

REPRESENTATIVE POLICY BOARD
CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
MARCH 18, 2024
MEETING TRANSCRIPTION

Mark:

I'd like to call the meeting to order. We're being recorded. Any public comment from residents and customers may address the Committee regarding agenda items or other items. Discussion is limited to the presentation of information for consideration and comment on agenda items. Anybody here?

Jennifer:

No.

Mark:

Okay. Mario's with us. He remembers what these meetings are like. Okay, let's do this before we lose somebody. Approval of our minutes. Now can I do all three, Jennifer?

Jennifer:

Yes.

Mark:

The meeting of the 22nd, the 26th and the 28th. I believe you all have the minutes. The 28th was-

Tony:

I move we accept the minutes of those three meetings.

Mark:

That's why you're important, Tony.

Stephen:

I'll second it.

Mark:

Okay. Any comment? Any other questions about the minutes? All those in favor?

Committee members:

Aye.

Mark:

Opposed? Abstained? Okay, education. Now we're going to have a discussion. Do you think we should go right to approve the OCA's bills before anybody leaves?

Jennifer:

If you want to, you could do that.

Tony:

Yes, let's knock them out.

Mark:

Why don't we skip down to Mr. Donofrio's bill, if that's okay, invoices? January 2024th was \$2,967, and February 2024th was \$3,633. I think you all have the bill in front of you. I got mine.

Stephen:

I move the invoices.

Mark:

Any second?

Rich:

Second.

Mark:

Okay. Any discussion about the bills? Invoices? Jeff, you're going to get paid, I think. All those in favor?

Committee members:

Aye.

Mark:

Aye. Thank you very much for that. Okay, so now we're going to skip back to item number four. Thank you.

Lisa:

All right, ready to get started?

Mark:

Yes.

Stephen:

Yes.

Lisa:

All right, well good evening everybody. Thank you for having us here tonight. We're going to get a brief education update. I believe the last time I presented to this committee was about a year and a half ago and we've had a nice update, a nice change since then. But I'll get to that in just a second. So let me start

my screen share and we will get to the presentation. All right, can everyone see the screen that I'm sharing? Slide show?

Committee members:

Yes.

Lisa:

Thank you very much. All right, so our Whitney Water Center in Hamden as everybody knows, offers our free hands-on programs all water science related primarily for kindergarten through eighth grade students within our district and those programs are open to public and private schools, homeschooling organizations, girl scout, boy scout troop, libraries, community organizations. Pretty much anyone who can put a group together is more than welcome to come to the water center or have us visit their location.

So we have on-site and outreach programs by far in-school programs are still the most popular with our early elementary school educators. They have a lot in their day, they have a very full schedule and it's difficult for them to get busing to come to the water center. Recently I found out Hamden made a change. They used to have free busing within certain hours within the town, but that's not the case anymore. So even Hamden has to pay to come to the water center that's in Hamden to do a program. So it just makes sense that we go out to them. Project Water, our field study program that's been very popular is the target middle school. That is mostly what we see for our middle school user groups is going out with Project Water. And our loan boxes, they are growing in popularity because we've been promoting our program a little bit more.

So people who are new to the school system, new to our programs are finding them and realizing how helpful they are in their everyday curriculum. So the water center was started back in 1990 and since then we've reached over 374,000 students. Within that total, 17,000 middle schoolers have participated in Project Water. So they're getting an experience that most of us who went to school for science didn't get until college. Project Water, I'll talk about the details of that just a little bit more for those who may not know about it. And 54,000 students have used our water science loan boxes, self-contained science teaching kits that are free just like everything else that we deliver and pick up to the schools. So it doesn't get any more convenient than that. All right. Program trends. So-

Mark:

I just want to ask you this, those numbers are for a year, right?

Lisa:

No, the ones that we were just looking at, oh my Lord, we need 10 of us to do that. That's since the Water Center started.

Mark:

Well it says 374,000 students have participated in our programs. And then you have this underneath. That's since 1990 for all this?

Lisa:

Correct. Yes.

Mark:

Okay, thank you.

Lisa:

Sure. So obviously COVID had an impact on everything. Pre-COVID, there was one educator, I was averaging about 4,200 students going into the classroom program or programs here at the water center. You can see the years that I use for the average up there. School year '16, '17 and '18. COVID sliced that in half. All of those programs were virtual through school year 2021 and '21-'22. School year '22-'23 started to return to normal. Very little virtual. More in-person. I would say this year, school year '23 is back to normal. No virtual programs, other things in-person, things are running the way they did. And we are up 15% from our pre-COVID average. So we are getting back out there. Teachers are finding us again.

Our popular programs, and this has definitely been a change since before COVID out of all the classroom programs that we teach, these two programs, the Invasion of the Aliens, which is about invasive species and their impact on the environment, and Problem with Pollution, which is about water quality and pollution. These two programs count for 30% of the programs that were booked this year. This is definitely a change from before COVID and it's definitely an evolution in learning of what teachers are teaching in the classroom. They're definitely getting more to the nitty-gritty of the environmental things. Macro Invertebrate Messages, that's a very popular one and it's about water quality and what lives in the water. So it's nice to see them getting more science heavy in what we're doing with the third, fourth and fifth grade.

So we've seen some nice increases in some towns that we're reaching. West Haven has always been a really big user group for our education programs. We picked up approximately 200 students in West Haven this year. Hamden doubled in volume, New Haven picked up an additional 200. Milford and Orange are back on the map. They were off for a while. Brantford's holding solid with North Haven coming up and Seymour joining our program as well. And the reason that we are having these trends happen is because we have a new educator. Sorry, I'm not advancing here. There we go. So for the first time since 2009, the Water Center has two educators. So I'm going to turn this over to Paris Robberstad. She joined us last April and I'm going to have her talk about the next two slides.

Paris:

Hello everybody. Good evening. It's really nice to meet you all. Just like Lisa said, I have joined the team in April of last year, so I'm almost coming up on one year in my position and I've been having a really awesome time so far with it, going out to the classrooms and teaching the little ones all about water and the environment. My background's in environmental science, so I really love to do that. And let's go ahead and see this. So it says, "Expanding our reach. The Whitney Water Center is happy to announce that for the first," oh, you just read that... "the first time since 2009 we have two educators." Can you go to the next slide, Lisa, for me? Or can I do it?

Lisa:

That's you.

Paris:

Can I click it?

Lisa:

Nope, I need to drive it. I advanced it. You should see it now.

Paris:

Thank you. All right, so you can see there on that slide, the kids are having a really awesome time when we come out to the classroom doing the programs. It's such a great thing to know that the kids are excited about what they're learning. So much so that they want to write thank you cards. I'm always excited when we get thank you cards. Those are two of the thank you cards that we got from some of the students this year. And I got some more here too to show you guys. But it's been really exciting. I've learned a lot from Lisa and she's been able to teach me the ropes and show me how it goes. And I've been able to get out there and add my own little spin to the programs and just add a different little flavor to the programs that we can offer. So now some students will see Lisa and some of them will see me too.

Lisa:

All right. So we've been able to advance our programs. Now that there's two of us, we can mail brochures. I was always on the edge of being able to handle extra volume. We'd send out brochures and I'd only be able to say yes to a few. Now we can say yes to many of them. So that's why we've seen that nice bump in our numbers, that 15% increase. And it's fantastic just having another person here, a different perspective. We've been collaborating on program improvements and that's been really, really helpful. Paris has received some wonderful accolades. I don't know if she's seen these yet.

Paris:

I have not seen those.

Lisa:

We send out Google surveys to our new teachers in the program because we want to make sure we're meeting their needs and doing a good job. And as you can see by the results up on the screen, Paris is doing a fantastic job. The students love her. She connects amazingly well with the students. They're excited when she's back in the classroom. She keeps them engaged and we are thrilled to have Paris on board.

Paris:

No, it's been awesome. I'm really glad to see those. I haven't seen those. Oh my gosh, I'm doing my job right, right? People love it.

Lisa:

Yes. I was holding onto those.

Paris:

It's really nice to see those. Give you a little encouragement.

Lisa:

All right, so for Project Water, which is the field study, the teachers spend time in the classroom. That's with the digital improvements. Someone have a question?

Stephen:

You need pull up the next slide that you're talking about, I think.

Lisa:

I should have Project Water up right here.

Tony:

I'm looking at it.

Lisa:

Okay. So before COVID, we were seeing about 800 students for just the field trip. The same students spent time in the classroom getting ready to go out on the field trip. COVID didn't have that big of an impact on the field trip, even though a lot of it went virtual. We still had a lot of our regular teachers participating. So they are very vested in the program. And this current school year, we are right up to where we were prior, which is about capacity. There isn't too much room for increase here. There's only so many nice weather days within the year that we can schedule this. So this continues to be a very successful program.

The digital improvements that we made during COVID have carried through with Project Water. There are videos that the teachers use for the kids to get ready to go out in the field. It provides a consistency so all the students are getting the same introduction and the teachers love to put the stuff on Google Classroom so the kids can go review it, they can access it so they can answer questions that the teacher has. It's a great, great place for it. And our last technology update that I am very proud of.

I created a narrated video of Bartholomew and the Oobleck that we use with one of our programs. It's called Oozing Oobleck. We talk about properties of matter and water and how liquids are different from solids. And this video, when I made this slide last week, had 134,000 views. It's up to 136 right now. So this has reached far and wide well beyond our district, well beyond our country. And I just think it's great that it's reached so many teachers. All right. Any questions for my-

Mark:

Is that program free for everybody, even if it's like you said, other countries, YouTube? Or do we-

Lisa:

So if they're watching the video, that's free. Obviously I can't be doing the program with the people who are just viewing the video, but this, having the video on YouTube allows the teachers to hear the book remotely during COVID. But it's become popular enough, and this is a very popular program. A lot of teachers will play it in the classroom before I arrive so they don't have to read the book. So anyone who's outside of our district is only hearing the story, not getting the program.

Mark:

Okay. So outside. Do you think that we should offer this to students at some stipend, they'll pay the costs? We're always trying to get into other businesses and stuff.

Lisa:

Right. I don't know how we would monetize this necessarily because they would need to provide supplies. So we make Oobleck or slime in the classroom and the recipe isn't here, it's just the story being read. With the prevalence of slime and kids today, I don't think anyone would pay for that opportunity.

Mark:

Okay. Well, just wanted to know.

Lisa:

Well, good question.

Mark:

We're trying to get into other businesses and help the freight cost there.

Lisa:

Non-core revenue.

Prem:

Lisa, just a quick question. So this is almost like a YouTube channel for this [inaudible 00:17:54]?

Lisa:

Regional Water Authority's, yes.

Prem:

Perfect. That's great.

Lisa:

All right, I'm going to stop the screen share just so I can see everybody. And Paris had some cards. I don't know if you want to share the cards now that we're at full screen.

Paris:

Yes, I can share the cards.

Lisa:

It's always a highlight.

Paris:

The cards are just adorable and they just make me smile. So I went to school a couple of weeks ago and I taught estimation and experimentation and the kids do a series of experiments trying to figure out how many marbles does it take to sink a cup, how many drops of water can you fit on a penny, stuff like that. So that's the program I taught to them and the kids loved it. And they made some cards. So I'll show you some of the cards that are just adorable. This student was really excited about the program. We have four or five. I don't even know if you can see. Hold on.

I don't know if you'll be able to see. We took off the blur, that might help. So the kids were super excited about the program, so they drew out each one of the activities that we did, no... that they actually

remember. They weren't just having fun, but they remembered too. And some of them are just cute. They'll say like, "Thank you for coming, we had such a great time." And then draw a little picture of me and them just having a good time. But they're just so cute and they make me smile. And it just helps me to know that the kids actually remembered what we talked about so much so that they want to continue it the following day. There's more. I have 20, 30 more. We don't have to see them all, but those are just a couple.

Stephen:

Excellent.

Naomi:

Lisa, what's in the loan boxes?

Lisa:

A whole different range of stuff. All depends on the program. We have about 15 different loan boxes. We provide everything but water. So if they were doing a program called Water Wizards, they would have the binder with all the teaching materials, the worksheets that they would copy, droppers, pennies, yarn, cups for water, a container to even put water in. We have topics on the wet history of new Haven, weather, watersheds, water quality. So I'm going through the checklist in my head. A lot of hands-on doing physical experiments.

Naomi:

Thank you.

Stephen:

Lisa, this is Steve. I have a similar question. When you had students in the building, they could look through microscopes. How do you handle that in the outreach program?

Lisa:

We do not do outreach for microscopes. That is only coming here to the Water Center.

Stephen:

Okay. Do you contact science teachers? Are these part of a science program in the schools or do they go to different classes?

Lisa:

It depends on the grade. So elementary school teachers aren't science teachers per se. They're more generalists and they have the same kids and they teach different subjects. In the middle school, I am working with the science teachers. So we mail our brochures to all the teachers in all the grades, and then we'll focus a little bit more on just the science teachers once we hit middle school.

Stephen:

Do you see this program staying the way it is as an outreach more than at the water center?

Lisa:

Absolutely. It's evolved so much from when it started in the '90s. Getting here is difficult, logistics cost. And for them to go on a field trip to leave the school, they need quite a curriculum justification.

Stephen:

Okay. No, you're doing a great job.

Lisa:

Thank you.

Stephen:

I mean, just to give them basic concepts about pollution and conservation and when they're young to have them be aware of those things, I think it's fantastic.

Lisa:

And they go home and talk to their parents about it, which is where it makes the difference.

Tony:

Paris, when you go into a classroom, what does it take? Is it an hour, a two hour?

Paris:

Every program is about 45 minutes to an hour. So if I go see three third grade classes, I'll spend an hour in each of those classes. So I'll be at that school for three hours.

Tony:

Thank you.

Paris:

Anybody else have questions for me?

Naomi:

Yes. Paris, a question. How do we get some of those brochures?

Paris:

So we have a digital brochures, so I could email you one or we have paper brochures and I can send you one.

Naomi:

Okay. Either way. Thank you.

Paris:

Let write it down, a personal note so I don't forget.

Mark:

Do you do private schools too or just public schools?

Lisa:

Sure do.

Mark:

Okay, great. It's a great super program. I'm so glad you have help. We all want to back for you.

Lisa:

Me too.

Mark:

We all want to back for you. If everybody remembers the battle of getting you help.

Lisa:

It was a battle, but we won that one.

Mark:

Do you need more help? You want us to go to a battle again?

Lisa:

Maybe me next year, Mark. We're good this year. Maybe next year.

Mark:

Okay. You're doing a great job. Super to see something like this go on. Anybody else have any questions?

Stephen:

I was just curious how Prem supports your program or does he? Is there a connection there?

Prem:

Not yet.

Lisa:

Not a direct connection.

Prem:

Yes.

Stephen:

Okay.

Prem:

So basically Steve, all of these resource ask, even when we got Paris on board, the senior leadership team got together, figuring it out together. While this is a very, very important program for us, we are looking at resource across the board. And to your point earlier, we are constantly looking at how do we manage our resource across the board because we do have a head count challenge nonstop. So there are things that we try to do and help Liz because all of this is a part of our new DNA, if you will. So again, thanks to Lisa and Paris and it's going great. And we'll see if we need to add more heads, right?

Stephen:

Is there any opportunity for your information, Lisa, on the website? On the RWA-

Lisa:

Say that one more time, Steven.

Stephen:

Is there an opportunity for you to use the RWA website with the info you have or any programs to-

Lisa:

We do.

Stephen:

... help create an awareness? You do. Okay.

Lisa:

We have an education page, our brochure, links to videos. We are well-represented on that page.

Prem:

We have that. Yep.

Tony:

Very good.

Stephen:

Thank you.

Lisa:

All right, thank you very much for having us. Have a great night everybody.

Mark:

Wonderful report.

Tony:

You too.

Prem:

Thank you, Lisa.

Mark:

Thank you very much.

Paris:

Thank you.

Prem:

Take care. Thank you, both.

Jennifer:

Thank you.

Lisa:

Bye.

Mark:

Okay, the next item on our agenda is report of the OCA. You already got paid, so are you still around?

Jeff:

I'm here, Mr. Chairman. In terms of what's going on in the OCA's right now, we don't have any active consumer complaints. There was previously a discussion about 180 North State Street in Ansonia, which the authority is still in the process of trying to resolve directly. So it really hasn't been escalated directly to me. The main item that I'm working on right now pertains to the pending application by the authority for the RPB's approval of the acquisition of assets of target three. As you know, there's a public hearing scheduled on that application next Thursday, March 28th, which is Holy Thursday by the way. And I'm working on my memo, about halfway done. I received on Friday, the authority's responses to my interrogatories. I've reviewed that information, so I'll be getting my memo out to the RPB with respect to the OCA's recommendation on the application by this Thursday, March 21st. That's really the main item that I'm working on right now.

Mark:

Jeff, do you need any help on this application? Because it seems to be pretty intense.

Jeff:

No, it's not really that difficult to analyze. The valuation approach is a valuation approach that I'm familiar with. So it's not anything that I need any help with. Thank you.

Mark:

Okay. Anybody have any questions?

Stephen:

Hey Jeff? Yeah, I have a question for Jeff. So this is similar review to the previous two acquisitions?

Jeff:

Very similar, yes.

Stephen:

Okay.

Mark:

Okay. So any other questions for Jeff? This is going to be a short meeting. Oh, great. Any new business? Upcoming meetings, Monday, April 15th. Oh, tax day. Joint meeting with the land use to review the fiscal year budget 2025 with management. And it's our regular meeting too, so we'll probably have our regular meeting right after the budget review. Is that correct, Jennifer? Can we have it before?

Jennifer:

Yes, the presentation will be first and then the regular meeting will happen after.

Mark:

Okay. So we're not going to have anything on our meeting, right?

Jennifer:

No.

Mark:

We're not going to have any presentations besides the budget presentation for that because that'll be enough to swallow. Okay. We have April 8th, 2024. It's a finance committee meets to review the fiscal 2025 with management. So you can go to either one of these meetings if you don't want to come to our meeting, just to be known that. Any other items that come in front of us?

Naomi:

I think you have to approve the OCA invoices.

Mark:

We did that.

Naomi:

Did we already that? Okay.

Mark:

Yes. I was afraid that we might lose members, so I said let's do it before we start. So we did that. Thank you very much, Naomi, for reminding me.

Stephen:

We didn't hear what he had to say. We just wanted to pay him.

Naomi:

You just wanted to pay him.

Mark:

Okay. So any other things that come before the committee?

Tony:

I move we adjourn.

Mark:

Thank you.

Stephen:

Second.

Mark:

All those in favor?

Committee:

Aye.