

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Jesse Applegate, Mazama President

What if I told you the Mazamas is going out of business? Would you believe me? Would you wonder what that means—especially since our programs are volunteer-led? Well, it's true. If we continue doing everything we currently do, as we have been, the Mazamas will cease to exist in the not-so-distant future. Why? And what do we do about it? First, I'll make some assumptions. I assume you, as a member or participant in our community, care and wish to change our course from its current outcome. Without you, the Mazamas will be only history. Second, I assume you don't necessarily have enough information to understand what needs to be done. Let me help you.

The Mazamas: is it a business or social organization? It's both. Yes, most of our programs are volunteer-led, and the experiences we have participating in those programs give us that sense of community that keeps us coming back. However, we have infrastructure to support all those volunteer-run programs in the form of real property, i.e., the Mazama Mountaineering Center (MMC) and Mazama Lodge, maintenance, group gear, custom website, database, insurance, permits, business relationships with other organizations, cloud services, bank accounts, investments, telephones, bills, etc. Most importantly, among us are people (staff) to help us run all of these things. They answer questions, help us operate the website when we don't want to figure it out ourselves, and they also participate in the same Mazama programs we all love. Just as your household needs money to exist, the Mazamas does too. What's the phrase: "no money no mission?"

So, what's our business plan? We rely on only a few revenue sources including membership dues, program and activity fees, and donations. "But we're a nonprofit, what about grants?" you may ask. Unfortunately, we're not eligible for most grants available to public benefit nonprofits because of our institutional structure. How else can we support ourselves? The obvious conclusion is to increase membership. However, we can't easily increase our membership because of the glaciated peak membership requirement in our bylaws. In many cases, the glaciated peak requirement is not only holding back our membership potential, it's also preventing us from applying for and receiving the grants mentioned above.

Perhaps you've heard this all before. That's because it's a conversation that's been happening periodically for a long time. The difference now is that we are, and have been, consuming our investments and we will no longer have them to rely on in the future. We must find a way to be sustainable.

There have been many well-intended efforts in the past to adapt, but they have for the most part been thwarted by our institutional structure defined in our bylaws and operating policies. There is no single position of institutional stability in how we're structured. We don't have a permanent finance director, a financial professional who keeps us operating to standard business practices, has their thumb on how we're operating, can predict our needs, and makes recommendations before it's too late. We have a new board makeup every year, new board officers every year, and our staff turnover is high. We've seen over and over that investments of time and money in programs and policies take longer than a year before they're fully established and can bring results. With each new election cycle we get a new board, new leadership, and new ideas about the direction of the organization. Often, the new leadership is unfamiliar with the previous direction and there may be little to no sharing of institutional knowledge from one leader to the next. The average lifespan of volunteerism in the Mazamas is about seven years for a given person. These instabilities are baked into our bylaws, which is why there was so much effort to change them recently. Unfortunately, the message communicating the need to change was not received by enough of us.

So, here we are, continuing on a path that, without a correction, will likely lead to an insolvent dead-end. While we still have options, we need to determine who we are and what we want for the future of Mazamas. The path forward will not be easy as we have some difficult decisions to make. It will take all of us to help organize, take ownership, and participate in making our nonprofit business healthy, solvent, and stable so that the Mazamas community can survive and thrive. We can find solutions to the problems that are in front of us and we can do this best, if we do it together.

I encourage all of you to learn about how our business works, what could be better, what should change, and why.

To facilitate that sharing and to listen to your input and ideas, the Executive Council along with Kaleen, our Interim Executive Director plan to host two online forums in March, tentatively on the evenings of March 14 and March 22, 2022. We'll come ready to share our thinking about priorities for Mazamas and we want to listen to yours. More details will follow in the eNews and on the mazamas.org website. Please plan to attend one of these sessions and contribute your best thinking to the future of our great organization.