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DEVELOPING

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

CLAIRE LOWE Staff Writer 8 hrs ago



Board attorney Ben Brenner, left, and business administrator Elisha Thompkins, front center, discuss board member elect Richard Norris, right, taking the oath of office with board member elect Jerome Page, back center.

Claire Lowe / Staff Writer

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PLEASANTVILLE — Only three of the four new members elected to the local Board of Education were sworn in during Thursday's reorganization meeting.

While Jerome Page, Cassandra Clements and Sharnell Morgan took their seats on the board, Richard Norris was unable to take the oath of office because of a lack of paperwork, district Business Administrator Elisha Thompkins told the board member-elect that evening.

Following the meeting, Norris said he believed he should have been sworn in and showed a reporter his background check and fingerprint receipt, which he brought with him. He said he had reached out to Thompkins during business hours Thursday to confirm his eligibility but never spoke on the phone with anyone there. He said he also confirmed his eligibility with the state.

Thompkins left after the meeting and could not be reached for comment Friday.

Norris, a former teacher in Pleasantville and Atlantic City, was previously elected to the board in November 2016 but was removed after taking his seat for failure to get his fingerprints done.

Norris said Thursday he was told at that time by the board that fingerprints weren't necessary because of his employment in the district. That turned out not to be the case, leading to his removal.

"My opinion is that the meeting is still ran by the 'Good Old Boys' and if you're not a member of a favorite clique, you will be harassed, intimidated and bullied," Norris said after the meeting. "It's time for a change."

Thursday's meeting was particularly combative, with several moments of conflict between reappointed board President Carla Thomas and Page.

Prior to Page's swearing in, the new member questioned why Norris wasn't being sworn in, too, drawing Thompkins and board attorney Benjamin Brenner into a discussion over his eligibility. During the discussion, Thomas yelled out several times from her seat at the board table, "Come on" and "Come on, Ben, don't fold."

After the new members took their seats, Page, who previously served 15 non-consecutive years on the board since the 1990s, asked to pull for discussion the agenda item setting the meeting schedule. He suggested eliminating small committees and instead having "a committee of the whole" meet once monthly for discussion, in addition to the monthly action meeting.



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"We're a young board, and we need to know in every category what is going on," Page said.

Thomas interrupted Page saying, "You're just going to keep going on and on. We know how it is."

She also would not let him make a motion to change the number of monthly meetings from one to two. Instead, Thomas made a motion to change the meeting start time from 6 p.m. to 5 p.m., which passed unanimously. Eventually, Thompkins told Page to make his motion, which failed 4-3.

At another point, Thomas told Page to address her as "Madam President" and threatened to call the police to the meeting to remove him from the board.

After the election of the board president and vice president, but before the meeting ended, board member Hassan Callaway left with no explanation.

In other business, the Carroll Law Firm of Smithville will continue to serve as the board solicitor for the district and James Barclay will serve as board vice president for the second year in a row.

Thomas thanked the board for unanimously voting her in as president for a fourth year in a row.

"I will continue to work for the betterment of our students, our staff and our community," Thomas said.

After the meeting both new members Page and Morgan described the meeting as "terrible" and "divided." A message was left Friday on Thomas' voicemail to comment.

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