

EDUCATION

Questions about students heats up Clifton meeting on proposed middle school

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CLIFTON HEIGHTS » The Upper Darby School District's contentious issue of building a new middle school on the borough's beloved athletic fields heated up again at a public hearing Tuesday night, at one point reaching a boiling point that seemed to center on which students would be attending the school.

For the most part, opposition in the borough to the school district's plan to build a new \$65 million, 147,000-square-foot middle school on the borough athletic fields off Springfield Road - which the school district owns - has focused largely on the loss of the fields, the last bit of open space in the borough, and traffic concerns.

But Tuesday night reinstated a factor that has been a simmering point of discussion: which district kids would be attending the school?

At issue for some Clifton Heights residents is the population of Beverly Hills Middle School which is 61 percent black, 22 percent Asian, 10.5 percent Hispanic and five percent White, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Some think the district wants to bring the Beverly Hills students to Clifton for middle school. The district's unofficially official plan (which the school board has vote to on) is to rearrange boundaries and have students from Garrettford, Primos and Westbrook Park elementary schools go to Clifton Heights and not

Drexel Hill Middle School, whose demographics are 49 percent white and 36 percent black.

Each middle school has approximately 1,500 students and Clifton Heights is looking to accommodate at least 900.

Around 100 minutes into Tuesday's meeting Upper Darby Superintendent Dan McGarry addressed a "venomous" question by a resident, a woman who did food services at Beverly Hills, about which students would be coming to the Clifton Heights school, specifically questions about Beverly Hills students.

"Thank you so much for asking that question because I think that continues to be the venom that comes out of this, when the question being asked of us of the boundaries," is how McGarry started his response to the racially-shaded comment. "The concern would be regardless of what the boundaries are, we're here to serve the entire school district."

Upper Darby School District Director of Communications Aaronda Beauford, who was live-streaming the meeting on the district's Facebook page, responded to the question about the potential student makeup of the school.

As McGarry was answering the woman's comment about the redrawing of boundaries to accommodate students for the new middle school and what elementary schools they would come, Beauford started to comment.

"What's the problem?" Beauford openly asked the woman. "Children, cor-

rect?" said Beauford after McGarry completed his answer.

"So you're saying none of the students from Beverly Hills, Bywood, Stonehurst, none of that is coming here," said the resident.

"Why does that matter?" responded Beauford.

"What does that matter?" Beauford repeated herself. At this point McGarry said "please stop" to quell the escalating conversation.

Clifton resident John Cannon jumped into the fray by calling out that it doesn't matter where the students are coming from, and "Beverly Hills is nowhere near Clifton Heights to bring them here."

Again, Beauford said, "Why does it matter?"

With the dialogue reaching a boiling point, Planning Commission Chairman John Todd immediately called a recess. McGarry spoke to the concerned resident, a former employee working with food services at Beverly Hills.

Clifton Heights Mayor Joe Lombardo, who has adamantly opposed putting the new school on the borough's fields, denied race had anything to do with the heated opposition to the plan.

"I would like to clear the air about the Planning Board meeting last night. I am disgusted and appalled that the Upper Darby School Board would let their superintendent grandstand in front of the media trying to make a school district land development project in the Borough of Clifton Heights about race," Lom-



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This is the sign for the Clifton Heights Athletic Fields on North Springfield Road on a piece of land owned by the Upper Darby School District. The school district wants to build a new middle school on the site, which has sparked intense opposition in the borough.

bardo said in a Wednesday Facebook post. "In my opinion the man doesn't deserve to hold that position. He not only represents the board but all of the school district taxpayers and I am ashamed to say I live in the Upper Darby School District."

Lombardo went on to question why district officials have not been prepared to answer questions from borough officials and residents and insisted opposition to using the site is more about the size of the facility, traffic and the loss of the fields.

He took McGarry to task for an interview with a local TV station in which the superintendent seemed to focus on race.

"The idea of who's going to go where shouldn't matter to anybody but it seems to be a big issue in Clifton Heights," McGarry told CBS3. "Who is going to attend Clifton Heights Middle School? It seems to be in this room that the conversation has become one of race, unfortunately. At least that's what's coming out."

The topic, or even the

insinuation, of race first came up when the resident shouted out of turn in the middle of questioning by Clifton Heights Solicitor Frank Catania of McGarry which resulted in the back and forth among the resident, McGarry and Beauford.

The testy interaction drew the attention of news cameras in what was a pretty mild meeting up until that point.

In October Drexel Hill Middle School teacher Renee Greeley resigned after a racially charged attack against a parent following a fender-bender in the school parking lot made international headlines.

Greeley allegedly used racial slurs in the video, which captured her exchange with an African American parent. No racial slurs were used by anyone in attendance at Tuesday night's meeting.

McGarry said he could relate to what his administrators have to deal with surrounding the makeup of their classrooms.

"This has been the undercurrent time and time

again. I respect Mr. Lombardo, but why do you keep asking who is going to school there (in the borough)? It doesn't matter," said McGarry after the meeting. "If you're a person of color, and you're sitting in this room, or you're someone who worked in those schools and those communities for what those kids need, to have the question be, and what it comes across as, 'does anybody deserve it as much as someone else does?' It comes across that way ... but why does it keep coming up that way?"

"My issue is, what does it matter? It struck a chord... and people feel like why does that have to be a topic of conversation?"

The borough and district are headed back to court later this month in a dispute over which set of borough zoning regulations should be used for the school project. After the school district announced its plans, the borough passed new zoning regulations - including a new height restriction - that would make it more difficult for the district to proceed as planned.