

**COLONIAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
PLYMOUTH MEETING, PA**

Finance and Audit Committee Chairperson, Hope Luken called to order a meeting of the Finance and Audit Committee at 7:06 P.M. on Tuesday, May 4, 2010 in the District Office General Meeting Room located in Colonial Elementary School, 230 Flourtown Road, Plymouth Meeting, PA.

Finance Committee Members Present: Kathleen Oxberry, Tom Sigafos and Mitch Zimmer

Other Board Members Present: Gary Johnson, Susan Moore, Bernie Brady, Beth Suchsland and Alan Tabachnick

Administrators Present: Dr. Vincent F. Cotter, Superintendent; Dr. MaryEllen Gorodetzer, Assistant Superintendent; Joseph P. Bickleman, Chief Financial Officer/Treasurer; Richard Hartz, Director of Human Resources; Karen Berk, Director of Pupil Services and Special Education; Andrew Boegly, Chief Information Officer; Dr. Elizabeth McKeane, Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; Maria Bellino, Science Curriculum Supervisor; David M. Sherman, Community Relations Coordinator/Board Secretary; John Quinn, Director of CITV.

Community Members/Public Present: Christy Sfida, Monica Williams, Larry Delaney, Dr. Julia Plummer, Stephen Berr, Bart Fried, Jessica DiRenzo, Tom Davis, Mary Jo Katona, Mike Katona, Jordyn Dunacusk, Robin O'Brien, Ann Haasis, Emily Jolley, Elena Horn, Alan Fiermonte, Yale Joseph, Kathy Scott, Becky Krumm, Christy, Werkel, Jen O'Brien, Jenna Werkel, Frankie O'Brien, Caroline Slagle, Carol Cohen, Linde Geisler, Michelle Myers, Erin Savarese Cynthia Slagle, Corey Stricklin, Diane Squires, Scott Eisner, Annika Eisner, Aeryn Eisner, Carolyn Eisner, Lauren Stern, Teddy Slagle, Elizabeth Searle, Dave Pontari, Madelyn Pontari, Louie Wein, Dawn Brown, Kapil dev Singh.

Mrs. Luken welcomed everyone and stated that, because of the challenging financial situation facing the Board this year, the meeting was being televised in order to give more community members an opportunity to understand the tough choices facing the School Board. She stated that following a budget presentation from Mr. Bickleman, community members would be invited to speak. She asked that in consideration of everyone's time that comments be kept to three minutes. Mrs. Luken asked those who wished to comment to sign up in advance with Mr. Sherman.

Mr. Bickleman began his PowerPoint presentation entitled "Finance Committee Budget Report: Challenging Times Ahead. [See Attachment A.](#)

Mr. Bickleman touched on the decline in revenues facing the District beginning with a reduction in the tax assessment base as companies and business owners appeal the assessed value of their properties. He confirmed for Mrs. Luken that challenges to property assessments are handled through the legal system. He also corroborated Mrs. Moore's assertion that the District has actually had to refund taxes to some companies. Responding to a question from Mrs. Luken, Mr. Bickleman stated that there are 60-70 tax assessment appeals active at present.

Mr. Bickleman also highlighted reductions in transfer tax income, interest earnings and state and federal revenue. He noted the influx of \$1.4 million of federal stimulus funds this year and stated that half of that is covering current expenses and half is funding new items. Responding to a question from Mrs. Suchsland, Mr. Bickleman explained that the new Transition Coordinator position at the high school is being paid with stimulus money as are expenses for students who were newly identified as being autistic. He confirmed for Mrs. Moore that the District will need to fund the transition position in the future after the stimulus money is gone. Mrs. Berk confirmed that the transition component is a large part of IEPs for students aged 14 and older. She added that the state has placed greater emphasis and mandates on transitioning special education students into the workforce.

Mr. Bickleman confirmed for Mrs. Luken that the District is receiving a reduction in state and federal revenue. He confirmed for Mr. Johnson that this is the first time in his more than 25-year tenure that all District revenue streams are decreasing.

While addressing an increase in state mandated special education costs, Mr. Bickleman corroborated Mrs. Suchsland's assessment that the state only reimburses the District about 20 cents for each dollar spent on special education.

Mrs. Moore stated that the District is mandated to provide transportation and asked Mr. Yemm to detail the service the District provides. Mr. Yemm explained that Colonial buses approximately 6,500 public and non-public students each day to more than 120 schools within a 10-mile radius of the District's borders. He confirmed for Mrs. Moore that the addition of one bus run can cost the District as much as \$45,000 per year. Mr. Zimmer added that in some cases the District may be required to add a bus run for just one student.

Mr. Bickleman also explained the taxing limitations placed on school districts by Act 1. At Mrs. Oxberry's request, he explained that the state index used to set the tax increase ceiling is based on the state average weekly wage for the prior year, and elementary and secondary school costs for the prior year. He estimated that the index for the 2011-2012 school year will be one 1.0 percent or less.

Mr. Bickleman also explained the use of the District's fund balance and budget reductions by department. He affirmed Mr. Sigafos' contention that at the current rate the District's fund balance will be gone within two years. Mr. Bickleman also explained that the District could be facing a shortfall of as much as \$57 million by the 2014-2015 school year.

Mr. Tabachnick asked how other school districts are dealing with this issue. Dr. Cotter summarized significant cutbacks implemented by regional districts including the reduction of administrative, teaching and support staff positions, expansion of class size, dropping language and art programs and, in one case, closing a school. He stated that the Upper Dublin School District is facing a 12.7 percent real estate tax increase.

Following the budget presentation Mrs. Luken thanked Dr. Cotter, Dr. Gorodetzer, Mr. Bickleman and the entire District Administration for their diligent work in compiling a fair budget. She added that following the adoption of the Preliminary Budget, the Board directed the Administration to cut more than \$1.65 million in order to significantly reduce the projected 7.0 percent increase in real estate taxes.

Mrs. Luken stated that the Board has considered the Planetarium issue at length and has decided to close but not deconstruct the facility for the next budget year. She noted that family and community events like Star Parties and Laser Light shows may continue. She asked Dr. Gorodetzer to explain what resources will be utilized to meet the curricular needs in light of the closure of the planetarium. Dr. Gorodetzer reported that the planetarium is aligned with the curriculum in grades three and eight for science and grades six and seven for social studies. She stated that Web sites, polycom video conferencing, videos, field trips, guest speakers and virtual simulations and activities will be employed. She noted that the staff continues to research other resources.

Responding to a question from Mrs. Suchsland, Mr. Boegly explained that several sources, including the University of Pennsylvania, are being explored to access telescopes via the Internet and make use of whiteboards in each classroom. He added that additional online resources are being researched.

Mrs. Luken invited public comment.

Public Comment: Yale Joseph – a resident of Plymouth Meeting stated that it would be a tragedy to allow the planetarium to close and closure should not be an option. He added that the planetarium is central to the educational experience and is one of the greatest teaching aides ever devised. Mr. Joseph reported that he has created a Save Our Planetarium Facebook group that quickly attracted over 1,900 students, alumni and taxpayers. He referred to a school district in Allentown, Pa. that has used creative financing and grant funding to keep its planetarium active. Mr. Joseph urged the Board to reconsider its decision to close the planetarium.

Dr. Julia Plummer – a resident of North Wales stated that she was an expert on planetarium and astronomy education. She reported that research shows that planetariums can be a great motivator for students and an impetus for them to explore careers in science. She noted the availability of grant funding.

Teddy Slagle – a Whitmarsh resident and Colonial Middle School (CMS) student stated that the planetarium has provided an enriching educational experience since he was in the first grade. He added that there is no better way to experience the stars.

Emily Jolley – a Plymouth Whitmarsh High School (PWHS) student said that the planetarium is the only ideal place to view the night sky free of pollution. She asked the Board not to close the planetarium.

Louis Wein – a CMS student stated that the planetarium helped him to better understand his class work. He stated that the planetarium is very impressive to a first grader and provides the best way to understand astronomy.

Chrysti Sfida – A Plymouth Meeting resident told the Board that she understands the financial situation but said they cannot close the planetarium. She urged the Board to seek grants, sponsors and private donations. She said that no modern technology referred to earlier can compare to what students receive in the planetarium. She asked the Board to understand the value of the planetarium.

Bart Fried – A New York City Resident and PWHS alum stated that the recession won't continue and revenues won't continue to fall as presented. He stated that Colonial has a synergy with a planetarium and an observatory that perhaps no other school district in the country has.

Elizabeth Searle – A Plymouth Meeting resident, stated that there is no better place than a planetarium to see the night sky. She asked the Board to consider opening the planetarium to outside activities and other events to which admission could be charged.

Lauren Stern – A PWHS student and Board Student Representative asked what will happen to the planetarium space. Mrs. Luken stated that the area will be closed during the school day but could be used in the evenings for star parties and other events. She added that the planetarium was previously closed from 1993 through 2003. Ms. Stern suggested alternate sources of funding such as grants and charging other public school districts and non-public schools to use the planetarium.

Steve Berr – A Whippenburg resident and former District teacher spoke to the positive impact of the planetarium on students. He stated that among all the cuts mentioned, not one district in the area is cutting their planetarium. (Note: Dr. Cotter noted that Lower Moreland had cut their planetarium). Mr. Berr stated that the planetarium is a positive for the District and helps to keep District property values high. He urged the Board to investigate alternatives to closing the planetarium.

Dave Pontari – A CMS student stated that the planetarium was a valuable asset. He estimated that 20 percent of the questions on a recent PSSA exam were astronomy related. He stated that the value of the planetarium stretches across the curriculum, and it puts the world in perspective. He asked the Board not to close the planetarium.

Allan Fiermonte – A Conshohocken resident stated that there are only 2,000 planetariums left in the United States and asked the Board not to close this one. He admonished the Board for what he termed no proactive communication to allow parents and community groups to organize support. He asked the Board to work with the community to seek other funding. Mr. Fiermonte also encouraged the Board to create a community STEM committee.

Dawn Brown – A Lafayette Hill resident stated that she chose to move her family to this area from Delaware County because of the quality of the District. She stated that friends of hers have had to move from the area and have put their children in private schools. She says those schools have asked her friends what private schools their children were in previously. She stated she is proud of the District for doing a good job. Ms. Brown encouraged the Board to work together with the community to raise funds for the planetarium to make it work.

Kapil dev Singh – A Philadelphia resident and member of the Delaware Valley Astronomer's Association stated that he was from India. He commented that the world was a complicated place, and that we needed to provide students with all of the scientific learning opportunities possible. He referred to the alternate resources being considered and stated that there is no replacement for a planetarium.

Ann Haasis – A Plymouth Meeting resident stated that her daughter enjoyed the planetarium and wanted to save it. She gave the Board a petition that her daughter created and had signed by classmates and community members. See Attachment B.

Scott Eisner – A Plymouth Meeting resident and teacher in the Cheltenham School District stated that Cheltenham previously had a planetarium but closed it. He said the space is now a domed classroom that no teacher wants to use. He added that once a planetarium is gone, it's gone. Mr. Eisner said that you cannot replace a planetarium with a white board.

Frankie O'Brien and Carolyn Slagle – Colonial Elementary School students urged the Board to keep the planetarium open. They said they learned so much from it.

There being no other members of the public wishing to comment, Mrs. Luken asked if there were any questions.

Mr. Joseph asked what the community had to do to keep the planetarium open.

Mrs. Luken asked if the community members understood the budget presentation. She noted that the Planetarium is not the only cut being made, and that no matter what is cut, people won't be happy. She reiterated that the planetarium is not being dismantled. She stated that she wished the community was as passionate enough to march on Harrisburg to effectuate change in how school districts are funded. She noted that the School Board has control over only a small portion of the budget, much of which is controlled by state mandates.

Mr. Berr asked if classes may still be able to use the planetarium. Dr. Cotter said it may be a possibility as long as instruction aligns with the curriculum.

Mr. Fried reiterated that the Board is not treating the problem properly and should work to find a way to fund the planetarium.

Mike Cottone asked if money was the only issue, why won't the Board look elsewhere for funding? Mrs. Luken stated that the Board is not adverse to alternate funding.

Mrs. Suchsland stated that all of the Board members like the planetarium. She asked other members how to move forward to designate a Board member to work with the community and develop an action plan for the following year. She reiterated Mrs. Luken's prior comment that the Board has very little wiggle room in the budget.

Mrs. Luken commented that this is not a one-year issue. Funding will be required for a 5-6 year time period. She added that if the money wasn't an issue the Board would not make any cuts. She again stated that among \$1.6 million in reductions, the planetarium is just one piece.

Mr. Berr stated that the planetarium operating costs represent a very small portion of the budget and that the planetarium teacher touches every student in the District.

Mr. Fiermonte asked what other non-mandated programs were being cut and also noted that the planetarium teacher's position is .4 gifted.

Dr. Gorodetzer stated that the gifted program will be provided the level of staffing needed.

Dr. Cotter stated that a reading position is not being replaced. A high school math position is not being replaced. A .5 Family and Consumer Science position is not being replaced. A writing position is being cut and a number of instructional aide positions are being cut. Dr. Cotter said he would love to keep all of the positions because they are all valuable. He added that \$100,000 was cut from the technology budget and any further cuts would hamper the operation of current equipment. He also noted that a planned baseball field will not be built because the District can't afford it. Mr. Bickleman added that the high school was asked to cut an additional \$60,000 from its budget while the middle school was asked to cut an additional \$40,000 from its budget. He said that those cuts involved athletic and music programs.

Mrs. Sfida received confirmation from Mrs. Berk that gifted IEP services will not be affected and the District is well within state mandates without adding another teacher.

Mr. Joseph asked for a plan of action.

Mrs. Luken stated that the Board will further examine the issue and review it with the District solicitor. She added that the Colonial Foundation may be the best avenue through which the community members can coordinate any fundraising efforts. Board members stated that it may take as long as two months to get a handle on the issue.

Dr. Cotter reiterated that a long-term plan must be in place. He stated that the group is looking at a

significant sum of money.

Mrs. Moore recounted previous Board discussions of moving the planetarium to Wetherill Park or Erdenheim Farm and creating a nature center there.

Responding to a question from Mrs. Suchsland, Dr. Gorodetzer stated a possibility exists that teachers may be trained to use the planetarium.

Mr. Berr stated that there are funds available but to obtain them the community needs the Board to commit to keeping the planetarium open.

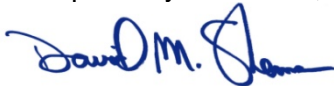
Madelyn Pontari stated that she is troubled by comments she has heard noting that she has friends who send their children to private schools because they feel there is not a commitment in the District to be better than average. She said that there are not a lot of things that separate one public school district from another and that the planetarium sets Colonial apart. She also stated that the District should look into cutting a replication of services.

Dr. Cotter responded that the District has examined eliminating replication and is so doing that by not replacing the .5 Family and Consumer Science position.

Mrs. Moore took exception to Mrs. Pontari's comment that the planetarium is the only thing that sets Colonial apart. She pointed out the improved achievement results in the District for the past 10 years and the fact that public and private schools from around the country have visited Colonial to view our programs. She said that the Board respects the community members' concerns, and she hoped that the community in turn respected the difficult decisions that the Board has to make.

There being no further business to be brought before the committee, Mrs. Luken adjourned the meeting at 9:12 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David M. Sherman". The signature is stylized and cursive.

David M. Sherman
School Board Secretary