

Montclair Board of School Estimate continues evaluation of budget



staff photo by ricardo kaulesar

Members of the Montclair Board of School Estimate at their March 30 meeting ask questions about the school district's tentative 2015-2016 school budget.

The Montclair Board of School Estimate spent much of the time at its meeting on Monday, March 23, listening to the public speak about the proposed \$113.6 million Montclair School District budget while offering no comments.

During its meeting this past Monday, March 30, the board posed some questions of its own.

The BoSE, a five-member body that will approve the district's budget, asked about line items ranging from savings from health insurance costs for district employees to bonuses for employees in the district's Central Office, with many of the questions posed by Third Ward Township Councilman Sean Spiller.

Serving on the BoSE is Spiller, Mayor Robert Jackson, First Ward Councilman Bill Hurlock, Montclair Board of Education President David Deutsch and board Vice President Anne Mernin.

Before the meeting ended, Jackson commended the conversations regarding the budget, whether between speakers and the board or board members with the district's chief operating officer Brian Fleischer, who also serves as the BoSE secretary.

The mayor said that he was "guardedly optimistic" that the board was "moving in the right direction" with the budget before the BoSE's third and final hearing next Monday, April 6, at 6:30 p.m. in the George Inness Annex, 141 Park St., when the budget is scheduled to be approved.

And he left the audience with a quote from the 19th century German dramatist Georg Büchner to explain how the BoSE or any voting body must operate to serve those in the community.

"Government must be a transparent garment that clings tightly to the body of the people," Jackson said.

posing questions

Spiller has been subject to scrutiny in recent weeks after an anonymous education activism group, Montclair Kids First, filed a legal complaint against Spiller to have him removed from the BoSE before its March 23 meeting. MKF maintained that Spiller's role as secretary-treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association, the statewide teachers union, was a conflict of interest to him serving on the BoSE and making decisions on the annual budget.

However, an Essex County Superior Court judge ruled on Friday, March 20, against having Spiller removed from the board, on which he has served on since 2013.

However, for Spiller at the March 30 meeting, it was business as usual as he posed numerous questions to Fleischer.

He first asked Fleischer whether he received a detailed analysis from the district's health insurance broker, Brown & Brown, about the rise in health insurance costs from the previous school year and whether additional savings could be found by the broker to put back into the budget. The health insurance costs for district employees has been brought up at Montclair Board of Education meetings in recent weeks, and the district found more than \$830,000 in savings from reduced health costs.

Fleischer responded that there was a "significant back-and-forth" with Brown & Brown representatives to get certain data to justify the rising costs, but said the district did not get an answer as to why that was the case. Fleischer said that he will be able to provide an amount of savings of "six figures and larger" from health insurance costs at the next BoSE meeting.

Spiller also asked about why substitutes have cost the district over \$290,000 in the current school year, with a similar amount slated in the upcoming school year budget. Fleischer said some of the reasons include more teachers being out sick than during the previous school year.

He then asked Fleischer how much in bonuses were paid out to school employees in the current school year, which had some people in the audience buzzing. Fleischer laid out the bonuses paid to employees in the Central Office eligible for bonuses during the tenure of just-departed Schools Superintendent Penny MacCormack. He then said no bonuses will be paid out this school year due to anticipated issues with the budget, and none are planned for next year.

Hurlock asked Fleischer about technology costs for the district regarding the PARCC tests. Fleischer said \$130,000 was spent on technology purchases for this school year, much of it devoted to the PARCC. Purchases included more laptops, keyboards, and mice.

Fleischer noted during the meeting that seven of the 10 teacher positions being proposed for cuts would be absorbed by attrition.

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