

On March 30, 2008 the Friends of the Guiding Star Grange sponsored a conference for callers and dance organizers who use the Guiding Star Grange. While all who were invited were not able to attend we did have a good turnout. What follows is a summary of this meeting by Jane Kaufman.

Friends of the Grange meeting with callers and dance organizers regarding issues at Greenfield

Present: Linda Leslie, Bob Golder, Bob Isaacs, Ray Sebold, Orin Nisenson, Allison Bell, Liz Sturgen, Val LaBelle, Tim Van Egmond, David Kaynor, Steve Zakon-Anderson, Steve Howland, Norma Patton, Peter Amidon
And Jane Kaufman taking notes,

The agenda:

Meeting the needs of the new dancers
Meeting the needs of skilled dancers
Better understanding the role of the caller, the dance organizer and the dancers
Inappropriate activities of some individuals
Reducing injuries on the dance floor
The center line – facts and myths

Orin and Allison opened the meeting by explaining that there have been some issues that have arisen as the Greenfield dances have become more popular and more crowded.

They noted an increasing sense of divide between new, younger dancers and very experienced dancers, concerns about inappropriate behavior, people who have stopped dancing at Greenfield because they feel there's too much risk. Are we doing enough to serve the needs of both new and skilled dancers? This raises questions about exclusivity. Is there a consensus? There are similar conversations going in Boston. Maybe it's happening everywhere. Their hope in holding the meeting was to try dialogue as a way of beginning to find answers.

Callers identified a key difference between Greenfield and other venues is its lack of continuity among organizers – and to some extent --- dancers. That makes it tricky for all involved to have consistent policies. And puts a lot more onus on the caller.

That variety in bands and callers and organizers also means there's no consistent policy setter at Grange dances.

“It’s helpful when someone says would you try to make comments about safety or dancing to the music? Often in Greenfield I feel I’m the only one taking care of things,” one caller said.

“It is hard to respond from the mike” to inappropriate behavior, one caller said. “Nobody wants to be nagged or scolded. It’s a drag.”

Contra dance for the community or as an individual’s entertainment also came up as a theme.

Length of travel time for many dancers was cited as a reason it may be difficult to build community. Potlucks before dances are sparsely attended.

While many dancers may hope to dance with their friends in the best line, it helps the community as a whole if experienced dancers dance with newcomers and beginners.

Someone said: “Remind people how important we all are to make the dance work. The dance isn’t the caller, the band or the organizers, it’s really the dancers.”

One North Carolina dance pairs beginners and experienced dancers at every dance.

“If every experienced dancer spent one or two dances with a beginner, that’s all you need,” said Peter Amidon. He said, to that end, he’ll often announce at the beginning of one dance that the next dance is going to be challenging in an effort to encourage beginners and experienced dancers to dance together.

Veteran dancers who have developed bad habits jeopardize safety, rather than beginners.

Beginners are not the problem, said David Kaynor. “I have never been injured by a beginner.”

“The buzz on the street in Greenfield is that Greenfield dances are difficult to go to for beginners. The beginners themselves are really tools. My real goal is really experienced dancers who are not good at technical or social skills,” he said.

The center line fills up fastest because of who dances there and partly because of booking (which may be a deterrent for visiting and new dancers as well). David Kaynor noted that visiting dancer (and caller) Becky Hill wasn’t asked to dance by one person at a Greenfield dance.

“Isn’t it evident that the line is full?”

Someone suggested putting a traffic cone at the end of the center set when it's full.

David Kaynor noted: Cammy used to charge money to be in the center set.

"It used to be floor managers made introductions. Now we are culturally free to meet each other, make our own introduction. The floor manager is now the caller. It's an organic process," Bob Golder said.

Booking ahead cuts down the opportunity for surprise sexy dances, Peter Amidon.

Ideas to try:

- * Posting a dancer code of ethics at the Grange.
- * Holding a fundamentals contra dance to address both the needs of beginner and intermediate-level contra dancers on different ways to perform the same move (courtesy turns, etc.)
- * Holding brief demos and lessons during the break by either the caller or experienced dancers
- * Holding beginner workshops before every dance, possibly by the caller, possibly by highly skilled dancers and teachers
- * Preparing fliers to give beginners about contra dance
- * Holding a brief town meeting during the break of a dance to start a conversation
- * Form a list of priorities and expectations for callers
- * Attempting to encourage skilled experienced dancers to dance with beginners on a more regular basis as a way of helping the whole dance progress to a higher level
- * Asking dancers to pay attention to the balance between the lines and to fill out the shortest line as the center line gets too long
- * Asking dancers to realize that – as stakeholders -- we are the dance and that we have a responsibility to make it work