:

|                             |                      |                             |
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| Bob Bahrs #1184             | John J. Boehner #648 | William (Bill) Botkin #1377 |
| Peter Brill #162            | Curt Carlough #120   | Jim Dent #3144              |
| Paul Graf #1485             | Bill Hallstead #1640 | Bob Hannon #67              |
| Pete Hasler #160            | Jay Held #1405       | Robert Mohowski #2078       |
| Dave Monte Verde #802       | Brian Palmer #3311   | Bob Pennisi #999            |
| Rich Pennisi #615           | Rusty Recordon #448  | Mike Riley #3207            |
| Tom Schmeider #1727         | Walter Smith #3278   | Ray Threlfall #118          |
| Richard (Rich) Tubbs #1226  | Gordon Wickham #2711 | Dennis Yachechak #51        |
| Rich Zmijewski - New member |                      |                             |

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We realize that many members do not have internet access, but we urge you to seek the help of a family member or friend that does, so that you may participate. For those with no other means to provide their input, you may write your comments and mail them to one of the following address:

|  |   |
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| William Shultz<br>558 Valley Road<br>Brooktondale, NY 14817-9702 | Paul R. Tupaczewski<br>50 Livingston Avenue<br>Dover, NJ 07801-5412 |
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