

HOW PHILLY WORKS Where PA's Bigwigs Will Gather This Weekend

Thousands of Pennsylvania bigwigs will hang out together this weekend, starting tomorrow. They will talk in quiet corners, in noisy hotel bars and over fancy hors-d'oeuvres about critical issues that matter to everyone who lives and pays taxes in the Keystone State.

And, because the races for PA's governor and Philadelphia's next mayor are well underway, alliances will be formed and frontrunners anointed.

It's that time again. The Pennsylvania Society weekend. It's held every December. In New York City.

This edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** dives into this annual orgy of eating, drinking and, needless to say, politicking by the state's most powerful and influential people. And why a group of young professionals are holding a gala of their own this weekend to talk about Pennsylvania's future. And doing it in Philadelphia.

--December 11, 2013

Orgy?

Not in the sense you're probably thinking – although we learned in researching this that the Pennsylvania Society's constitution says a key reason for the group's existence is to “cultivate social intercourse among its members.” (We didn't make this up.) But there are plenty of opportunities for excessive food and drink (another definition of orgy) and deal-making for people who take full advantage of the festivities: largely business and legal leaders, lobbyists and high-level state, regional and local officials, both appointed and elected.

Seriously – What is the Pennsylvania Society?

The Pennsylvania Society is a 115 year-old, almost-2,000 member, non-profit, non-partisan charitable organization. According to its current President – James E. Nevels, Founder and Chairman of The Swarthmore Group, Philly-based investment and financial advisors – Pennsylvania Society members are “doers and dreamers, believers and skeptics ... who believe in our Commonwealth – in the inspired example of its past and in the limitless potential of its future.”

To ask the obvious: if they believe in the Commonwealth, why is their annual event in N.Y.C.?

It's Manhattan. And it's tradition. The event started in 1899 with a dinner at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel attended by a group of native Pennsylvanians living in New York City. The Waldorf still hosts the signature event of the Pennsylvania Society weekend: a black-tie dinner gala featuring lots of pomp and ceremony plus a speech by the winner of the Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement. This year's award recipient is Vice President Joe Biden (who was born in Scranton). The list of past Gold Medalists is a who's who of famous Americans (www.pasociety.com/history.html).



Let me rephrase this: why is the event still in N.Y.C.?

Even people who go to the Pennsylvania Society weekend are befuddled about why millions of dollars should be spent in New York, rather than at home. One of Philadelphia's top business leaders, Harold Epps – President and CEO of the business solutions' firm PRWT Services, Inc. and former Chair of Mayor Nutter's 2009 Task Force on Tax Policy & Economic Competitiveness – thinks the event should alternate between Pittsburgh and Philly.

Tell me about the young professionals' ball.

It's not exactly being called an "anti-Pennsylvania Society" event, but the press release for the Inaugural Pattison-Leader Ball notes that it is being held on the same night as the Society's big dinner for "Pennsylvania's political elite." The event at Philadelphia's Hyatt at the Bellevue, named after the two youngest governors in Pennsylvania's history, is designed "to provide an outlet for civically-engaged young professionals who represent the rising stars of their chosen fields, to engage in conversation about the state of Pennsylvania policy and politics, network with others...."

Come to think of it: Why spend all that money in New York City?

Perhaps the Philadelphia region's official destination marketing organization – formerly Greater Philadelphia Marketing Tourism Corporation, recently rebranded as Visit Philadelphia – can make a strong case for bringing the event home.

What's happening this weekend?

You can read a schedule of announced events [here](#). Some receptions are largely for networking (e.g., the statewide Genevieve Society champions more public and private sector women leaders). Others present awards (e.g., Children's Hospital of Philadelphia will honor U.S. Congressman Patrick Meehan and Philadelphia City Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell). The exclusive Metropolitan Club seminar, co-sponsored by Pennsylvania Manufacturers' Association and Wells Fargo, features speeches by Pennsylvania's top federal, state and local elected officials. This is the place to go for political rumors and news if you can snag one of the coveted invitations, according to the online political news resource, PoliticsPA (which sponsors a reception of its own).

I see there are plenty of fundraisers scheduled.

Naturally. For elections underway (e.g., 2014 PA governor's race) and down the road (e.g., a reception paid for by "Friends of Darrell L. Clarke" is seeking contributions at the maximum annual level allowed under the city's campaign finance law for the Philadelphia City Council President – who has yet to say whether he's running for reelection or mayor in 2015). Lancaster businessman Tom Wolf, a former Pennsylvania Revenue Secretary now running for governor, says he will donate the cost of the reception (around \$15,000) he might have thrown for himself to three food banks.

Can I get invited to these parties?

For the most part, you can't. Virtually all of the receptions are by non-transferable invitation only (except for guests of invitees).



Who picks up the tab for public officials?

Partially the companies or firms who invite them. And partially the taxpayers.

Seventy has criticized big gifts to city employees lately. Seems to me freebies at these events is a pretty big gift.

The Philadelphia Board of Ethics that was created in 2006 by the city's voters has never issued a formal opinion or given any advice from its General Counsel about how city employees should handle invitations to attend Pennsylvania Society events. But the Ethics Board that predated the current Board addressed it in a 2004 opinion that you can read [here](#). In short, the Board said that under certain conditions city employees could accept invitations to eat and drink at Pennsylvania Society events as "gifts to the city."

"Gifts to the city?"

Here's how the 2004 opinion defined this: "Where the City has designated individuals to attend events [the Pennsylvania Society among them] as part of the City's institutional efforts in trying to influence legislation in Harrisburg as well as policy (e.g., environmental, safety, storm-water) in surrounding jurisdictions."

So, in other words, high level city officials going to NYC are accepting "gifts to the city."

Yes, as long as the invitations are viewed as furthering the city's interests. A directive to senior officials who report to the mayor cautions that invitations to events that are not widely-attended should be turned down. And that people who approach them about city business or financial assistance should be discouraged.

Can companies pay for city employees to travel and stay in Manhattan?

No. For most employees, that comes out of the city's budget. But back in 2008, Michael Nutter's first year as Philadelphia's incumbent mayor, the *Daily News* reported that his campaign would pick up his travel and hotel expenses.

How can I become a member of the Pennsylvania Society?

Here's the [application](#). It's pretty wide open as long as you have past or present ties to Pennsylvania. But you're not a shoe-in. You need two Pennsylvania Society members of at least three years to support your application: one as a sponsor; another as a "seconder." There's a one-time entrance fee of \$200 and annual dues of \$50. Or you can join for life by paying \$1,000.

Final Question: Will Seventy be there?

No paid Seventy employee attends. But many of our volunteer Board members will be there.

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