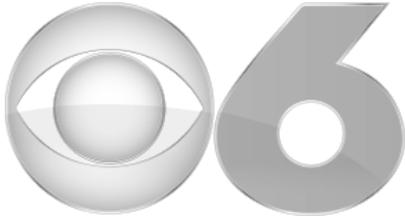


School board members refuse to answer questions about expensive out-of-town trips

POSTED 12:18 AM, NOVEMBER 4, 2014, BY LORENZO HALL



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RICHMOND, Va. -- The City of Richmond is filled with old school buildings that need millions of dollars in emergency repairs, according to the Richmond School Board. Board members have said they are working to come up with the funds to fix the problems.

However, some of the money the school board spends is not going toward fixing buildings or hiring new teachers. After looking through receipts, CBS 6 anchor Lorenzo Hall had questions about the way some Richmond School Board members spent city tax dollars.

For instance, so far this year Richmond School Board member Tichi Pinkney-Eppes has attended conferences in cities like Miami, New Orleans and Portland. Once you add up food, airfare, registration fees and hotel stays -- including a stop at the Four Seasons in Miami -- the total cost was \$8,556.

Richmond School Board Member Mamie Taylor joined Pinkney-Eppes on those trips to New Orleans, Portland and Miami.

Your bill for her trips added up to \$8, 107.

Taylor's travel expenses are not limited to out-of-town trips. Richmond taxpayers also pay for Taylor's gas when she drives from her house to every school board function. Analyzing receipts from December 2013 and March 2014 -- the total \$199.

For more than two weeks, we attempted to question Taylor and Pinkney-Eppes about these costs. Neither wanted to answer questions on camera, however both responded with written statements.

Pinkney-Eppes said her schedule is "hectic" and in the future she planned to use her funds for "informational events" and to "celebrate academic gains."

Taylor said these trips afforded her the opportunity to make "informed decisions."

However, we wanted more of our questions answered. So we went to recent Richmond School Board meetings to question the members face-to-face. Unfortunately, Pinkney-Eppes and Taylor were consistently absent from those meetings.

Based on attendance records from the clerk's office, Eppes and Taylor have only been to two meetings since early September.

When we went to their homes in an attempt to get answers, Eppes would not open her door.

"We want to speak with you quickly. We've been trying to meet up with you," Lorenzo Hall asked through a closed door.

"Oh, wow," Eppes replied. "I can't talk to you tonight, Lorenzo. I wouldn't dare put myself on camera like this."

"I just wanted to let you know this is an opportunity to chat with us about everything," Hall said.

"Yes. I appreciate that," Eppes replied.

No one answered the door at Taylor's house.

These two board members aren't doing anything illegal. They are spending money from the Richmond School Board's professional development and constituent services budget.

Last year each board member received \$1,233 for that purpose. That money can be used for conferences, supplies or even food and beverages at community meetings.

This year, however, the budget jumped from \$1,233 for each board member to \$15,933 for each member. A jump of 1192%.

Richmond School Board Member Jeff Bourne said the significant increases were needed to help board members better communicate with the people in their districts through local conferences, community events and newsletters. Now, he said, he had concerns about the way this money is being spent.

Bourne is one of four board members who have not touched a dime of this money. He said he wanted to spend it wisely.

Richmond School Board Member Shonda Harris-Muhammed agreed. She, Kristen Larson and Donald Coleman have used their funds for community events, newsletters or in-state conferences. Combined, they have only spent \$3,242.

Who is holding the other board members accountable?

"Have you guys inquired from those board members about those trips, what they learned to try and get information and set up a presentation?" Hall asked Harris-Muhammed.

"We are now. We are now. We are now," Harris-Muhammed replied. "We have to be held accountable for ourselves."

In comparison, Henrico Public Schools has a total of \$38,000 for its five board members to split. Chesterfield has \$30,000 for its five board members.

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