

Inside LRA(2): Conference Myths and Realities
February/March 2010

This is the second installment of “Inside LRA.” The purposes of these communications were outlined in the first installment (http://www.nrconline.org/pdf/InsideLRA_Dec09Jan10.pdf) along with several changes in the structure of LRA’s leadership and governance.

In this installment, I hope to clear up some myths and highlight some realities associated with the annual conference. Comments at the town and business meetings, on member surveys, and informally overheard in elevators at the conference suggest that many members do not understand the complexity of the issues and the process for planning and conducting the annual conference.

The prime directive/reality (and a survey that illustrates it)

Those of you who are “Star Trek” fans know that crews of starships had a prime directive that guided their decisions about interacting with the cultures they encountered in their journeys. The prime conference directive/reality might be: “You can’t please everyone.” Not surprisingly, we are an opinionated group with diverse interests, priorities, and reactions. As a case in point, **the full results of the recent survey completed by 458 members about the Albuquerque conference and about our annual conferences in general can be found online at <http://www.nrconline.org/pdf/2009ConferenceSurveySummary.pdf>**. There are a few discernible patterns that will guide the LRA leadership about future conferences (e.g., whether to consider a conference center in the future), but there are many examples of equally strong opposing opinions about several aspects of the conference.

How is a conference site selected? (Or, why don’t we ever have the conference in/at [insert favorite city/venue]?)

First, we are bound by a general geographical scheme that rotates the annual conference from the Eastern, Mid-, and Western regions of the US. Historically, conference sites have been held in mild to warm Southern climates. However, that criterion has been somewhat relaxed (as evidenced dramatically in Albuquerque) to realize lower costs (to the organization and to members) offered by smaller cities and to add variety to conference venues.

Here is a brief chronological outline of how a decision is made (two years in advance of a conference), with some explanatory notes and comments:

- Members make suggestions for future conference venues at the annual business meeting.
- These cities are automatically considered as possible conference sites.

- LRA's management company (TEI) sends out, through a network of professional organizations, a request for proposals (RFP) from conference hotels in the region for that particular year. The RFP includes general specifications, priorities, and data from previous conferences. **Note: the latest RFP can be found online at <http://www.nrconline.org/pdf/2012NRCAnnualMeetingRFP.pdf>, and includes data that may be of general interest (e.g., regions of the country from which members come).**
- RFPs returned by a deadline are evaluated and discussed by the Executive Committee, which typically narrows the list to 4-6 sites in 2-3 cities. Note: This step explains why we can't always go to a preferred location. That is, we can't go where no hotel has submitted an RFP. **Note: Remarkable as it may seem, LRA is not necessarily an attractive client to hotels because we are not big spenders.**
- Site-visits are conducted by a team including LRA's Executive Director (Chris Roper, who has a background in the hotel industry and who routinely negotiates with hotel conference managers), the Vice President, and the just-elected Vice President-elect. Note: Until two years ago, the Vice President-elect was not included in the site-visit, which created the awkward situation of being conference chair for a venue that one did not select.
- After a thorough analysis based on a wide range of factors, the site-visit team makes a recommendation to the Executive Committee, which then makes a recommendation to the LRA Board of Directors, which has final approval.
- Note: Many factors figure into a decision that leads not to an ideal site, but only the best among the available alternatives. Some factors considered would be obvious to the members (e.g., lodging costs, access to low-cost alternatives for graduate students, easy access from the airport, a layout conducive to small group interactions, etc.) but others are not likely to be (e.g., number of complimentary rooms for plenary speakers, suitable space for the management staff to work and store materials, cooperativeness and competence of hotel management with whom we will be working, etc.).
- Note: The LRA leadership listens to members' suggestions and requests for activities and services and tries to accommodate them when feasible. For example, we found ways to provide digital projectors in all presentation rooms. However, the often-requested wireless Internet in service in presentation rooms has, so far, not been possible. Hotels charge exorbitant fees for such services (e.g., \$500 per room per half day), and it is often non-negotiable, sometimes because of union contracts.

I hope this brief explanation provides a deeper understanding of how conference sites are selected and the range of factors that must be considered in reaching that decision.