

**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF EDUCATION, ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
DISTRICT 126, LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS  
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2024 – 6:04 pm.  
ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
BOARD OF EDUCATION BOARD ROOM**

The Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126, Lake County, Illinois, met in Regular Session in the ZBTHS Board of Education Board Room, One Z-B Way, 3901 W. 21<sup>st</sup> Street, Zion, Illinois, commencing at 6:04 p.m.

Board President Nordstrom presided.

**ROLL CALL**

Members present: President Nordstrom, Secretary Stephen, Vice-President Benitez, Member Scott, Member Cook, and Member Champine.

Members excused: Member McNeal

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**STAFF, STUDENT, AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATION**

Ms. Felske addressed the guests to present two awards. First, Janalise Jimenez, the student award winner and chief editor of the Stinger, was acknowledged, despite her absence. Her dedication to truthful reporting was highlighted, and her award will be presented the following day.

The second award, for staff, was given to Joy Mobile. She was praised for her invaluable contributions as the leader of the district's bilingual program. Over the summer, Joy worked diligently to assist international teachers from Spain in their transition, showcasing her compassion and commitment to the community. Ms. Felske expressed pride in recognizing her efforts.

Dr. Rodriguez expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with Joy Mobile and highlighted her impactful connections with over 80 newcomer students. Reflecting on his own experiences, he noted how Joy's mentorship reminded them of the support he received from a high school teacher. Dr Rodriguez praised Joy for fostering a similar bond with students who are learning English and thanked her for her dedication, offering congratulations on her award.

Mr. Wiland expressed pleasure in discussing the two recipients of the Zion Benton Pride Awards. The first award was presented to Elliot Weiss, a model student, who was praised for his kindness, engagement in learning, and positive attitude. Teachers noted his helpfulness, sense of humor, and leadership within the Bee Leaders club, where he actively contributes to planning workshops.

The second award went to Robin Undo, the school's social worker, who was recognized for her critical role in supporting students' social and emotional well-being. Mr. Wiland highlighted her caring nature, community involvement, and willingness to volunteer for various initiatives. Robin's multifaceted contributions, including mentoring and advocacy for students, were celebrated, and he concluded by thanking all those recognized that evening.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "A,"** Zee Bee Pride Board of Education Recognition

#### COMMUNICATIONS FROM STAFF, GUESTS, AND DISTRICT RESIDENTS

President Nordstrom invited staff, guests, and district residents to address the board. Attendees were instructed to sign in, and it was noted that four individuals had registered to speak. Additionally, comments were limited to three minutes per person.

Ruth Davis, a community member and taxpayer, raised several concerns during her comments to the Board of Education. She inquired about the plans for overseeing the district's financial operations and when the new business manager would be hired. Davis also noted that the minutes from the previous meeting had not yet been posted online and highlighted missing items from the online packet. She questioned the board's compliance with the Open Meetings Act regarding the availability of complete packets for 48 hours before meetings and pointed out that the meeting location was incorrectly listed.

Ms. Davis expressed concern about leadership in the district, asking why a credentialed administrator was not overseeing operations while both the Superintendent and business manager were absent. She questioned the lack of response to her previous inquiries during public comments, including the existence of a work-from-home policy and the administration's attendance during student hours. Additionally, she asked about retirement contributions for administrators and the process for the community to receive answers to questions raised at board meetings, suggesting that relying on Freedom of Information Act requests was not a viable solution.

Jay Davis addressed the board with concerns regarding the accessibility of handicapped parking at the school. He noted that there are only two designated spots near the entrance, making it difficult for elderly individuals and those with mobility issues to access the building. Mr. Davis suggested that the board consider relocating some of the regular parking spaces further away to create more accessible spots closer to the entrance.

He also raised questions about whether there is a ramp available for wheelchair users to access the building safely. Emphasizing the need for better accommodations for the elderly and handicapped members of the community, Mr. Davis urged the board and the new safety director to prioritize improving access to the facility, stating that it should not be necessary for him to remind them of this responsibility.

George Foster acknowledged the previous speaker's concerns about accessibility for the elderly, noting his recent status as a great-grandfather.

Foster expressed optimism about the district's commitment to transparency, specifically mentioning the intention to upload full recordings of meetings to YouTube without edits. He inquired about how community members could receive answers to their questions, asking if responses would be provided via email or at future meetings. Foster suggested the possibility of scheduling a town meeting for open dialogue.

President Nordstrom responded to Foster's inquiry by outlining the general process for addressing questions raised during meetings. He explained that the administration typically reaches out to individuals shortly after the meeting to discuss their concerns. Nordstrom acknowledged that this process may have been overlooked recently due to complications over the past month. He emphasized the board's intent to ensure that individuals have the opportunity to engage with the administration and receive answers to their questions. Additionally, he mentioned the importance of transparency regarding recordings and the use of meeting materials.

George Foster asked whether committee meetings, in addition to board meetings, would also be recorded to enhance transparency.

President Nordstrom acknowledged the feedback regarding video recordings of meetings, stating that they are working through the process. He expressed appreciation for the input and confirmed that they would explore the use of the facility for this purpose.

George Foster reflected on his long history of paying taxes in the district, noting that he has contributed enough to support a student at Harvard. He emphasized his concern for improving academic excellence for the students, as they will need to compete in a challenging world. Foster acknowledged the board's efforts and expressed his appreciation, drawing on his background as a member of a family of educators.

Chris Szymanski addressed the board, commending them for beginning to record meetings and making them available to the public, which he viewed as a positive step toward transparency. He requested that the board also consider recording and posting committee meetings, as these smaller gatherings often contain important discussions that impact board decisions. Szymanski expressed appreciation for the board's responsiveness to community concerns and emphasized the community's desire to communicate directly with elected officials, encouraging the board to remain engaged in that dialogue.

President Nordstrom asked if there were additional speakers. Kelly Regnier stated she'd like to speak.

Kelly Regnier, a staff member and President of the Zion Federation of Teachers, expressed concerns during her comments. With 27 years at the district, she noted a positive atmosphere this year, yet raised issues regarding recent board discussions.

Regnier clarified that claims about insurance being cost-neutral did not account for significant increases in what staff members were paying.

She also disputed the characterization of recent negotiations as amicable, citing a 98% strike vote as evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, she expressed confusion over reports of administrators receiving increases in their 401(k) and 403(b) contributions, especially after the board had previously denied requests for similar benefits for staff. Regnier questioned the board's priorities, asking whether they were focused on supporting classrooms or favoring administrative perks.

## CONSENT AGENDA

A motion was made by Secretary Stephen, seconded by Member Champine, to accept the Consent Agenda. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0. Included in the Consent Agenda are the following:

- Minutes from the Regular Board of Education Meeting - August 27, 2024
- Treasurer's Report – August 2024, **EXHIBIT "B"**
- Contractor Payout Request, **EXHIBIT "C"**
- FOIA Requests, **EXHIBIT "D"**
- Revenue & Expenditure Report – **EXHIBIT "E"**
- Bills Payable Report – September 2024, **EXHIBIT "F"**
- Bills Paid Report – 2nd half August, 1st half of September, **EXHIBIT "G"**
- Activity Board Report – August 2024, **EXHIBIT "H"**

## SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT

Dr. Rodriguez addressed the board, highlighting the ongoing work of the Finance and Personnel Committees. He emphasized a focus on "pathway to proficiency," which aims to enhance both student learning and administrative processes using technology as a tool. He spoke about the shift from technical leadership to adaptive leadership, aiming for 90% graduation rates, post-secondary plans, staff retention, and attendance.

Dr. Rodriguez shared optimism about preliminary results from the district, which are expected to be publicly announced in November, indicating that the faculty and administration's efforts are yielding positive outcomes. He acknowledged the importance of setting ambitious goals, including preparing students for success beyond graduation.

He also mentioned the development of a new strategic plan and collaboration with the Long Range Committee. In concluding, Dr. Rodriguez recognized Dr. Matt Wilkinson for his five years of dedicated service as Chief Financial Officer, thanking him for his contributions to the district's financial stability and success.

President Nordstrom expressed gratitude to Dr. Wilkinson for his dedicated service to the district. He acknowledged Dr. Wilkinson's collaborative approach with the board, staff, and community partners, emphasizing the educational clarity he provided in discussions. Nordstrom appreciated the effort to communicate complex ideas simply, ensuring that responses were understandable. He wished Dr. Wilkinson well in his future endeavors.

Dr. Wilkinson expressed his gratitude to the Board of Education for the opportunity to serve the community. He reflected on his 25 years in education, stating that this district is where he feels he has left a legacy, particularly through the investments made in its infrastructure. He thanked the board for their support during his tenure.

Dr. Rodriguez informed the board about the ongoing recruitment for a new position, noting that while over 40 candidates applied, many were unqualified. He encouraged community members to refer potential candidates. In the interim, Dr. Wilkinson will continue to work with the team to ensure operations remain stable and that the district maintains its financial recognition. Dr. Rodriguez acknowledged the loss of Dr. Wilkinson but was reassured that a plan was in place to continue important work until a suitable replacement was found.

## REPORTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Principal's Report**

The Principal's report was included in the attachments and did not have a presentation.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "I" and "J", ZBTHS & ZB East Principal Reports**

## BOARD COMMITTEE REPORTS

### **Business/Bid/Finance Committee**

President Nordstrom reported on the recent BBF committee meeting held on September 17th. He noted that key topics discussed, which would also be addressed in the current meeting, included the 2024 budget hearing and approval, the CPPRT resolution budget certificate, the FY2026 revenue estimate, and the 2025 CEJA grant. Additionally, they covered updates on the 10-year facilities master plan and discussions regarding the Inspire Youth and Family Services grant. Nordstrom also mentioned capital improvements and next steps in the strategic plan process.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### **2024-2025 Budget Hearing**

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to open the public hearing for the purpose of considering the 2024-2025 budget. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Dr. Wilkinson addressed the board regarding the public hearing on the budget, emphasizing the district's strong financial position. He explained that the budget

is an estimate of revenues and expenditures and highlighted the district's practices of amending the budget as needed. He detailed various funds, including the Education Fund, which supports operational and instructional costs, safety and security, and infrastructure. The Operations and Maintenance fund supports building maintenance needs, and the Transportation Fund provides transportation services.

He provided estimates for the upcoming fiscal year, projecting total revenues of approximately \$78.2 million against expenditures of \$76.3 million, resulting in a surplus. He noted local property tax collection rates and continued property tax abatements aimed at reducing tax rates for residents. Additionally, he mentioned grants and funding increases, including the Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) and the Stronger Connections grant, which will support initiatives such as improving attendance rates.

Dr. Wilkinson concluded by discussing anticipated decreases in federal funding and emphasized the district's commitment to fulfilling contractual obligations while maintaining financial recognition. He expressed confidence in achieving a surplus and ensuring the district's continued financial stability.

Dr. Wilkinson discussed the district's operating fund expenditures, noting that salaries represent the largest portion at 45%, followed by benefits and various services. He outlined key goals for the district's five-year financial plan, emphasizing strategic investments, fulfilling contractual obligations, implementing facility improvements, and maintaining low tax rates while ensuring financial stability.

He projected a slight decrease in operating fund balances in 2025 due to significant purchases and transfers for construction projects, but anticipated gradual growth in subsequent years. Dr. Wilkinson also mentioned the district's bond capacity and plans for an energy transition grant aimed at renovating libraries and classrooms, with a substantial portion of funding coming from grant dollars.

Additionally, he highlighted upcoming projects, including electric bus charging stations and HVAC system improvements. Dr. Wilkinson concluded by emphasizing the importance of strategic planning for future goals and announced the timeline for submitting the budget to relevant state agencies.

#### Public Comment:

President Nordstrom opened the meeting to public comment.

Larry Stephens expressed confusion regarding the fund transfers discussed earlier. Dr. Wilkinson clarified that they plan to transfer \$3 million from the education fund to the operation and maintenance (O&M) fund for upcoming capital improvement projects. He further explained that \$4 million will be transferred from the O&M fund to the site and construction fund, which will also receive excess funds from the working cash fund to support the projects.

Stephens then voiced his concern about the focus on building projects, suggesting that the community feels the district is spending too much money without delivering a satisfactory educational product. Dr. Wilkinson and others on the board attempted to address his concerns while maintaining that the budget was sound and necessary for ongoing improvements.

Blake Fortenberry inquired about the district's long-term debt, specifically the \$10 million outstanding, and whether there were plans to retire any of it early, given the reported surplus of \$1.6 million. Dr. Wilkinson explained that while they had considered this option, current interest rates were not favorable for refunding the debt. He noted that as the Federal Reserve makes adjustments to interest rates, they could revisit the possibility of early repayment or refunding.

Fortenberry emphasized the potential benefits of reducing long-term obligations to increase cash flow. Dr. Wilkinson acknowledged this point and reiterated their strategy of abating tax rates to keep them low. He encouraged Fortenberry to continue the conversation with the council about revisiting the refunding options in the future. The discussion highlighted the need to carefully time any financial decisions related to debt management.

Chris Szymanski expressed concerns about the district's significant cash reserves, specifically referencing a \$5 million balance in the emergency fund. He highlighted his long-standing experience in the community and noted that, historically, referendums were used to involve the community in funding decisions for school improvements. Szymanski argued that the district's growing cash reserves and increasing tax rates limit community input on financial decisions and projects. He suggested that rather than accumulating surplus funds, the district should consider refunding some of this money to taxpayers through tax reductions.

Ruth Davis inquired about the district's working cash fund, specifically referencing a slide that indicated a balance of \$695,742 in interest earnings. She requested clarification on whether this figure represented the interest received for that fund. Dr. Wilkinson confirmed that the \$695,742 was indeed the projected interest (Clarification on 9.25.24: This number included the .05 levy and interest) for the year. Additionally, he mentioned that \$2 million from the working cash fund would be allocated to support upcoming capital projects.

President Nordstrom inquired if there were additional comments and no other public members responded.

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to close the public hearing for the purpose of considering the 2024-2025 budget. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "K"**, 2024-2025 Budget Hearing

### **Approval of the 2024-2025 Budget**

President Nordstrom stated that at this point in the process, the board is asked to consider approving the FY25 budget based on the information presented and discussed during the hearing. He asked if the board had any questions.

Member Champine expressed her belief that capital spending on projects will decrease moving forward. She emphasized the importance of the 10-year master plan, aiming to upgrade classrooms to 21st-century technology. While acknowledging the loss of funding from the ESSER grants, she urged a thorough examination of the budget to secure additional funding, particularly for essential areas like security. Dr. Wilkinson agreed, noting that the district has made significant investments in the past five years, which will reduce future project costs. Member Champine also highlighted the value of providing students with diverse opportunities, such as drama and career training, and expressed appreciation for the investments made in these areas.

A motion was made by Vice President Benitez, seconded by Member Scott, to accept the superintendent's recommendation to approve the 24-25 budget resolution as presented and to file the budget and certifications with the Lake County Clerk's Office, Lake County Regional Office of Education and the Illinois State Board of Education. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "L", 2024-25 Budget**

### **Approval of the Resolution of Distribution of 2024-25 Corporate Personal Property Replacement Taxes**

Dr. Wilkinson outlined the allocation of funds as mandated by school code, detailing that \$190,000 will be assigned to the IRS Social Security Fund for non-certified staff pensions, \$315,000 to the Education Fund, \$600,000 to the Operations and Maintenance Fund, and \$835,000 to the Transportation Fund. He emphasized that these assignments must be approved and filed with the county clerk alongside the budget through a resolution.

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Vice President Benitez, to accept the superintendent's recommendation to approve the resolution for 2024-2025 CPRT distribution as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

### **Approval of the Budget Certificate & FY26 Revenue Estimate**

Dr. Wilkinson explained that, as part of the budget process, the board secretary must certify that the budget was presented in a public hearing and approved by



the Board of Education. The secretary will sign off on this certification. Additionally, the district is required to provide revenue estimates for the upcoming fiscal year, which will also be signed by the Chief Financial Officer upon approval by the Board.

A motion was made by Secretary Stephen, seconded by Vice President Benitez, to accept the superintendent's recommendation to to approve the 2024-25 budget certificate of board Secretary and Chief Financial Officer, including the projected estimate of revenue for 2026 and file the approved budget and certifications with the Lake County Clerk's Office. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "M"**, Budget Certificate and Revenue Estimate

### **Approval of the CEJA Grant 2024**

Dr. Wilkinson reported that the district received a notice of funding opportunity from the Department of Economic and Community Opportunity. This year's grant amount is approximately \$13.5 million, slightly less than last year's \$14.1 million. The application is due after being approved by the Board of Education.

He clarified that the grant funds can be used for public infrastructure investments, which will contribute to an overall project budget of \$8.5 million. The district intends to allocate \$8.5 million for initial projects, with \$3.2 million coming from the grant, covering 38% of the project's costs.

Additionally, he noted that the district's share of grant funding decreased from \$3.4 million to \$3.296 million due to lower tax rates, which affects future funding calculations. Dr. Wilkinson plans to submit the grant application promptly once approved.

A motion was made by Vice President Benitez, seconded by Member Scott, to accept the superintendent's recommendation to approve the 2024 energy transition Community CEJA grant for \$3,296,877.58 and authorize the CSBO to move forward with submitting the grant application to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

Member Champine asked for confirmation and discussed the concept of rebate grants, noting that the district must first spend the funds before receiving reimbursement. Dr. Wilkinson confirmed and emphasized that while there are opportunities for such grants, some districts lack the upfront cash needed to cover those expenditures before getting reimbursed.

A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Included and made part of these minutes:

## **EXHIBIT "N", CEJA Grant**

### **OTHER BUSINESS**

#### **Capital Improvements Updates**

Dr. Wilkinson provided an update on the recent renovations to the phase two gymnasium, highlighting new bleachers, a painted ceiling, a digital scoreboard, and an advanced sound system, all set to enhance the upcoming basketball season. He then discussed the district's 10-year facilities planning process, emphasizing the importance of gathering community input through town halls and collaboration with staff and students. Dr. Wilkinson outlined a strategic master planning approach to identify needs, explore options, and develop final recommendations, aiming for board review in March 2025. He indicated that the architect and construction manager would establish a timeline for these activities and keep the community informed as the plan progresses.

Dr. Rodriguez outlined the upcoming focus on the facilities master plan and the new strategic plan, emphasizing the need for a financial plan to support these initiatives. He noted that discussions will take place from November to January regarding both plans, with the goal of having the facility's master plan approved by March and the strategic plan finalized by April or May.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "O", Capital Improvements Updates**

#### **Compliance with Public Acts**

Dr. Wilkinson informed the board about the requirement to present information regarding salaries for certified, classified, and administrative staff in compliance with Public Acts 960026, 960334, and 970609. He stated that this information will be posted on the district's website by October 1st and also sent to the Regional Office of Education by the same date, ensuring it is publicly available.

#### **Personnel Committee Update**

Vice President Benitez reported on the Personnel Committee meeting held on September 12th. The committee discussed strategies for FY25 and noted significant staffing achievements, including the hiring of 25 teachers, 28 classified staff, 10 coaches, one principal, one district director, and 88 internal transfers. This reflects the district's commitment to being fully staffed. They also covered topics such as collective bargaining agreements, employee relations initiatives, and upcoming celebrations and holiday lunches planned for the end of the year.

### **CLOSED SESSION**

Member Champine made a motion, seconded by Vice President Benitez, to adjourn to closed session at 7:18 pm for consideration of the appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees and collective negotiating matters between the public body and its employees or their representatives, or deliberations concerning salary schedules for one or more classes of employees. (5 ILCS 120/2(c)(1,2). The motion was approved by a roll call vote of members voting 6-0.

### **RECONVENE IN OPEN SESSION**

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to return to open session at 8:30 pm. The Motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 6-0

### **PERSONNEL APPROVALS**

A motion was made by Vice President Benitez, seconded by Member Scott, to approve the personnel approvals as amended. Motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 6-0. Included in the amended personnel approvals were:

#### Employment

- Wilkinson, Matthew is recommended for hire as Interim Chief School Business Official. Dr. Wilkinson's start date is October 1, 2024, and will be paid an hourly rate of \$115.00 plus TRS.
- Gallagher, Daniel is recommended for hire as Full Time Paraprofessional - Safety for ZionBenton Township High School District 126. Mr. Gallaghers' start date is September 25, 2024. Mr. Gallagher will be paid at an hourly rate of \$18.65.
- Curtin, Ryan is recommended for hire as a Drama Assistant Technical Director for School Year 2024-25 October, December, February, and April productions. This position is a Category H Step 1. II.

#### Adjustments

- Hersh, Thomas is recommended for a salary adjustment based on a change in educational category. His salary level will move from BA00, Level 1, to MA00, Level 1, in his role as a Social Studies teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School.
- Gonzalez, David was hired as a Lead Maintenance Technician for Zion-Benton Township High School District 126 on August 27, 2024, by the board. Mr. Gonzalez was approved at an hourly rate of \$32.17. A rate adjustment to \$33.17 per hour is recommended to align with CBA rate for the position. III.

#### Transfers

- Sponenburg, Amanda J. is recommended for transfer from a Zion-Benton Township District 126 Human Resource Benefits Specialist to a Zion-Benton Township District 126 Human Resource and Technology Specialist effective October 14, 2024. Ms. Sponenburg will retain her current salary. IV.

## Leaves

- Myrum, Jeanne is requesting an intermittent leave of absence beginning approximately September 06, 2024, through October 04, 2024. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Swanson, Thor is requesting a leave of absence beginning September 09, 2024, through December 06, 2024. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Mills, Katherine is requesting a leave of absence beginning September 16, 2024, through October 18, 2024. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Terrelonge, Dwight B. is requesting a leave of absence beginning September 24, 2024, through October 11, 2024. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Rossmann, Kimberlee is requesting a leave of absence beginning October 01, 2024, through November 26, 2024. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Greathouse, Nickea is requesting a leave of absence beginning approximately January 06, 2025, through May 05, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy. V.

## Termination

- Groebe, Duncan is recommended for termination of employment as a Zion-Benton Township High School District 126 Substitute Teacher.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "P"**, PERSONNEL APPROVALS

## **APPROVAL OF LETTER OF AGREEMENT WITH ZBFT**

A motion was made by Secretary Stephen, seconded by Vice-President Benitez, to accept the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Letter of Agreement with ZBFT as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "Q"**, LETTER OF AGREEMENT

## **ADJOURNMENT**

President Nordstrom adjourned the meeting at 8:32 pm.

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JERRY NORDSTROM, President

ATTEST:

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PATRICIA STEPHEN, Secretary

JN/PS/kr: MNJul2523R