

Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission
Meeting of January 23, 2024
via Zoom

Minutes

Present: Mr. Edward Kaplan, chair; Mr. Richard Bodorff, vice chair; Ms. Rebecca Hanson; Dr. Lakeisha Lashley; Mr. Bruce Wahl; Ms. Ellie Wang. Ms. Erin Senior was present to represent Dr. Carey Wright, Maryland State Superintendent of Schools.

The following members of the MPT management staff were in attendance: *MPT President and CEO Larry Unger, Ms. Betsy Peisach, Mr. Travis Mitchell, Ms. Krista Respass, Ms. Suzie Wolfinger Schmitt, Ms. Suzanne Schwertman, Mr. Steven Schupak, Ms. Linda Taggart, and Mr. Tom Williams. Ms. Dionne Neblett was present to record the minutes. Mr. Max Zelalem was present for IT services.*

The chair called the meeting to order at 10:34 a.m. He requested approval of the minutes of the November 28, 2023, meeting. Mr. Wahl made a motion to approve the minutes, Ms. Wang seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously as submitted.

President's report

Mr. Andrew Levine, general counsel, has retired. Lara Hjortsberg was hired as his replacement. She will begin employment at MPT on February 7. Ms. Hjortsberg has served with the Attorney General's Office since 2010. Ms. Suzanne Schwertman, chief financial officer, will retire at the end of February. Ms. Patricia Fitzhugh will fill the CFO role beginning tomorrow. Ms. Fitzhugh comes to MPT with a great deal of Maryland state experience. MPT's IT technician, Rob Jefferson, has retired. Max Zelalem will take on IT responsibilities for the commission meetings beginning today.

The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed a short-term continuing resolution that funds the government through January 2024. They have been unable to agree on a budget for public media, and the outlook for federal funding is uncertain. Industry advocacy groups are working to resolve the problem. Pat Butler, America's Public Television Stations (APTS) president and chair emeritus of MPT Foundation, Inc. will retire before the end of the year. A search committee has been formed to hire his replacement.

The state is expecting a more challenging financial year in FY25. MPT's analyst report to the legislature includes a full appropriation including an increase resulting from the SB 1034 formula, as well as funding for The Center for Maryland History Films. As in past years, Mr. Unger and Mr. Schupak will meet with members of the House and Senate budget subcommittees and leadership to attempt to ensure that the appropriation gets through the session intact.

An external audit firm has been acquired; however, the audit was not delivered on time. An extension was requested and granted by CPB. An audit report will be available at the next commission meeting. The legislative audit is complete. MPT is awaiting a draft report and does not expect the report to have any major material findings.

MPT plans to conduct two primary debates: one for the Baltimore mayoral race and one for the U.S. Senate race to replace Ben Cardin. MPT is also providing gavel-to-gavel streaming coverage of the Maryland General Assembly 2024 session.

Commissioners viewed a clip from the 11th season of *Chesapeake Collectibles* that premiered earlier this month. MPT anticipated taping Season 12 this June, but learned that *Antiques Roadshow* will be coming to Baltimore at the same time. This is the first time in at least 20 years that the national PBS series has come to Maryland. Mr. Unger shared clips from the new season of *Outdoors Maryland*, *Becoming Thurgood Marshall*, a spot promoting MPT Passport, and a clip of what is coming up from PBS.

Budget & Compensation report

Mr. Bodorff, committee chair, turned to Ms. Schwertman for her report. Ms. Schwertman presented reports on revenues and expenses. The Legacy Society has already exceeded its full year budget forecast. MPT is waiting for the cost of living adjustment from the new administration. The state covers the cost of increases to general funded staff; however, MPT covers the cost of increases to special funded staff. There are currently only two vacancies which have impacted MPT's financial position. The forecast variance is close to \$1 million over budget due to salary and benefit expenses. Mr. Unger stated the low turnover rate significantly impacted the station's budget.

There were no contracts that required commission approval. Mr. Kaplan thanked Ms. Schwertman for her report and for her service. Mr. Bodorff thanked her for postponing her retirement until a replacement was hired.

Ms. Wolfinger Schmitt, vice president, Human Resources, reported that as of December 31, 2023, there were 141 filled posts out of the 144 authorized positions. There were six new hires and three separations--all retirements. MPT has a low turnover rate of 2.1%. The average age of employees is 49. The EEO percentage of female and minority employees remain high.

Education Division update

Ms. Betsy Peisach, vice president, Education Division, delivered an update. The division provides media rich instructional resources to teachers, students, and childcare providers. With a core of six staff members, the team is able to accomplish its goals with the help of collaborative partnerships to meet the teaching and learning needs of the community. The early childhood initiatives such as Ready to Learn connect developmentally appropriate learning with PBS shows. Students are taught about the use of primary sources and civics in fresh interactive ways with grants provided by the Library of Congress.

Thinkport continues to serve as MPT's gateway to education resources; 52 new Thinkport lessons were developed this school year. Credit-bearing MPT courses are developed for teachers and childcare providers to maintain certification in several academic areas.

Ms. Krista Respass, senior managing director, Early Childhood Services, said MPT provides free tools and resources to support educators and families with young children. MPT is leading the effort to meet the needs of underserved K-12 children, working with libraries and Judy Centers (named after Steny Hoyer's late wife) throughout the state. The *PBS KIDS* channel remains the gold standard for early learning. Approximately 500 educators are trained by MPT each year.

The Education Division has noted a shift in attitudes about children and the media. Media has powerful shaping effects and impacts behaviors and beliefs. Education is needed to teach parents and childcare providers how media can be used as an active means of learning, and not to just park kids in front of a screen. The role of media in children's development and learning is critical and MPT educates adults in building healthy media habits with their children.

Ms. Peisach stated the establishment of the Maryland Center for Media Literacy & Education will bring action to the critical issue of media literacy that is important for the mental health of children and the senior population. Media literacy gives you the ability to discern what is true and what is not true, what may be helpful and what may be harmful. MPT will take on the commitment to build this statewide network to advance media literacy. The Education Division plans to raise \$10 million over the next five years. The Maryland Center for Media Literacy & Education will launch in the fall of 2024.

Mr. Bodorff asked if First Lady Dawn Moore would be a spokesperson to champion this cause. Mr. Schupak said Ms. Moore considered appearing in the Maryland Center for Media Literacy & Education video; however, she thought a fundraising video may not be the best place for her. She plans to participate in the future.

Ms. Hanson inquired how artificial intelligence will affect trust from a media perspective. Ms. Peisach said social media is the #1 place kids and adults are getting their news. MPT can educate them about AI to aid them in making informed decisions. MPT will also work with school systems to find the best ways to educate teachers about this topic.

Mr. Kaplan, on behalf of the Commission, expressed appreciation for the time and effort put into getting the education program to where it is today and congratulated the Education Division.

Streaming update

Mr. Schupak stated linear television viewing continues to decline, and MPT is focused on getting its audience comfortable and engaged to stream content. Currently, the PBS App offers viewers the opportunity to stream MPT shows, but there are a number of issues preventing its use including confusion about the app, presenting a threat to the station's viewership.

To maximize on-demand streaming of its shows, MPT has dedicated station-wide resources to a Download the App campaign. The campaign focuses on increasing downloads, sign-ons, and TV activations of the PBS App. A team consisting of representatives from departments throughout MPT meets regularly to explore data about app usage, marketing strategies for app promotion, and the alignment of messaging with PBS guidelines. The campaign underscores MPT's promise to provide content anytime from multiple devices.

Campaign messages will have clear language about getting the free PBS App, which includes access to PBS and MPT shows utilizing streaming on-demand services. Messaging will reinforce the need to download the app and encourage viewers to choose MPT as their location station. Each message will be customized for the platform that it is on.

More national and local programs will be acquired for the on-demand service. Additional content is available with an MPT Passport membership. Seminars will be held on a regular basis to educate viewers about the PBS App, in addition to newsletters, on-screen messages and other communications tools. The campaign has a budget of \$175,000.

Ms. Hanson said it is courageous to accept the movement to streaming and asked if PBS could ask Samsung for tiles (preferred apps and features). Mr. Schupak said PBS currently supports 20 apps. MPT has shared a number of solutions with PBS and presented the Download the App campaign at the TRAC Media Development Workshop to industry colleagues earlier this month.

Old/new business

There being no old or new business, the chair asked for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Wahl made a motion, Ms. Hanson seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at 11:52 am. The next meeting will be held on March 19.