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Board trying to establish uniform per diem policy for members, administrators when they are traveling out of town

By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

Many questions have been raised recently regarding travel expenses for USD No. 480. In an effort to add more fiscal responsibility to the district, the policy committee drafted a travel policy to be voted on during the board of education's Monday evening meeting.

Currently, there are no caps on meal costs for district employees.

The expenditures are reviewed on a case-by-case basis by business director Jerry Clay. The new policy up for review would set a \$38 cap on meals per day for in-state travel and a \$45 cap on meals for out of state travel.

"The new policy is a per diem set for in-state and out of state, there will not be money advanced out in front, it will be either take the company credit card or pay for the expenses on your own and come back to the district and be reimbursed – not to exceed those per diems," Clay explained. "The exception to that is based upon location, if we have someone travelling to Boston, then the new policy does allow the superintendent to say that 'I understand that in Boston you are probably not going to be able to buy lunch for 10 bucks.' If they will need more money, then it is up to the superintendent to say yes or no."

Board member Cheryl Louderback asked if the new policy would actually lower travel expenses for the district.

“We are trying to set a policy that we can live with,” Superintendent Vernon Welch said. “We don’t know if it is going to lower or raise expenses.”

Board president Dan Diepenbrock felt the new policy was just more paperwork for the district and felt a simpler approach of giving each district employee a per diem check before they go out of town would alleviate a lot of red tape.

“I think that is a big mistake,” Diepenbrock said. “This is not a per diem policy, this is the same thing we have now – it just has a cap on it. So we are going to ask some teacher to go to Dallas or San Diego or Chicago or Timbuktu and spend three to five days away from his or her family and say by the way, you can’t spend over \$45 a day?”

Board member Nick Hatcher tried to explain to Diepenbrock why the policy committee, of which he is a member, came up with the new policy and how it will help the district appear more fiscally responsible.

“Mr. Diepenbrock, hold on a second,” Hatcher said. “During the policy committee meeting, I think we talked about how we could allow on those overnight trips, they have to fill out a form requesting the overnight expenditures. In that, they have to request food expense as well. If they feel like the per diem food expense is going to exceed, they can request additional monies to pay for those meals. The overnight request will still go through the same channels they have in the past. It has to go to the superintendent to be approved. It will be at the his discretion and his staff that would either set the standard for that trip, if it does exceed the per diem, then they can allow for that.

“So, it does give some flexibility and it does put the burden on our superintendent and his staff, which they have that now,” Hatcher continued. “But it does set a guideline for the amount of money that we feel we should be able to spend. I am not in favor of a per diem.

I tend to think it makes honest people dishonest, that they have to spend that much money. If their expenditures were less than \$38, we would reimburse them for whatever they spent, if it was above \$38, anything above \$38 is on them or it is up to the superintendent to approve any expenditures over the per diem amount.”

Diepenbrock continued to feel that unnecessary work would be created for administration due to the new policy.

“But why create that work and that paperwork, why not make it easier and just go to the per diem?” he asked. “Dishonesty is not an issue.

The issue is, we are sending employees out somewhere, trying to make it easy for them and cost effective for us.”

Board member and policy committee member Reid Petty explained the only change to the policy was the cap on the amount that could be spent on meals.

“This is exactly what we have been doing, just now we will have a cap,” Petty said. “If they think they are going to go over that cap, they need to let Mr. Welch know so he can decide.”

Diepenbrock continued to feel the new policy, as well as the old policy, kept administration busy with things they should not have to be concerned with.

“Why create this communication between the teacher and Mr. Welch when he is running the district?” Diepenbrock asked. “Let’s change it, let’s make it easier. Let’s do a per diem so we don’t have to mess with that. He can focus on educating kids, and Jerry (Clay) can focus on finding the money that we need rather than all this paperwork of receipts and keeping track of stuff like that.”

“Are you wanting us to just hand out the cash then?,” Petty asked Diepenbrock.

"Yes, that is what you do," Diepenbrock responded. "They fill out their request and we give them a check."

Petty felt that if a check was given out before each trip, the money would not all be spent on meals. Due to the fact that it is taxpayer money, he felt that was not an appropriate way to handle funds.

"We brought that up actually, but we thought we would actually lose money if we gave everyone \$45 for every day they were out of state because they wouldn't actually spend that amount," Petty said. "The one thing is that you have \$45 out of state and you decide not to eat breakfast and then you have Subway for lunch and dinner, you could pocket almost your whole per diem on whatever you want."

"I don't care," Diepenbrock replied. "Don't care."

"But that is the district's money, though," Petty quickly responded.

"You are going to save a miniscule amount of money for all of the paperwork and the work that you are creating for administration when you could very easily go to the per diem and be done with it,"

Diepenbrock added. "I asked this person to leave his or her home for a day or two days or three days, and if they want to eat granola bars, that is what they can do. But we are depriving them from a home cooked meal or whatever else they normally do. That is essentially the compensation for it."

As a result of recent accusations regarding district spending, board member Nick Hatcher felt the new policy was a very responsible solution to the problem.

“It is my opinion that this policy shows that we are physically responsible for the money that goes out of the district,” Hatcher said. “We are watching our dollars.”

A vote was taken regarding the new policy, a three to three vote caused the motion to fail. Nick Hatcher, Jim Jury and Reid Petty voted in favor of the policy. Dan Diepenbrock, Stacy Johnson and Cheryl Louderback opposed the policy – board member Tammy Sutherland- Abbott was absent.

Board members asked the administration to bring back alternative plans to a future board meeting in order to bring about a travel policy all board members and administrators could agree upon.

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