

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

State orders school lawyer to reveal invoices

The Pennsylvania Office of Open Records has directed the Pottstown School District to release invoices submitted by its lawyer for legal services during the last five years.

Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government requested these records on January 6 under the state's new Right to Know Law.

About a month later, the school district provided 744 pages of legal invoices at a charge of 10 cents per page, but deleted the descriptions of all work performed.

The district's lawyer, called the solicitor, claimed this "redaction" of information was justified by attorney-client privilege.

We appealed this redaction to the newly created state Office of Open Records.

On March 3, state Appeals Officer Dena Lefkowitz upheld our appeal and ordered the district to provide the invoices again, this time without excluding descriptions of legal services performed, except for any specific information related to an individual child or employee as allowed by law.

As of today, two weeks later, the school district has still not complied with the state's order.

It is unfortunate that Pottstown's solicitor is encouraging a culture of secrecy, rather than transparency, in the school district. Even worse, school district officials are spending our money to keep us from knowing how they are spending our money.

Aside from the superintendent of

schools, the solicitor is the most important official in any school district. The solicitor tells school board members what they can and cannot legally do.

The solicitor attends all meetings of the school board and conducts all legal business.

According to the Pottstown School District's published budgets, the district has paid about \$750,000 for legal services over the last five school years.

The public clearly has a right to know exactly what services were performed for this money.

We have asked for other information from the school district that has also been withheld.

Since last April, the district's architects, Crabtree Rohrbaugh and Associates, have prepared estimates for several options regarding the renovation and enlargement of Pottstown's elementary schools. Under the Right to Know Law, we requested all correspondence between the district and Crabtree Rohrbaugh. This included drawings and other information provided to the district by Crabtree Rohrbaugh.

The district has refused to release this information, stating that it does not meet the definition of a public record. We have appealed this decision to the Office of Open Records as well. We will keep you posted on the results.

Thomas Hylton, a 36-year resident of Pottstown and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is treasurer and Web site editor of Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Summary

- **The state Office of Open Records has ordered the Pottstown School District to release all invoices submitted by its solicitor during the past five years.**
- **The district has yet to make these invoices public.**
- **It is unfortunate the district continues to withhold public information.**