Annual Gathering Task Force Final Report

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Task Force Creation

An Annual Gathering Task Force is appointed with the following charge:

To review and update the model for selection, hosting and management of the Annual Gatherings.

EXPLANATION: The current model of selecting, organizing, and managing AGs has not changed much over the years while the meetings industry, AG attendance, AG program depth, technology, and the type of activities have all changed significantly in the past 5-10 years. Member expectations have changed as well. Some of these selecting, organizing, and managing activities are best accomplished by a team of volunteers, while other activities have or may need to shift to be the responsibility of paid staff and consultants. These changes need to be reflected in the site selection process and in the host agreements.

It is the intention that the task force appointment will carry over into the next term; however, that appointment must be made by the new AMC. Preliminary recommendations should be presented to the AMC in September 2011 for discussion, with final approvals in December 2011.

Topic 1 - Goal

What are the goals of an AG?

Goal:

- To produce an enjoyable national event that attracts new as well as returning members and their guests, and promotes the social as well as the educational aspects of the organization.

Sub goals:

- To attract media attention locally, and perhaps nationally, that gives public exposure to Mensa and may change stereotypical attitudes and expectations of the organization and encourage people to join.
- To allow the national leadership to conduct the business of the organization, and allow for member observation and participation in the process.
- To train current and future leaders about the leadership, business and operational aspects of the organization.
- To create a positive experience for those who attend to the extent that they leave feeling that it was time and money well spent and want to do it again.
- To respond to the changing climate of social interaction that has come about because of the Internet.

Topic 2 - How do we meet our goals and sub goals?

The committee came up with several ideas that will help us meet our goals and sub goals.

The first step in the process needs to be mandatory training for the AG Chair(s). An AG chair is typically appointed 3 to 4 years prior to their AG. This gives them ample opportunity to learn from the AG Chairs leading up to their AG and members of the National Office staff. The core AG committee needs to study AG trends to be prepared to run their area. This may prevent committees trying to re-invent the wheel.

Attendee expectations need to be set at a realistic level, and advertised to the membership as early as possible. If an AG cannot provide something typically seen at an AG, they must let everyone know, early and often.

AG Committees need to remember that the AG is an American Mensa event, and they need to embrace the diversity of the membership, and not just design an event around their personal preferences.

Consistency is an important aspect of AGs. By producing an event of consistent quality, our returning guests know what to expect. Every year hospitality is different, but our attendees know we have hospitality. They know we have a game room. The National Office creates the website and handles pre-registration, partly so that our members know where to find it and how to register. Those members who like to volunteer know there are places they can work every year and feel like they are an important part of the AG experience.

Each of these areas will enable us to provide a value packed event that offers members an attractive place to visit, an opportunity to experience attractive locations, a wide variety of speakers and entertainment, and attractions that showcase the location as well as offer unique opportunities for members as life-long learners.

Topic 3 - Locations

Where should we have AGs? Consider pros and cons of destination cities and non-destination cities. How important is having an AG at a hotel with enough guest rooms for all the attendees?

The committee was mixed on the ideal location, but many think we need to plan AGs in both destination and non-destination cities.

If we want to attract younger members who may have less vacation time and discretionary funds, destination cities will work better so they can combine them with a vacation. Destination cities may offer a larger selection of outside activities, more transportation options, and be more conducive to families.

For those people who attend AGs solely for the AG, non-destination cities may prove to be more affordable and less congested.

Each hotel size option has pros and cons. If you go with a hotel with enough guest rooms for all, you have the advantage of not needing an overflow hotel (and the issues that go along with that), but you limit yourself to cities that have a 1000+ room hotel. Multiple hotel AGs will give you more cities to choose from, but you then have multiple hotel contracts and minimum room nights to meet.

The general consensus is that whenever possible, we should have the AG where enough rooms are available within walking distance of the host hotel. As we move forward with larger AGs, we will need more meeting space and larger rooms for our big name speakers. Smaller hotels may soon be too small to meet our needs. Larger hotels also have a better chance of providing better physical accessibility to all functions.

Topic 4 - AG Selection/Bid Process

How should we select AGs? Should we continue to solicit bids from local groups, SIGs, and consortiums four years in advance of the AG, or should we consider a culture change and have a National Office driven search committee who works with our Site Selection Committee to seek out viable locations four to five years out? This would allow the AMC to appoint an AG Chair a bit closer to the AG, say three years out, and the AG Chair would appoint the remainder of the AG Committee, with approval by the AMC, two years out.

There are two very different schools of thought on this topic. Some believe that the current process of having local groups, SIGs, or consortiums submit bids is the best way to go. These people are best able to know the area to determine whether or not it is suitable for an AG and whether or not they have a strong enough committee to support an AG.

Some believe our restrictions and process for AG site selection tie the hands of the organization to get the best possible deals for our members. The larger convention hotels fill up the fastest and often require the largest lead time. There is also the inability to take advantage of opportunities that may be further out. As economic factors change then the lead time may need more flexibility, and there might be occasion to make a two-city deal that would favor the organization.

One alternative to our current process is for the National Office to target several cities as potential AG host cities, and present them to the Site Selection Committee. The Site Selection Committee can work with the local group, and/or interested SIGs and Consortiums to see if there is interest. This solution would represent the best resources of both the National Office and our membership.

Topic 5 - AG Responsibilities

Who should be responsible for various aspects of AGs? Some tasks are best done by the National Office, while some are best done by volunteers. Let's break down the list of tasks, and look at how each position can best be filled.

The consensus of the committee is as follows:

These roles should be filled by members of the AG Committee:

- Security
- Speakers
- Hospitality
- Treasurer
- Tours
- Program Booklet
- Logistics

These roles should be filled by the National Office:

- Accounting
- Website
- Pre-Registration

These roles should be split between members of the AG Committee and the National Office:

- Hotel Contract/Liaison
- Onsite Registration
- Publicity
- A/V

Topic 6 - Consistency

How do we ensure consistency, adapt to the changing needs of the members and the organization, and allow local flavor which makes each location unique.

One way to ensure consistency is to have a set of minimum AG standards. AG Committees should publicize as early as possible what they are providing to the attendees.

One member felt that another way to ensure consistency is for AG Chairs to avoid one-upmanship inherent in trying to better the event, leading to higher expectations from the membership. We don't want to set an unrealistic expectation for future AG Chairs. Another member felt each AG should strive to put on the best possible AG, even if it sets unrealistic expectations for future AGs.

The host group should work with the local Convention Bureau to bring some local flavor to the AG.

Topic 7 - AG Comps

Should we standardize what is comped to AG Committee Members, including registration, room nights, meal, and/or travel or do as we do today and let each committee decide what it wants to do? Local Group or SIG run AGs can profit from an AG and may make more frugal decisions than a consortium AG which returns all profits to AML. Should we standardize a discounted registration rate for committee members (or at least guarantee they register at the lowest registration rate), and should we quantify what determines a committee member?

The lowest possible registration rate should be offered to committee members no matter when they register for the AG.

The majority felt that room and other comps are best left up to each individual committee, based on number of earned room comps, size of committee, and the amount of work each person does. They also think we need some type of minimum standard to guide future committees.

Topic 8 – Speaker Expenses/Perks

Do we need to standardize a policy on how we compensate speakers? Some AGs give them a free registration, some give them just a day pass, and some only give them a few hours. Some pay for parking, some don't. Some provide free rooms and airfare, some don't. Is this something that needs to be standardized from year to year?

One way to attract more attendees at an AG is to have big name speakers on the schedule. To do that will cost us money, and it is reasonable to budget for premium speakers.

There is a big difference of opinion in how we treat speakers who are Mensa members and those who are not.

Members are expected to pay their own costs to attend the AG, and should not expect any compensation. The premium member speakers can be given some perks such as extended hours to sell their books and videos.

Non-member speakers should be given a free half-day or all-day pass for the day they are speaking and compensated for any parking fees.

One person suggested that we include in our budgets a token gift for each Mensa speaker, maybe a $5 gift certificate to Fox Imaging, or some type of gift card.

Topic 9 - Volunteering

We have seen a lot of comments recently that AG volunteering isn't as strong as it used to be. As AGs get larger, are we relying too much on volunteers? Should we find ways to compensate or reward volunteers?

A majority of the committee was in favor of some type of volunteer reward. The most popular answer is to create special give-aways at each AG that are only available to people who volunteer a minimum number of hours. Commemorative pins, T-shirts, and lanyards have been used in the past by gatherings, and have been successful to compensate onsite volunteers. Special AG T-shirts have been given to core committee members in advance of an AG to help promote the AG and thank the committee member for being part of the committee. Another option is to give gift certificates to Fox Imaging. Any costs associated with volunteer give-aways needs to be part of the AG budget.

On the other hand, if we automatically reward volunteers, it is no longer volunteering. It is paying for service, and it is very difficult to keep accurate records to ensure each volunteer is properly rewarded. Budgeting for volunteer rewards will increase the registration rate for all attendees.

Other comments on volunteering included reducing shifts to one hour to make it easier for more people to volunteer, or to provide overlapping shifts.

Topic 10 - Training

Right now there is no formal training program for future AG Committees. How can we best train future AG Chairs and AG Committees?

We all agree that training for future AG Chairs and AG Committees is essential to running successful AGs.

One recommended method is for future AG Chairs to shadow a current AG chair. They can offer to be part of a current AG Committee to better understand what goes into the AG.

Another suggestion is to establish an AG Training Camp for future AG Chairs. The changes in state health laws, in hotel contract negotiations, in financial responsibility alone make this desirable. To better prepare an AG Chair for what they are required to do, expected to do, and are allowed to do, this would be a serious stress reliever. Two issues that would have to be overcome are timing and funding for this training.

All past AG Chairs are invited to join a past AG Chairs mailing list. This list is available to the current AG Chair to use as a resource. Unfortunately, this list is seldom used.

The Past AG Chair reception could change from what is primarily a social hour to a session of serious training for future AG Chairs as they get valuable insight from those who have chaired AGs in the past.

All future AG Committees should be encouraged to hold committee meetings at each AG leading up to their AG. These meetings can be open to the public or just their committee members. With the number of experienced past AG Chairs and AG Committee members in attendance at an AG, this is a low cost way to get training.

One issue that needs to be address separately is what to do when you have a future AG Chair who doesn't have the money to regularly attend AGs leading up to their AG. Chairing an AG should not be a financial hardship for anyone, but many of the ideas we discussed for training would require the person to spend money to attend other AGs.

Topic 11 - Pre-Event Meetings/Site Visits

Should we set limits on the number of pre-event site visits that are comped for the AG Committee. Should it depend on whether the AG is run by a local group, SIG, or consortium? Should we set limits on committee positions that are comped to attend?

The committee agrees that it is necessary for some members of the AG Committee to visit the site hotel during the planning phase of the AG. Some positions, such as AG Chair, may require more than one visit. Some positions don't require any visits. The number of visits for each committee member should be left up to the AG Chair, and money must be budgeted to cover these costs.

Topic 12 - AG Chair Expenses (Food, Lodging, Transportation)

Should we allow AG Chairs to be reimbursed to attend their own AG? They are on duty 24x7, and do not get to participate in much of the AG. Now that we allow SIGs and consortiums to host AGs, the AG Chair can easily be a flight or a long drive away from the host location. AG Chairs will get their rooms comped from the hotel, but are still on the hook for transportation and meals.

The majority of the committee felt it was reasonable to cover transportation and the AG meal plan to the AG budget for the Chair(s). The main reasons in support of this include giving less affluent members the opportunity to

chair an AG, compensate the Chair(s) for having to spend 2 to 4 years working on this event, and better allowing us to recruit AG Chairs from all over the country, not just the local area of the AG hotel.

One reason against allowing this is that we are a volunteer organization. Many people do so many things without getting any compensation or reimbursement. To "pay" anyone, and that's essentially what this is, seems to open a door that many don't think should be opened.

Topic 13 – AG Profits

ASIE 1998-088 states: That the first surplus from an AG of 100 times the annual regular American Mensa dues at the time the AG is awarded shall go to the host group(s) with the remainder going to AML. AMC shall consider a contribution to MERF from the surplus, if any. Now that the national office performs several of the tasks that used to be performed by the host group, should we consider switching to a fixed stipend to a local group or SIG chairing an AG?

One person suggested we find a way to split AG profit among the local groups of the volunteers. Further discussion showed this idea to be very cumbersome to implement, and doesn't recognize the fact that many people volunteer for themselves, not on behalf of their local group.

One person felt that the amount granted a local group hosting an AG to be too small for the amount of time and work that goes into the AG. But with the National Office taking on more and more of the tasks, this amount may now be in line.

After much discussion with the members of this committee and the 10 current RVCs, the following motion was approved by the AMC in December, 2011.

Effective with the 2016 Annual Gathering (AG), the parties to AG host contracts shall have the following responsibilities:

- Host groups will be responsible for development of the program, identification of speakers, promotion of the event, and delivery of the actual program. "The program" in this context includes such areas as hospitality, security, and tours as well as speakers, games, tournaments, etc.

- American Mensa (AML) will have financial responsibility for the AG. All AG profits go to AML, and all AG losses are absorbed by AML. The AG's budget shall be mutually developed and agreed to by AML and the host group. AML shall have final say and execution authority over the final budget of the AG.

AML shall provide a hosting stipend to the host group as follows:

- If one or more Local Groups are hosting the AG within one of their local group boundaries, the local groups will be given a stipend of $3,000 to be split per agreement of the involved groups upon the conclusion of that AG, as specified in the host contract.

- If one or more Local Groups are hosting the AG outside of their local group boundaries, the local groups will be given a stipend of $2,500 to be split per agreement of the involved groups upon the conclusion of that AG, as specified in the host contract. The Local Group where the AG is held will be given a stipend of $500.

- If one or more SIGs are hosting the AG, the SIGs will be given a stipend of $2,500 to be split per agreement of the involved SIGs upon the conclusion of that AG, as specified in the host contract. The Local Group where the AG is held will be given a stipend of $500.

- If a consortium of individuals is hosting the AG, the Local Group where the AG is held will be given a stipend of $500.

The stipend is independent of the financial success or failure of the event, and is to be paid regardless of AG profit or loss. In addition, this motion eliminates all potential local group and SIG financial liability associated with hosting an AG, thereby protecting local group and SIG assets from unlimited loss.

Topic 14 - Hotel Negotiating

Who should be allowed to negotiate AG hotel contracts?

Currently anybody can go to a hotel and attempt to negotiate an AG hotel contract. Several years ago we created a National Events Hotel Consultant who would be available to handle hotel negotiations for AG bids, but that position has since been discontinued. Should we restrict negotiations to the National Office? Should we hire a professional? Are we overreacting, and anybody should be allowed to do it who feels qualified?

The committee believes strongly that we shouldn't allow "just anybody" to negotiate an AG hotel contract, but they aren't willing to remove members who are experienced in this area from doing the job. If "just anybody" goes into a hotel as a first contact, it makes the second "somebody" meeting ten times more difficult. There should always be someone available to assist an AG bidding group with hotel negotiations.

The National Office has several staff members who are available and have been used several times to negotiate AG hotel contracts. Their levels of training include contract negotiation, hospitality management, event logistics, and food and beverage. They do it regularly for AMC meetings, Colloquium and as requested for AGs and RGs. It is part of their ongoing professional development, and they know the industry today not just from experience doing an RG or AG XX years ago, but what the latest trends are as well as what the future forecasts and issues are.

Topic 15 - SIG Comps/Responsibilities

Some of our longtime SIGs have been grandfathered for suites because they provide so much help. Should this be policy? How does another SIG or non-SIG group get in on the action? Can they?

One thing to keep in mind is there is no such thing as a free suite. We essentially pay for those suites by accepting those suites in lieu of some other hotel benefit. In most cases those suites are attached to guest rooms, and we require any SIG that gets a suite to find members to rent those attached guest rooms. We are also limited by the number of suites made available in the AG hotel contract.

At some AGs, we have the capability of allowing volunteers to indicate a SIG preference and tabulating volunteer hours for each SIG. We can use that data to help decide which SIGs earn suites. This becomes more difficult when we have volunteers who are active in multiple SIGs.

One option if a new SIG wants a free suite is to ask them what they are willing to do for the AG, and then let the AG Committee decide if it is sufficient. As we enter an era of hotel-catered hospitality, there are fewer volunteer opportunities to give SIGs a chance to earn a suite.

Topic 16 - What should be the role of the AMC Liaison

I asked current AMC liaison John Recht what he thought the role was, and we will use this as a starting point.

The primary function of the AMC liaison is to communicate effectively. That means staying in touch with the committee on a regular basis, especially the AG Chair, but the liaison should also be included in conference calls and the committee e-mail list. The liaison should also be in regular contact with National Office staff who are working on AG-related tasks.

The liaison needs to be privy to, and familiar with, all of the major issues in connection with an upcoming AG. It should be the responsibility of the liaison to give updates to the board regarding the progress of AG preparations, especially in the last 12 months prior to the event; this is in addition to the reports submitted by the AG Chair. In particular, the liaison should know with whom to discuss his concerns about AG preparations, if problems have arisen. Sometimes National Office staff member support is appropriate, but in extreme cases, the board may have to act. Certainly the liaison should be in touch with the AMC Chair about major problems or concerns. Currently the board has only the Chair or the ExComm to get involved on an emergency basis if it seems necessary, as the Site Selection Committee has no actual role once the bid has been approved.

The liaison should have an extensive working knowledge of past AGs and the plans for upcoming AGs. Often, the liaison will be asked to advise an AG Chair or committee about the best way to handle an issue, and the liaison should be able to provide such assistance.

In summary, the liaison should be a knowledgeable communicator and advisor. I think it would be a good idea to include funds in the AML budget to provide for a site visit by the liaison, which is something that is not currently done. I do not think that funding for the liaison to come to the host city for an AG should come out of the AG budget.

Currently the AMC has four past AG Co-Chairs, but what happens when the AMC doesn't have someone who meets the above qualifications?

Several on the committee believe the AMC liaison should not be part of the AG Committee because he would be too close to the people involved. He should be aware of what the AG Committee is doing, and interface with the AMC when needed, but not be part of the decision making committee.

Topic 17 – AG Milestones

Should there be a few key milestones defined by policy that will ensure the event's success? If so, what are they and who monitors these milestones? The following are some of the rough guidelines used today.

Bid time – preliminary budget, committee members
24 months out – quarterly reports begin
18 months out – updated budget, proposed registration rates, hospitality plan
12 months out – website ready to go on line
6 months out – final budget

The AMC liaison should take an active role to make sure these milestones are met. These milestones need to be reported in the quarterly reports submitted to the AMC.

Topic 18 - Cancellation policy

The last few years have seen an increase in AG cancellations. As the number of cancellations increase, we also have an increase in room cancellations. At least one AG had to pay a hotel penalty for failing to meet room obligations in the overflow hotel. Our current cancellation policy refunds all but 8% to cover our costs. Should we consider something stronger? Should we consider having hotels charge a non-refundable first night when you make a reservation? Is the current Mensa cancellation policy too generous?

Over the years more people are booking AG hotel rooms just in case they decide to go to the AG. Some people are booking multiple rooms in case some of their friends forgot to book a room. When the main hotel fills up, we book contracts with overflow hotels so our members have a place they know they can get a room. When the barrage of last minute cancellations happen, people then leave the overflow hotel to get a room in the main hotel, and we no longer meet the contract for the overflow hotel.

There was no consensus on what to change to help reduce this problem. One suggestion discussed was to make the lowest AG registration rate non refundable, similar to internet deals on flights and hotels. Another suggestion was to move the registration cancellation date up to one month prior to the start of the AG. This would give the AG Committee more time to recover from last minute cancellations.

Topic 19 - Minimum Standards for Hospitality

What are the items that every AG hospitality absolutely must have, and what are the things we recommend, but not require them to have?

The committee discussed the differences between requirements and recommendations. The main problem with requirements is that it limits our ability to negotiate with some properties. In the last decade we had two AGs at hotels that did not allow us to serve our traditional hospitality fare. Each AG advertised exactly what they were allowed to have, and each had great attendance.

Here is a list of items we'd like to see in AG hospitality when possible:

Around the clock: covering all the basic food groups
Water, tea, coffee, milk, juice, Pepsi and Coke products (diet and regular)
Salty and sweet snacks (far less variety over night)
An assortment of chocolate, such as M&Ms, Hershey Kisses, mini candy bars
Some type of vegetation (celery sticks, baby carrots)
A source of protein – can be nuts, hot dogs, peanut butter and jelly and bread
Fruit – apples are mostly universal.

Mornings: covering all the basic food groups.
Dry cereal
Fruit (especially bananas),
Carbohydrates (breakfast cakes or pies or pastries)
Breads and other toastable things with toasters available
More protein – cheese slices or cubes – a protein source.
Hard boiled eggs (purchasable already peeled by the case).

10AM – midnight – covering all the basic food groups in greater variety.
More variety of salty and sweet
A constant source of protein – cheeses, PB&J, summer sausages or pepperoni slices, hummus.
Fruits and Vegetables (grapes, bell pepper slices, pickles, etc)
Potato salad, Macaroni salad (which require icing)

Meals – As long as there is always food of some sort and I do mean always (covering the basic food groups), then we don't think we have to have meals. A committee can if they want to.

Satellite Hospitality – if hospitality is far away from major programming or game areas, we should have a satellite hospitality area.

Topic 20 – AG Minimum Standards

Aside from hospitality, what are the other minimum standards an AG should meet?

The committee shared their AG experiences and expectations for future AGs.

At the March, 2012 AMC meeting, the following item was approved by the AMC:

Meeting Room Requirements (For a typical Wednesday - Sunday AG)

Monday - Sunday
- National Office Staff Room - minimum 500 square feet, rekeyable space

Tuesday - Sunday
- Registration Preparation Room - minimum 500 square feet, rekeyable space
- Mensa Store rekeyable storage space

Wednesday - Sunday
- Hospitality Room – Minimum of 7500 sq. feet, Minimum seating capacity of 300, plus prep and storage space
- Mensa Store - Minimum of 500 sq feet, 10 tables
- Registration Area
- Speaker Tracks - minimum five concurrent rooms for 200-500 theater style
- SIGs Room - minimum seating capacity of 75 theater style
- Game Room - minimum 2000 sq feet
- Tournament Room - minimum 1000 sq feet
- Officer Meet & Greets - Wed & Thu, 50 people in a large circle
- Leadership Development Workshops - Fri & Sat, 50 people theater style
- Gifted Youth Programs - 3 rooms, 500 to 1000 sq feet

Thursday Only
- 8 AM - 4 PM - AMC Meeting - 25 people U shaped. 2000 sq. ft minimum
- 4 PM – 6 PM - Annual business Meeting - 250-300 people theater style
- These two events cannot occur in the same room due to conflicting room setups

Meals and special events

Thursday
- VIP Lunch (for the AMC) - seating for 30 people

Friday
- Lunch (optional) - seating for 400 people

Saturday
- VIP reception (for the Mensa Foundation) - 150 people
- Dinner - seating for 400 people

Sunday
- Brunch (optional) - seating for 400 people

Topic 21 – AG Hotel Inspections

Should the AMC require an independent AG bid hotel inspection as part of the bid package? AG bid Chairs will always try to showcase the highlights of their bid and their hotel, but there may be aspects of the hotel they don't mention when presenting the bid. By the time we find out about these, the bid is already awarded.

There were some strong mixed feelings on this topic. Some question whether the unaffiliated person would have enough knowledge of the AG bid plans to render a meaningful opinion. Some believe a person affiliated with the AG should do the inspection, but they might be less willing to highlight the negative qualities of the hotel.

At the March, 2012 AMC meeting, the following agenda item was approved by the AMC:

For each Annual Gathering bid, the Site Selection Committee shall appoint someone unaffiliated with the AG bid to perform a complete hotel inspection as part of the evaluation process. The appointee may, but need not, be a

member of the Site Selection Committee. The Site Selection Committee shall determine the minimum categories of information required from the inspection. The inspection will normally be performed after the complete bid has been received by the Site Selection Committee, but the bidder may choose to have the inspection occur after submitting a Letter of Intent but before submitting the complete bid instead. The inspection will be done at American Mensa's expense.

To allow sufficient time for this inspection, the deadline (in ASIE 2005-095) for submitting a Letter of Intent to bid on an AG is changed from 60 days to 90 days prior to the AMC meeting at which the bid is to be considered, and the deadline (in ASIE 1986-035) to submit the full AG bid is changed from 30 days to 60 days prior to the AMC meeting at which the bid is to be considered.

Topic 22 – AG Spending Priorities

This topic was inspired by the AG2012 quarterly report recently filed. In that report, Ken Wright said "I would suggest that we need to look at investing money in Speakers who will draw an audience and give credence to a gathering of the finest minds in the country. At present we give the majority of our funding and attention to running a HI IQ soup kitchen. There is more money invested in intellectual activity at Comic Con."

The majority of the committee believes we need to let each AG Committee decide how they want to use their budget. Some may want more hospitality. Some may want less hospitality and more speakers. The important thing to remember is we shouldn't spend so much money in one area that we have no money to spend in other areas. We also should look at the 97% of our members who don't attend AGs and understand why they don't attend. If there's something lacking in an AG that if added would bring out a lot more people, we need to consider spending money in that area.

A couple of people think we need to spend more money to attract some big name speakers, who attendees will remember for years to come. Ideally we'd like to see American Mensa with a strong enough name that getting people to speak is thought of as a feather in their cap.

Topic 23 – AG Dates

The bylaws of American Mensa state the AG must be held between June 1 and August 31, though typically it is held around the Fourth of July. One year it was held in August to accommodate the World Gathering, and we had our biggest turnout ever. One big plus for July 4th is that members who work typically get a day off and might need fewer vacation days to travel. One negative is that some members have family or other social obligations around the Fourth and can't attend. Should we continue to encourage AGs to be held around the Fourth of July or should we consider giving bids a bit more freedom to host it some other time during June, July, or August?

When we use the July 4th holiday, we typically get a better hotel rate because we use a weekend that no business conferences want. Major corporations do not schedule conventions around family holidays. We are able to get both rooms and space at deals that we could not get if we were competing against corporate America. July 4th is generally a light occupancy time and it works for us.

Since there may be times when a group or consortium may be able to get a much better deal for the members away from the 4th, it is worth keeping our options open to consider other weeks.

Topic 24 – AG Management

Starting in 2016, local groups and SIGs hosting an AG will receive a flat stipend, not a portion of the profits. How do we ensure AG committees can do the best job running their AG when they don't have a financial incentive to do so?

The first step to ensuring an AG Committee does their best is by the AMC carefully studying each AG bid and awarding an AG to a group they feel will to an excellent job. They need to look at the background and experience of the AG bid Chair(s) and the core committee members.

When you consider the amount of work that goes into running an AG, we don't think anybody is going to bid on one solely for the stipend. We already have an AMC liaison in place to monitor the performance of an AG Committee. If the job isn't getting done, the liaison will bring this to the attention of the AMC who can take action if needed. We believe AG Committees work for the fun and sense of accomplishment they get from a job well done. They want to put on the best possible event for their own enjoyment, their friends, and the 1500+ new friends they'll make during the AG. Working on an AG Committee is a labor of love and a way to give something back to this organization.

Topic 25 – Attendee Entitlement Attitude

What can/should we do about attendee entitlement, specifically the people who don't read the AG website about what's going to happen and expect there to be 3 meals a day and free entrance to every event, despite what is advertised for the AG.

The best thing an AG Committee can do is advertise exactly what is being offered at the AG. This includes details on the hospitality plan, the meal plan, the program schedule, and anything out of the ordinary, such as a pay-to-attend event. There really isn't much you can do about those that tend not to read the fine print.

Looking Forward

Annual Gatherings are constantly changing. More and more, new requirements or agreed upon enhancements arise between the time of awarding and the actual event. Over the years the Site Selection Committee has reviewed and approved bids, but has not been involved beyond the bid process. We are past due in recognizing that an additional committee is needed, one with experienced AG leaders who will continually fine tune the AG bid process, and lend guidance and oversight to upcoming AG committees, from bid to event.