

**Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission**  
**Meeting of September 22, 2020**  
**Via Zoom**

**Minutes**

*Present: Mr. Edward Kaplan, chair; Dr. Betty Morgan, vice chair; Mr. Paul Berry, Mr. Richard Bodorff; Dr. Debra Bright; Ms. Shelly Gardeniers; Mr. Irwin Kramer; Mr. Howard Rosen; Ms. Beth Suarez, Mr. Bruce Wahl; Ms. Ellie Wang.*

*The following members of the MPT management and staff also were in attendance: MPT President and CEO Larry Unger, Mr. George Beneman, Ms. Erin Chrest, Ms. Colette Colclough, Mr. Andrew Levine, Mrs. Frances Minakowski, Ms. Betsy Peisach, Mr. Travis Mitchell, Mr. Steven Schupak, Ms. Suzanne Schwertman, Ms. Linda Taggart, and Mr. Tom Williams. Ms. Dionne Neblett was present to record the minutes. Mr. Rob Jefferson was present for IT services.*

Minutes review and approval

Mr. Kaplan called the meeting to order at 10:33 a.m and acknowledged the presence of a quorum. Mr. Kaplan asked for approval of the April 28, 2020, commission meeting minutes. Ms. Wang made a motion to approve the minutes; Mr. Bodorff seconded the motion, and the minutes were unanimously approved. Mr. Kaplan asked for approval of the May 26, 2020, commission meeting minutes. Mr. Rosen made a motion to approve the minutes; Ms. Gardeniers seconded. The minutes were unanimously approved.

President's report

Mr. Unger welcomed three recently appointed commissioners to MPT: Richard Bodorff, Debra Bright, and Beth Suarez. Debra Bright serves as associate dean of student affairs at Montgomery College. She holds a doctorate from George Washington University and earned her undergraduate degree from Syracuse University in broadcast journalism. Dr. Bright responded she is delighted to work with MPT and looks forward to serving on the commission. Beth Suarez currently serves as director of development at Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society. Ms. Suarez previously served in development roles for 14 years at PBS and has already been helpful to MPT's development staff. Ms. Suarez said it is an honor and pleasure to serve with the commission. Richard Bodorff serves as senior counsel at the law firm Wiley Rein where he specializes in telecommunication and technology. Mr. Bodorff has already agreed to a generous planned gift to MPT.

Mr. Unger began the Commission's tribute to retiring commissioner Paul Berry by thanking him for almost two decades of dedicated service to MPT. Commissioner Berry has had a long television and radio career and is widely recognized as one of the area's most respected journalists. Mr. Unger read a resolution from the Commission in honor of Mr. Berry. Mr. Bodorff presented Mr. Berry with that framed resolution. Mr. Berry thanked all in attendance for

the special honor. He stated it never occurred to him how important MPT would be to him, as he gained not just colleagues but friends. Dr. Morgan and Ms. Wang thanked Mr. Berry for his years of service. Mr. Kaplan added his personal thanks and congratulations to Mr. Berry on his distinguished TV and radio career at MPT and Metropolitan Washington.

Regarding MPT's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Unger reported the staff has adjusted well to working remotely and will continue to do so at least until the end of the calendar year. Conditions will be re-evaluated at that time to determine if employees should report back to the Owings Mills campus.

Mr. Unger stated MPT was having a good year financially prior to the epidemic. However, since the pandemic hit, FY20 was predicted to be one of the worst financial years in MPT's history but the bleak projection was wrong and FY20 ended in the black. There were a number of factors that contributed to the financial rebound including \$200,000 from the federal government set-aside for public broadcasting, \$310,000 from the CARES Act through the state, and \$87,000 from a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan that may not have to be repaid. Additionally, Development performed remarkably well in the final quarter of the year and surpassed its projection by a wide margin.

Future federal and state funding remains uncertain. Mr. Unger explained that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting has been receiving \$445 million each year in federal funding of which MPT would typically receive approximately \$3 million. The FY2021 federal appropriations package that included an increase of \$50 million for CPB passed the House of Representatives but it is unlikely the Senate will approve this funding increase. Congress has been unable to agree on another COVID-19 relief package. MPT could suffer further cuts to its State appropriation since the State of Maryland is estimating budget shortfalls in the billions of dollars. This fiscal year, MPT's funding was cut by \$314,000 and additional cuts may be required. Under these circumstances, he stated keeping MPT employees and programs in place is most important and he will consider the year a success if this is accomplished.

Mr. Unger announced the Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass documentaries have been written and approved. Both films are scheduled for delivery to PBS in 2021 and will be broadcast on PBS in 2022.

Mr. Unger reported that MPT has completed a successful fundraising campaign. MPT surpassed its \$12.5 million goal raising \$12.8 million to date. He congratulated Erin Chest, managing director, Major & Planned Giving, and the entire Development team. In addition, Mr. Unger stated that when the campaign began, the endowment funds were approximately \$300,000 and are now close to \$7 million.

Mr. Unger announced that MPT won eight Emmys® in June. He shared clips of Emmy Award-winning programs including *Chesapeake and Delaware Canal: Gateway to the World* funded by the MPT New Initiatives Fund with a grant from Irene and Edward Kaplan; *Made Possible by Viewers Like You: 50 Years of Maryland Public Television*; *Maryland Farm & Harvest*; *Maryland Crabs: Traditions & Taste*; and *Outdoors Maryland: Water from the Air*.

## Budget & Compensation report/FY20 year-end results

Dr. Morgan, chair of the committee, stated she was nervous about the outcome of FY20 and was pleased that MPT avoided any large loss. She turned to Ms. Schwertman to present the report. Ms. Schwertman directed commissioners to the financial report in their materials. She stated FY20 started strong with a forecast of a \$732,000 surplus. However, in FY20, MPT had to stop production of shows due to COVID-19 and that revenue was deferred to FY21. To help mitigate the financial shortfall, Development added pledge dates. In addition, the Maryland State Ad Agency increased revenue as well, raising more than \$3 million. Departmental spending was decreased for the remainder of the year and the fiscal year ended with a surplus. There were no questions regarding the year-end results. Dr. Morgan stated the ad agency was a brilliant idea and bodes well for future revenue.

Regarding the current fiscal year, Ms. Schwertman said the State has frozen all vacancies as a cost-saving measure. General funding for MPT was cut by \$315,000 and staff was told to watch discretionary spending. She directed commissioners to the contract reports and explained that many of the contracts listed were renewals and multiple-year contracts. Mr. Wahl inquired if The Nielsen Company helps with national productions, MPT programming and content. Mr. Schupak explained that Nielsen has a virtual monopoly in the audience research area and provides data on who is watching MPT channels and related demographics. Mr. Wahl made a motion to approve the report; Mr. Rosen seconded the motion, and the commissioners unanimously approved it.

Ms. Colclough, Vice President of Human Resources, addressed the personnel-related reports and said the State has frozen all positions. Only 132 of the 145 authorized positions are filled. There were no hires and one separation, the retirement of Alex Vitalo, managing director, Creative Services. The EEO percentages for managers and executive positions are above the national average. Ms. Wang asked what was considered an executive position. Executive positions include vice presidents and above.

## Audit report

Mr. Rosen, chair of the Audit Committee, announced that MPT received a clean legislative audit report. The most recent audit had fewer findings than the previous year's report. The biggest issue was the auditors request to look at MPT Foundation, Inc. books and contracts that State auditors legally are not authorized to see. He thanked Ms. Schwertman for her meticulous record-keeping. Mr. Unger said the state legislative audit takes place every four years.

Mr. Levine, General Counsel, conducted a review of the audit and MPT's contract process and said a change was necessary. The auditors wanted MPT to combine its internal contract review policy with its artist and grant policies. MPT's internal contract review policy that has been in place for 23 years includes review and approval of certain contracts by the commission. Within these policies are procurement exemptions for artists and grants and policies and procedures related to those exemptions as required by legislature. Mr. Levine stated it is necessary to raise dollar thresholds to be more realistic with current-day dollars and proposed that MPT notify commissioners of contracts that are above \$500,000 in total value and that the commission

approve contracts valued at more than \$1 million. He asked if there were any questions. Hearing none, Mr. Rosen made a motion to approve the change to the policies; Mr. Wahl seconded the motion. The motion was passed unanimously.

### Content report

Mr. Unger stated Travis Mitchell who joined MPT shortly before the pandemic hit, is a great addition to MPT's staff and is managing the *Standing Against Racism: Fostering Unity Through Dialogue* initiative. Mr. Mitchell thanked Mr. Unger for his leadership internally and externally, citing the most recent example of MPT's collective response to the tragic murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest that followed. Mr. Mitchell stated MPT strives to shed light, not heat, on race relations. This long-term initiative was developed to increase thoughtful discussions using content and engagement activities. MPT has led the region in its commitment of primetime viewing hours regarding racism and inequity. Mr. Mitchell asked if there were any questions about the initiative. Mr. Rosen asked what MPT was doing to engage schools and colleges in Maryland. Mr. Mitchell responded that resource guides and content is available on *Thinkport*. Additionally, materials have been shared with school districts and stressed that engagement with young people is vital.

Mr. Mitchell announced MPT is broadcasting a three-hour presentation on October 26 that features an interview between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and David Susskind. This presentation is in partnership with Morgan radio station WEAA and will include discussions with students, historians, and journalists and bring together a panel of experts with the goal of building positive community relations.

### COVID-19 response

Ms. Colclough stated that fewer than one-third of MPT employees come into the building and those that do keep a safe distance from other employees in compliance with State regulations. MPT has provided personal protective equipment to employees, including masks, hand sanitizers, wipes, and COVID-19 fobs to open doors and operate equipment and machinery in public areas of the building. MPT has also provided employees with materials on mental health resources. In addition, two-thirds of employees telecommute or come into the workplace intermittently are required to wear masks in common areas. A meeting has been scheduled to re-evaluate when and how employees could come back to the workplace.

Mr. Beneman said production has cautiously resumed with standard operating procedures for field and in-studio productions. Videographers have the right to refuse to do a shoot if they feel their health is in jeopardy. For example, *Steven Raichlen's Project Fire* was taped at Pearlstone Retreat and Conference Center in early September with a crew of 18. Safe Production Services of New York joined the crew to handle on-site testing, monitor COVID-19 protocol, and maintain a safe set. The crew was "in a bubble" and not allowed to leave the property during the two-week shoot for safety reasons. With the proper precautions in place, the shows taped for Season 3 are high quality and that all crewmembers left the shoot in a healthy state.

### Education update

Ms. Peisach gave an overview of the At-Home Learning initiative that began in the spring due to in-person school closures. However, there was a digital divide and many students did not have electronic devices or Internet services. MPT's response played an important role to help children, families, and teachers throughout the State with a continuity of learning. The initiative contained three components; a broadcast schedule, digital resources for active learning, and curated toolkits for parents and educators. MPT broadcast more than 600 hours of educational programming and added a backyard summer camp component that included hands-on activities. The learning initiative connected viewing with doing. Ms. Gardeniers asked if MPT makes contact with state and county offices to develop programs for school-aged children. Ms. Peisach explained that MPT has ongoing relationships with schools in Maryland, but school systems act independently. MPT acted according to each school system's needs and hopes to have even more interaction with them in the future.

#### Construction update

Mr. Beneman stated that construction on the expansion of Studio A began in March and is 25% complete and shared photos of the construction site.

Mr. Unger said due to the length of the meeting, Mr. Schupak would give his presentation on the Maryland State Ad Agency at the beginning of the October meeting.

#### Old or new business

Mr. Kaplan asked for old or new business and, hearing none, asked for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Wang made the motion and Mr. Wahl seconded it. Mr. Kaplan adjourned the meeting at 12:03 p.m.