

# Schools turn to naming rights

By BARBARA S. ROTHSCHILD • Courier-Post Staff • June 16, 2010

**CHERRY HILL** — A high school cafeteria named for an organic food corporation?

An auditorium bearing the moniker of a bank or an arts group?

It could happen in Cherry Hill soon -- possibly staving off further cuts to programs and restoring others eliminated under the district's current budget crisis.

For the past three years, the Cherry Hill Education Foundation has provided more than \$202,500 in grant funding for educational programs in the district. Monies were raised through fundraisers such as Dancing with the Teachers and Cherry Hill's Got Talent.

Now, the foundation wants to do more. With the blessing of the district and its school board, the nonprofit group recently established a committee to identify district assets that can be offered for naming rights.

The 11-member committee asked the district for a list of assets. It plans to assign monetary values to the assets and seek corporate and private sponsors the committee says will complement, not compromise, district integrity.

"The Marlboro Man is not going to have any rights here," said Lloyd Birnbaum, an attorney on the committee who helped oversee naming rights for Philadelphia's Wachovia Center in its earlier CoreStates incarnation. "BP Oil would not be a company I would want advertising, but maybe an alternative energy company would provide a positive example for our children."

"We can make this a true community-wide effort," Birnbaum added. "If average, middle-class families in Cherry Hill want to participate, they could have a plaque on every water fountain."

The school board, which had qualms about naming rights in the past, now embraces the concept.

When a grass-roots group spearheaded an effort to build a stadium at Cherry Hill High School East several years ago, it promised \$1.5 million in corporate funding, but became discouraged when the board got bogged down in whether it would be proper or even fair to accept the money.

But the district lost \$12.8 million in state funding for 2009-10 and 2010-11. A pared-down budget failed at the polls and the district had to make more cuts.

The board is very supportive of this effort," President Seth Klukoff said. "We asked the public to come up with creative and strategic ways to provide alternate funding.

"We are already starting to plan our 2011-2012 budget, and we have to be very prudent for any circumstances that may come down the pike from Trenton."

Foundation President Eleanor Stofman said the main auditorium at Cherry Hill High School West is at the top of the asset list.

"It was never named, and is always referred to as the 'new' auditorium," Stofman said.

The committee is confident it can attract sponsors during the coming year.

"It behooves us all to do this sooner rather than later," said committee member Howard Silverstone, an accountant lending his expertise. "It's a matter of understanding the process and helping it along."

Not all districts are interested in selling naming rights, even in hard times.

"If you begin to do that, do you alienate portions of the community? You have to deal with someone sweeping into town with something inappropriate," Mount Laurel district spokeswoman Marie Reynolds said.

But Washington Township has already embraced the concept and is moving full-steam ahead.

In 2004, the district accepted a five-year corporate commitment of \$300,000 from Commerce Bank for the naming rights of its 2,500-seat Centre for the Performing Arts at Washington Township High School.

After it merged Commerce with TD Banknorth, the latter agreed to a one-year extension of the contract through Sept. 30. The district plans to continue sponsorship with TD Bank or a higher bidder, school board member Jim Murphy said.

"We've got a beautiful building, and it's maybe worth a little more than what we get right now," Murphy explained.

The board is putting together a proposal for Dr. Richard Rothman of the Rothman Institute orthopedics practice.

District spokeswoman Jan Giel said there is also limited sponsor signage at the township football field. Murphy wants to take it much farther without changing the name of the field, which is dedicated to late coach Tom Brown.

The school board has approached Atlanta-based Coca-Cola and a bottling plant in Philadelphia about putting one of its brand names on the high school sports complex.

"Our girls' sports teams are called Minutemaids, and Coca-Cola makes Minute Maid orange juice," Murphy said.

"If Minute Maid would support the Minutemaids, hopefully it would pay for our entire sports program. That would be utopia."

What about the boys' teams, known as the Minutemen?

Murphy noted Major League Baseball's Houston Astros play at Minute Maid Park. He also plans to approach the New England-based Minuteman Group, an insurance agency, about sponsorship.

With enough sponsorship, Murphy said, the district may be able to bring back freshman sports, cut from the 2010-11 budget.

"We've got to look outside the box without pressing on our taxpayers anymore," he said.

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