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PLEASANTVILLE

## Infighting halts Pleasantville school board meeting

CLAIRE LOWE Staff Writer 22 hrs ago



The Pleasantville Board of Education meeting Jan. 15 at the high school cafeteria started with a quorum but ended abruptly after two board members left mid-meeting.

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CLAIRE LOWE Staff Writer

PLEASANTVILLE — Teachers were not hired, field trips were not approved, bills were not paid and business was not conducted when a Pleasantville school board meeting ended abruptly Tuesday after more than an hour of bickering among members.

Despite having six of its nine members present, the board's first full meeting of the year never got past public comment. Two board members left midway through a meeting marred by arguments over board control for the second meeting in a row.

"It's not right if we have to do this every time, and it's not right to the community," said board President Carla Thomas after the meeting.



**With 4 new members, Pleasantville school board off to rocky start**

Thomas was at the center of the fighting with newly elected members Jerome Page and Richard Norris, who finally took the oath of office prior to the meeting.

Neither Norris nor Page could be reached Wednesday by phone.

When Thomas stopped Norris from speaking during public comment, he accused the board of being controlled by an "organized crime family," referring to Thomas and the Callaways of Atlantic City.

Thomas' uncles, Craig and Dave Callaway, were in the audience.

After the meeting, when asked about the comment, Thomas answered, "I thought he was talking about his own family."



### **For fourth time, Pleasantville school board meeting canceled for lack of quorum**

Following a 15-minute recess during which board member James Barclay left, bringing the members present down to five, board attorney James Carroll said Norris had the right to speak as a member of the public.

Norris was directed to the microphone, where he detailed the events that led to his removal from the board in 2017. He again stated that his paperwork was in order in time for reorganization and he should have been allowed to be sworn in Jan. 2.

“The residents of the city of Pleasantville are witnessing how an organized crime family can run the Board of Education in this town,” Norris said. “It’s time for a change, and the time is now.”

Norris and Page attempted a motion to revisit the vote for board leadership, but Thomas and Carroll said they were not following Robert’s Rules of Order. Carroll directed Page to submit the motion for the next meeting. During this back and forth, board member Bernice Couch stood up and was escorted out of the meeting by Dave Callaway without explanation, leaving just four members and no quorum to continue.

**Not enough votes to oust Pleasantville school board member**

Meanwhile, in the back of the meeting room sat Christopher Mancuso, a defensive coordinator for the Pleasantville Greyhounds football team, eagerly awaiting approval for a job as a physical education teacher at the South Main Street School.

Mancuso had been substitute teaching in the district since the start of the year and was hoping to get a full-time position.

During the reorganization meeting earlier in the month, there was a public outcry for Mancuso, including a show of support from the high school football players.

After Tuesday's meeting, Mancuso sat sullen. He declined to comment about the status of his position.

**Pleasantville school board meeting canceled again due to lack of quorum**

As the board members filtered away from the meeting table, teachers could be heard asking about the field trips they had planned that needed approval. Pleasantville Education Association President Tim Newkirk said Wednesday that staff was disappointed in the conduct of the board.

"It's really disheartening to the staff. Everyone's upset. A lot of teachers have clubs and field trips and things that need to be approved, and everybody's waiting to see if their things get approved," he said. "If they don't get approved, we can't go."

He said he would like to see the board leadership change — the PEA backed Sharnell Morgan, Page and Norris in the November election — and steps taken to shore up facilities and the staff.

"I would hope new leadership could bring some good change to the district," said Newkirk. "We're really short-staffed, so getting back our teachers and our support staff who were RIFed (laid off) would help."



### **Six students, six stories about life in Pleasantville schools**

Newkirk said there are also health issues due to the upkeep of the buildings, including mold.

“The custodians and maintenance guys not being here has led to a lot of unsanitary conditions. There’s a lot of teachers and kids getting sick,” he said.

New Jersey School Boards Association spokeswoman Janet Bamford said board conflict isn’t uncommon and that the state organization offers help to boards who request it.

“These are elected officials that need to learn to work together,” Bamford said. “NJSBA often will go in and facilitate team-building exercises or conduct a retreat for the board to try to build a working relationship among the board members.”

### **Layoffs latest in long story of turmoil for Pleasantville schools**

The Pleasantville school board has a state-appointed fiscal monitor, Constance Bauer, who has oversight on financial decisions but generally does not have a hand in other governance. The state Department of Education has some mechanisms for general oversight of boards though not related to political disputes, which are usually resolved through elections, said DOE spokesman Michael Yapple.

“While differences of opinion can occur on any board, school boards have an obligation to provide oversight of their district. Our expectation is that boards of education will carry out their responsibilities with a focus on providing a quality education to the children in the community,” Yapple said.

After the meeting, Thomas said Norris and Page have a personal agenda and she couldn’t speak to what happened during the meeting.



“The only people who can explain is them two. They come in with a personal agenda, who knows,” she said.

Board members Anny Melo, Cassandra Clements and Hassan Callaway were not present Tuesday. Thomas said Melo was out of town, Callaway had a conflict with his work schedule and Clements had a family emergency.

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Pleasantville school board fills vacancy, but another could arise



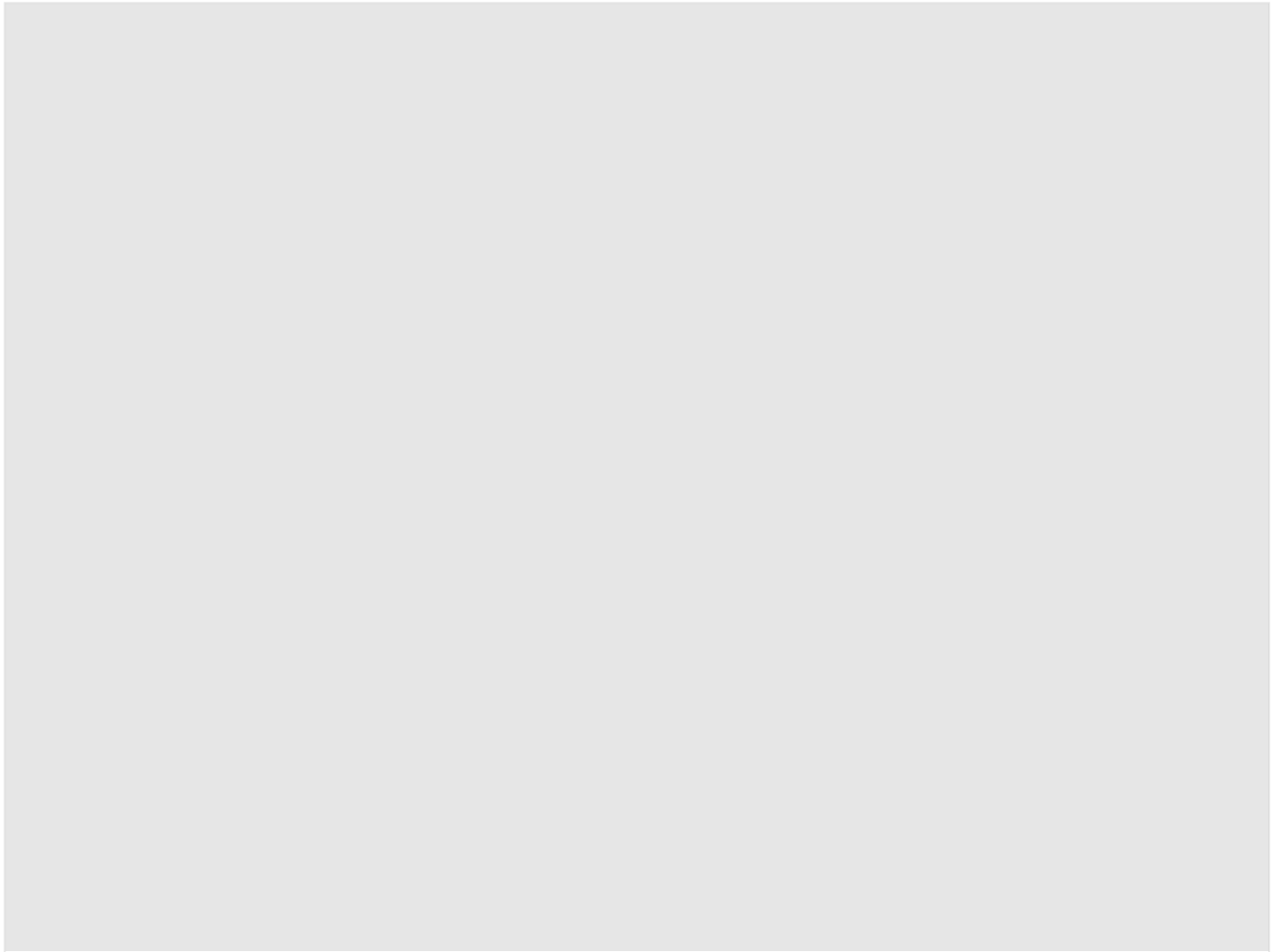
Pleasantville school board reinstates custodians without boiler licenses



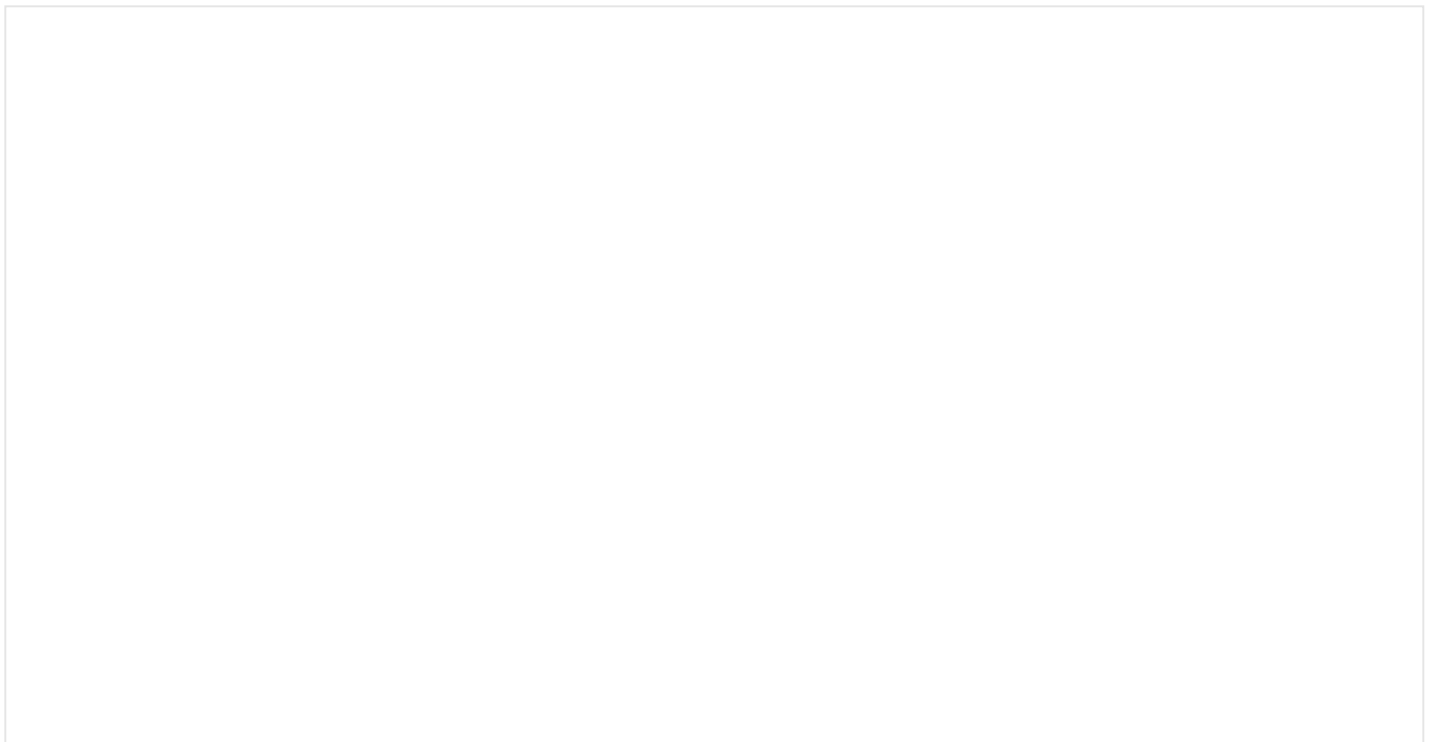
Pleasantville school board and union members clash at meeting

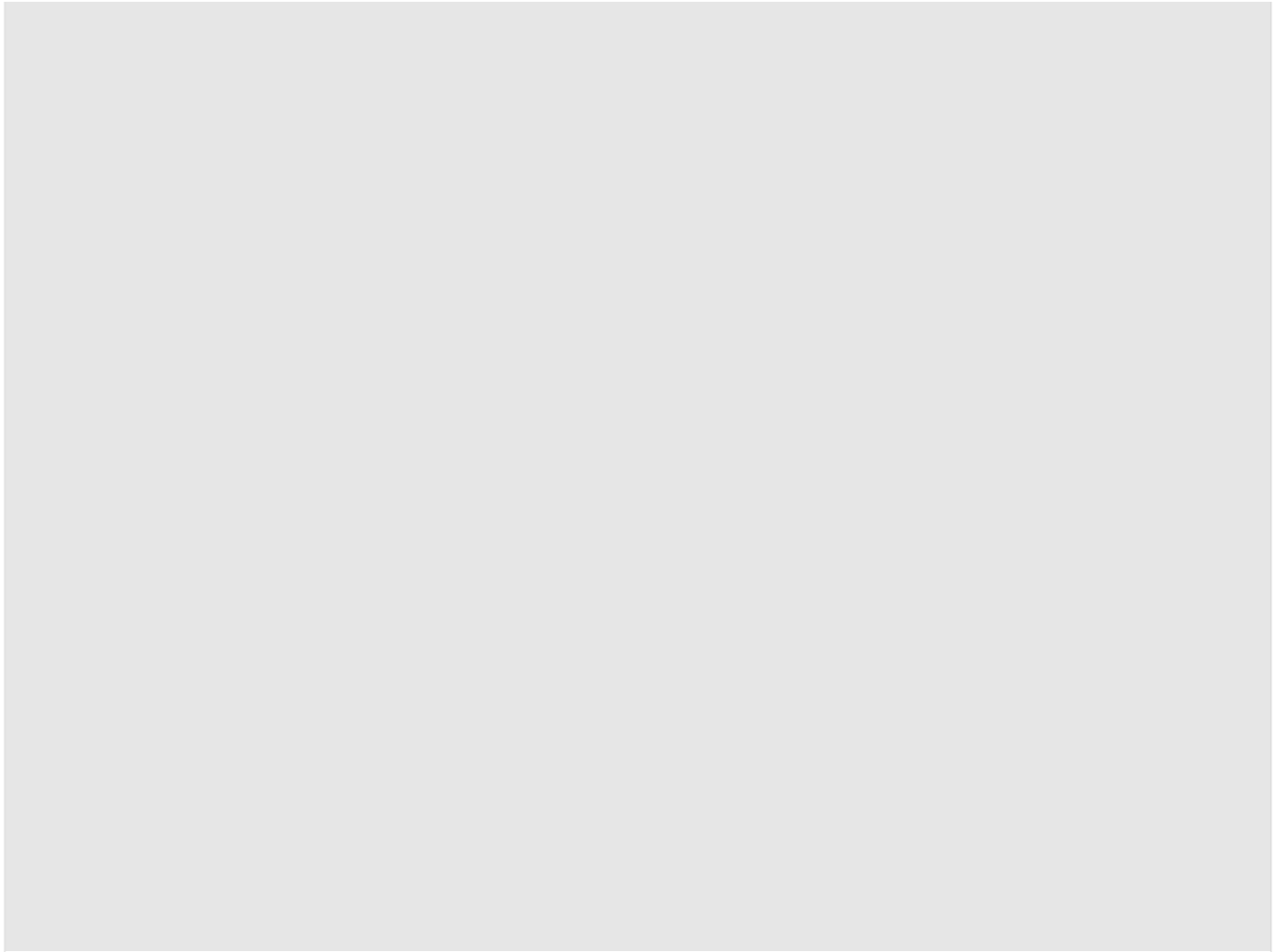


Pleasantville school leaders want less input from state monitor

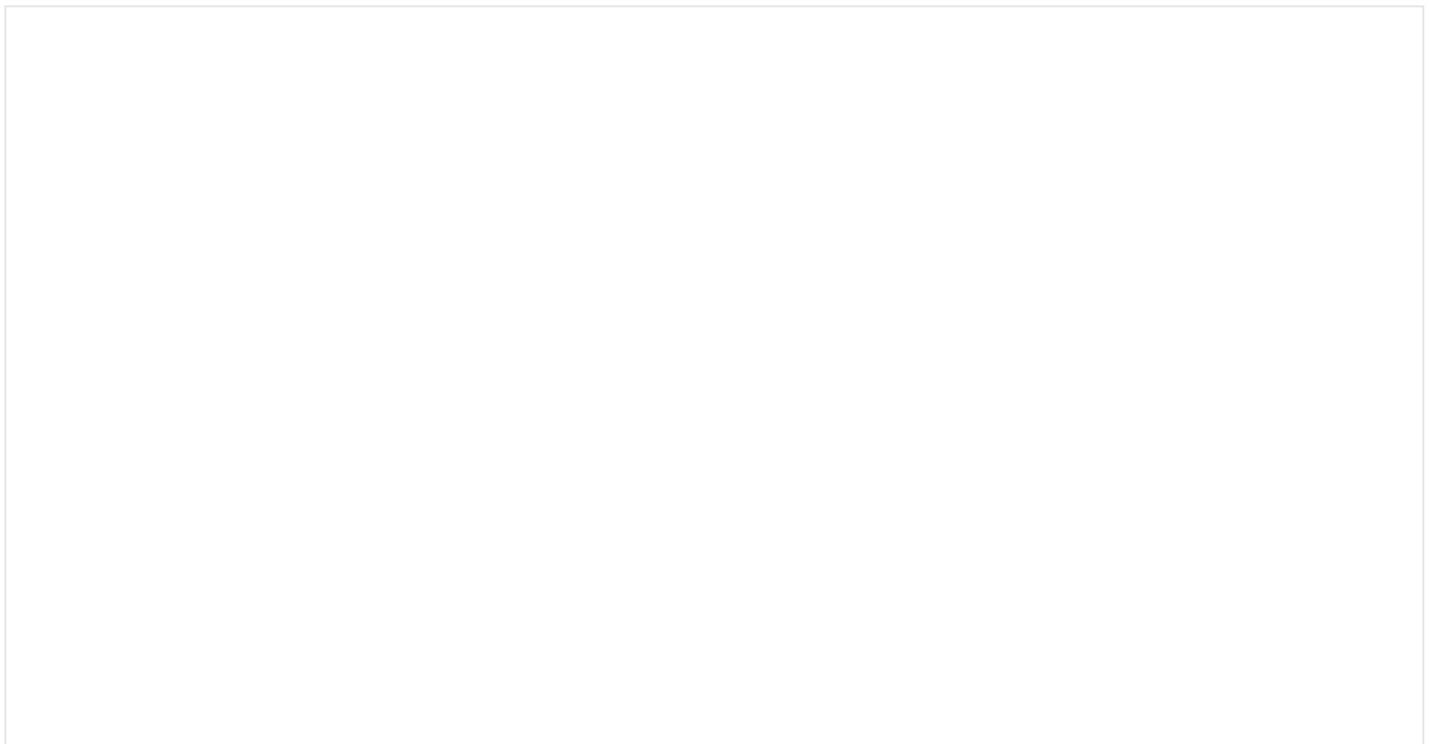


Pleasantville school board changes mind on transfer of athletic director





### Pleasantville school board bickering escalates



## New superintendent in Pleasantville stays positive despite controversy

### OTHER BOARD NEWS

Superintendent Clarence Alston in his report to the board noted that after more than a year, the elevator in the middle school has been fixed and is awaiting state inspection before it can be open to the public.

In addition, the district is anticipating a visit from the state Schools Development Authority at its North Main Street and Leeds Avenue schools for inspection of its HVAC systems, which are in need of replacement. Alston said temporary units have been put in place until the repairs can be made, which is contingent on funding.

Alston said the schools will likely not be available for summer programs, so the district is making contingency plans for its other schools.

"We are hoping that the work will be finished and we will be able to use them in September," Alston said.

During public comment, teacher Susan Swezeny asked about staffing in the television production class and for a mold report from the district. Swezeny also chastised the board over its conduct.

"I would like to think that there's something in your policy that says something about a level of civility on this board," she said. "You represent Pleasantville. I think we can notch it up a bit."

Early childhood teacher Carol Zubkov brought in photos of the trailers at the North Main Street School with missing siding and a splintered split-rail fence. She asked the board to come up with a better solution.

Another school employee, Calvin Rice, also spoke during public comment about his position in the district, which was on the agenda for termination. He said he was being terminated unfairly, without following proper protocol, due to a false accusation.

"I haven't harmed a child. I never have, I never will," Rice told the board.

Steve Young of the South Jersey Chapter of Al Sharpton's National Action Network spoke on behalf of Rice.

"It's very important that your policy and procedure is done correctly and done right," said Young. "We were very surprised to know to have this recommended at this time without the due process."

Rice was told he could attend the executive session to discuss his position, however the meeting ended before any action was taken.

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## Claire Lowe

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I began covering South Jersey in 2008 after graduating from Rowan University with a degree in journalism. I joined The Press in 2015. In 2013, I was awarded a NJPA award for feature writing as a reporter for The Current of Hamilton Township.

