

Summary of Open Consultations with the Meher Baba Community held on site at the Meher Spiritual Center on December 27 & 30, 2008

Introduction

During December 27th and 30th, 2008, open consultations were held at Meher Center relative to the Strategic Action Plan for future development of the Center. These consultations were particularly focused on proposed action scenarios designed to achieve the goals associated with each of the seven issues determined to be the primary challenges ahead for Meher Center. If you were not present at these consultations, we strongly encourage you to respond to the survey on the Center's website, as that is our primary/direct mechanism in place for feedback: (MeherCenter.org). Your input from the survey will be utilized both by the Board and by those charged with drawing up specific action plans for each issue.

Over 100 people from the nearby community, staff and overnight guests at the Center participated in these consultations. The large group first gathered in the Meeting Place, for a brief overview of the strategic plan as developed up to this point and an introduction to the goal for the day. The group was then divided into small roundtables and dispersed to different locations on the Center. Following the small sessions, each group reassembled in the Meeting Place to report back to the whole group. The following is a summary of the feedback received, grouped under general themes representing the salient points of view expressed during the consultations.

There was no attempt during the consultations to arrive at any consensus. The intent was to allow a wealth of points of view to be presented, whether or not they were agreed on by many or presented as one person's opinion. There were some ideas and themes that were emphasized more than others. Communications, governance, environment, overall atmosphere of the retreat experience, programming, and financial outlook and fundraising, as well as service to others, were given, to varying degrees, special attention by the majority of the participants. The notes presented below are meant to cover the essence of the comments made and not the anecdotal details.

You will note that a wide range of views and priorities were expressed in these roundtables, and, while every idea that was presented will be read and considered carefully by the Board, not every idea can be acted upon. Once the Board has considered the input, developed action plans, and finalized the strategic plan, there will be a clear communication from the Board about the final plan. Once the plan has been circulated, there will be opportunities for the community to remain informed about the progress being made in implementing the plan, as well as opportunities to participate

Communications/Governance

- More focus on action oriented planning.
- Getting youth more involved in running the Center at all levels i.e., Board, staff, volunteers.
- Develop systems to create synergies, spaces for intentionality and dialogue and consensus building.
- Need to enhance mechanisms to incorporate feedback given to the Center stewards. Important to acknowledge that voices are heard. There is not a structure in place for response to input. Form a liaison committee that would be responsible for the flow of communication between the Center and individuals giving input.
- Develop appropriate and effective dialogue processes to incorporate collective wisdom about the future of the Center coming from all those who love the Center.
- Develop systems that identify volunteer skills, allow for conflict resolution in decision- making and establish accountability of the governance process.
- New governance processes based on models that go beyond Carver should be considered in order to move into more dynamic communication and dialogue systems of consultation.
- The energy of the Center governance should be the primordial thing to focus on. Once the proper energy of stewardship is in place, the rest will follow suit because there would be a process for arriving at priorities and decisions that honors the heart of all and allows all to participate in their shaping.
- Parallel systems of consultation and interest groups like youth, nearby community, volunteers, elderly, etc should be considered as tools to enhance the consultative processes.
- The governance of the Center needs to move away from a hierarchical model to a co-creative one. Everybody must feel that they have a relationship to the outcome.
- There is a need to take risks in decision-making.
- There should be a more open process for the selection of Board members.
- Web casts should be used to share with the larger community existing video archival material that is very restricted in its dissemination.
- Diversity is needed in the Board that reflects all types of differences and openness to new ideas.
- Diversity of age on Board, young people need to be involved and brought in more.
- Concern about how Board members are selected. What are the selection criteria/process? Is it equitable?

- Need to look at other models for Board structure.
- Technology/efficiency/infrastructure needs to be updated. There are many ways to bring the Center up to date in terms of technology and efficiency. Email vs. mail. (Save money, time, paper, etc.) Computer systems connected through a network.
- There needs to be a structure in place for implementation of the strategic plan.
- Appreciation for all that the Board has done in this strategic planning; it is all about the relationships, if we get our relationships straight in Baba's love then all else will work out.
- The committee structure needs to transform into being inclusive, with process guidelines that include rotating leadership, group sharing and decision-making and problem solving strategies that solve problems. The current structure has some feeling labeled as difficult and devalued.
- Evaluation, assessment, feedback loops, and comprehensive committee reports where accountability and transparency are ensured.
- The community needs to have a voice. The response from the Board is inadequate with regard to ideas and attempts to talk
- Concern about the administrator structure. The funnel is too small that everything goes through one person. All the stuff cannot filter through one person; this makes the funnel too small.
- We need a systemic structure, one that understands and values interconnectedness. A new infrastructure is critical to the success of the 7 strategic issues we are discussing. Everything needs to be integrated.
- Have an event where the Board states the "state of the center" to everyone in an open forum, every year between Christmas and New Year.
- Regarding feedback, many felt that surveys are not the best way; (one suggested that it's a 20% average response), and encouraged a balance with face-to-face opportunities for ongoing interaction and communication.

Suggestions: A) Have periodic meetings, 2 to 4 times/year B) Who are the stakeholder groups? C) We could have meetings with representatives D) Create meaningful advisory structure E) Have a group more empowered than a committee F) Form special interest groups G) Make a formal system for advising, consultation – instead of a committee with assigned tasks.

Preservation/Environment/Atmosphere

- More personal welcoming to newcomers.
- Declaring the Center a no car zone. With electric cars to transport the people and parking in the gateway area.

- Concern around protection of the environment on the Center: the trees, lake, algae concern, and encroaching grasses. How to protect the land and water from infiltration of surrounding pesticides on golf courses, and landscaping.
- Balancing quietude/retreat with social interaction opportunities.
- Need to enhance welcoming experience and make it more personal maybe by establishing an able and well-trained welcoming committee.
- All activities in the Center should be undertaken “focused on Meher Baba” but meaning “in the spirit of Meher Baba”. This means in the spirit of oneness and love that He taught.
- Staff and volunteers need to be educated on diversity and cultures. Staff needs training to be more welcoming, sensitive.
- Only Christian holidays are celebrated on the Center, not others. Holidays celebrated should be more inclusive of other religions.
- The Center should be using ecologically sustainable products in its daily running. We need to have a totally green center, using waste recycling and clean energy technologies. Consider Yurts/green building practices and pattern language in development.
- The land should be protected so it can produce food.
- The deer are a problem that must be dealt with.
- Use sand instead of coquina on the roads.
- The Center is not a museum. As a place of living experience there should be less emphasis on Meher Baba’s role and more on the inner lives of those at the Center.
- The Center should benefit from environmental, government and foundation grants, for examples, as well as incentives to convert to solar panels and energy. Grants to save the Center lake that is filled with algae and is dying at this point.
- We must respect the primary and historic spaces at the Center and focus development away from those valuable assets.
- Center should make it more open for “non-Baba” lovers to be at ease. Train employees and volunteers to do this more efficiently.
- Making Baba archival treasures available for display. Focus on being more open in this area.
- Focus on protecting the Center – consider all night security person.
- Baba’s House needs to be quiet – we need to have both, consider putting greeters on the porch.

Programming

- Programs need to be more participatory.
- Balance between private retreat experience and social interaction opportunities.
- Programs on Center should include interactive meetings where people can share their hearts rather than just top down sessions where people listen but do not participate.
- More creative artistic programming is needed on the Center.
- We could have at least one-half of the programming devoted to discussion amongst those in attendance. The chairs could be arranged in a circular pattern so folks could have better connectedness.
- There could be programs prepared by unique group, i.e., youth and possibly others.
- We could record the stories of those who have lived and worked at the Center for many years. That would be valuable to future generations. It would explain what happened in the early years (the current times).
- All should have the opportunity to share their personal experiences.
- Do not limit program speakers and sharing of experiences to people who met Meher Baba.
- Offer Arti in the morning and evening, like in India, for those who would like to share in it.

Volunteers/Staff

- Providing better opportunities for youth to become staff at the Center, (higher wages/dormitory facilities).
- Internship opportunities should be advertised/communicated more.
- A volunteer coordinator is needed.
- Recognition/celebration – accountability. You have to have both to have a strong volunteer program.
- Better communication about the opportunities to serve.
- Set up a website or Group (like Yahoo! Groups) to invite people to share what they do/what they can contribute/ their particular area of expertise. For Baba lovers and non-Baba lovers. Also, can interface with other Baba communities and include more young people.
- Focus should be on younger people being trained as workers.
- More organized internships that are advertised in the community openly and organized to support people in the work (through housing, college credit, etc.) Scholarship programs for working on Center, so that individuals or groups could

sponsor Center workers.

- There is a need for a volunteer coordinator who finds ways to include us and identify our talents and groups us so we can connect with each other and the Board knows who could help with action plans and projects.

Suggestions: A) Go all volunteer B) Have housing available C) Have an internship program D) The challenge is to keep the consistency E) There could be an intern position on the Board F) There could be more use made of the internet – there could be a Youth Advisory Board that the Board consults with.

Accommodations

- Have a space for meetings, multipurpose building where groups can meet.
- Consider a multipurpose assembly building, a pavilion-a structure like the pandal (tent) used in India).
- Multipurpose building offering spaces for interactive programs and gatherings of groups.
- Developing a dormitory type building for overflow times.
- Privilege of staying on Center for future guests should be expanded bearing in mind all other considerations of atmosphere. Gator Lake area should be seen as a possible expansion site.
- Need a bigger meeting place.
- New buildings should be designed around handicapped accessibility. The Center is not accessible enough.

Service to Others

- The Center should provide social services.
- Build a community garden to grow vegetables to feed people. People can volunteer and work together in the garden, also. The garden is a great place for people to work together. It also allows us the opportunity for service and to give food to the poor in our community.
- About rendering service to others: What is being done? Is there a Service Committee? What are the needs in the larger Myrtle Beach community? Would like more information and how nearby community can get involved? The Center should connect with the Circle of Friends. Service is such a part of Baba's message; why isn't it included as its own issue?
- Poor people – Can we have a scholarship program? How can we provide some

support? (*This group not being served.*)

Fund Raising/Financial Outlook

- Back-up plan for financial stability.
- Fundraising would be more successful if tied to specific and concrete plans.
- Fundraising is fun when it's project-oriented. It's more personal than big picture/operational fundraising.
- No expansion before stabilizing and maintaining what we have now. No loans, no leveraging, which is essentially what we are doing by risking Center funds in the stock market. Full disclosure of how our endowment is being managed and by whom.

Interface with Broader Community/Dissemination

- Need a building at the front of the property for the public, for meetings/drop ins/etc.
- Making our presence in the community more available. Move outside the box in terms of Baba community presence.
- Access to the Center is limited. Create new opportunities/ways to be on the Center. (New interface building up front).
- Local public relations is being neglected and needs real focus regarding creating value for this place in the MB community needs to be an on-going public relations program. Dispel the myths that exist in town.
- There is no mechanism in place for people to access the Center.
- Make plans to reach out to the local community.
- Dissemination of Baba's message and more interactive programming and facilitation of informal sharing through increased opportunities for involvement and input and making better use of web, library, archival material for Baba-lovers and public.
- Importance of how we present Baba to the public. Must maintain flexibility, spontaneity. Don't constrict or formalize. Every tour of the Center is different. Respond to individual ion the tour.
- More information should be made available to new people, i.e., via web site, publicizing that movies and info is available at the Gateway. Have published listing of ways to gain info while on the Center as well as through the Internet.