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INFORMATIONAL SUBMITTAL

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TO: Mitch D’Olier, Chairperson Applications Committee

FROM: Tom Hutton, Executive Director

AGENDA ITEM: Presentation on 2014-2015 Charter Application Cycle Process and Decision-Making Stage

I. DESCRIPTION

Information on the process and decision-making stage of the current application cycle.

II. BACKGROUND

The Commission received three Final Applications and convened an Evaluation Team to evaluate each application. The Evaluation Team was comprised of three Commission staff members and three external evaluators.

While it is the Evaluation Team’s duty to evaluate and develop a recommendation on each Final Application for a new charter school, and the Applications Committee holds a hearing to consider these recommendations and in turn make recommendations to the full Commission, the Commission is solely responsible for deciding whether to approve or deny each application. It is important for Commissioners to keep in mind, as the authorizer, that the purpose of the application process is to approve only high-quality charter applications and deny those that do not meet the high standards set forth in Request for Proposals (“RFP”) and evaluation criteria. Importantly, the purpose of the application process is not to assist applicants in refining and finalizing their proposals; this is one of the fundamental reasons for not accepting and considering new information provided by applicants after the Evaluation Team made its recommendations, as will be discussed further later in this submittal.

The rigor and seriousness of the application process is evidenced by the amount of time that the Evaluation Team dedicated to the thorough and careful evaluation of applications and that other

staff members have dedicated to review of the resulting materials produced by the Evaluation Team and applicants. Additionally, Operations staff has been involved in managing the process from its inception and has developed recommendations on each application after a thoughtful review of all relevant materials.

The Evaluation Team developed Final Application Recommendation Reports (“Recommendation Report”), which recommend approval or denial of applications. Each applicant had an opportunity to provide a written response (“Applicant Response”) to its Recommendation Report, and the Evaluation Team had an opportunity to provide a written rebuttal (“Evaluation Team Rebuttal”) to any Applicant Response. The Recommendation Report, Applicant Response, and Evaluation Team Rebuttal form the Recommendation Packet.

III. DECISION-MAKING STAGE

Staff Recommendation. In developing the recommendations to the Committee, staff was mindful of the application evaluation process and scope of the Commission’s review, as set forth in the RFP: “The Commission’s Application Committee will consider the staff recommendation, Recommendation Packet, and public hearing testimony, DOE comments, and any other relevant information and make a recommendation to the full Commission regarding approval or denial of each application. At its General Business Meeting, the Commission will consider the staff recommendation, Recommendation Packet, public hearing testimony, DOE Comments, any other relevant information, and the recommendations of the Commission’s Application Committee and decide whether to approve or deny each application.”

While the Recommendation Report, Applicant Response, and Evaluation Team Rebuttal cover a variety of issues, staff has attempted to focus on the few issues that appear to be the most significant and would have the biggest impact on an applicant’s ability to successfully start and operate a high-quality charter school. The omission of an issue from the staff’s review is not meant to indicate that the staff believes that the issue was resolved one way or another, only that it is not a major point of contention or is not a critical point that warrants further analysis in the submittal. For each key point, staff reaches a conclusion for the Committee’s consideration, but at a minimum, the inclusion of these points in the submittal are intended to draw out the key points for an approval or denial of the application.

As is not uncommon from applicants being recommended for denial, Applicant Responses may criticize the application process and may even go so far as to imply that the process is the reason for the recommendation of denial. Staff recommendations may directly address some of these criticisms, but the recommendations generally ignore process critiques as they are rarely relevant to the quality of the application. While staff believes the application process to be well-designed for the purposes of vetting applications, any possible flaws with the process are highly unlikely to have caused any application to not meet standards.

Scope of Commissioner Review. Unlike the last application cycle, applicants had a chance to make minor changes to their applications through the Initial Proposal Amendment or Request for Clarification. However, applicants were advised at the beginning of the application process that the application should be a complete and accurate depiction of their proposed plan, and that no new information would be accepted after the Recommendation Reports were issued, as the Evaluation Team would not have had an opportunity to holistically evaluate such information.

Further, the RFP states, “[T]he Commission shall disregard any new information prior to the issuance of the Final Application Recommendation Report.” The RFP defines “new information” as “any information that substantially differs from what is provided in the Components of the Application and is revisionary in nature, versus information that simply clarifies factual inaccuracies or misunderstandings represented in the Final Application Recommendation Report.”

Because this was what was communicated to all applicants, and applicants submitted their applications with this understanding, Commissioners should not consider new information that was or may be provided after the issuance of the Recommendation Reports in their review and decision-making. New information is specifically flagged in the Evaluation Team Rebuttal and, where relevant, is noted in the staff submittal. Commissioners can consider whether the Evaluation Team has an adequate basis for denial of an application. This includes considerations like whether the Evaluation Team gave enough weight to certain aspects of the application or whether the Applicant Response points out significant information that the Evaluation Team overlooked.