

Open Work Session
Letter of Support for State Legislative Bond Bill
for Minds in Motion Mobile Museum Project
February 1, 2022

Dr. Melanie Kerber, Ed.D., Board Member of the Minds in Motions Children’s Museum, came before Council and said she is here today seeking a letter of support for a State Bond Bill. She said their name is Minds in Motion and they are proposing a children’s museum in Salisbury, Maryland. She explained, they are still in the startup stages, but it is their goal to bring a children’s museum to Salisbury. She said, when they talk about the children’s museum, it all about commitment, and this is a grassroots group of volunteers who came together and recognized the need to bring a children’s museum to this area, and they are very dedicated to this activity.

Dr. Kerber said, looking at their mission statement, basically, what they want to do is provide a place for children to be very interactive. She said they want to develop critical thinking skills, high order thinking skills, discovery exploration, problem solving, and intuition. She said the more students that are practicing those skills, the more likely they are to get better at doing harder things.

Dr. Kerber said their vision statement is to provide a place where children can be nurtured and also provide a meaningful experience for families. She said they have eight million visitors every year to the Eastern Shore in Ocean City, and there are a lot of families in this area with 15,000 children in the Wicomico County School District alone. She said Wicomico County is the largest school district on the Eastern Shore and, according to their feasibility study that was done by North Start Museums, they have 30,000 school-aged children, and that does not include pre-kindergarten, who could benefit from having a children’s museum.

Dr. Kerber said their objective is to create lifelong learners prepared to step into careers. She said it is now a national requirement in school curriculums that children be exposed to careers and have an idea on the world of work, and they want to start that experience very young in the children’s museum. She said, looking at some of their commitments to education in the packet she provided, she included some information on Wicomico County Schools. She said she is a retired superintendent, and she was a school administrator for many years and ran four different schools and district schools nationwide. She said, no matter what their demographics are, no matter what their financial situation is, they are all struggling. She said, looking at the school budget, which she is sure Council is familiar with, 80 to 85 percent of that budget out of the gate goes to salaries. She clarified, before they purchase the first pencils, the first textbooks, the first white boards, they are talking about the majority of money going out the door to pay teachers and to pay staff.

Dr. Kerber said they want to help secure these skills in younger children. She said, in 2017, Wicomico County placed second to last in kindergarten readiness with only one out of every three children being prepared for kindergarten. She said, with this children’s museum they would like to increase vocabulary, learning, and language skills, as well as fine motor skills and math. She said, looking at the math scores in Wicomico County right now, it is 38 percent, which is below the State average as the State average is

maybe 43 or 44 percent. She said children who learn to do basic math concepts are able to develop higher order thinking skills, so they can problem solve and learn how to complete hard things.

Dr. Kerber said a children's museum offers a meaningful family experience and also helps kids become more appreciative of diversity as they are able to understand differing points of view, and they are able to be more tolerant of others.

Dr. Kerber said this group started in 2016 and has come a fairly long way. She said they did the feasibility study that was done by the North Star Group, they have Articles of Incorporation, and they have gotten grant awards. She said a few years ago she received \$15,000 from Salisbury University in their Shore Hatcher Competition, and they have received other grant money. She said they also get a lot of media attention. She said they have a Found 50, which is the first 50 people who were able to give \$1,000, and they hold two 5ks every year. She said they have done galas, and they have also researched in this area the wisdom of bringing a children's museum here. She said the closest children's museum is 90 miles away in Annapolis and many families do not have the wherewithal to make that as a day trip. She said they also have a website and a Board of Directors, which has been meeting for five years now.

Dr. Kerber said the logo in the shape of a heart with a sun is the logo of a non-profit group out of Pittsburg they hired to help coach them through a capital campaign. She said they need to raise a million dollars for their brick and mortar museum, and they are now looking at space at the Shops at Salisbury that is 8,000 square feet where JC Penny's used to be. She said there is a large peak that would be very visible from the road, and they have met with the mall management and they are willing to give them the space for free for one year while they refurbish it. She said they like the location very much and it would provide ample parking because this would be open to a lot of school groups and a lot of families.

Dr. Kerber said, basically, right now Minds in Motion is at two places, one they are working very hard toward securing a brick and mortar space that they would repurpose and the capital campaign would raise a million dollars to pay for that, and the other location is a school bus. She said they are trying to figure out a way to do more outreach where they could get jumped started as they have not been successful in securing grant money, and they have not been successful in securing grant money because they have not been able to get any seed money. She said she found a woman who owns a school bus and she is donating it to Mind's in Motion at the end of this academic calendar year in June. She said it is a 2008 bus in good condition, and, looking at the interior of the bus, she is speaking as a principal and a school superintendent who rode buses way too many times, she has never seen seats in such good condition; they are in mint condition. She said they have now talked to three different companies that repurpose buses to find out what they would charge to make it look like a mobile museum, and the school bus would be repurposed to the point where kids would use it as a classroom. She said the space underneath the bus would be used for portable exhibits and the students would actually go on the bus. She said there would also be interactive displays on the interior roof of the bus and it would be painted, so it would look like a Minds in Motion bus when it comes rolling into the community and would go to every corner, ever hamlet, every specific area of Wicomico County for the benefit of the kids. She said they would visit every single school, including those in the more rural areas.

Dr. Kerber said New Jersey has an interactive museum, there is a natural history museum in California, and there is also one in Brooklyn. She said this is a popular way of bringing a museum to a classroom that is low cost for the school. She said they would take their exhibits out there and they really want kids to be able to interact and do hands-on activities. She said one of the things that has been proven with this is the level of retention, the level of application, and also the main idea about a children's museum is engagement where they see kids really working with each other. She said there is a saying in education today that the kids who are doing the talking are the ones who are doing the learning, so the idea when she went to school back in the dark ages where kids sat and a teacher spoke is no longer the best practice. She said the companies they have spoken to are in Los Angeles, Whitehaven, Pennsylvania in the Poconos, and one in Grove City, Ohio. She said there is a National Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and one of the companies they talked to actually repurposed that bus, so there are many, many, many different ways that they could go with this.

Dr. Kerber said what they would like to do is fill the bus with exhibits that are interactive, that are interchangeable, and that would provide the most learning availability. She said they got the school bus for free, but now they need money to convert the bus to a mobile museum. She said, in looking at the costs, the bid they liked the most is from a company in Whitehaven, Pennsylvania, close to the Poconos, so the closest to the Eastern Shore, and the cost is \$188,000 to refurbish the bus. She said there is probably some wiggle room in there to change certain things around, but that gives a ballpark figure of what it would cost to make the school bus that is going to be given to them for free usable for school-aged children that would go all over the place. She said they would be able to park it at the mall and it would be a central focal point for the County. She said it is almost like when the bookmobiles used to roll into town, so this would be very much the same thing, but it would be a museum.

Dr. Kerber said the other part of this is the exhibits. She explained, it would cost \$188,000 to make it look like a museum inside, but that does not include the cost of the exhibits. She said there are several different companies, one in Indiana, one in Minnesota, and one in New York, that provide exhibits for museums. She said she has been told to allocate about \$50,000, so, by the time they would finish this, if they go with this plan, it would be about \$230,000; however, they would have the capacity to reach 15,000 school children just in Wicomico County alone, 30,000 along the Eastern Shore, and it would be a real launch for the brick and mortar museum they hope to be in within a reasonable length of time.

Dr. Kerber said they will see kids interactive and kids working together, and it really helps students right now to make a difference. She said they do not have to walk any further than their front doors to see the impact COVID has had on learning, but also before COVID. She clarified, when they are talking about a school district where two out of three children receive free and reduced lunch or qualify for free and reduced lunch, there is a very high correlation between low test scores and low attendance, and they also have the ongoing problem of trying to reach math proficiency as well as graduation rate being below the State graduation rate.

Dr. Kerber said they would really want to have some mobile part for Minds in Motion that would go around the County, visit classrooms, visit science classes, visit community centers, visit summer camps, and be a venue for birthday parties, so all of those different things that would not only generate revenue, but also would really provide a very interactive learning experience. She said they feel that,

once they get the bus on the road, they would qualify for a lot more donors for a lot more grants. She said they are in the process now of starting a capital campaign, and they will ask for money from every law office, every insurance company, and every medical practice. She said they will offer naming rights for certain schools for certain rooms in the museum, but right now this is their baby. She said this bus becomes available on June 15, and it takes about two months to retrofit a bus like that, and they would like to have it on the road by the opening of the new academic year.

She said the packet she provided includes a copy of the power point, a little bit of background on Minds in Motion, a copy of the application she submitted for the letter of support if Council is willing to offer one, all of the financials, and then the final page is the budget.

Mr. Hastings said this is exciting to see. He then asked if this is a State Bond Bill request, to which Dr. Kerber responded, yes. Mr. Hastings then asked if she has a number in mind and if she has a Bill sponsor, to which Ms. Acle responded, it is \$100,000 and Senator Eckardt is the Bill sponsor. Mr. Hastings then asked if this is targeted to any specific communities and if it is more science-oriented, or is it more preschool? He clarified, what group are they targeting, to which Dr. Kerber responded, they are probably looking at STEM-related technology, science technology, engineering, and math. She said any kind of interactives would start with very young children and work their way up, but they really want to target young children and make them more prepared for kindergarten, and there is a big push for universal pre-k. She said she was a principal in a building where the kids came to school not ready to learn, and they really want to make kids inquisitive so they are asking questions, solving problems, making discovery exploration and creativity. She said they would want to use it not only in preschools and elementary schools, but also in middle schools and, ideally, they would like Minds in Motion really designed to go up through the high school years and also a training facility for Salisbury University to offer their interns to work in the education section of the Minds in Motion Museum.

Mr. Holloway asked if they have made a presentation to the Board of Education, to which Dr. Kerber responded, yes. Mr. Holloway then asked what the response from them was and if they are providing a letter of support, to which Dr. Kerber responded, no. She clarified, she has not formally presented, but she approached the superintendent multiple times about this. Mr. Holloway asked, there is not any support from the Board of Education, to which Dr. Kerber responded, she does not want to say there is not any support. She said she was just talking to a colleague about the State, and there are so many demands on schools that right now looking at what they are funding in the school district, she does not want to speak out of turn, as she has great respect for Dr. Hanlin and her team, but everything goes toward raising test scores, and that is not just in Wicomico County, that is a national trend. Mr. Holloway clarified, he realizes that she is not asking for money, she is asking for a letter of support.

Ms. Acle said she thinks the Legislative Bond Bills need a letter of support from the Local Government Body. Mr. Holloway said the school system would be where to start with this because this is a teaching aid, to which Ms. Acle responded, it is not under education, it is separate from the public school system. Dr. Kerber said, if they did that, they would have to go to the private schools, and then there is another sector. She clarified, she is not saying they would not do that, she just really felt that going to their local government and having a show of support from them would it make possible for them to receive more grant funding. Mr. Holloway asked if Dr. Kerber thinks, if she has support from the schools, she would

get more grants too, the more the better, to which Dr. Kerber responded, when she has gone to the schools for different things, she has not been told no, but she has not been invited to do what Council was good enough to do for her.

Ms. Acle said, again, this is a Legislative Bond Bill that they are asking support for, which would be the Local Governing Body that would have to send the letter of support, and would not be relevant to the Board of Education.

Mr. Davis asked, if they are going to be visiting the schools, do they think they should have the support of the schools, to which Dr. Kerber responded, they will have the support as they would love to have the bus out there, and that is from a teacher's point of view and a principal's point of view. She said, if she went to the school district, that is an upper layer of administration that is bogged down with a lot of other things right now. Mr. Davis said, but they are the ones who are going to approve Minds in Motion coming to the school and onto the school properties as the upper level, to which Dr. Kerber responded, she understands what Mr. Davis is saying, but, again, she has not been encouraged when she has mentioned things like this. She said Dr. Hanlin has been good about writing a letter about non-financial support for other initiatives that she has worked on, but for something like this it did not even occur to her to do that because she does not see it as strictly an educational thing.

Ms. Acle said it was mentioned that they would be going to schools. She then asked if they would be going to other places like community centers, to which Dr. Kerber responded, they would be going to community centers, they would go to neighborhoods, and what they really would like to do is reach out to communities in need. Ms. Acle said what really stood out to her when she looked at this project was outreach in the rural communities. Dr. Kerber said school are one of the places they would go, but there are Boys and Girls Clubs, after-school programs, and communities where on Saturday they would like to have a Minds in Motion Day. Mr. Dodd added, she even mentioned birthday parties.

Mr. Cannon asked how she aligns her program with the current curriculum, to which Dr. Kerber responded, with the Minds in Motion, the Association of Children's Museums curriculum is all aligned with the common core, so what they do is line up their standards with what is being taught in the schools. She clarified, basically, it does not come down to matching one-for-one, but it adheres to STEM standards and reflects a curriculum that is indicative of that. Mr. Cannon asked where the oversight? He clarified, the reason he is asking is because the Board of Education is a very controlled structure with accountability from all aspects, and he is wondering, if they change the curriculum from STEM and shift it in another direction, where is the accountability. Dr. Kerber responded, even if they change it from STEM to math concepts, STEM is such a wide birth that it would contain other elements, such as if they decided to do engineering on how machines work, it would be like that, or if they would do it for Black History Month, STEM oftentimes become STEAM and talks about the arts, so it is a pretty all-inclusive curriculum, and she does not see getting any pushback on that. Mr. Cannon said there are so many different perspectives that are taking over, including politics, of the educational system, so that is why he was wondering where the accountability is and what guidelines she is required to follow. Dr. Kerber responded, the American Children's Museum Organization, which is their umbrella organization, has best practices, and they would fall into that, which encompasses many different things. She said, if they went to any children's museum across the country they would pretty much find that those are the

general guidelines they are following. She clarified, they do not just stray and present material that would be considered controversial.

Mrs. Hurley asked if Dr. Kerber could clarify the amount of grant funding she is seeking, as the application mentions \$250,000, to which Dr. Kerber responded, \$250,000 is for this project, but, obviously, they would like to receive the maximum amount, so it would be up to the Governing Body to decide how much of that it is willing to support.

Ms. Acle said she thinks the dollar amount that is allocated depends on the other Legislative Bond Bill projects, so depending on what else Senator Eckardt has, that would determine it.

Mr. Cannon said he thought Council would support the \$250,000 and then the State Legislature can decide if that is too much.

Mr. Davis said Council is not asking for the Bond Bill, Dr. Kerber is. He then asked Dr. Kerber how much money she is asking for, to which Dr. Kerber responded, she is seeking a letter of support for \$250,000.

Mr. Dodd said he has been giving it some thought and it sounds like Dr. Kerber said Council needs to come up with the figure, but Council is not asking for the money. Mr. Cannon clarified, there is not a financial obligation on the County's part. Dr. Kerber said she is asking for Council for a letter of support for \$250,000. Mrs. Hurley said the letter is drafted that way, which is why she brought it up, but she just wanted to clarify the dollar amount. Mr. Cannon said, if the State decides to choose a lesser amount, they will have to take a lesser amount.

Mr. Holloway said the bus is getting donated. He then asked what year it is and how many miles it has, to which Dr. Kerber responded, it is a 2008, and she does not know how many miles it has, but it has been recently inspected and was deemed to be in good condition. She said she addressed that in the application, as there would be a maintenance clause with this, and if it got to the point where it was going to cost them more to keep the bus on the road, then it would become a stationary bus and they would still have groups come in and use it. Mr. Holloway said he is not trying to manage her business, but he is looking at this and it says they are spending \$250,000 on a 15-year-old bus that probably has a hundred thousand miles or more on it, but that is her business.

Mr. Davis clarified, the letter would say the County is supporting the project as the County should not be asking for the funding.

Mr. Holloway clarified, the funding is not coming from the County's finance system.

Mr. Cannon then asked for a consensus to send the letter of support, to which everyone agreed.

There was no further discussion.

Signatures on next page.

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John T. Cannon, President, At-Large



Ernest F. Davis, Vice President, District 1



William R. McCain, At-Large



Nicole Acle, District 2



Larry Dodd, District 3



Josh Hastings, District 4



Joe Holloway, District 5



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator