

Communications Committee Meeting Minutes

May 30, 2023

7:00pm via Zoom

In attendance: David Cantor, Brian Fleischer, Eric Scherzer (portion), Phaedra Ruddock-Dunn (portion), Allison Silverstein

1. Update on Website redesign

Mr. Cantor shared that there has not been much conversation on the procurement of a website vendor since our last Committee meeting, but his understanding is that Dr. Ponds remains committed to procuring a vendor and redesigning the website. Ms. Hunt would still run it as a competitive procurement using an RFP process, but that it wouldn't happen until after June 30, which means that any website re-design would not be ready for September school opening. I could be ready to be phased in over winter break. Mr. Scherzer asked again about the anticipated cost delta versus the current vendor, and Mr. Cantor estimated that the annual cost with his preferred vendor would be \$3,000-\$5,000 more per year, but noted that there would also be a start-up cost of approximately \$14,000 in Year 1.

2. Communications on budget, staffing and schedules

Mr. Cantor shared that the designated email account created for inquiries related to the budget has received dozens of separate emails, far more than were ever received by the email account created for inquiries related to the bond referendum. Mr. Cantor is personally responding to every email sent to that account, even if he is not able to provide answers to all of their questions at this time. The most prevalent area of inquiry has been the MHS schedule, credits and common lunch. The second most prevalent has been Glenfield math instruction. The third has been Renaissance core instruction. The fourth has been the sharing of a drama teacher between Hillside and Nishuane. The fifth topic – small in number of emails but including some of the most passionate and deeply informed community members - has been the district's decision not to use the "banked cap" / "health benefits exemption" to increase the tax levy beyond 2%. A sixth topic of inquiry has been the perceived dearth of effective communications about the details of the budget and its impacts.

Mr. Cantor noted that he has drafted an FAQ document that he hopes to post to the website tomorrow. He also expressed that he knows that Dr. Ponds is committed to continuing to work with MHS and Glenfield.

The Committee shared their thoughts on areas where the communications around the budget have been more or less effective. Mr. Cantor agreed that it would have been helpful to have been able to strategize and anticipate our stakeholders' key questions and to have answers at the ready prior to the Budget Adoption meeting. Ms. Silverstein noted that we attempted to communicate proactively through her OpEd, but it wasn't clear how widely read it was or whether it was already forgotten by the time of the Budget Adoption meeting (as it seemed many stakeholders at the meeting were unaware of the district's drop in enrollment or the impact of the 2% cap, despite that they were highlighted in the OpEd. Mr. Cantor felt the OpEd was one of the most effective communications we made around the budget.

Mr. Scherzer expressed his belief that the communications issues were bigger than just what was or wasn't shared with the public, saying that he felt the Board as a whole did not receive enough effective information and communications about the budget decisions and their basis. For example, he felt that there was insufficient information for Board members on the MHS schedule impacts, the contracted paraprofessionals, and the possibility of leveraging the health benefits adjustment. Ms. Silverstein noted that the MHS schedule had been a topic of discussion all year in connection with discussions about instructional time and costs/grievances related to the MHS schedule.

Ms. Silverstein shared that she had a conversation earlier in the day with Dr. Ponds and Ms. Hunt about possibly holding a "Town Hall" format event to address open questions and concerns about the budget. The Committee discussed the possibility of having the event moderated by a parent/communicator who works in television, but Ms. Dunn expressed her feeling that we should use such an event to leverage and highlight Mr. Cantor's communications role and proficiency. We discussed that a Town Hall shouldn't put the onus entirely on Dr. Ponds to explain/answer everything, but could include Ms. Hunt, representatives from the ECI Department, building principals, and some Board members. But Board members shouldn't be primary speakers, because it is important to clarify the distinction between the Administration's role and the Board's role in making these recommendations and making sure they will work for kids. We discussed requiring stakeholders to submit their questions in advance via email (or potentially leaving the email open during the event to take additional questions) rather than opening the "mic" or the "chat" to the public, which could result in some critical information being drowned out. Mr. Cantor spoke about targeting later in the week of June 5 for the Town Hall.

Finally, the Committee discussed the outreach from Mayor Spiller, including questions from the Township's Financial Advisor, Mr. Benecke, and questions from the NJEA. The Committee felt that it was important to "take the meeting" that was being offered, but agreed that it would be best to answer the questions in writing first.

Mr. Cantor said he would discuss the communications strategy with Dr. Ponds in the morning and reach back out to the Committee members about how they can help/support.

