# **Minutes of UIC SUAA Virtual Annual Assembly**

# **June 29, 2021**

The Zoom waiting room for the Annual Assembly opened at 10:45 a.m. The President called the meeting to order at 11:03 a.m., with 66 participants registered at that time.

1. Welcome. President Michele Thompson welcomed all attendees and explained that the Assembly would have two parts: First, presentations from Linda Brookhart, Executive Director of SUAA, and Matthew Maloney, who has been an advocate for annuitants in Illinois for the past several years. She asked Board Member William Peterman to introduce the speakers.
2. Speaker Introductions.
	1. Mr. Peterman relayed that Linda Brookhart has been the SUAA Executive Director for the last 14 years, following a 16-year career at the Illinois Tax Federation. She provides direction and assistance to the 51 SUAA chapters in Illinois and supervises the staff in the Springfield office. A current and past member of numerous education and retirement committees, she has developed strong relationships with legislators and is often called upon by them for information regarding pensions.
	2. Matthew Maloney has worked on issues of advocacy and regulatory affairs for over 25 years. Previously he worked with the Illinois House and also served as an advocate for several non-profit organizations. He testifies regularly at hearings and has working relationships with government officials at the local, state, and federal levels.
3. Presentations. (Note: The speakers spoke in tandem on the topic of legislation related to Public Pensions and Health Insurance Benefits. Below are some highlights of the presentations which can be viewed in their entirety in the recording on our chapter website.)
	1. Linda began with the reassuring message that - at the moment -pensions and health care are “under the radar” in the legislature. The State’s fiscal situation for 2022 looks better in part because of increased revenues and the influx of federal monies. The Governor has directed the full, required payment into the pension systems. After the Graduated Income Tax Constitutional Amendment failed, the Governor attempted to reduce spending in some areas and close some corporate tax loopholes, and the State has repaid some $2 billion of COVID 19 loans as well as some of the backlog of previously unpaid bills. This resulted in an improved credit rating from Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s.
	2. Higher Education. Some changes have been made:
		1. Adjunct professors must be granted earlier notice about the certainty of the courses they are to offer in a term.
		2. Faculty at all levels shall be eligible for federal family leave.
		3. The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) is developing a plan to increase the graduation rate for minority students.
	3. Ethics: As we know, several legislators were indicted in the past year and, although leaving much to be desired, the Ethics Act that was passed is seen as an important first step. For example, it allows the Legislature’s Inspector General to act on investigations without approval from the Ethics Commission; legislators’ pay will be prorated so, if they vacate their seat before the end of a term, they will be paid only for the time they have worked; there is a new registration system for lobbyists; economic interest disclosures were made more specific; and some restrictions were placed on when fundraisers can take place.
	4. Legislation: Nearly 7,000 bills were introduced in the 2021 session, some bundled together. Significant ones included:
		1. a ½ cent increase in the gas tax; a reduction in the fee to register a utility trailer; naming Juneteenth as a State holiday, and permitting student athletes to sign endorsement contracts.
		2. Fortunately, a proposal to forbid SURS from deducting SUAA dues was defeated. Rules for vote-by-mail, drop boxes, etc. for the November 2022 election were also enacted.
		3. Term limits of 10 years for leaders were adopted in both chambers. There is a LOT of turnover in both houses, and Linda again noted the importance of getting to know legislators. With so many bills introduced each year (7,000, with 573 passed in one week at the end of the session!), it is important that our voice be heard regarding pensions and health insurance benefits.
		4. A veto session is scheduled for the end of October, but the legislature may be called back this summer to address energy legislation.
	5. New Leadership: In addition to electing a new Speaker of the House, the Legislative Black Caucus became quite active and accomplished a lot in a short time, identifying ~~4~~ pillars of focus for future legislation. These are: criminal justice reform, education, economic access and equity, and health care equity. It is anticipated that all future legislation will be viewed through an “equity” lens. Linda also believes the Latinx caucus may become even more active, particularly regarding remap issues.
	6. Although new maps were required to be completed for 7 districts by June 30, Congressional redistricting will be postponed until official U.S. census data can be used. That is why the 2022 primary has been changed to the later date of June 28, 2022.

COVID-19 made it more difficult to be a part of committee hearings and legislative discussions. But both Linda and Matt attended/participated in many hearings and meetings virtually. Also, since SUAA offices are located near the Capital, Linda was able to talk with several legislators despite the restrictions on meetings in person. Both she and Matt know and get along with the new leaders as they had built relationships with them earlier. Linda reminded all of the next SUAA statewide meeting to be held in Normal on November 17.

1. Attendee Q & A Session.
	1. Can you forecast when the next attack on pensions will occur?
		1. Probably not in 2022, but it depends on who is elected.
		2. 1/3 of legislators now are new, and we must continue to reach out. Many of them believe pensions are a “promise” which the State must keep, but we must reinforce that idea.
	2. Are there efforts to improve Tier II pensions?
		1. Yes, but not immediate ones; most likely it will be to lower the 10-year vesting period.
	3. Are other issues impacting SUAA?
		1. Some other interest group is always attacking pensions
		2. Employment in higher education continues to decline
		3. Capital budgets for higher education continue to decline
	4. How real is the concern about a change in the Illinois Constitution?
		1. We do not see it happening soon.
		2. The Governor is not inclined to remove these benefits.
		3. Much legislation would have to be enacted to allow for a Constitutional Convention.
		4. A Constitutional Amendment to cut pensions and/or to enable pensions to be cut is likely to be introduced in the legislature in the next year, but it is not likely to advance for serious consideration.

As time for this portion of the Annual Assembly had expired, President Thompson thanked the speakers and those submitting questions for a lively and informative program. She then called the Business Meeting of the Assembly to order.

UIC SUAA Virtual Annual Business Meeting at Annual Assembly

1. President Thompson called the Annual Business Meeting to order at 12:11 p.m. with over 40 members in attendance.
2. Treasurer’s Annual Report. Larry Kloc was pleased to report that our chapter is in a strong financial position with a treasury of $64,355 that has been accumulated over 50 years. We spend about $11,000 per year on educational and social programs – in person, and now often virtually – as well as co-sponsoring programs like the UIC Retirement Seminars on campus.

In 2020, the SUAA Board recommended, and the delegates to the Fall meeting approved, a dues increase of $6.00, for a new total of $39.00 for the SUAA central office. The UIC SUAA Board in turn wanted to keep its chapter dues as modest as possible. To accomplish this, it decided to reduce expenses for the chapter and to attempt to recruit more members to meet expenses while reducing chapter dues to $8.00 per year. This, added to the $39.00 for the SUAA central office, totaled $47.00 per individual per year. The membership of the chapter approved this retroactively at the 2020 Annual Assembly. This amount allows for maximum participation even as it balances the needs of the central office with local needs to continue creating chapter programs.

1. Legislative Committee Annual Report. William Peterman noted that the presentations that we had just heard were an excellent synopsis of activity in Springfield this year.
	1. He agreed that increased tax revenue and federal funding helped our fiscal position and reduced the calls for pension reform, although we do hear repeated calls for change, especially from the *Chicago Tribune*.
	2. He thought that it would be useful to give members a sense of his activities during the year. Primarily, his job is to follow the legislation being introduced as well as policy initiatives of other organizations like the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability.
	3. He also serves as co-chair of the SUAA Legislative Platform Committee, which produces a document that is submitted to the SUAA House of Delegates at its Fall meeting. The draft is on our chapter website and the main SUAA site. In this position, he does participate in SUAA Executive Board meetings but does not have a vote. However, it gives him an opportunity to share our chapter views with that Board.
2. Report of the Nominating Committee. Chair Brenda Russell began with a tribute to current President Michele Thompson who has contributed in countless ways to the advancement of our chapter during the past most difficult years.
	1. Next, she submitted to the chapter members the slate prepared by the Committee, which included members Arlene Norsym and John Palmatier. For President, Christopher Keys; Second Vice President, William Peterman; Treasurer, Lawrence Kloc; and Member at Large, Ashish Sen. She noted that there is a succession plan in place for the position of First Vice President should Christopher Keys be elected.
	2. Webmaster Merrill Gassman posted an online voting slate, with immediate results indicating 27 voting yes and 0 voting no. Mailed-in ballots that are postmarked by July 7, 2021, will be added to this result, and the final vote will be posted on the chapter’s website. An e-mail with this information will also be sent to the membership.
3. President’s Annual Report. Michele Thompson expressed her heartfelt thanks to Merrill Gassman and Linda Brookhart who provided substantial assistance to all of us that allowed our meetings and Annual Assemblies in 2020 and 2021, as well as the February 2021 webinar, to be presented virtually. She reported on the excellent attendance some of our programs had from across the State and is hoping that the new year will allow for some in-person gatherings again.
	1. In her last report as President, she was pleased to report a net gain of 36 members, bringing our current membership total to 1477. She attributed the increase to the January letter which SUAA sent to all employees, to our February webinar, which was attended by over 1,000 individuals, and to individual outreach efforts of our Board.
	2. She expressed thanks to all Board members who have been faithful participants at meetings and to our Treasurer Larry Kloc and Legislative Chair William Peterman for their invaluable service in their vital roles.
	3. She welcomed John Prochaska as our parliamentarian and two new Board Members, Anne Burkhart and Cynthia Herrera-Lindstrom, who are already regularly active on committees. She also congratulated Elliot Dudnik who was elected Chair of the SUAA Foundation.
	4. The Chapter Board will meet 10 times in the coming year – 5 virtually and 5 in-person, with Zoom participation as an option. The schedule will be posted on our website, and all are welcome to attend. Early discussions indicate that we will continue to offer webinars and programs, many in a virtual format to allow participation from members around the world.
	5. In closing, she noted that, while being pleased with the news about State funding for this year, we must all be vigilant and explain to our fellow citizens how we have paid during employment for our pensions and retiree health insurance, and we must ensure that the State fulfills its promise. It is also important that we make efforts to connect with and inform legislators (especially newly elected ones) of the same.
	6. And finally, she expressed her sincere gratitude to Past President Brenda Russell and each of the other Board members by name.
4. Question & Answers from Participants.
	1. Chris Keys requested a moment for a brief comment as the presumptive new President. He relayed that he felt extremely fortunate to be coming into this position following a long line of excellent leaders of our Chapter, including Merrill Gassman, Richard Johnson, Brenda Russell, and Michele Thompson. He gave special notice to Michele’s successful tenure and noted that she was a “board builder”, remarkably thoughtful with great attention to detail. The amount of work she has done behind the scenes as well as in our public gatherings has left him well prepared for his new role in a fiscally sound and healthy chapter which he is excited to be a part of.
	2. These comments were echoed by the Board, and Michele expressed her gratitude for these generous comments while noting once again the contributions of all board members who share their time to serve all of us and ensure benefits will remain for those who follow us.
	3. Merrill Gassman again expressed his thanks to Executive Director, Linda Brookhart and her staff for all of their help on this virtual meeting.

Hearing no other questions from attendees, M. Thompson adjourned the meeting at 12:42 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Arlene Norsym, Secretary