
RHAM Board Declines Action on Two Big Issues

by Sarah McCoy

At a meeting this past Monday, the RHAM Board of Education (BOE) opted not to take action on two hot topic issues within the district.

After voting against a contract proposal for the district's non-certified personnel union in September, the BOE decided not to reconsider the offer despite dozens of union members in attendance asking them to do just that. The board also took no action on allocating any part of the \$218,000 balance in the floor settlement account. Board members did vote to schedule a special meeting on the matter and extend invitations to the boards of selectmen in each of the district's member towns – Andover, Hebron and Marlborough.

After Monday's meeting, BOE Chair Susan Griffiths said that board members simply chose to take no action on a contract for the non-certified personnel union. This union includes 75 paraprofessionals, maintenance workers and clerical staff.

However, members of the union present on Monday stated that the non-action signals that the two sides will most certainly go to arbitration. Arbitration dates have been set for December and January.

"It's not surprising," Jackie Skillings, a Hebron resident and paraprofessional at RHAM High School, said Monday after the meeting. "They have never bargained in good faith. Going to arbitration seems the only way to get this done."

The union has been without a contract since July 1, 2008. Charles Fabian, the union representative for the Region 8 chapter, said that the two sides were miles apart for over a year and it wasn't until this past August that

"the board made an offer the union could seriously consider."

That offer, Fabian reported, was made by Superintendent of Schools Robert Siminski with two other members of the BOE present at the time. It called for a 2 percent raise in 2009-10, 4 percent in 2010-11 and 4.1 percent in 2011-12. The contract also includes a 3.75 percent raise applied retroactively to the 2008-09 school year – the year in which employees worked without a contract.

The offer also called for increased employee contributions to health care from the current rate of 14 percent to 15 percent in 2009-10, 17 percent in 2010-11 and 17.5 percent in 2011-12, as well as a step freeze for the duration of the contract. Steps are reached when an employee reaches experience markers or obtains additional education.

When the BOE initially rejected the contract at its Sept. 21 meeting, some members stated that this wasn't their contract and wasn't anything that they agreed to.

Fabian stated that this is a disappointing stance for BOE members to take. "Shame on them," he said Monday after the meeting. "When a side sends in someone to negotiate a contract they are saying that this person has the authority to reach an agreement. They authorized the superintendent to reach a settlement and they didn't like the agreement reached. Shame on them. They should have been at table."

The Board of Education has one more meeting, Nov. 16, prior to the start of arbitration on Dec. 2.

Joining the dozens of union members in the audience at Monday's meeting were dozens more in favor of spending the remainder of the flooring settlement to improve the condition of the school's athletic facilities.

Johnathan Ware, a member of the RHAM High School football team, stated that parts of curb and street are coming through the grass on the team's practice field.

Hebron resident Pat Fromme called the district's fields "embarrassing," "laughable" and "a safety hazard."

Those views were echoed by many others in the crowd on Monday. Siminski also read a letter from RHAM Athletic Director Mark Logan imploring the BOE to use the money to improve the field conditions.

However, the only motion the BOE heard on the matter was from Maryanne Leichter who asked the board to return \$200,000 of the \$218,000 to the three member towns as a way of closing out the short-term bond the district had to take out to fix the flooring and seek a settlement on the matter.

In addition to the building project bond, the school district asked voters to approve a \$500,000 note to fix faulty floors in the high school and go after the parties responsible for improperly installing the tiles. The short-term note was approved and, in 2006, the district received a \$1.1 million settlement on the matter.

The majority of this settlement was used to complete the flooring repairs and another \$300,000 was allocated to pay down the \$500,000 note.

Last Thursday, Oct. 15, BOE Chair Sue Griffiths, Leichter, BOE member Tom Tremont and Siminski attended the Hebron Board of Selectmen meeting to discuss the matter.

Current BOS Chair Jeff Watt served on the RHAM BOE from 1998-2004. He stated the intention of the board, at the time the \$500,000 bond was taken out, was to repay that amount when the flooring was complete. "The only reason the board approved a \$300,000 repayment and not the \$500,000 amount was because we didn't know how much the flooring repairs were going to cost," he said on Thursday.

Watt asked the BOE to finish what the prior BOE had started and return the money to the towns.

On Monday, Griffiths stated that she took issue with the "give the money back" language that town officials have used. She said that the note was taken by the taxpayers of the school district and the settlement was reached by the school district, therefore the money was never the towns' so she questioned why the BOE would give them the remainder now.

The motion by Leichter to give the money to the three towns according to the levy schedule failed by a count of 3-7.

A second motion to hold a special meeting on the matter passed 6-4. Griffiths said she would work to schedule that meeting prior to the board's Nov. 16 meeting. Town officials from Andover, Hebron and Marlborough will be invited as the board will discuss whether or not to use the money for capital projects within district or another use.

Any decision will have to be voted on by taxpayers at a district meeting.