

# PB board member's recusal demanded over girls' school

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The Pine Bush school board held its most recent meeting in the Pine Bush High School auditorium to allow for the anticipated high attendance regarding public comment on the Village of Bloomingburg's proposed private girls' school. Though many empty seats were available, those who wanted to ask questions or be heard for their allotted three minutes waited first to hear about the Town of Wallkill East Rotary's donation of free dictionaries to students in all four elementary schools, as well as a capital project update from Joseph Fuller of Fuller & D'Angelo with Paul Adamo. Fuller and Adamo explained the project will be broken into three main phases. As much work as possible will be done during summer months or non-school areas and portions will be put to bid for appropriate sub-contractors rather than the more expensive option of a single general contractor. Anticipation for the public comment portion built as board President Lloyd Greer explained the Pine Bush Central School's stance on the proposed girls' school. "... the board lacks the jurisdiction to review, supervise or determine any part of the application to establish or construct a school," Greer said. "That authority rests in the Village of Bloomingburg Planning Board and other public agencies that will be required to issue permits regarding its operation. "We have, however, received information from the Village of Bloomingburg with regards to their intent to be the lead agency for the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQRA). We are doing our due diligence to carefully review these documents and will provide a thorough response to the Village of Bloomingburg. "The board acknowledges its responsibility to ensure that all students receiving instruction within the Pine Bush School District boundaries do so in a safe environment. We will continue to remain an interested party during this process and advocate for the needs of the entire district ..." First to comment was Holly Roche of the Rural Community Coalition. Roche informed the board of the Village of Bloomingburg Planning Board's Sept. 26 meeting was in violation of the Open Meeting Law per Robert Freeman's "Open Government Laws" and requested the board also follow all ethics laws when discussing the proposed school. JoAnn Root raised her concerns regarding "... allowing someone on the board who has real estate dealings with Shalom Lamm (the Developer of the high density housing project and Learning Properties LLC for the proposed private girls' school)...and my concern is that there is a divided loyalty." Root went on to question the procedure for having that person removed from any discussion or decision-making and requested a copy of the ethics guidelines. Board President Greer responded legal counsel has advised the board is acting, "... within the confines of our Code of Ethics." Additionally, Superintendent Joan Carbone stated the board does not take action without the vote of the entire board. Sean Sweeney and John Kahrs both spoke on behalf of the newly formed Concerned Citizens Group of Pine Bush and implored the board to represent the people of the Pine Bush School District. Kahrs also reminded the board of their ethics policy No. 6110 and stated he hoped they would enforce it. "There is a level of distrust in the community, a huge level of distrust in the community," Kahrs stressed. "Do not let it extend to your school board." He also asked the board to consider taking action regarding not only activities that may have been illegal, but also those that may have been improper. He said the board has that right and authority as well as the resources. District resident Jimmy Korpai inquired if the board had any knowledge of a proposed boys' school in the Town of Crawford, to which Carbone said she had no knowledge of a boys' school, just rumblings. Korpai also asked about potential costs associated with the private school to the taxpayers. While Carbone said it would be impossible to place a set dollar amount on the costs, she stated the application indicated enrollment of 400 students in grades K - 8 with 60 of those students identified as being potentially in need of special education services. Korpai continued that it was interesting that a specific number of enrolled students and their needs have been identified when it is still not clearly known who will be living in the 396-unit housing development on Winterton Road. The board returned to the regular agenda before holding a second public participation segment. Liz Thorpe asked who determines if the private school students are in need of special education services to which Carbone replied, "The Pine Bush school District." Joann Root returned to podium after reviewing the board's Code of Ethics policy to ask the board to consider removing R.J. Smith and that the matter is not personal. Root cited R.J. Smith for having past business dealings with Shalom Lamm and said he, "cannot serve two masters." Though R.J. Smith had not made any comment earlier, he did ask to address the issue and stated, "I, nor anyone in my organization has had any involvement with Chestnut Ridge or the private girls' school now or in the past." Smith indicated he had previously given Lamm advice regarding business parks in local townships but had no involvement with any principals, corporations or entities owned by Mr. Lamm. After the meeting Joann Root was asked how she felt about Smith's response and she said, "I don't think he addressed it at all. He said he is not currently working with the developer. He has asked boards for changes on behalf of that developer. My point was as someone who has an obligation to the people who elected him, he should remove himself from any discussion or decisions regarding the impact of this development on our school district."

By SHARON MacGREGOR