

St. Rita School PTO Meeting Minutes

November 3, 2021

KEY NOVEMBER DATES

- **NOV. 10:** Auction Committee kick-off meeting, 7:30 p.m. in the school hall
- **NOV. 11:** Veteran's Day; No school, parent-teacher conferences
- **NOV. 12:** 11:30 a.m. dismissal, parent-teacher conferences
- **NOV. 15:** Open house at 9 a.m. for prospective families, details at saintrita-school.org
- **NOV. 23:** First Trimester ends
- **NOV. 24-29:** Thanksgiving break

PLEASE NOTE: A new stewardship shares form has been created for the 2021-2022 school year; [it can be found here](#). Please input any time or money spent for shares into the form as soon as possible. Please email any questions to Mr. Cary Balser at reportyourshares@gmail.com. *Thank you to the many folks who have already emailed or used the old form to submit shares. If you used the old form, thank you! They have been pulled into this year's record keeping.* At this point, please use the [new link](#).

I. Call to Order and Opening Prayer

Eric Oaks, PTO President

II. School Update

Mrs. Hamm, Principal

1. The two-day Classical Conference during the October teacher workdays was meaningful for faculty and staff, and gave them the opportunity to dive more deeply on what it means to be a Classical school. The teachers learned the foundational type of lesson in a classical school, and how to implement it across all subjects/disciplines, including specials.
2. Thank you to the parents and PTO for the teacher lunches and support for the faculty
3. All Saints Day was a "memorable and adorable day." All grades could wear saint costumes; the celebration included the Walk for the Homeless for ALIVE and an ice cream party donated by a school family.
4. Conferences will take place Th., Nov. 11 (no school) and Fri., Nov. 12 (11:30 a.m. dismissal). The sign-up sheets for times will go out by end of the week. The conferences are designed to be 10-minute check-ins with the child's homeroom/humanities teacher. Specials teachers will be available to meet on a drop-in basis. If you need more time with your teacher, please schedule a follow-up conference.
5. The week of Nov. 15 is Discover Catholic Schools Week; St. Rita School and Preschool will host an open house on Monday, Nov. 15 for prospective families; details and registration information is on the website. The school will host another open house in January.
6. The First Trimester concludes before Thanksgiving break; gradebooks will close Nov. 19. Teachers are reaching out now to parents of students with missing assignments.
7. The school is closed for Thanksgiving break from Nov. 24-29; including the Bishop's holiday on Monday, Nov. 29 -- providing an extra travel day and additional time to monitor for COVID-19 symptoms. Mrs. Hamm noted that schools are seeing an uptick in COVID-19 cases across the Diocesan schools.
8. Details to come on Advent/Christmas Lessons & Carols; Mrs. Hamm hopes to have live concerts, but needs to evaluate size/capacity restrictions. A parent suggested holding the concerts in the church.
9. The Staff Epiphany Dinner will be rescheduled to a spring event so it can be held outdoors; it is tentatively scheduled for the Saturday concluding Teacher Appreciation Week in May.

10. A parent asked about the 5th grade teacher search; Mrs. Hamm said she has a number of interviews scheduled, and she has a back-up plan to cover the position internally if more time is needed to find the right fit.
11. A parent asked about Fr. Christensen's approach to Advent/Christmas. Mrs. Hamm anticipated a similar approach as previous years, noting that Advent is a penitential season and Christmas should be celebrated during the Christmas season.
12. A parent asked if Mrs. Hamm anticipated any school policy changes with the COVID-19 vaccination now available to children ages 5 & up. Mrs. Hamm said the school will follow all state/local mandates, but noted that, as St. Rita's position is to give the children as normal of a school day as COVID-19 regulations allow, the school will adopt any relaxation in state regulations, based on an analysis of cases in the school. Mrs. Hamm asked that if parents have their child vaccinated, please let the nurse know (mvanderwoude@saintrita-school.org), so the school can watch for side effects, and so their information is on file. A parent asked if the school will relax mask requirements if the new governor lifts restrictions in January, noting it will be at the height of cold/flu season. Mrs. Hamm reiterated that the school's [COVID mitigation plan](#) outlines changes that would take place if there were outbreaks and the school will adjust accordingly.

III. Faculty Representative

Miss Tillotson, 6th Grade Homeroom

1. Miss Tillotson said this has been a great year -- learning is going on with joy -- sign of a flourishing community. Teachers had a wonderful work session and are excited about classical education.
2. Thank you to parents for the faculty lunches, ice cream party, and teacher pumpkin carving party, and stocking the shelves.
3. She noted that while Mrs. Hamm said teachers will reach out to parents, parents should also reach out to teachers if they feel that their students are struggling.

IV. Treasurer's Report

Christine Hughes, PTO Treasurer

- 11/3/2021 Balance: \$ 98,086.06
- Remaining 2021-2022 School payments: -\$44,000
- 2021 Christmas Bonus: -\$15,000 (*note: total amount pending*)
- Available 2021-2022 Balance: \$39,086.06 before any future fundraising
Of note: Charleston Wrap fundraiser has raised \$1,733.30 to date.

V. Committee Reports

1. 5K Wrap-Up

Mark Malseed

Thank you to the entire 5K team -- the event raised \$47,000; the bill from the City for the police is still outstanding, but it is estimated that the school's profit will be \$33,000 -- a 35% increase over the previous record. Amazon was the first Diamond-level sponsor at \$5,000; the student fundraising drive raised nearly \$15,000. Jude Prabakaran of Nova Race Timing donated timing and race equipment. This year's race also saw the largest turnout -- 526 runners; an estimated 3/4 were from the St. Rita community. 1K awards will be given out at school, possibly on Friday. Help is needed writing thank you notes -- contact Mark Malseed at msmalseed@yahoo.com to volunteer.

2. Auction

Kara Wilson

The official kick-off meeting for the Auction planning committee will take place Wed., Nov. 10 at 7:30 p.m. in the school hall; details will go home in backpack mail. The Mardi Gras-themed event will take place at the Knights of Columbus Club in Arlington on Feb. 26.

3. Calling All Chefs

Eric Oaks

A volunteer is needed to coordinate Calling All Chefs; the committee provides meatless luncheons for teachers on inservice days and early dismissal days; meals can be either home-prepared or ordered. Email pto@saintrita-school.org to volunteer.

4. Robcyn's Update

Lisa McNichols

Robcyns will host a St. Rita shopping week before the holidays, with 10% all purchases being donated to the school. Date TBA.

VI. Old Business -- Adopt October Minutes

Eric Oaks

Minutes approved; they are available in the newsletter after the PTO meeting and on the school website.

VII. New Business

A parent suggested increasing the Christmas bonuses for teachers based on the 5K's success. A motion was made to increase the budget for teacher bonuses to \$20,100. Approved.

VIII. Open Discussion with Fr. Christensen

A parent asked Fr. Christensen about his philosophy on Advent, and whether a Children's Christmas Eve Mass is possible at the parish. Fr. Christensen said he is open to ideas, please reach out to him at frcc41@gmail.com; though he did note he is hesitant to shake things up dramatically in his first year.

A parent asked if the Advent/Christmas concerts could be moved into the church. He said it would be dependent on content, and that scheduling may be an issue, but he would consider it.

PTO Meeting Adjourned. Immediately after the PTO meeting, Fr. Christensen hosted a meeting with the school and parish community about a potential building project.

Potential Building Project and Update on Adjacent Construction -- Fr. Christensen

- Before the pandemic, Fr. Gee planned to launch a building project for a gym in the parking lot/playground area. The pandemic postponed a major capital campaign to fund the project; since then, the City of Alexandria announced that the Alexandria Housing Development Corporation (AHDC) plans to build a large affordable housing complex adjacent to the school/parish grounds, which would eliminate the municipal parking lot used by St. Rita's. The Arlandria-Chirilagua Plan includes a 10-story building in the former Safeway lot adjacent to the parish, plus a 7-story building located on what is now the municipal parking lot. Parking is provided in the building at 0.75 spaces per unit (City claims this is above the minimum required). Construction will begin in early 2023, with construction scheduled to be completed in 2027. [Plans for the Arlandria-Chirilagua Development project are available here.](#)
- Fr. Christensen has been in communication with the developer and City planners. The City plans involve adding a publicly accessible alley between the building and St. Rita property, which would require the developer to acquire land from St. Rita (located near the dumpster). AHDC has proposed a land swap, which would give the parish space to expand the gym project into a multi-use building that would include a gym and auditorium, making it useful to the entire parish community for events. While construction of the AHDC project is underway, the developer will also need temporary easements onto the St. Rita property for equipment; Father is working with the developer on compensation for that land use.

- In talking with Diocese planners and the land use lawyer representing St. Rita (paid for by the Diocese), Fr. Christensen said a building project on St. Rita property should not be affected by the Arlandria-Chirilagua Plan. Father said he hopes that the parish will be self-sufficient on parking; the City has proposed sharing parking or adding on-street parking on Glebe, though Father does not see that as sufficient. Current zoning restricts building height to 45 feet, and we can build on up to 75% of the parish's property area. Additional parking spaces could be created at green space between church/school (angled spaces).
- The proposed multi-use gym/auditorium would eliminate the existing playground and extend into the lower school wing; a new playground would be built on a location TBA, possibly the convent garden. Building options include parking with a gym on top (though the City is likely to dismiss citing Zoning regulations); below-grade parking with a gym on top; and turf or parking on top of the gym. Fr. Christensen noted that the project would be a new, unattached building; any structural modifications to the existing 1952 school building would require the entire building be brought up to code; which would double the cost.
- Fr. Christensen noted that the community should consider and pray about what the long-term vision is for the space and the parish; he stressed that the longer we wait, the more expensive the project will be; (the \$3 million estimate from the pre-pandemic plan has likely increased). Additionally, Father noted that it makes sense to have a plan and make needed infrastructure changes while the adjacent development project is happening.
- Potential school uses for the new building include PE space; rain/cold location for recess; practice space for CYO basketball; event space for music festivals, concerts, the school play, graduation, receptions, auction, etc. Potential parish uses include meeting space, reception space for funerals and baptisms; indoor soccer with the Spanish community; and parish picnic/festival/events.
- Mrs. Hamm noted that the building plan would provide space for parish groups to use during the school day. **Plan A:** Transition to a Montessori-based preschool, located in the school hall; the preschool space would then exclusively be a parish center; the gym space would serve as a cafeteria for lunches. **Plan B:** Preschool stays in the current space and lunches are in the school hall; gym space would be available for parish use during the school day (except scheduled PE classes).
- It was asked whether the parish community should advocate to stop the City's building plan. Mrs. Hamm said that Fr. Gee indicated that the plan was unstoppable; Fr. Christensen agreed that his sense is that the plan is moving forward with or without St. Rita's support or the land swap. Father has been meeting with City officials and the developer, but encourages others to express their opinions to elected officials. [Details on upcoming meetings are available here.](#) From the City's website: *In addition to attending meetings and events associated with this planning process, you can also be involved and provide comments via the WhatsApp text messenger (571-358-7569), texting 571.358.7569, or emailing Jose C. Ayala, Principal Planner, at jose.ayala@alexandriava.gov or calling 703.746.3820.* A school parent noted that many members of our school and parish community serve as lobbyists and work in advocacy; she offered to help coordinate any needed grassroots efforts advocating for the parish and school.
- Concerns were expressed about safety, both during construction and due to the additional traffic and density. Fr. Christensen noted that the developer has built adjacent to schools in the past, and information on safety precautions will be communicated throughout the process. Father said the

developer is open to meeting with the school and parish community.

- A school parent asked if school tuition would be raised to help fund the building project. Fr. Christensen said there is no plan for a tuition increase; the building project would be funded by a capital campaign and loan; he is leaning toward selling the Casita on Glebe Road to help support the building project.
- **NEXT STEPS:** Fr. Christensen said he believes it is worthwhile to build now. Next steps are to form a building committee, then hold additional meetings with the parish community before taking action. The Diocese will provide guidance and support on fundraising. There is no set timetable for the St. Rita building project, though Fr. Christensen did note that 2024 is the 100th anniversary of the parish.
- Contact Fr. Christensen with questions or feedback: frcc41@gmail.com