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Why couldn't room and board be enough?

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Maybe you can overlook the high-priced rooms and the free transportation.

Maybe if you were on the board at the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency you would have signed up for their **retreats**, too. After all, you would have been entitled. Who wouldn't want to go to Napa Valley or stay at The Greenbrier, a National Historic Landmark in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.? Especially if it was all paid in full.

What irks me is the incidentals.

Couldn't these folks just be grateful for the free room and board? Did they have to jam their hands into the bottom of our pockets and pluck out the last penny?

Yesterday, **PHEAA** released hundreds of pages of records detailing expenses from its board **retreats** to posh resorts.

The folks at **PHEAA** didn't do this to be nice. They were pushed into it by Patriot-News reporter Jan Murphy, who has been after the records for 19 months, and this newspaper, which was willing to back -- and pay for -- her fight.

Jan wanted to know just how 70 people -- board members, agency staff, their spouses and guests -- managed to spend \$135,637.74 in a couple of days in June 2005 at Nemaocolin Woodlands in Fayette County.

Now we know.

We also know where the money went at The Homestead and Colonial Williamsburg Inn in Virginia, The Greenbrier in West Virginia, Meadowood in California, Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, and Hotel duPont in Delaware. Nearly \$900,000 in all.

It isn't pretty.

Here's a happy note, though: **PHEAA** says it's not going to happen anymore.

The board **retreats** are history, it says.

But as someone famous once said, those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it.

Trust me, no one wants a repeat of this extravagance.

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So take a look at some of this small stuff that bugs me.

If you or I were whisked away to Napa Valley, Calif., all expenses paid, don't you think we'd remember to pack a camera?

Former state Rep. Elinor Taylor, R-Chester, for whom the **PHEAA** building is named, apparently left hers at home. So she charged the disposable camera offered through the mini-bar service in her room. It cost \$19, plus \$1.43 tax.

And she wasn't the only one. At least two others at the conference pocketed an overpriced camera.

This irks me because I know I can buy a 27-exposure Kodak for \$5.99 at CVS.

But then, maybe Taylor really did need it to capture the view.

Somebody -- I don't know who -- charged \$3,900 on a **PHEAA** American Express card for an early morning adventure with Napa Valley Aloft, a company that takes people on hot-air balloon rides.

Shippensburg University and its 13 sisters across the state charge \$210 a credit for undergraduate courses this semester. So the hot air up in the balloon that morning could have bought one student a full load, with spare bucks for books.

And what about the somebody who burned up \$150?

Did you know a **cigar** -- one **cigar** -- could cost that much?

I did some comparison shopping. The most expensive sampler pack on BestCigarPrices.com gives you five of the nasty things for \$92.50.

But one evening in The Restaurant at Meadowood, somebody picked up the tab for one Bud Light bottle (\$4), one Hennessy XO (\$25), one B&B, (\$10), and one miscellaneous **cigar** (\$150.) With tax, the bill totaled \$202.43. Michael, the waiter, hauled in a \$37.80 tip.

I'll assume he emptied the ashtray, too.

The list just goes on and on.

For the 2004 conference at The Homestead, **PHEAA** paid \$2,680 to ferry people in a van from the airport to the resort. The resort is 90 minutes from the airport, five hours from Harrisburg.

Did these people really need to fly?

But that's not all: three hours by a jazz trio, \$1,400; \$450 to a pianist.

Then, one of my personal favorites, \$86.25 for falconry.

PHEAA paid for people to hunt game with falcons.

Geez, why didn't they just sponsor a pigeon shoot?

Of course, all that hunting and golfing and ballooning and whatnot can leave a guy or gal feeling mighty wrung out.

But not to worry.

Our **PHEAA** guests found plenty of ways to relax and recharge.

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At the Homestead alone, they dropped more than \$5,500 on spa treatments, including a Swedish massage for \$110, a luxury facial for \$140 or the popular mineral clay wrap for \$95.

No sign of anyone getting Shirodhara there, although someone did take advantage of that in California.

It figures.

If, like me, you said, "Huh?" here's what I now know about Shirodhara: Somebody pours warm oil on your head to disperse negative electrical impulses that accumulate in your forehead from stress. The treatment rejuvenates your face and renews the sweetness of life.

All for just \$160 a pop, plus a \$32 tip to the oil pourer.

Yes, for those **PHEAA** board members, life sure has been sweet.

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INFOBOX:

THE STORY SO FAR

The Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency has drawn scrutiny from Gov. Ed Rendell over its spending.

Patriot-News staff writer Jan Murphy reported that **PHEAA** has spent nearly \$900,000 since 2000 on board **retreats** at places such as the Nemaquin Woodlands Resort in Fayette County and Napa Valley, Calif. The Patriot-News asked **PHEAA** to provide detailed receipts for those **retreats**.

PHEAA refused and sued The Patriot-News and two other news organizations in Commonwealth Court, arguing that those documents were not public records.

In November, Commonwealth Court ordered **PHEAA** to release the records. **PHEAA** unsuccessfully appealed to the state Supreme Court.

Two weeks ago, **PHEAA** released records of travel and entertainment expenses incurred mostly by staff members.

Yesterday, **PHEAA** released detailed receipts for those board **retreats**.

NOTES: THERE IS AN INFOBOX AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STORY.

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