

Letter to the Editor: Healthcare Holiday

Posted by [TBN\(Staff\)](#) On 12/02/2019

A decision the county commissioners made last week resulted in several articles, some unflattering comparisons to a green Christmas character and many many emails from concerned educators. Before I address the issue and our proposed solution, I want to state that I do respect and appreciate the amazing job our educators do and how hard their work is—to suggest otherwise is just ridiculous. There is no other profession where such trust is placed on people and I know the long hours of work that our teachers put in to ensure the success of our children.

Dr. Smith, the school superintendent, brought forward a proposal to use \$4 million of the school system's fund balance for various projects. As the board of county commissioners, part of our job is to approve the budget developed by the Board of Education and then approve any changes to this budget throughout the year. We approved all of these changes for things such as technology upgrades and maintenance needs, but we held off approving \$1.5 million for a two-month health care holiday for the educators. A health care holiday is where the school system covers the premium costs of the health care plan that are usually taken out of the employee's paychecks. This has been provided as a bonus to employees in past years, so employees were understandably upset when we did not approve it yet this year and I do not begrudge anyone for advocating for themselves. It is also important to understand that the majority of the fund balance that was realigned came from a health insurance rebate to the school system that was provided, in large part, due to the diligence of employees in cutting costs in healthcare.

As county commissioner, we need to always keep in mind the big picture. Expenses are always increasing, needs are growing, and funding is finite, but the people who choose to work in our county are our most valuable resource. School system health insurance is an 80/20 split, meaning the school system pays 80% of the premium costs and employees pay 20% of the cost in their paychecks. I can not speak for the entire board of commissioners, but a plan that has been proposed and I believe would be acceptable is 20% of the health care refund go back to the employees (since they are the ones that helped enable it) and the remainder of the funds be applied to the OPEB account—OPEB (Other Post Employment Benefits) is used to pay for educator's retirement plans and has been woefully underfunded since being transferred from state to local responsibility. I have expressed my support for this plan to Superintendent Dr. Smith, BoE Chair Karin Bailey, and Education Association of St. Mary's County (EASMC) President Jill Morris. This would allow for a healthcare holiday for the educators and hopefully express that we do still value their work and appreciate them choosing to live, work and raise their families in St. Mary's County. This would also allow for important long term financial issues to be addressed in a fiscally responsible manner. The County Commissioners will have a joint meeting with the Board of Education in early December and I hope we will be able to take this action at that meeting.

As a community, we have a lot to be thankful for this Thanksgiving, and I wish you all a happy holiday and encourage everyone to thank a teacher, police officer, EMS personnel or firefighter every time you see them!

Eric Colvin
County Commissioner, District 1

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