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## **An Open Letter the Membership of the Lincoln Park Boat Club**

The Lincoln Park Boat Club is the oldest rowing and paddling club in Chicago, founded in 1910, with the boathouse being constructed in 1908. LPBC celebrates its 102nd anniversary this year, literally more than a century of rowing at the same location, with the same team, under the same roof. Rowing at LPBC has spurred the creation and development of many important programs in the immediate area like the Loyola Academy Rowing Association, St. Ignatius Chicago Crew, the University of Chicago Crew, the Lincoln Park Juniors, and the Chicago Training Center, who all share roots at LPBC. The club has played an important, senior role in the Chicago rowing community for generations and is the historical club of note, the only real legacy to the history of rowing in Chicago. The club needs to return to its former significantly important paternal role for the Chicago rowing community. I hope this letter is the turning point for that return.

Like a lot of rowers in Chicago, I am unhappy with how the master's rowing community has declined in recent years. This degradation of the master's community is connected to the leadership at the Lincoln Park Boat Club. I feel LPBC has been going down the wrong path for quite a long time and it is time for the club to depart from this failed course. I feel the club should implement significant changes in order reverse this negative trend that has been facing it over the past several years. LPBC and the Chicago rowing community need a clean break and fresh start.

The continuing actions, or inactions, of the current long-term leadership of the board of directors are causing LPBC to decline in a number of important areas. We can see this through the empirical decline in membership, revenue, club camaraderie, membership satisfaction, and an overall lack of long-term membership. It is important to note that a large amount of the important issues detailed in this open letter were communicated to me by current club members of LPBC.

Some of the most important issues that need to be addressed are the lack of openness and disclosure of club financials to the membership as well as the limited amount of communication to membership detailing any meetings held with the Chicago Park District on behalf of the club. Other important issues are the current status of an updated Chicago Park District contract with the club and a general lack of transparency regarding the development of the Lincoln Park Boat Club Charitable Outreach, including a public discussion of the new bylaws. Finally and most importantly, there is no long-term master plan in development to direct the club over the next 10, 25, and 100 years.

Along with these and other issues that will be detailed later in this open letter, the LPBC membership and the Chicago rowing community need to work together to address what has the potential to negatively impact the long term security and survival of the Lincoln Park Boat Club.

The club is faltering. Bold moves need to be made in order to ensure LPBC continues on as Chicago's historical club of note. We, the Chicago rowing community, need to work together to return the club back to a better, more desirable environment that works to sustain rowing, allowing it to flourish.

## **Major Current Issues with LPBC**

These are issues that have not been properly addressed by the current board, the majority of which were highlighted by current LPBC members.

- **Disclosure of Club Financials**

It has been made aware to me that the current board of directors does not disclose important financial status updates to the general membership. Full financial disclosure should be understood an essential responsibility of the board of directors. Potentially critical financial decisions are being made out of the view of the general membership and some have said this trend of opaqueness is detrimental to the club in the long run. This lack of transparency needs to be addressed immediately.

- **Disclosure of meetings with the Chicago Park District**

According to current LPBC members, the current board has met with the Chicago Park District on behalf of the club on several occasions. The content or results of these meetings are rarely communicated to the general membership of the club. The board of directors needs to work to be 100% transparent and open regarding any meetings with the Chicago Park District.

- **CPD Contract**

At last check, LPBC does not currently have a contract with the Chicago Park District. The club is working off an expired contract that details access to the facility and revenue sharing with the Park District. As far as I can tell, no effort has been made by the current leadership to start a dialogue to enter into a new, beneficial and long-term contact with CPD. This is crucial in order to secure LPBC's ongoing ability to operate out of the Lincoln Park Boathouse for years to come. Not addressing this significantly important issue is a failure of the long-term leadership of LPBC.

- **Lincoln Park Boat Club Charitable Outreach**

No substantial movement on the LPBCCO has been made in the last few years. There has been a significant amount of uncertainty and cloak-and-dagger actions around LPBC's 501c3/7 status and its impact on the club. New bylaws are going to be enacted soon and the majority of members do not know what impact these will have on the club. There has been a good deal of club funds paid to attorneys in both expenses and underutilized retainer fees already. The membership needs to know what the motivation of the board is at this time and what their priorities are for the future.

- **Long-Term Master Plan for LPBC**

The current board leadership has not implemented a comprehensive plan for the future of the club. The club seems to be lead on a year to year basis with little planning or established goals. While there definitely are certain select members of the board of directors who are actively trying to improve the rowing community in Chicago by developing a master plan, they are clearly running into significant roadblocks from other, more vocal, long-term members of the board.

## **Recent Significant Failures of Leadership**

- There was a failure to communicate the need for a south facing sidewalk on the newly constructed bridge at Fullerton in order to provide a safe location for spectators and officials to observe regattas on the lagoon. This lack of foresight demonstrates the club's inability to communicate with the Chicago Department of Transportation or the local aldermanic offices to make sure all of the needs of the club are met when decisions are made regarding permanent infrastructure changes at the lagoon.

- The de facto disillusion of the women's masters sweep team is a significant failure of the long-term leadership of the Lincoln Park Boat Club. This stems back from the 2011 USRowing Master's Nationals trailer disagreement with senior members of the women's sweep team and certain members of the LPBC board. This disagreement surely prompted invaluable members to walk away from the club. This failure of the board to protect important aspects of the club, like women's sweep rowing, is made clear when one considers in 2010 the LPBC women's club 4+ placed 1st at the Head of the Charles. In 2011 they placed 31st in the same race. In 2012 the LPBC women's 4+ did not participate in the regatta. A decline like that cannot be disputed, leadership has failed to support crews like women's sweep rowing.

This lack of support is also demonstrated by the sale of valuable sweep team equipment in the fall of 2012. Selling equipment shows the leadership's lack of interest in maintaining and protecting the sport of women's sweep rowing in Chicago.

This information on the women's team was accumulated through several current and former members of the LPBC women's sweep team. By all accounts, the team is on the verge of disbanding. This is unacceptable.

- There were failures in planning for regatta transportation in 2012. The Head of the Charles trailer and the Head of the Hooch trailer both had significant planning and communication issues which resulted in higher expenses for all participating LPBC members. This consisted of multiple failures to communicate with the rest of the Chicago rowing community in order to consolidate transportation costs by utilizing shared trailers. It should be noted that multiple LPBC members decided to haul their private boats on other community trailers due to a lack of confidence in the trailering logistics and planning of the current LPBC board. This is not a failure of the club trailer driver in any way, but instead it is a failure of the leadership at LPBC.

### **Other Outstanding Issues with LPBC and the Board of Directors**

These are issues that have not been addressed by the current board and should be included in a long-term master plan for the Lincoln Park Boat Club.

- **Poorly Run Meetings**

According to a number of current LPBC members, there have been no substantive agendas planned for board meetings and important topics have not been discussed with membership prior to meetings. In addition, the discussions during meetings have been reported to be largely unproductive with meetings rarely accomplishing much more than creating more agenda items to discuss the following month. This is a result of inexperienced long-term members of the board who unfortunately do not know how to run a rowing and paddling club.

- **Openness and Transparency**

A large number of current and former members complain about the true lack of openness and transparency with the current long-term board leadership. A large number of important issues, like the disclosure of important financial information to the membership and the development of LPBCCO, have gone on without the knowledge of the general membership. This lack of transparency dates back to the transition of Steve Quinn to Willa Lang as commodore and demonstrates the failure of certain long-term members of the leadership.

- **Dragon Boaters**

The way the club handled the dragon boaters in 2011 was not thought out well, had little planning, it cost the club a large number of paying members, and it reinforced the notion that LPBC is failing in their role to develop and sustain paddle sports. This is demonstrated by the establishment of a new dragon boat club by the exact same members of the former LPBC dragon boat team in Arlington Heights. The dragon boat issue demonstrates a true lack of vision and leadership, and it is reinforced even more when you consider the lack of use of the two outrigger canoes during the last four years. The outrigger canoes have been an ongoing waste of resources due to a lack of leadership at LPBC and now are going to be sold to another Chicago paddling program at a significant loss to LPBC, both in valuable club assets and unique programming.

- **Former Board Members**

A number of former board members have left the club because of poor interactions with select current long-term board members. Former commodore Steve Quinn is the best example of the club's inability to keep valuable long-term members. He left because of a true inability of the current board to communicate important information to the membership regarding the development of the LPBCCO, its bylaws, as well as other important long-term issues.

- **The Lagoon Level**

The present lagoon level is low and may continue to drop. What has the board done to help mitigate these issues?

- What they should have done already: Initiate dialogue with Army Corps of Engineers to consider dredging of the lagoon, work with Alderman Smith to identify community priorities for the lagoon, and work with groups like Friends of the Parks to develop a long-term plan for the park space around the lagoon.
- The low level of the lagoon might prompt the cancelation of the Chicago Sprints, one of LPBCs largest revenue generators.
- Low water height may limit learn to row and learn to scull classes as well as the club's ability to raise revenue.
- What is the board's plan to address these issues? These sources of revenue are what keep membership dues competitively low. Because of a lack of planning and leadership, membership dues could increase within this new environment.

- **Obligation to Rowers**

It is the duty of LPBC to help rowing develop in Chicago. However, this current board has done little to help in the development of the sport of rowing. The priorities of the club should be to aid and assist in the development of rowing in Chicago, and this unfortunately has not been the case at the Lincoln Park Boat Club for a number of years.

- **Adaptive**

Sadly, the programming and leadership at LPBC has failed to create an adaptive program. There has not been a permanent adaptive rowing program established at LPBC aside from infrequent one-off events for a select group of participants. Sizable investments by the Chicago Park District in adaptive facility improvements largely are going unused, some never having been used at all, literally. This is demonstrated by the seldom, if ever used kayak launch apparatus. This costly investment goes unused every year since it was first installed by CPD.

This is a direct result of poor leadership on the part of the board of directors at LPBC.

This adaptive failure is not a result of LPBC members who volunteer to direct the program, but rather a lack of vision of leadership to develop the adaptive program overall.

\* It is important for the general LPBC membership to understand that the entire transition of the club's current tax status to the more desirable 501c3 tax status is dependent entirely on a successful adaptive program. Having worked in the adaptive industry for nearly a decade, I know that the club will find issues hanging their 501c3 hopes on such an underdeveloped adaptive program. It is the obligation of the LPBC board to immediately push through the needed planning to advance adaptive rowing and paddling at the club in order honestly to continue pursuing this 501c3 course. Otherwise this push for tax-free status is motivated by the tax savings rather than the true point of the 501c3, which is adaptive development.

- **Failing Paddling Side of the House**

The paddling side of the boathouse has degraded to such a point where paddling is no longer a dominant influence at LPBC. I feel this is mainly because of poor long-term leadership on the board which prevents paddling members from participating. Paddling members just don't want to enter into the usually caustic realm of the current long-term board leadership. It's been nearly three years without a true paddling director. This was demonstrated in 2010 with no paddling director, in 2011 with a poor choice of leadership who mostly went missing in action all season, and in 2012 when Michael Westenberger (Westy) was brought in, but was prevented from developing paddling at the club because of the lack of vision of the long-term board leadership.

#### **Summary of Outstanding Issues with Paddling**

- The past LPBC dragon boat bid to worlds was allowed to leave the club rather than working on finding a solution to keep the dragon boaters at LPBC. This is failed leadership that was demonstrated throughout this long process. The dragon boat team disillusionment occurred after a lot of work and many meetings, but was later abandon.
- There was an underuse of outrigger canoes with no clear or established solution to remedy their lack of use. There was little focus to prioritize this issue by the long-term leadership despite the high level of invested club funds and resources in these boats.
- There was an inability to quickly adapt to new and outstanding paddling leadership under Westy. The long-term board membership put up roadblocks for him to share fully his talents with the club in the summer of 2012, surely costing LPBC a new and proven source of revenue.

#### **Solutions for Moving the Club Forward**

Here are some ideas and concepts that I have been developing for the Chicago Park District-owned boathouse in Lincoln Park and the lagoon. These are concepts that rely on a sitting board of directors that prioritizes the development of rowing and paddling at all times.

LPBC is the only historical link to Chicago's rowing and paddling roots. It is the **obligation** of the Chicago rowing community to ensure that LPBC survives. At the same time, the current management structure of the club needs to be adjusted to take advantage of proven methods to

generate revenue in the rowing and paddling industry while ensuring that the feel and culture of the club is preserved.

LPBC significantly is underutilizing the space that it occupies and the members of the club should be made to understand the way the organization is being maintained as a volunteer-run operation is unsustainable. With the development of the four Chicago River rowing and paddling boathouses, it is logical to expect that the Chicago Park District will revise their expectations of the Lincoln Park boathouse to include updated programming and requirements in-line with other programs like the Chicago Training Center and Lincoln Park Juniors.

In order for LPBC to stay competitive, the board of directors needs to work to implement significant operational changes in order to secure LPBC's place at the lagoon. The club needs to demonstrate its usefulness to the whole Chicago community, not just the rowing community. I hope these goals listed below help to identify pathways to return LPBC to its former position of greatness.

- The club needs to focus on class development, specifically catering to the demands of the outdoor industry. The current class structure at LPBC is valuable, but in no way is the Lincoln Park Boathouse optimized to its fullest extent. The club is vacant during most of the day and is significantly underutilized.
- The club needs to immediately hire an Executive Director. If no funding is available, a non-board member volunteer must be selected to act in this role with a goal to fund the position in the future. This is crucial in order to relieve board members of the mundane and taxing duties associated with the day-to-day operations of the club. The executive director would answer to the board, but would be free to run the club as he or she sees fit. This change is imperative.
- The club needs to do a full inventory of the boathouse infrastructure, including consultations from structural engineers and planners. There needs to be a boathouse infrastructure fund developed in order to prioritize funds for the management and development of the boathouse facilities.
- There needs to be a significant push to communicate with decision makers in Chicago. This includes aldermen, the mayor's office, state and federal leadership, as well as peer groups like the Friends of the Parks, Openlands, Friends of the Chicago River, and the Lincoln Park Advisory Council. This communication needs to happen in order for our shared voice to be heard and our priorities to be considered when rowing-related infrastructure and funding issues are discussed. Who else will speak on our behalf? We need to be vocal and we need to make our priorities known in Chicago.
- LPBC needs to secure its place in Chicago's community. Right now LPBC is a minor club in Chicago despite being founded at the same time as boat club stalwarts like Columbia Yacht Club. LPBC leadership needs to do more to develop the amenities of the club for the membership.
- The club needs to work with Alderman Michele Smith of the 43rd Ward to identify ways to repair the lagoon at the same time as when the north section of Lake Shore Drive is replaced, which is planned for next few years.
- The club should work with the Army Corps of Engineers to prioritize straightening and dredging the lagoon to ensure appropriate depth for racing, even in low water conditions. Board members and the Chicago rowing community need to work to find the funding and support to make this happen.
- The club leadership needs to work with the Chicago Park District to advocate for and to develop a modern facility for the lifeguards, who currently work in outdated facilities at the boathouse. It is by working with peer groups like the lifeguards that we can work to

address everyone's priorities, including what should be a major priority for the club: returned use of all boat bays and rooms in the boathouse to the boat club. I would propose the construction of a new dedicated lifeguard facility in Montrose, Belmont or Diversey Harbors.

- The club needs to work to plan and fund the redevelopment of the entire Lincoln Park boathouse to include reinforcement of facility, readaptation of lifeguard space, restructuring of boat bays with Focus brand racks, the redevelopment of a sculling/rowing tank in the boathouse, and the reutilization overgrown green space surrounding Lincoln Park Boathouse.
- There should be an introduction of Chicago Park District vendors or concessionaires, like one-time kayak and rowing rentals at the lagoon during underutilized times of the day, including for tourists. The boathouse is underutilized significantly in its current profile. In addition there should be exploration on other proven ways to increase revenue without diminishing the culture of LPBC.

### **Conclusion**

I ask for all LPBC members, both past and current, to write to your friends in rowing and share this open letter with them. Ask for their feedback and thoughts on the situation at the club, then go to the next board meeting motivated to make the changes that are needed. LPBC needs to move on to the next stage of rowing and away from the failures of the past.

The Chicago rowing community needs LPBC to be an example for development and support. LPBC needs to be the voice of history and the leadership into the next century. Right now it is neither. However, with your help, we can right the course and blaze new trails for the benefit of the Chicago rowing community.

Sincerely,

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