

Open Letter from the Ottawa Centre RASC for inclusion in the FAQ – Summary of Questions and Discussion

The process and communication related to the recent fee increase put in place by the RASC National Board of Directors has been the subject of much discussion at the Centre level. We believe it has evolved into a tipping point event regarding financial transparency and the role of National Council in a 21st Century Society. The Centres need more detail on finances and meaningful input in matters related to the services provided to the Centres and their burden on members.

Ottawa Centre had some concerns about the recent National Fee increase when it was originally proposed, albeit less regarding the actual amount and more regarding the lack of meaningful engagement with the National Representatives. These concerns further deepened when a “spreadsheet” of financial information was sent out to explain and justify it. The information provided was completely inadequate and raised as many questions as it answered. The “spreadsheet” sent out was only a table of numbers with no ability to check calculations or look at the background behind the numbers. Several numbers did not add up correctly when looked at closely bringing the rest of the data into question. A million dollar one time donation was left in the 2021 revenue numbers significantly skewing the revenue percentages used for calculations. Initially the percentage increase was downplayed by including the Centres amount, where in fact the National portion of the fee is going up by a whopping 24%. Most of the justification for the increase was primarily related to expense increases, however, only a total expense figure was provided with no further breakdown to permit a proper expense analysis to be undertaken. The straw that broke the camel’s back for us though was the recent communication from the President that basically said “suck it up, we are the RASC Board and we know better than you volunteer Centres”. Such a superior attitude is simply unacceptable.

It is particularly disturbing that this National fee increase is coming after what only can be termed an abysmal year for member services from National Office. The much touted and anticipated Driven database system has so far not delivered. In fact, just the opposite. It has significantly increased the workload at the volunteer Centre level, particularly during the first six months. However, issues still remain with database inaccuracies and there are still problems with features such as merge duplicates. Valued features touted at the beginning of the process have not materialized. These include the ability for Centres to edit their own positions and update the system. Instead we get multiple requests from different people at National to update positions manually throughout the year wasting everyone’s time. Initially the system was set up to channel all donations to National, a situation that took months to correct and took eight months with constant nagging to compensate our Centre for. As we have no faith in the database we continue to maintain our own email and other administrative listings.

There were significant delivery issues with observer’s handbooks, calendars, and other orders. This created huge membership dissatisfaction and in many cases the people contacted were the Centre executives, again putting more workload on the Centres in dealing with these inquiries.

It took us nine months of constant nagging to finally get an invoice for our 2022 calendar order. Not only does this skew our financial reporting but makes us question what other revenue is National missing out on?

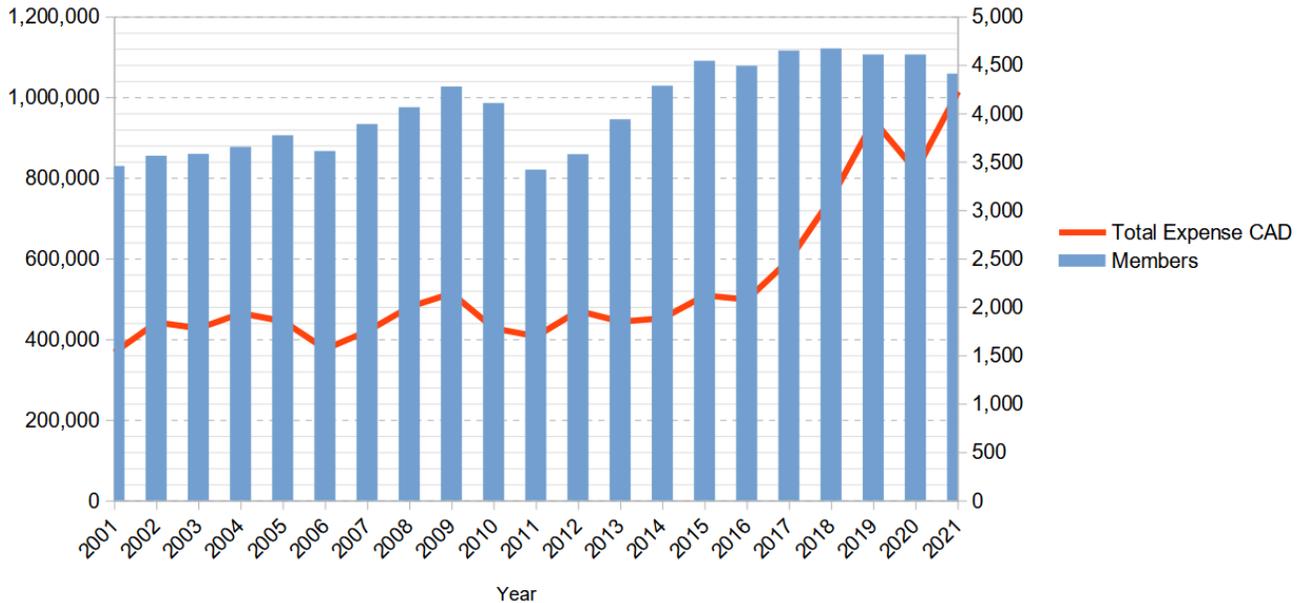
It is all fine and well for National to boast about how well the Society is doing in terms of membership and pat themselves on the back for a job well done, but have you really thought about where that membership is coming from? We suggest that it is actually the Centres that are primarily responsible for the level of RASC membership numbers, not National. What brings in members is the personal touch. Outreach programs, star parties, Centre observatories, loan libraries, and open meetings are what is getting new members to join. Grass roots engagement at the Centre level is bringing in membership, not National big picture programs.

You also have to realize there are options to the RASC, particularly in today's connected world where groups and get togethers are easily organized. Here in Ottawa there are at least two other active non-RASC Astronomical observing groups. Many of their members are actually ex RASC, disenchantment with the Society their primary reason for departure. Among them there is a minimal perceived value of RASC National. They see no value in the remote telescope, have no need for the Observers Handbook with virtually everything now on line, view the Journal as too obscure in many cases and they see National overall as bureaucratic and dictatorial. They do like SkyNews though and appreciate RASC keeping it alive.

National reps were only paid lip service (if not outright dismissed) during this latest fee increase debate. It cannot be called "consultation" at all. Despite there being a written mandate to consult with National Reps on major items it was not conducted in a meaningful fashion. The saddest part being the lack of recognition of the valuable resources they bring to the table. It was apparent that no serious thought was given to cost reduction, only to acquiring more revenue. The major rationale for the increase was increased cost of publication and distribution, yet this expense is not even known as it is hidden in the annual totals of the spreadsheet. It appears no review of the Observers Handbook was even considered, let alone undertaken. Serious thought should be given to moving to an on line option for Observers Handbook for members versus printing and mailing to everyone. Similar to what was done with the Journal perhaps an opt in fee for those who still want a printed copy sent to them. The vast majority of Ottawa members polled find in current times they hardly use it, if at all, versus the internet and question the value it brings.

The following chart illustrates our concern. It shows RASC National expenses versus overall membership over the last 20 years. Up until 2016 expenses were fairly stable, rising generally along with the cost of inflation. However, things changed drastically in 2016 and expenses have increased dramatically. In fact they have more than doubled in the last 5 years, with membership staying somewhat constant. In other words National costs per member has doubled, the bureaucracy is expanding exponentially but the actual service level to Centres is declining. The Board's response to this seems to be to double down and raise fees rather than tackle fundamental problems.

RASC Total Membership all Centres
versus Total Expenditure CAD
2001-2021



There also seems to be a revolving door of people at National Office and we never know who to deal with. We used to have a small but extremely competent and stable staff. Now we have more people but significant churn. Corporate memory is now virtually non-existent and there is no continuity of service. Why? What is wrong?

\$100 plus for a membership may not seem a lot to those on the RASC Board of Directors but we have to think of everyone. We are trying to attract new youths, families, students, those still paying off student debt or trying to buy a home, those who are going to be the future of the society. Many people are struggling with high transportation and food costs. Typically to this demographic a \$100+ membership is a big deal.

We ask that National in compliance with what we believe are legal Society obligations provide complete and detailed financial information to the National Representatives adequate to properly evaluate the necessity for an increase and to provide recommendations on how to potentially mitigate future ones. The information needs to be detailed enough to also determine if what were to be stand alone projects such as Sky News, the robotic telescope, and the telescope museum are in fact independently funded and not being subsidized by member fees.

You have to keep in mind the old adage - perception is reality. The RASC National board of directors has the perception of being an isolated and elitist group out of touch with the general membership, only interested in prestige projects such as the robotic telescope and the telescope museum rather than general membership interests.

In our opinion the system is broken. Centres are the engine of growth and deliver the majority of member services actually used and appreciated and yet have virtually no say at the National level. Service levels

from National to the Centres and their members have actually fallen, particularly during the last year and yet fees go up 24%! Things need to be restructured so that Centre National reps actually have proper input and say in operations or you will face the real possibility of Centres breaking away. We propose that a series of serious discussions take place over the next few months on how to enhance the role of the National Council, and thereby the Centres, vis a vis major Society decisions. The goal being to present concrete proposals at the next RASC Annual General Meeting. We can no longer continue with a structure put in place a century ago.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Nourse". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent horizontal line across the bottom.

Stephen Nourse
President, Ottawa Centre RASC
2022/08/14