

BASD Community Advisory Committee shares update

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HUNTER SMITH/THE EXPRESS Members of the BASD Community Advisory Committee met Wednesday morning in the Bellefonte Borough Council Chambers. From left are, Bellefonte Elks Exalted Ruler Terree Michel, Executive Director of FaithCentre Nicole Summers, CPI VP of Secondary Education Jessica Martin, CPI President MaryAnn Volders, BASD social work intern Megan, YSB Assistant Director of Prevention Reginald Meadows, BASD School Social Worker Maria McClatchey, Mayor of Bellefonte Buddy Johnson, Director of Youth and Discipleship for Faith Church Jeff Pilger, Interim Bellefonte Borough Manager David Pribulka, BASD Alumna Patti Hillard, Bellefonte Police Chief Bill Witmer, BASD Director of Fiscal Affairs Ken Bean and Superintendent Roy Rakszawski.

BELLEFONTE — In Bellefonte’s borough council chambers, representatives from local organizations gathered Wednesday to share resources and discuss how they’re supporting the community at a meeting of the BASD Community Advisory Committee.

Organized by the Mayor of Bellefonte, Gene “Buddy” Johnson, and Roy Rakszawski, superintendent of the Bellefonte Area School District, the advisory committee meets every few months to strategize ways member organizations can cooperate to benefit the community.

Beyond the school district and the borough, the group includes representatives from the Bellefonte Police Department, Youth Service Bureau (YSB), Faith Church, Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology (CPI), the Elks and FaithCentre.

Though Wednesday’s agenda included few actionable items, each member had the opportunity to share updates on how they are contributing to the community.

Kicking off the meeting were members of Bellefonte Elementary’s Student Leadership Team, who shared who they are, what they do and how they contribute to the school community.

Student Leadership Team

Four of the nine members of Bellefonte Elementary’s Student Leadership Team spoke during the meeting.

“As students, our mission is to help everyone feel excited to come to school, follow school rules and be kind to others,” said one student. “We lead by example and create fun, positive activities that make our school such a great place to learn and grow.”

The students meet during lunch with their advisors, Dean of Students Chris Cipro and Principal Michael Baughman, to develop and implement their ideas.

“They’re giving up some of the social parts of their day to help make the school a better place,” said Dean Cipro. “It’s really a statement of their leadership and their commitment to our school community.”

So far, they’ve helped classroom teachers on picture day and brainstormed activities that encourage students to follow schoolwide rules and get excited to learn.

“We hope to make our school an even kinder, happier place,” another student said.

Their first major project is creating kindness boards. The students plan to design the boards with a clear title and positive theme, email teachers to explain the project and provide classrooms with index cards for students to write uplifting messages that will be displayed around the school.

“We’re happy to have this group doing what they do,” said their advisor, Principal Baughman. “Seeing them kind of blossom into those leadership roles has been cool.”

Similar groups are established in the district’s high and middle schools.

Districtwide Capital Projects

Superintendent Roy Rakszawski said progress on the new school is coming along “very nicely,” with completion anticipated in the early months of 2026.

He also noted that the district is close to finalizing a deal on furnishings for the new elementary school.

“Our goal was to really find that sweet spot of quality, affordability and customer service,” Rakszawski said, noting that the purchase will be discussed in greater detail at an upcoming board meeting. “I’m really pleased with the outcome.”

District staff then addressed the status of the traffic light at the intersection of East Bishop Street and Airport Road.

According to Ken Bean, the district's director of fiscal affairs, the road hump at the intersection is being graded down about 11 feet to improve visibility. Officials confirmed the work will be completed in time for the start of classes at the new Bellefonte Elementary.

Rakszawski also announced the completion of Pleasant Gap Elementary's HVAC project, which replaced the school's outdated system that lacked proper heating and cooling.

School District Financial Outlook

The ongoing state budget impasse marks the 12th time in the past 25 years that the state has gone without a budget. According to Director of Fiscal Affairs Ken Bean, the district operates on an approximately \$65 million budget, about 34 percent of which is funded by the state.

Bean said the shutdown "doesn't impact us as much" because of the district's funding structure.

"That being said, I'm out millions of dollars right now that I could be earning (interest) on for the district," he added.

The district primarily relies on real estate tax income to operate, which has been coming in gradually since September. Those payments are expected to continue through December.

"Last time we had it go this long, we were probably good through February and March before we had to seriously look at the cash flow issue," Bean said.

The federal government shutdown is also affecting the district's finances, though to a much smaller degree. Only about two percent of the district's funding comes from the federal government, primarily through Title programs.

With major cuts to federal programs and the closure of SCI Rockview, a major local employer, members of the group expressed concern about how those changes could affect local families. About 33 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, many of whom rely on programs facing cuts like SNAP.

According to Bean, since COVID the district has increased its hiring of social workers and started providing free breakfast to help offset these challenges.

“We’ve put a lot of money into those different areas,” he said.

Bean said Penn State’s proximity reinforces the district’s economic and demographic stability, which has helped mitigate the community impact of past losses of major employers. Still, he’s contacted the Centre Tax Agency to provide data to help project the impact on income tax.

School Safety Training

Faculty and staff recently attended a day-long threat assessment team training. While the process is mandated, the superintendent said the district goes above and beyond to prepare staff to review and assess any potential threats.

“We take anything that resembles a threat very seriously,” Rakszawski said.

He explained that the process involves a rigorous, checklist-driven approach to asking the right questions.

“What’s really important about that is we have a multidisciplinary team,” he said. “It’s that multidisciplinary lens that leads to the best outcomes in those decisions.”

Chief Bill Witmer, speaking for the police department, said they are doing their best to address issues in local school zones. Each morning, he and at least one other officer patrol the four drop-off zones in their coverage area.

“We are out there,” Witmer assured.

The district has also strengthened its school presence by adding an additional School Police Officer (SPO), he said.

“I think our department works well with the school district,” said Witmer. “We all have the same goal, and that’s the safety of everybody.”

Future Junior Elks

Since their last committee meeting, the district has worked with Terree from the Elks to start a Junior Elks program. A high school student has volunteered to take the lead.

“We’re in the beginning stages of putting something together, but we’re really excited about that,” he said.

Youth Service Bureau

Assistant Director of Prevention for YSB Reginald Meadows says they serve all five of Centre County’s districts, but have “a real strong presence here in Bellefonte.”

Among the many ways they support youth in the county is their Bellefonte Youth Center, which is open to school-aged youth after school and throughout the summer. The center provides a safe, supervised environment for kids where they can be with friends, get a snack or a meal, find help with homework and participate in fun and meaningful programming with staff.

“We just recently changed our scheduling,” said Meadows, noting the decision was made to keep the center’s activities developmentally appropriate.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, children ages 5 to 12 are welcome. Tuesdays are reserved for ages 12 to 18, and on Thursdays, everyone from 6 to 18 can come to the center. They are closed Fridays.

The Youth Services Bureau (YSB) offers a wide range of programs, from parenting support and decluttering services to reunification and court-mandated programming. Meadows himself works in prevention, which operates a variety of school-based programs.

“We have a strong presence in the middle school, high school and now we will be starting with fifth-graders here at the elementary school,” said Meadows.

Across Centre County, Meadows has observed that middle school students are struggling with emotional regulation, relational aggression, decision-making and executive functioning.

“Kiddos in middle school—we’re seeing a lot of problems pop up,” he said. “After meeting with my director, we’re developing an action plan to catch things further upstream.”

That’s why the YSB is working to implement universal programming that includes younger students at local elementary schools.

“We’re needed everywhere,” Meadows said, and with the incoming casino in College Township, he said, “There’s going to be that negative trickle down.”

CPI

At CPI, a lot is happening. The school is currently implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to better align with member districts.

“Students are really engaged, excited,” said Jessica Martin, vice president of secondary education for CPI. “We are incentivizing employability skills.”

CPI President MaryAnn Volders said enrollment from sending districts has been strong. “You don’t walk into every community career and tech center in the commonwealth and have the support we have,” she said.

Volders added that the school is exploring new programs for high school students.

“Even though enrollment is where it needs to be, we know there are still students we are not serving,” she said.

CPI is currently considering expanding programs in electrical, plumbing and potentially aviation technology, though such growth will require additional time and funding.

On the adult education side, enrollment is down, prompting CPI to explore bringing back evening classes and increasing flexibility. Students who don’t want to attend during the day could soon take advantage of discounted evening classes instead.

“We need to look at new models of how we can approach post-secondary education,” Volders said.