

NESHAMINY / MIDDLETOWN

School board, township at odds over fees

The Neshaminy board president asked Middletown officials to refund some of the fees, but the township isn't wavering.

By RACHEL CANELLI COURIER TIMES

A question about fees has Middletown and Neshaminy officials accusing each other of attacking the other's integrity.

Earlier this month, Neshaminy school board President Richard Eccles, a Republican running for reelection, asked why the township was charging so much — more than \$400,000 — in fees for the \$82 million high school renovation project.

He said politics might play a role in the fee schedule since principals of one of the engineering firms the township is using contributed money to county Democrats.

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.

Thomas Beach, executive president of the engineering firm, previously called Eccles' comments a political ploy and added that principals with his firm make contributions to both parties, but didn't have figures available.

Although Marseglia previously responded by saying the fees related to the size of the project, not political contribution, Republican Middletown Supervisor Lisa Pflaumer during a meeting this week also replied to Eccles' questions.

Pflaumer called his comments "an attack on the integrity of the township that was unwarranted ... and blatantly political."

Pflaumer said Eccles is embellishing the fees and the amount is actually lower. Also, Middletown told workers to log their hours for a possible rebate to the district, she said.

"Make no mistake," Pflaumer read from a prepared statement. "We will not allow your flagrant violation of our trust and compromising disposition to go unchecked."

Since the fees were approved by both governing bodies last year, Pflaumer referred to Eccles' allegations a year later as "sheer propaganda."

Neshaminy officials said they approved the fees to move the project along. While Pflaumer said Middletown has been cooperative, the township was hesitant to approve the project without certain conditions, including a traffic impact study, officials said.

In response to Pflaumer's comments, Eccles, in a statement to the Courier Times, accused Middletown and Pflaumer of launching "a retaliatory attack" on Neshaminy's integrity.

Eccles also maintains the district's figures are correct, and said Neshaminy officials are worried there will be no rebate.

"I am not going to allow ... the township to bully the taxpayers of ... Neshaminy ... any longer," he wrote. "We must do what's right for our taxpayers and children."

Eccles and other board members did complain about the fees in the spring and summer, but the school board only recently sent a letter to the township asking for an explanation.

It's not a Democratic or Republican issue, Eccles said. He believes the township is taking advantage of Neshaminy taxpayers and taking money away from students. He requested the township refund a portion of the fees.

School board members Ritchie Webb, a Republican running for re-election with Eccles, and

Jason Bowman, a Republican candidate for Middletown auditor, previously agreed the fees sounded a bit unreasonable.

But school board members William Spitz and Irene Boyle, both Democrats, questioned the timing of both Eccles' and Webb's criticism, right before the general election.

Spitz previously 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, running for re-election. The Courier Times was unsuccessful Friday in reaching Profy for comment.

Eccles, though, previously said the school board picked the best firm possible, not who contributed to political parties.

"I am not looking for a free ride," said Eccles, who added that Neshaminy officials are concerned over the rising cost of the fees not even halfway through the project. "If you were a retail department store, I would want to shop somewhere else because you charge too much. But since you are the only store in town, you get to charge what you want."

Pflaumer, though, said the township is responsible for the safety and security of the building.

"We will not waver," she said. "... and will not apologize ... if it makes some members of this school board uncomfortable."