

Food fight erupts at board meeting

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WILLIMANTIC — The board of education Wednesday continued to weigh the possibility of privatizing school food services and scheduled a public forum on the matter for next week.

The forum has been tentatively scheduled for Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Windham Middle School, 123 Quarry St. The forum will be followed by a board vote.

Education officials this morning had to change the date, because July 16 — the date discussed Wednesday night — also is the third Thursday of the month and conflicts with the Third Thursday Street Festival.

In addition, a town meeting has also been scheduled for the day on several items of business.

The board of education budget and finance committee — a board of education subcommittee — recommended Sodexo — a food service company based in Gaithersburg, Md. — if such a switch was considered.

“This is a very serious matter,” said school board Chairman Kenneth Folan this morning.

Folan said one constant in discussions with potential vendors is ensuring current food service employees were protected and employed.

Unionized workers have expressed worry that privatizing school cafeterias (**Fight, Page 4**)

Fight erupts over school food services

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could lead to job or benefit losses.

Folan said from 2006-2008, the district has lost \$ 210,000 on the food services budget, primarily due to labor and material costs.

"We can't continue to do business like this," Folan said.

However, Folan said he appreciates the work the food service workers perform.

"I see the other side," Folan said, adding workers in attendance Wednesday are the workers who serve food to his two children as well. He also elaborated on what private companies have offered, with Sodexo guaranteeing a \$141,000 savings the first year.

When asked how they could offer the savings, Folan said he believed the company could do so by using the company's national buying power.

"We are in the business of education," Folan said, adding the town has privatized other services including garbage collection.

Folan said the companies were scrutinized by the board and they would keep the existing workforce on at a similar rate of pay, positions and comparable health benefits.

Folan said school officials were trying to match "apple to apple."

Still, members of the food service union and others in attendance Wednesday voiced their concern.

Deborah Dubord, president of the Connecticut State Employees Association Service Employees International Union Local 2001, the local chapter which represents 31 food service employees, delivered a petition signed by more than 1,000 residents who oppose "outsourcing" Windham public schools' cafeteria services.

"We are concerned because outside private vendors often cut corners in food quality, nutrition and service to squeeze profits out of the meals they serve our kids," she said. "We can't be sure profit-motivated contractors won't import unsafe food from China into our schools to cut their bottom line."

Dubord, who is an assistant manager of food services at Windham Middle School, said the current food service staff is committed to working for the district and serving the students.

"We are also concerned that outsourcing meal services in our schools could result in less accountability," Dubord said. "Not only does it add an extra layer of bureaucracy, but private vendors often recruit temporary employees from outside the community to replace the district's long-term employees."

"As you can see from the signatures we have gathered, the community agrees. We think the board of education should also agree and drop this outsourcing scheme once and for all."

Catherine Osten, CSEA SEIU's president, said Sodexo has an "awful" reputation for dealing with employees and she applauded the members of the local union for standing up for themselves.

"You should stand up for them too," Osten told school board members.

Selectman Dawn Niles said she was unaware the proposal had progressed to the full board level and the school board could be adding a "middle man" in the process — "a middleman that is a Fortune 500 company."

"We are better than this, Windham is better than this," she said, adding she urged the board to vote "no" and not outsource food service.

Yolanda Negron, former selectman, told the board that, sometimes, the "bottom line" isn't always what's important.

"We have an incredible asset in our food service employees," she said. "They really know our children."

Another former selectman also weighed in.

"It's about profit," said James Flores. "What about the children?"

He said the board was "putting the horse behind the wagon" and it should have a public hearing to see if the public was interested in making the switch.