

Dear Volkssporting Friends of the Northwest Region,

10-10-2016

Please consider my application to serve as your next Regional Director. Know that I have a natural reluctance to take on such an important responsibility because of family and travel commitments, but I believe it is my duty to step up to fill a need in a program I cherish and will serve to the best of my ability, if elected. As you know, I have served as your Deputy Regional Director for about a year now and have appreciated Nancy Wittenberg's tutoring in the RD position and sharing of workload. In that role, I'm also getting to know more about you and the issues affecting our region. If a more qualified candidate is elected RD and I know there are many great candidates in our region, I would be honored to continue serving as your Deputy RD. My resume is attached for your consideration.

My comments below focus on the areas that I believe need attention, but I want you to know I love our sport and am very optimistic about the future of Volkssporting in America, especially here in the northwest. Louise and I moved here a little over five years ago because of the vibrant Volkssporting community and the great walking opportunities that exist here.

Following are what I believe to be the key challenges we face and why I'm willing to be considered for the Northwest Regional Director position. No surprise that I believe growing membership is our most pressing need and all other issues stem from that need. Here in the northwest we have made some recent progress in adding membership through personal contacts, MeetUp.com promotion, newspaper ads, health fairs, group walks, traditional events, etc. Even so, overall regional membership remains relatively constant, several clubs have recently closed and others are on life support. Nationally, I understand the Volkssporting community is only about 11-12,000 active participants, which either means we have great opportunity to attract 325 million new participants who don't know about us or we have dwindled to a barely sustainable population. I worry it is the second case. Regionally, we need to renew our efforts to get clubs in communities outside our major cities and shore up our struggling clubs. I'm prepared to work with our state organizations and clubs on strategies to make that happen.

Beyond that, I worry about volunteer burnout in our clubs, because I see many of the same faces in leadership positions across clubs and in our state associations. Also, many of those same dedicated people do much of the work in organizing and leading traditional events and group walks. The burnout I see, combined with declining access to popular walking areas and increasing traffic around our major cities have ended great venues, such as the Discovery walks in Vancouver and Gorge events. While we still have some wonderful multi-day events with walks, bikes and swims in the region, we need more large scale events to raise awareness of our program. More importantly, we need to encourage more members to step up to leadership positions to help spread the workload and bring in new ideas to grow in the northwest. And yes, I recognize many of our dedicated volunteers enjoy giving their time and energy and will always be there. But we do need to mentor our replacements so that clubs and programs don't collapse when the key person moves on, as I've seen in other areas.

Next, I believe our program has become somewhat stagnant after 40 years in the US and we need to see some significant changes to remain relevant and appeal to a newer generation. The Strategic Planning effort has taken some steps toward identifying needed changes, so I am anxious to see the results of those efforts and what affect they may have on membership growth. Collaborating with Kaiser Permanente's *Everybody Walk!* movement offers some opportunities to address several of our needs, such as walking promotion and making our communities more walkable, so I hope to see that effort increased too. Along the lines of

collaboration, I see the need for more partners to promote Volkssporting as an alternative for healthier living. We just don't have the reach and resources to do it on our own.

Raising more funds for AVA remains a secondary concern for me. Most of our viable clubs and our state organizations are reasonably well funded, so the greater need for funding is at the national office. While I believe that real growth in our program can only come through a large-scale (and likely costly) effort through the national office, that effort and associated costs have not yet been spelled out. In recent years our national office has operated at a growing deficit, due to declining revenues from fewer walkers and reduction in clubs. Adding special programs has been an effort to involve more walkers as credit walkers, but the effects of that effort have leveled off. At the current rate, our national reserves are still good for maybe 10-12 years before we're out of business. The only way I see this picture changing is if we can dramatically increase the number of clubs and credit walkers.

Past proposals from other regions to eliminate the concept of "free" walking and only offering credit or noncredit status will continue to be pursued as a means to share the national funding burden. As the Northwest RD I would continue to support the will of the regional to keep free walking. Having been a credit walker for nearly 35 years I can easily argue the case for greater sharing of the cost for our national office. However, I would ask the National Executive Council and national office to assess our staffing and cost of operation, relative to other countries, to see if some cost savings can be achieved and look at how other countries deal with free versus noncredit. Beyond that, I'd want to see some better explanation of the need for more revenues and how that will help grow our program before I would ask you to consider the other side of the issue. I don't see an imminent change, but I also don't expect the issue to go away.

I could be gratuitous in this political season and say that "I want to make Volkssporting in America great again!" Our program is great. It's a wonderful concept that can offer fun and healthy activity for so many people, if we can only gain greater visibility. I would be honored to represent you nationally to work at growing our program, while helping to manage our program regionally.

Respectfully,

~ Signed ~
Tom Baltes
Deputy RD
VUSAV President
AWW Treasurer