

NESHAMINY

Board wants fees explained

Board President Richard Eccles said politics could play a role in the fees.

By RACHEL CANELLI COURIER TIMES

Why so much and where is it going?

That's what some Neshaminy school board members want to know about the fees Middletown is charging the district for the high school renovation project.

As of August, the district's bills from the township had reached almost \$460,000 — \$350,000 for permits and the rest for inspections, according to school board President Richard Eccles.

The school board agreed Tuesday night to write a letter to Middletown seeking an explanation of those fees. The decision was made by consensus at a board work session. No vote was taken.

The Republican-controlled Middletown board of supervisors approved the fees early last year, saying Middletown wanted to recover the costs of construction oversight. At the time, supervisors expressed concern the township might lose money on the deal.

At Tuesday night's meeting, Eccles, a Republican, said politics might play a role in the fee schedule.

According to county documents, principals of Remington, Vernick & Beach Engineers, one of the firms Middletown hired to oversee the project, donated \$31,000 to county Democrats from April 2004 to May 2007.

This year, the documents said, a principal at Remington gave \$5,000 to the Democratic county commissioner campaign of Lower Makefield Supervisor Steve Santarsiero and Middletown Supervisor Diane Marseglia.

Middletown hired the firm at the beginning of 2006 in a 3-2 vote. Marseglia, fellow Democratic Supervisor Robert McMonagle and Republican Supervisor Lisa Pflaumer voted for the appointment. Republican Supervisors Jasper Caro and John J. Kelly II voted against it.

"It's outrageous. Who's paying to play? Are taxpayers [footing] the bill for the county race?" Eccles said Tuesday in the latest round of the battle between the political parties. Each side is accusing the other of "pay-to-play" politics.

"I don't know if there's a connection, but it just seems funny. We're just looking to treat people who pay taxes in a fair and just manner," Eccles said.

That's what Marseglia said the township is trying to do.

"It is not the taxpayers of Middletown's job to solely bear the burden of costs to check on the safety and legality of Neshaminy's engineering and building," she said. "Our role is to keep the children and workers safe and make sure the construction is done correctly."

Marseglia also said the amount of the fees has to do with the large scale of the project. There's no connection between the fees the township charges and people contributing to political parties, she added.

Thomas Beach, executive vice president of the engineering firm, agreed.

"It sounds like a political ploy," the Conshohocken-based executive said Thursday of the allegations made during Tuesday's Neshaminy school board meeting.

Beach added that the principals with his firm make campaign contributions to both parties. He didn't have specifics on how much has been donated recently to the Republican Party.

Middletown has paid Remington, Vernick & Beach a little more than \$42,500 in inspection fees for the high school project, according to Middletown Supervisor Robert McMonagle, a Democrat.

That includes charges for a review of the project plans and about \$25,000 for site inspections, Beach said. The inspection fees are about a quarter of what private developers would be required to pay for their projects, the engineering executive said.

"We try to make inspections only when necessary [to ensure township standards are being

adhered to]," Beach said.

School board member Jason Bowman, a Republican candidate for Middletown auditor, said he could live with the inspection fees but called Middletown's \$350,000 permit fee "questionable." Bowman said the township previously waived such fees for other school projects.

"It just seems excessive," said board member Ritchie Webb, a Republican.

School board members William Spitz and Irene Boyle, both Democrats, pointed out the size of the \$82 million high school renovation project in relation to the fees.

Spitz also added that district Solicitor Thomas J. Profy III's firm, Begley, Carlin and Mandio, has contributed more than \$100,000 in the past several years to county Republicans, according to the Democratic Party.

County documents show Profy personally contributed \$1,500 this year to a campaign for Eccles and Webb, who are running for re-election. The Courier Times was unsuccessful Thursday in reaching Profy for comment despite a phone call and e-mail sent to his Middletown office.

Spitz asked if Eccles thought that was also an issue, to which Eccles answered no.

"We hire the best firm possible," Eccles said Wednesday. "Not who contributes [to political parties]."

Boyle questioned the timing of Eccles' and Webb's criticism.

"This isn't new," she said. "We sat here and approved the invoices. I'm distressed that we're bringing politics where it doesn't belong and it's strange that it's before the election."