

# National Arts Club Board Faces Tough Questions at Annual Meeting

May 3, 2011

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**The National Arts Club at 15 Gramercy Park South (DNAinfo/Amy Zimmer)**

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MANHATTAN — The annual membership meeting of the National Arts Club, to be held Tuesday night, is expected to be a crowded and contentious affair.

The closed-door forum is the first time members will have a chance to confront the venerable institution's board since its long term president O. Aldon James — who hoarded junk in several club apartments and is currently being investigated by the state's Attorney General and Manhattan District Attorney's office for alleged fiscal misdeeds — was given a "vacation."

"This meeting will be an opportunity to learn about your club's full cooperation with the investigations that have been reported in the media, the substantial progress that has been made toward cleaning up our house and affairs and our very bright institutional future," an email from the club told members.

Some members are hopeful about the board's promises of ushering in a new era of transparency. Others have questions and want further change at the club, where membership, financial data and information about its roughly 40 apartments have long been kept secret.

"I wouldn't miss this meeting," said former board member and current member Guy Frazier. "It might be a little raucous."

He is optimistic that acting president Dianne Bernhard will follow through on promises to open "a new era of transparency between the board and members," he said.

"Everybody has valid questions: What's going to happen with the club? What's happening with the apartments? The board has no choice but to stand in front of them and answer all questions," he said.

Some members are skeptical that much will change since the organization's constitution remains the same and board members — seven of whom will be voted in on Tuesday — are still elected by a nominating committee rather than directly by membership.

"The board is still isolated from the members," said one member, who asked to remain anonymous. "They make no effort to find out from the members what changes they think should be affected."

The club's newsletters, for instance, include pictures of celebs who win the club medals — the May edition features playwright Edward Albee, who will receive a Medal of Honor— rather than information about the current controversy, the member complained.

Steve Miller, a museum director who left the club more than seven years ago over frustration of how it was being run, had written a letter to the club's board members 10 years ago — when the club's finances were being investigated — about his concerns and said many of the questions he asked then are still valid today.

"I would want an independent, dispassionate audit of the last 10 years," he said. "I would want to know, what are you going to do to include members, keep members informed and make sure this doesn't happen again?"

He also said he would have questions about the structural conditions of the club's highly coveted piece of real estate at 15 Gramercy Park South and about the apartments.

"What are people paying for rent, or if they bought apartments, how much did they pay? And most importantly, how is tenancy determined? Who made that decision in the past and how will it be made in the future?"

Miller said he could understand some members' skepticism.

"If the new board was truly interested in making changes, that would be well received, but it is not a new board," he said. "Naturally, the feeling is, why all of a sudden are these people professing to be concerned about the appropriate functioning of the club?"

The board, which is busy cleaning out apartments, declined to comment about the upcoming meeting because of the ongoing investigations.

Some board members had in recent years expressed concerns about the way things were being run at the club. Many were afraid to speak out because of James' stronghold.