

## Communications Committee Minutes

September 26, 2023

7:45pm via Zoom

In attendance: Dr. Jonathan Ponds, Christina Hunt, Allison Silverstein, Brian Fleischer, Phaedra Dunn, Eric Scherzer

### 1. Update on website contract/procurement

Ms. Hunt shared that with Mr. Cantor on leave, Mr. Graber will take the lead on the district website initiative. Because the initial cost estimates provided by Mr. Cantor were over the bid threshold, Mr. Graber will need to prepare specifications to support a procurement. He will also need to provide an implementation plan that includes any period where we will need to sustain the incumbent website while a new website is being developed.

### 2. Communications roles and responsibilities while Mr. Cantor is on leave

Ms. Fusco, working closely with Ms. DeRosa and Dr. Ponds, will be the point person for district communications for the duration of Mr. Cantor's leave. Mr. Cantor's out-of-office email message is set up to direct people to Ms. Fusco. Press contacts were informed to communicate via Ms. Fusco, with Ms. DeRosa as backup. Dr. Ponds shared that he is working with Ms. Fusco and Ms. DeRosa to develop weekly messages to send out to district families. Dr. Ponds is in the process of assigning responsibility for the various meetings and community group commitments that had been on Mr. Cantor's plate.

The committee then discussed email response expectations. Dr. Ponds shared that they are trying to get quicker on email turnarounds. Ms. Fusco should be responding to all emails that previously would have been responded to by Mr. Cantor. With specific respect to emails from families regarding intersections and/or bus stops reported to be "dangerous", Dr. Ponds noted that he's meeting with MPD to discuss the possibility of adding/increasing crossing guards. Ms. Hunt noted that the Transportation Office team is in the process of going out to inspect reported bus stops.

### 3. Bond referendum communications and baseball field

Dr. Ponds shared that it is his goal to provide more public communication about the bond referendum project status at BOE meetings, with a significant presentation planned for the November 1 meeting. To date, the communications strategy has leaned heavily on communications with the Community Advisory Committee, who provided significant feedback on the initial draft schedule for all referendum projects, which feedback resulted in material adjustments to the schedule that is now available to the public on the district website.

With specific respect to the baseball field, the committee discussed the concerns that have been raised by community members about loss of trees and about artificial turf. The initially scheduled meeting with Woodman Field neighbors had to be canceled for a reason outside of the district's control, but is now set for Monday, October 2. The architect, Mr. Ross, will share renderings and explain that all design/orientation possibilities were explored and all possibilities that "correct" the current safety issues with the field, e.g., the intersection of the current outfield with the running track, would require the

removal of trees. The district will share its commitment to plant more trees to best mitigate the loss of existing trees from an environmental and aesthetic perspective, and the design has already seen some adjustments, e.g., bringing in the outfield fence, to facilitate more plantings of both shade trees and arborvitae. Coaches, players and parents are also expected to share their perspectives on the safety and field quality concerns with the current field and the needs for the new field.

Committee members and the administration discussed whether it is fair or accurate for critics to allege that the district has tried to “hide” the plans for the field. The field renovation was clearly included in pre-referendum communications and materials on the public website, and the need to change the orientation of the field to address safety concerns was discussed by the architect at multiple public BOE meetings. Members shared their different perspectives on the effectiveness, adequacy and timing of communications with respect to the baseball field and offered recommendations. There was discussion among committee members about whether and when the district should or could share detailed designs-in-progress with the public or concerned stakeholders, both retrospectively in thinking about communications on the baseball field and prospectively about other upcoming projects.

Following the October 2 meeting with neighbors and advocates about the baseball field, there may be further design adjustments. Dr. Ponds is committed to doing everything possible to obtain the best result, while remaining strongly committed to addressing the safety and adequacy concerns on behalf of the student athletes (baseball and track). And then the architect and the construction manager to share additional information on the baseball field at the public BOE meeting on October 4 to help address questions and concerns from members of the public who did not attend the October 2 meeting.

Finally, the Committee emphasized the importance of obtaining the arborist’s report evaluating the health and safety of the trees in question. Dr. Ponds reiterated his commitment to obtaining that report as soon as possible from a licensed arborist.

#### 4. Strategic Plan Development Process

The Strategic Plan Development process will be spearheaded for the district administration by Dr. Ponds with Ms. DeRosa and Ms. Fusco. Material support will be provided by the New Jersey School Boards Association. Board oversight, guidance and support will be provided via the Communications Committee. Administration would like to identify a thoughtful and diverse group of community members to provide initial thoughts on the Strategic Plan to help the district think through how to best engage the broader community. The intent is to leverage both Zoom meetings and surveys to maximize community participation in the Strategic Plan development process. The Committee discussed the need for an aggressive timeline to hopefully result in the development of the Strategic Plan by the end of this calendar year. The Communications Committee will need to schedule a special meeting the week of October 9 so we can stay on schedule. Ms. DeRosa will work with Mr. Fleischer to set the date and time.

The Committee discussed the roles and responsibilities of the administration, the BOE and the larger community with respect to Strategic Plan development. The BOE, with material community input, is responsible for the “why” and to some extent for the “what” at a high level, whereas the administration, again with material community input, is responsible for “what” at a more granular level and for “how”.

The Committee discussed the importance, from the BOE perspective, for the development of effective metrics and reporting against metrics for a Strategic Plan to be successful. We also discussed the

possibility of dividing the community input sessions and aspects of the plan into “buckets” along the lines of the BOE’s committee governance structure (e.g., curriculum and instruction, special education, finance, climate and culture, facilities/transportation/food service) to ensure that enough attention is paid to all critical areas for the Plan.

#### 5. Chain of Command

Dr. Ponds indicated that he has discussed with Ms. DeRosa issuing a press release to remind families of the “chain of command” for families/constituents to raise and/or escalate concerns, leveraging the “Question/Complaint Procedure” information and graphic on the website under Parents->Navigating the School System. Ms. Dunn wanted to take another look at the “Question/Complaint Procedure” language and graphic versus the South Orange Maplewood School District’s “Chain of Command” language and graphic to provide recommendations on any changes/revisions before the district issues the press release with the existing language and graphic.

The meeting concluded at approximately 9:00pm.