

Date: Sept. 15, 2021

To: Leelanau Board of Commissioners

From: Sue Miller, Leland Township Resident

Re.: Funding Early Childhood Education Services

Before reiterating my support for the Early Childhood Millage, I would like to comment on Board of Commissioners decision-making. I think we can all acknowledge that our county is divided by political party preference. This division, as evidenced in recent county-wide and township voting results, appears to be evenly divided, with the last Board of Commissioners election being decided by just two votes. Therefore, I would like you, our Board of Commissioners, to bear in mind that when you make decisions with your divided votes, you do not have a voter mandate; you are representing an evenly divided constituency. This makes the process of decision-making particularly important.

Your constituents expect each of you to seek and study credible background information on the issues that come before you. Most of your constituents expect you to rise above partisan politics and preconceived opinions and, with an open mind, respectfully consider all points of view. When your constituents see consistent 4-3 votes on major issues of importance — such as prayer in public meetings, a major reorganization of county government, a school mask mandate and now, the gutting of a voter-supported millage election — they can only conclude that there was little attempt to find common ground, compromise, or solutions that might satisfy most of them. There have been many missed opportunities to bring the community together on every one of these issues. The result of these missed opportunities is increased divisiveness. The community never benefits when board decisions are perceived in terms of “winning” and “losing,” alienating half of the county with each 4-3 vote.

As for the Early Childhood Millage, I can only hope that you will reconsider your decision to defund these voter-supported services and, that in doing so, you will seek out and study both the evidence of need and the results from early implementation. While service implementation initially looked different due to COVID, in-person services are now reaching parents and their children. I encourage you to look at the gaps identified, and recommendations made by the county’s 42-member early childhood advisory group; consider the millage-funded services that are now filling those gaps; and talk with the providers and

beneficiaries of those services. One word that has been used to criticize early childhood services is “redundancy,” implying that they are a duplication of existing services. As a member of the mental health advisory workgroup, created to provide oversight of the millage-related mental health programming, I can refute the assumption of redundancy in mental health services. As commissioners, are you aware of the scarcity of mental health services in our county? Do you know of anyone who has tried, unsuccessfully, to access services for themselves or someone they love? What are the results for that person and his/her family?

I have personally talked with clients seeking mental health services and providers who can't serve them due to full caseloads. Thanks to the millage, both parents and young children with mild to moderate mental health problems, often referred by medical personnel, can now receive interim support through Parenting Communities while they wait the 5-6 months currently needed to access a mental health counselor. Even then, health insurance issues often impede service delivery, but as they wait for those issues to be resolved, parents and children in need of mental health help can continue to receive support from Parenting Communities.

The only clients who receive more immediate mental health services are those in crisis, as determined by community mental health crisis response personnel. Yet once these clients are out of a crisis, they too, have difficulty accessing the kind of ongoing mental health treatment needed to maintain their mental well-being so they don't move back into crisis. Parenting Communities is also available to them.

Mental health is just one area in which misconceptions about “redundancy” is driving decision-making. Millage-related programming is designed to fill gaps in service, not duplicate them. Check out your assumptions about duplication with service providers to see if there really are other comparable services available. In continuing to support the Early Childhood Millage, you are being proactive in meeting a vital need for families and their young children. By discontinuing funding, you are letting these families down. You are also alienating everyone who voted for the early childhood millage, as well as the larger group of people who simply believe that, win or lose, their vote should count.