

RCS D budget items get renewed scrutiny by board

Amid finance woes, small items draw big attention

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A seemingly innocent proposal last week regarding a bulk purchase of graphing calculators turned into a illuminating exploration of the Rochester City School District’s evolving approach to fiscal controls.

The school board on Thursday was presented with a resolution to extend the district’s calculator contract with a Maryland company called Scantex Business Systems. The district earlier chose Scantex through a competitive bid process and was looking to extend the contract through the current school year to buy the calculators that students need in advanced math and science classes.

School boards everywhere regularly pass such resolutions without debate. Rochester’s precarious financial situation, however, has led to increased scrutiny everywhere.

At the same meeting the school board declined to approve additional pay for East High School teachers to take part in professional development, even though Superintendent Shaun Nelms informed them it was already included in the teachers’ contract.

The calculator resolution would have approved extending the Scantex contract but did not say how much the district intended to spend on the calculators, how many calculators it needed or how many it already had in stock.

Board member Amy Maloy asked for those details and also wondered how exactly the calculators would be distributed with students at home due to COVID- 19. “I just want to know what we’re actually spending in the long run,” she said. “It just seems very open-ended and it makes me uncomfortable.”

to point out exactly these sorts of concerns, repeatedly pressed the board on the details of the expenditure. The resolution to extend the contract didn’t mention the maximum authorized sum or the per-unit cost of the calculators.

When Powell said that the total expenditure is included in the district budget, Jallow asked her pointedly: “Do you know what that amount is?”

Powell did not.

“If you don’t know, then how are you voting in good conscience?” Jallow asked. “There’s things you just don’t know about this money – how much it is, where it’s going, where it’s coming from.”

Jallow and the school board have ample reason for skepticism regarding the district’s purchasing process.

In a 2017 audit, the state Comptroller found mistakes everywhere he looked. As an example, the audit found that the district had awarded a bid for rubber gloves for a price of \$3.88 a pair, but instead bought them for \$14.38 a pair from another provider with which it had a separate contract.

“What this conversation has highlighted is that the system does not work,” board member Beatriz LeBron said. “We are passing vague resolutions and then we are not getting concrete dollar amounts at the end of the bidding process. ... Every one single dollar right now matters in this district, because we don’t have any money.”

The calculator resolution was pushed until Tuesday, by which time Deputy Superintendent Genelle Morris said she would have more information about the contract and the district’s needs. The same point was repeated with two other procurement resolutions, one for science equipment and one for prekindergarten classroom materials.

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The resolution did mention that the district has spent about \$107,000 over the last two years buying calculators from Scantex. But no one was able to say on Thursday how many calculators had been purchased with that money or how many new ones were necessary.



Maloy

Board member Willa Powell countered that if the board didn’t pass the contract extension, it would have no means of buying more calculators at all without going through another bidding process later on. She and board President Van White worried the board was veering into micromanagement, a fault for which it often has been criticized.

“The district has to stay within the budgeted amount for school supplies, but once we’ve identified the lowest bidder there’s no need for us to approve the purchase of a particular lot size of calculators,” Powell said.

District Monitor Shelley Jallow, whose job it is