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Association Consolidation

ASAE, GWSAE JOIN FORCES, PUT ASIDE COMPETITION

By Rayna Katz

Washington — Tired of their long-standing and fierce competition for members and a draining duplication of efforts, the American Society of Association Executives and the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives last month announced their in-

tentions to consolidate.

One result, they stressed, will be much-improved educational offerings for members, many of whom are meeting professionals.

GWSAE's existing activities, the ASAE Foundation and ASAE's education programs

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ASAE & GWSAE Plan To Consolidate Operations

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will be rolled into the Center for Association Leadership, GWSAE's two-year-old educational effort. ASAE will function as a lobbying organization and will continue to run its annual convention, though the Center will handle the educational component. GWSAE, per se, will cease to exist, and its members will become ASAE members.

Thus, officials of the organizations said the arrangement, which at press time still was subject to the approval of the organizations' boards, will not be a merger. However, a key aspect of the consolidation is that, while there will be two separate boards of directors, each will have cross-representation on the other's board, and all staff will be employees of ASAE.

Two legally separate entities are being maintained to allow both of them, under applicable association laws, to receive donations and realize other benefits. Members of both organization will receive discounts on the other's services.

At the helm would be John Graham, continuing as president/CEO of ASAE, and Susan Sarfati, who would continue as president and CEO of the Center. Sarfati would relinquish her titles of president and CEO of GWSAE and become executive vice president of ASAE.

bers outside of Washington, D.C.," Graham confessed. "We need to look at how to package our programs and bring them on the road."

Greg Balestrero, chairman of ASAE and CEO of the Project Management Institute in Newtown Square, Pa., noted, "About 86 percent of ASAE education has been directed at and held in Washington D.C. With competition out of the picture, ASAE can serve New York,

sonals, particularly those in the meetings and events disciplines, there has been too much chaos, confusion and duplication of effort by these two organizations for much too long," said Kellee Magee, immediate past chairwoman of the ASAE Meeting & Exposition Council, and director of member resources at the American Nursery & Landscape Association.

"I applaud the putting aside of egos and feel that the streamlining and combining of resources will create a stronger and more compelling membership value proposition for both organi-

think that's a good message for associations to send," said Palmer. "Competition is what our society is based on, and associations creating a captive audience for membership doesn't necessarily make things better."

Palmer, who is now president of Palmer Publishing in Lake Ridge, Va., added, "There was a reason why there was a local and international organization, and that need didn't go away."

At the same time, however, Palmer suggested that the organizations' very existence could have been threatened if



A town hall meeting in Washington to discuss the GWSAE-ASAE consolidation produced a multiplicity of opinions.

Reducing Competition

"By consolidating," said Sarfati, "we reduce the need to maintain competing organizations and can focus on the needs of association professionals."

Roughly 22 percent of ASAE's membership belongs to its meetings and expositions section, while meeting planners comprise 15 to 20 percent of GWSAE's membership.

Said Graham, "By creating the largest association marketplace in the world, we believe great benefits will accrue to meeting planning professionals in the form of education, access to industry partners and networking."

Added Sarfati, "The Center for Association Leadership was founded in 2001 to provide global learning, knowledge and community building, but we didn't have our own research arm. Now, we'll have the ASAE Foundation's research to use in our programs, instead of having to come up with our own projects and proposals."

Organization officials will look for ways to bring elements of the center's programming, GWSAE's acclaimed speaker series and ASAE's education, which have been offered mostly in Washington, to a more nationwide audience.

"We know we haven't done a good job of bringing our programs to mem-

Philadelphia and the rest of the country."

Graham has appointed a task force to evaluate the possibility of ASAE creating formal relationships with what it calls "allied societies," such as the New York Society of Association Executives, with which it currently has no ties.

"We have a pretend relationship right now, meaning that we have one when it works for us, or when it works for them, but I think we need to have a more formal one," Graham said. "The task force is now investigating what that would look like. I believe we'll have something in place by August."

Aiding The Volunteer Spirit

The end of competition also will help the volunteer leadership of both organizations.

"Many people who are really committed to the industry take on leadership roles with two or more organizations, and they feel pulled, forcing them to give more energy to some over others," said Sarfati.

Most meeting planners who opined on the merger were supportive, but some had concerns.

"For D.C.-area association profes-

sions," she said.

However, at a town hall meeting here last month, the first of several such discussions scheduled to take place around the country, several participants questioned the restructured organizations' ability to preserve the strong community-building culture GWSAE has established locally in Washington.

"GWSAE creates an environment where people generally know each other well, and it's easy to participate," said Paul Greeley, a former chairman of GWSAE and president of the association strategic consulting practice at the Signature Group in Vienna, Va. "That has to be harder to create for a national organization. It's just the nature of the beast."

Added Bill Bergman, president of William Bergman Associates, a Washington-based association management firm, "I'm not hearing anything about how the GWSAE culture is not going to go away."

This level of concern was echoed by Judy Palmer, ASAE's former associate publisher and director of advertising.

"The message behind this is that competition isn't healthy, and I don't

they did not consolidate.

"The truth is, they've been competing to the point where both couldn't survive. ASAE has had two staff reorganizations that included layoffs in the last three or four years."

Graham disputed that claim. "Clearly, we've all been in challenging times, but none of the organizations in this are struggling," he said.

The town halls are meant for the organizations to accumulate information for a formal proposal to all four boards. That step, and a vote by each of those groups, is slated to take place in April.

GWSAE's membership, which is entitled to vote since the dissolution of their association is being proposed, will be called upon sometime within 30 to 50 days of the board's decision.

For the merger to happen, only 10 percent of the membership needs to vote, but two-thirds of that group must vote favorably. In accordance with GWSAE bylaws, that vote must take place in person.

If all goes according to plan, Sarfati said, the organizations' new structure will be up and running by July 1.

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