

>Phone call after BoE meeting to Ms. Boateng:<

>Hey, Brianna. This is Andrew Sholtz from Bethesda Beat Magazine. I'm calling to say that a committee has decided to go forward with the water bottle filling stations, and the BOE had mentioned your work. Yeah, it feels good to have an impact with your work, right?<

## 6/21/21 BoE Fiscal Management Committee Meeting

Recording available at [youtu.be/lvudlir0Rvs](https://youtu.be/lvudlir0Rvs)

### Transcript of Agenda Item #1: Hydration Stations in MCPS Schools

**MS. LYNNE HARRIS:** The first item on our agenda is efficient operations, use of supplemental grants for infrastructure improvements, and that is going to be talking about some of our sustainability issues, and most directly, we're going to be talking a little bit about an issue that was brought very succinctly and thoughtfully to the board table at our May 25th board meeting - when we had four students from the MCR Environmental Affairs Task Force, Bri Akuamoah-Boateng, Advika Agarwal, Ami Mundra, and Aparna Ganesh, testify about water bottle filling stations and empty gas cools and collectively together they really covered sort of 360 degrees of that issue, from human health to environmental health, water safety, to the sustainability piece and the budget piece. So, hats off to the students for keeping us focused on things that really matter to them, in making their schools safe and welcoming and healthy spaces for learning. So Mr. Adams, I'm going to turn it over to you.

**MR. SETH ADAMS:** Good morning, thank you for the opportunity to present. I would say also based on that discussion, Ms. Harris, there was a great opinion article by one of those students this weekend that really did a excellent summary of the advocacy and their work from a student perspective. And I really encourage folks to take a look at that because it was a well written and well encompassing article just putting together some of the thoughts and approaches around this work.

...This is a really important topic. A topic that we have been talking about for many years and quite honestly, one where we have implemented but struggled to implement from a system wide perspective. So what I would say is we have excellent opportunity to address concerns around equity of safe water, equity of facility improvements, and do it in a way that really does allow us to focus on recovery... What we're going to talk about today is the water bottle filling station approach. And I think there's a lot of folks out there that probably would say, "Why do you need water bottle filling stations? What is different about these compared to what we're all used to?" And I would say one of the big differences is that obviously, you put a sustainability lens on this, making sure that we do reduce the amount of plastic bottles that come through our waste stream, we reduce the large 5-gallon plastic jugs. But at the same time, when you think about where we are with COVID and how students and, quite frankly, many of the staff members obtain their water through the use of bubblers. For those that are not familiar with bubblers, which what we traditionally call water fountains, are where you put your mouth really close to the fixture, and I think we would all agree that coming out of COVID, that certainly has not been a process in which we can say with certainty that it is clean and we're doing what we need to from a school and from a use perspective to make sure that they they meet the high standards of cleanliness that we put forth.

So again, coming back to our water bottle filling stations. We've started this effort over the years. For each building renovation we include water bottle filling stations, but that has not necessarily been a systemwide process, it has been focused on individual schools. So we still have 93 schools to go to add working stations, as well as 43 of the ones that do have them only have one of the filling stations in operation. So part of our approach moving forward is, we do want to take advantage of these supplemental grants, particularly ESSER funds, to focus in on one of the 13 criteria around eligibility. That one eligibility piece is improving school facilities to reduce risk of virus transmission and exposure to environmental health hazards. So again, when you think about just that simple act of how you get your water at a school building or public building, this definitely fits within our approach to those efforts.

So just to talk a little bit about what we're going to do next. As we're moving through the ESSER grant application - and those that are wondering what ESSER is, we probably use that term a lot, but it is elementary and secondary school emergency relief funds. We are working with DA Collins and his team, and Mr. Damerell and his team, to make sure we put together the correct application to take advantage of those of those funds.

What we're looking to do is, also on a parallel track and it is out today: A bid for qualified contractors to put together a proposal to come into each of our schools to have at least two water bottle filling stations at each school. And we are looking to bring that contract to the Board of Education in July for consideration. Some may say, "Well, how can you bring a contractor without a grant application?" One of the ways that we're looking to move this forward is similar to the way these grants have also worked- look at it as a reimbursement opportunity. So our approach will be to look at the existing capital and operating funds, to take advantage of a pretty rapid installation process between now and the start of the year, or even very close to the beginning of the school year, to do as much of this work as possible.

And then as we're going through the ESSER grant process, to look at it as a reimbursement process, I would say there's some risk with that, but I would say this is an area of work that definitely fits well within that grant application process. So we feel very confident that this is one that would have a positive outcome... but at the same time, I also know that our County Council partners, as we are not a funding body, are also very supportive of this effort. So it feels very good to have those partners in both the Council and the County Executive, and many of our state delegates as we're moving through this. So from a funding perspective, again, when we bring this to the full board, we're going to feel very confident that we're well positioned to take advantage of funds, but also have those partnerships from the County Council perspective.

I think this is important because, some may say, "Is our water safe to drink?" I think there are going to be two distinctions here. Our water in our building is safe. (...) One of the things that we're very focused on is essentially, the act of drinking water. And again, back to that bubbler piece - you physically have to have your mouth very close to a fixture. That is the area we are focusing on. But at the same time, I do not want to lose sight that we're constantly working through our lead and water program. We test every fixture and if there are lead levels that exceed the state guidelines, those fixtures are pulled out of service.

But with the water bottle filling stations, it is important to note that they do come with filters. So these filters are point of use filters. They're activated carbon filters that filter out 98+% of any lead. They focus on chlorine reduction as well as particulates in that .5 to 1 micron level. So it is a supplement to

the safe water program, but I think it's really important to differentiate that if a student does drink from a bubbler [fountain] during the school year next year, it's not that it's unsafe water. But we're going to have to spend quite a bit of time to make sure that we work through that process, we make sure that students understand the hygiene that's associated with that. But we do really focus on trying to take advantage of the water bottle filling stations that we put in these buildings.

And then the last thing I want to point out - and with every initiative comes an element that we have to focus on safety and training, and that's going to be around our sustainability efforts with these reusable water bottles. Reusable water bottles are the pursuit for sustainability to reduce those plastics, but we definitely are going to have to put together a robust messaging plan for our families that there is cleaning and disinfecting that has to go on with water bottles as well. So we don't want some of those unintended practices... So there's definitely work to be done around this area, but we feel this is a really important start.

I would reiterate, as Ms. Harris said, the student led advocacy has really pushed us to get to this point. And we feel this is really a great path forward to find equity, opportunities for safer water options for students and staff. And obviously looking to meet our sustainability goals that we have put forth. To meet our sustainability goals that we have put forward. (...) There's a lot here and probably lots of questions, but I will turn it back over to Ms. Harris and Board Members for questions

(...) **DR. JUDY DOCCA:** Mr. Adams explained things very well. I do remember though, that couple of years ago, we talked about the water bottles- are from different manufacturers, so it makes it a little bit more difficult to keep those updated. But I did want to comment- in the post, there was an editorial about virgin plastics, which are plastics they are going to ask people to pay taxes on, which would be minimal. But the article also said that a lot of the plastic that we use is burned, and I think most people don't know that. We separate it out and we put it in recycling, but it's still burned, and it still ends up in the ocean. So, this water bottle technique really helps the environment, and I think the students are pretty much aware of that.

(...) **MS. PATRICIA O'NIELL:** In terms of the filters, do we have any idea when we have? Universal water bottle filling stations. How much the cost will be on the. On an annual basis on the filters and do the building service workers still need to flush those water bottle filling stations like they're required to do on the bubblers?

(...) **MR. SETH ADAMS:** One of the things that we'd like to do is as we're moving through this initiative is to essentially post the background of this initiative. The history of it, where we are in terms of the number of schools, the number of filter stations. We've sorted that by different categories- number of students in a building, square footage, but we've really narrowed it also on percentage of FARMs [students] and trying to understand how we can make sure that the initiative is equitable as we move forward. I think that would be great information to have and we will certainly look to post that.

I think to answer your question specifically around the filter costs and the process of flushing, flushing is important for a variety of reasons and for us as we implement more and more of the water bottle filling stations. While it may not necessarily be as critical to flush with filters, we still will require building services to flush all filters or all fixtures that are involved in the drinking process in the building. It's an important process. I think the other part I guess I did fail to mention.

The one thing I would say though about the budget of the filters is that again, thinking about it from a sustainability perspective, if we can start to offset the costs that we have been supplying around the bottled water and the water jugs, I do think in the long run this will be most likely a less costly endeavor than where we are. ... Looking at it from fiscal sustainability is a big part of it. ... We do have some of the non-filtered [filling stations] but we don't have to replace the unit, we can just add an inline filter to those part of that process. So, it's not going to be the added expense of replacing entire unit.

(...) We are looking to see how we can push out a stronger initiative to provide students with reusable water bottles, so a lot of that is obviously still part of this overall conversation and part of the initiative too.

**MS. PATRICIA O'NIELL:** I wonder... working on a communications strategy to make sure that when you're sending your child to school, you're sending them with a reusable water bottle. You can fill it at home, if not, it can be filled at school. ... In terms of budgetary items, it's my understanding that the mini bottles are in the food services, and then big multi-gallon bottles of water are in the operation, in our general budget. Food service also has to give water with a meal, and then also there are many adult meetings that MCPS is providing water for. So the cost of those non-reusable bottles may not disappear unless we re-educate adults to come bring your own- 'BYOB' of water.

**MR. SETH ADAMS:** ...this is a bit of a culture change... a lot of it is going to be that engagement. One positive reaction that we've had this last spring - we were able to, through the sustainability division, provide some reusable water bottles to the secondary students... We actually even received some great feedback from students that have said this is this is amazing... And you're right, we're going to have lots of conversations this as we transition back into schools from COVID around how we do things on a normal daily basis... particularly when it comes to some of the sustainable features.

**MS. PATRICIA O'NIELL:** What is the projected cost for completing the water bottle filling stations now?

**MR. SETH ADAMS:** So, where we left off with the previous bid- what we're anticipating to get us to that two per school is going to be in that probably \$1.5 million range. There's quite a variability in the construction market these days, so some costs have gone up 20 to 30 to 50 percent. We don't think this particular initiative will be impacted as others, but until we have received the bid we won't know necessarily for sure... What we'd also like to do from a procurement standpoint- consideration of bridging a contract with Frederick County. Frederick County has an on call plumbing support contract in place... So I think, all told we're looking at about \$2 million. Again, that's between escalations from our past initiatives to also trying to make sure that we put the right in the number of units and buildings.

**MS. PATRICIA O'NIELL:** So I would appreciate seeing the background for historical perspective and actually the specific lists of schools where we are.

(...) **MS. LYNNE HARRIS:** ...the model right now is 2 units for school, but we have to be really cognizant of making sure that we are looking at every school, both its footprint and its enrollment to make sure that these units are equitably accessible. Because it's not the same- 400 student elementary school and a 3000+ student high school, and even within that range of enrollment there are, you know, the different footprints. I appreciate your mentioning of that, as one of the issues that we're looking at when we're looking to.

And another thing I wanted to mention to you is - I guess it's a question so you mentioned - some of the units that are already installed but do not have a filter... [the possibility that] we standardize the units that are in schools so that we also are standardizing our procurement of filters.

(...)

I want to thank you for emphasizing once again: our water systems provide safe water but it's another piece of how that water, you know, the point of entry to our building and then that water's journey through the pipe system of any individual school to that point of use. And so that's why we need to be vigilant around testing for lead and other contaminants and making sure that we are providing truly safe water. ...Mr. Adams, anything else you want to add to this piece?

**MR. SETH ADAMS:** No, just the fact that we will be bringing contractual elements to the board at their July meeting. I just wanted to again flag that. So not sure if that would most likely be in the consent items, but certainly welcome the opportunity to talk some more about it that way too. Thank you very much.