

Businesses, philanthropies give \$2 million to Shelby County school merger effort

By Zack McMillin

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Thursday's approval of a \$2.2 million budget and \$1.7 million consulting contract by the Shelby County's school merger Transition Planning Commission revealed the costs and scope of the planning that will go into consolidating Memphis City Schools with Shelby County Schools.

The 21-member transition commission's budget includes \$2 million that has been donated by local businesses, corporations and philanthropies, with the bulk of that total now committed to a contract with [Boston Consulting Group](#).

Donors listed in a news release are FedEx, First Tennessee Bank, AutoZone, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, Hyde Family Foundations and Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, plus unnamed donors who wished to remain anonymous.

The contract, negotiated by commissioner Christine Richards, who is also executive vice president and general counsel for FedEx, outlines a hectic work schedule that calls for options on critical decisions outlined by the end of February and determinations made by the end of April.

One example is how to structure the district: Should it be centralized or decentralized into what the contract calls "regions, clusters, networks?" If so, how much authority or autonomy would be spread throughout the county?

That is vital, according to the contract language, because whatever model is chosen "will inform many committees' work."

The Shelby County Schools Education Foundation, which has served the suburban district, is acting as the commission's conduit for incoming and outgoing funds. BCG will be paid in phases to provide for accountability.

"BCG has a proven track record with urban school districts across the country and unparalleled experience coordinating complex mergers," said transition commission chairwoman Barbara Prescott. "They will be a huge asset as a partner in this

transition."

Said Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell, also a member of the commission: "The selection of BCG and the commitment demonstrated by area businesses and philanthropies are both crucial steps in making this merger successful."

BCG -- which has helped manage public education transformations in New Orleans, Delaware, Illinois, Cleveland, Los Angeles and other locations -- sent key members of its team to Memphis this week ahead of the commission's vote.

Richards, an Arlington resident, praised BCG for its flexibility in negotiations, and Kenya Bradshaw, Tennessee executive director of Stand For Children, described her meeting with BCG as very positive.

"I was just really impressed, based on the initial conversation I had," Bradshaw told the commission's executive committee before Thursday's full meeting.

The contract with BCG runs 30 pages and goes into great detail describing the work to be accomplished over several phases. It calls for the commission to "align behind" a draft of a merger plan by June 15, then have it finalized and ready for approval from the state and the 23-member unified county school board by Aug. 31. The pact also includes a plan for community engagement.

The commission will meet Monday evening at Christian Brothers University with leaders involved with one of the nation's highest-achieving large urban school districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools. On Dec. 15, the newly hired consultants will facilitate a planned four-hour "Vision Meeting" with the commission.

-- Zack McMillin: (901) 529-2564



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