

EDUCATION

Summer Stage takes center stage at Upper Darby School Board

By Pete Bannan

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Discussions of the future of the Summer Stage program took center stage at the Upper Darby School Board meeting Tuesday evening.

Meeting on the same facility where the award winning program holds its performances, School Board President Edward W. Brown addressed the topic at the start.

"I don't think you will meet anyone who wants Summer Stage to go away. We can all agree it is the crown jewel of our district, township and community," Brown said in trying to calm emotions. "That said it is not a simple issue that won't require some work and careful thought by three different entities, the district, township and the Arts Foundation."

Calling himself an eternal optimist, Brown said the three will find what is best for the children.

"Summer Stage is not in jeopardy and will be a part of the community, district and township for many years to come," Brown said. "The path may be difficult, some narratives may be distracting but ultimately children will benefit now and into the future."

He asked for patience and for the people involved to allow a solution to be crafted without accusations, vitriol, negative comments that detract from the common goal of what is best for the children.

Superintendent Dan McGarry also said that the township and district are in support of Summer Stage and their overall support

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for the arts. He noted proof could be seen with the musical stage show held at the high school in the spring as well as the fact that Summer Stage was held this summer despite the challenges of pandemic restrictions.

"Time and time again, we have demonstrated our support of programs that bring students and this community joy," McGarry said. "

He said recent criticism has overlooked the level of support that has been given to programs by the district over the years.

The superintendent said meetings about the future of Summer Stage have taken place and there is room for a resolution but it was not responsible for those who were involved in the decision but did not like what they heard to then turn to social media and make statements that aren't accurate or out of context.

McGarry went on to acknowledge the collective efforts of the Board of Directors, the township and "without question Mr. (Harry) Dietzler," in making Summer Stage a success.

McGarry said the statement that Upper Darby Township has never provided funding to the district for rent or support of Summer Stage is not true and he noted the 2019 mayor's budget that a facility rental fee be paid to the

district which he noted was for rent, not personnel.

"It is very easy for some to publicly state that the district and township should give the program away but there are very real important details in running such a program that we have to figure out," McGarry said. "We will continue to participate in discussions with the township and the foundation to make all parties understand the path forward with Summer Stage."

McGarry also noted the district's commitment to the arts and cited the hiring of a new supervisor of art, theater and music and the coming hiring of a new K-12 coach for art, theater and music.

"The show will go on, we will figure this out," McGarry said.

Board member Damien Warsavage said the members of the public who turned out for the meeting have a lot of heart, and the public love for longtime program director Harry Dietzler and Summer Stage is real.

"What Harry helped create in tandem with the district and township can be duplicated but never replicated," Warsavage said.

Public comments came next.

The first to speak was Margaret Schmidt, who was formerly a district employee as the assistant to the direc-

tor of the performing arts center for the school district before retiring in February.

She said she was responsible for much of the paperwork and financial issues involved in Summer Stage and called the relationship between the district and township "very convoluted."

Schmidt said Dietzler was asked to disentangle the two governments from Summer Stage and he came up with what she called a workable solution which would eliminate three full-time district positions, making the program eligible for grants and donations but the two governments did not respond for months and there seemed to be a planned effort to remove Dietzler from the pack.

She also stated at that time the district posted a job for a new supervisor of K-12 arts, music and theater which included many of Dietzler's responsibilities at that time.

"The locally and nationally recognized Summer Stage program is a result of Harry Dietzler's vision," said Schmidt. "It is inconceivable that the district and township can provide the same vision and level of excellence."

Dietzler spoke next and he challenged McGarry.

"Your actions do not follow the words," Dietzler told the superintendent.



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

The Upper Darby Performing Arts Sign outside Summer Stage.

Dietzler said he was charged with disentangling the program and that his solution was putting it into the Upper Darby Arts and Education Foundation.

"No one wanted to talk about it, don't tell me we had meeting after meeting," Dietzler said. "The first time everyone in the organizations from the township and district sat down together in the same room was Sept. 30. We never sat down and looked at my proposal."

Dietzler next took aim at township officials.

"I wrote to the mayor and she ignored me for months," Dietzler said. "I was told by the CAO, who runs the Mayor, who said..."

At that a person in the crowd made a comment.

"We have a part-time

mayor and I run this township, is what you said Vince," Dietzler said as he turned and looked up into the crowd.

He was referring to Vincent Rigione, township Chief Administrative Officer. Upper Darby's home rule charter does decree the mayor as a part-time position.

"I offered him my proposal and he didn't even take it," Dietzler said.

Dietzler turned back towards the board and said he was trying to solve the challenge of keeping the program going and avoiding a mess like the one now faced.

"I was trying to bail you out of this," Dietzler told McGarry as he waved his arms. "I gave you a home-run, and here we are."

Dietzler thanked Damien

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for words of encouragement and continued.

“I’m sorry we’re here like this, I’m sorry this is happening,” said Dietzler. “When you say you want Summer Stage in this building, What Summer Stage are we talking about, Vince Rigione’s version of summer stage?”

He then theatrically imitated Rigione — saying

“We can do Summer Stage, we can do it ourselves, we don’t need Harry, we don’t need his staff, we can do it,” said Dietzler. “That’s not what we want.”

Dietzler said he has offered a solution and raised money to make it work.

Reached by phone on Thursday Rigione said Dietzler’s statements don’t really deserve a comment. He also said Dietzler has been offered the opportunity to be the creative director and director of Summer Stage and that

has never changed despite his retirement.

“Harry has always had the opportunity, the only way Harry would not be involved is if Harry chose to walk away,” Rigione said.

After Dietzler the board listened to one hour of comments from many of the 200 people who appeared in person.

Supporters of Summer Stage have planned on appearing at next Wednesday’s Upper Darby Council meeting.