

New projects and initiatives for 2009

Several important institutions promoting Hellenism have announced openings or ground breakings for 2009.

Here is a list of some big planned projects for the diaspora this year:

Sofia, Bulgaria - The Hellenic Foundation for Culture recently opened a large branch of its network in Sofia, Bulgaria. The year the centre plans to extensively expand its language programs, exhibitions and activities for the Greek community of

Bulgaria and those interested in Greek culture.

Toronto, Canada - The Greek community of Toronto is continuing with the construction of its large cultural center in the heart of the Greek community. Construction is ongoing of the large building and the project recently received a 10,000 dollar donation from the Royal Bank of Canada.

Manitoba, Canada - The Manitoba Hellenic Cultural Center will have hopefully reached its 1.5 million dollar fund raising goal to continue the

expansion of its current facilities which help house a Greek school, a library, and a Hellenic cultural display area.

New York, USA - The Onassis Foundation will run until May 2009 its new exhibition titled "Worshipping Women: Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens." The exhibition brings together 155 rare and extraordinary archaeological objects in order to re-examine preconceptions about the exclusion of women from public life in ancient Athens.

New economy minister faces some crucial fiscal decisions

The new conservative Cabinet will have its last chance to put Greece on the path to sustainable growth if it chooses to put the good of the country before its own political interests by opting for a comprehensive set of binding economic measures. Unfortunately, the history of Greek administrations does not favor such an outcome.



2009 borrowing needs. The country should be able to borrow 2 billion euros or more when it taps the international markets for three-, six- and 12-month T-bills tomorrow, but it is not certain that it can manage to do the same for bigger sums in medium- and long-term bonds later. Papathanassiou, who is liked by many in the market because of his business background and pro-market philosophy, cannot do much for the government's slim parliamentary majority and the riots hurting the ruling party's standing in the polls.

He is in a good position though to convince Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis and Public Works Minister Giorgos Souflis, who appears to have a significant role in the formation of economic

policy, to take a set of unpopular short-term and long-term economic measures to convince the markets and international credit rating agencies of the country's willingness and ability to put its public finances in order. Already, Standard & Poor's has sent a warning signal by putting Greece's debt on negative credit watch as of last Friday, noting the credit watch will be likely resolved this month after receiving new information from the Greek government on how it plans to deal with the adverse implications of a sharply slowing economy on this year's public finances.

Of course, the need for a set of painful economic measures contrasts with the statement Papathanassiou made during his acceptance speech at the Finance Ministry, namely that economic policy cannot put new burdens on the little guy, such as small and medium firms.

It is understood that the new finance minister will want to safeguard employment as much as possible for economic and political reasons. After all, employment affects consumption spending, which comprises more than 80 percent of Greek GDP and therefore directly affects economic growth and public finances. At the same time, much lower employment will also hurt the government's political chances for re-election.



Big Brother housemate trapped in flood-hit Fiji

A former Big Brother housemate is among hundreds of Australian tourists trapped in flood-ravaged Fiji. Angela Aiken-Murphy, who was the first contestant evicted from the 2005 season of the reality television show, described the damage from the deadly storms as "phenomenal".

"Homes are covered in water, cars have been obliterated, shops destroyed — the conditions are hellish," Mrs Aiken-Murphy told ninemsn. "I asked a local man if he thought the floods were going to get worse and he said, 'we just need to leave, we just need to leave our belongings behind and take our lives with us'. "It's heartbreaking."

The 33-year-old arrived in Fiji last November with her husband Braden and mum Eva to renew her wedding vows on New Year's Day as part of one-year anniversary celebrations. "But the rain is forcing us going to do it back in St Kilda [where we met]," she said. At least seven people have been killed and over 9000 left homeless after four days of torrential rain pummelled the island, sparking the worst flooding in a decade. The death toll is expected to climb as rescuers reach more isolated areas in the next few days.

The country has declared a state of emergency, leaving tourists scrambling to reach the airport in Nadi. But many holidaymakers have been unable to leave their resorts because of the floodwaters.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said up to 1000 Australians were registered as holidaying in Fiji although it was still unknown how many were affected by the storms. Mrs Aiken-Murphy, who is staying with locals at Sigatoka in the country's west, said efforts to get to the airport may prove fruitless as flights out of the country are completely booked.

Teen sends 14,500 texts in a month

A Californian father was left speechless when he discovered his teenage daughter had sent an astonishing 14,528 text messages in one month.

Greg Hardesty thought there was a mistake with his 13-year-old daughter Reina's online phone bill when it stretched for 440 pages.

"First, I laughed: I thought, 'That's insane, that's impossible'," the New York Post reported the 45-year-old father as saying.

"And I immediately whipped out the calculator to see if it was humanly possible."

Reina's freakish month of texting equates to over 480 messages sent a day — or around one every two minutes for every waking hour.

Thankfully for Mr Hardesty's hip pocket, he had signed his daughter to an unlimited texting plan for \$30 [A\$42] a month — otherwise he figures AT&T would have slugged him with a \$2,905.60 [A\$4,113.13] bill.

"A lot of my friends have unlimited texting — I just text them pretty much all the time," Reina explained to her parents.

She said her texting had skyrocketed because she was bored on winter break and admitted to sending a bunch of messages to brag about her enormous effort.

The student has since been banned from sending SMS after dinner.

It is a common ritual: Most Greek politicians and political parties fail to live up to the people's expectations after coming to power. To some extent, they have only themselves to blame. After all, they are the ones who help mold the public's expectations, usually by promising tax breaks, higher pensions and larger salaries to civil servants before the general elections in hope of garnering their votes.

The question of who is going to pay the bill for the promised tax cuts and increased budget spending comes later and the answer is usually the same: fight tax evasion, do away with public sector waste and speed up economic growth.

Of course, everything changes when politicians come to power and face economic reality. Many of their initial promises are forgotten or delayed until later and their main effort is to blame their predecessors for their inability to fulfill them.

The socialist PASOK party played this card in the fall of 1993 when it succeeded the conservatives and the latter did the same when it came to power in March 2004.

However, the new conservative government cannot play the same card this time around. The new finance minister, Yiannis Papathanassiou, succeeds a conservative colleague and friend of his, Giorgos Alogoskoufis, and has to deal with an overshooting of the 2008 budget deficit to around 3.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

This fiscal overshooting threatens to put Greece under the EU's excessive budget deficit procedure for a second time since 2005 and, even worse, stifle its efforts to borrow the necessary funds on international markets to finance its