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SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS WEIGH IN ON PIRATE PRESS

By Nate Birt

// News and online editor //

Members of the Boonville School Board last week offered mixed reactions to the news that Superintendent Mark Ficken had decided Oct. 2 to stop distribution of some editions of The Pirate Press.

"Right now, this is not a board issue," President Brenda Campbell said. As of midweek, the board had not taken any action on the Boonville High School student newspaper, she said.

The paper has received national attention in the weeks after Ficken said he had stopped distribution of some issues of the student paper because of a violation of school protocol. The Associated Press ran a brief about the Pirate Press around Oct. 2, and the paper has since received coverage from KBIA radio and KOMU TV in Columbia, the Arlington, Va.-based Student Press Law Center and the First Amendment Center, which has offices in Nashville, Tenn., and Washington, D.C.

Ficken has said that he received a

call from high school Principal Jay Webster saying that he had not reviewed the paper before it was printed. Ficken has said the protocol requiring such review has been in place for three or four years.

The BDN on Oct. 12 filed a Missouri Sunshine Law request seeking, among other documents, a copy of that editing protocol and electronic correspondence among Ficken, Webster, journalism teacher Stephanie Carey and school board members. The BDN has been in contact with the district's attorney and is waiting to learn how much will be charged for the records and when they will be available.

Next meeting

WHAT: Boonville School Board
WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesday
WHERE: Board conference room, 736 Main St.

ON THE AGENDA: Here's a look at some of the issues on Wednesday's agenda:

- Approval of tax rate (State Auditor's Office) after Board of Equalization
- Approval of 2008-09 fiscal year audit
- LSE cell phone policy

Vice President Charles Melkersman told the BDN on Oct. 8 that he supported Ficken's decision about the newspaper because protocol was not followed.

"Articles need to portray accuracy," Melkersman said at the time. He referenced articles that appeared in the paper about school lunch and crowded buses, saying they contained misinterpretations and inaccurate comments.

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Campbell

Melkersman

Lammers

Roach

Kluck

// BDN file photos

Boonville School Board members reached for this article indicated that they had heard about Superintendent Mark Ficken's decision to stop distribution of some copies of The Pirate Press. Some said the school paper was not a board issue and others said they needed more information.

Treasurer Jeff Lammers said last week that he thinks Ficken made the right call and did his job as an administrator.

"We're a policy-making board," Lammers said, identifying the student paper as an "administrative issue." He said that if an issue of policy violation were to arise, the board would address it. He said he had received several comments from people about the paper.

Board member Bob Roach said that he hadn't had contact from his constituents about the issue and wasn't familiar enough with it to comment.

"I don't know enough to talk about this right now," Roach said.

Board member Richelle Kluck said that she would need to have conversations with all board members before commenting about the paper.

"I need to be privy to all information from all different directions," she said.

Messages left Monday afternoon for the remaining board members, Chris Dowling and Ben Phelps, had not been returned as of this morning.

A copy of the school board's agenda for its Wednesday meeting makes no mention of the Pirate Press. Calls seeking comment from Campbell and Ficken on whether the paper will be discussed at that meeting had not been returned as of this morning.





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Timeline: BDN's Sunshine Law request

A look at efforts by the Boonville Daily News to obtain public records about the decision to hold copies of The Pirate Press student paper:

Oct. 12: The BDN files a 15-point Sunshine Law request for public records with the Boonville R-1 School District. Custodian of records Pam Jaeger signs off on the document to indicate that it has been received.

Among other documents, the request seeks a copy of the protocol stating that the principal must review the paper before it is printed; e-mails and other electronic correspondence between Superintendent Mark Ficken, Principal Jay Webster, journalism teacher Stephanie Carey, journalism students and members of the school board; and copies of curriculum and guidelines pertaining to the newspaper production class at Boonville High School.

To read the complete request, go to BoonvilleDailyNews.com and search using the phrase "Sunshine Law."

Thursday: Natalie Hoernschemeyer, an attorney with St. Louis-based Mickes Goldman O'Toole LLC, which represents the

district, faxes a response letter to the BDN. The letter states that the law office is in the process of responding to the paper's records request.

Hoernschemeyer states that while the district will need more than three days to process the request, "We anticipate the request will be processed on or before October 23, 2009."

The letter also states: "Further, Requests No. 4 to 13 and 15 are vague in that they are not limited by any subject matter; therefore, please contact me if these requests can be limited by subject matter."

Friday: The BDN responds with a letter stating that it is seeking all electronic correspondence — "including but not limited to e-mails sent or received using district computers, and text-messages sent using district-provided electronic devices such as cell phones or pagers" — identified in requests No. 4 to 13 and 15, on any subject matter.

"I am requesting that you identify the number of records available for each of my 15 requests — including those that I have not re-listed here," the letter signed by news and online editor Nate Birt states.

Wednesday: The BDN anticipates receiving correspondence from the district's attorney by this day.