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RHAM board rejects contract, union asks it to reconsider

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HEBRON — Union officials want the RHAM school board to reconsider its rejection of a contract with paraprofessionals, custodians, maintenance workers, secretaries.

"This process is sadly going to drag on if the school board doesn't reverse its decision," said Matt O'Connor, a spokesman for the CSEA/SEIU local 2001. "This is rare for an employer to throw out a proposal that they essentially proposed themselves."

The RHAM school board on Monday rejected the contract, which covers 75 workers, by a 6-4 vote.

Opponents argued that the agreement was too generous and would lock in the terms for four years. Supporters called the contract fair and said the cost of settling it through arbitration could exceed its cost.

The RHAM schools, or Regional School District 8, serve students in grades 7 to 12 from Hebron, Andover, and Marlborough.

The union's previous contract expired in June 2008.

Under the rejected pact:

- Employees would have received raises of 2 percent in 2009-10, 4 percent in 2010-11, and 4.1 percent in 2011-12, along with a retroactive 3.75 percent raise for the 2008-09 school year, when they worked without a contract.
- The percentage of health care costs paid by employees would have increased annually from the current 12 percent.
- Employees agreed to forego step increases for three years of the contract. Step increases result when an employee moves up because of experience or additional education. Paraprofessionals can earn up to five step increases under the current contract, with a top wage of \$13.20 per hour.

O'Connor said the agreement should have been accepted because it was based largely on an arbitrated settlement with the teachers' union in February.

The contract was also similar to the school board's last proposal, O'Connor said.

Arbitration hearings will be held in December. In state arbitration proceedings, a panel of lawyers creates a contract based on the last best offers of each side, the town's ability to pay, and wages for similar work in other districts.

O'Connor said the arbitration panel would likely not make many changes to this agreement. That's why he's hoping the board will reverse its decision.

"No one wants to see this go to arbitration," O'Connor said.

Union employees plan to ask the community for support, O'Connor said. The group also is willing to consider the reasons why the board rejected the agreement.

Among those who voted against the agreement is Andover Republican Kenneth Lee.

"The big thing was the fourth year," Lee said in an interview. Most contracts extend three years. This agreement reached into last year with retroactive pay for the employees and extended until 2012. The last year also offered the largest raise, at 4.1 percent.

The proposal would have passed if it hadn't been for that fourth year, Lee said.

Board member Dieter Zimmer voted for the contract, but not necessarily because he agreed with the terms.

"This is the better of the two evils," Zimmer said. Allowing the contract to go to arbitration could cost taxpayers as much as \$50,000 in legal fees, Zimmer explained. That's money that could go toward education, and it might not be recouped in a better agreement, he said.

Zimmer, a Republican from Marlborough, is chairman of the board's negotiating committee and made the decision to call for a full board vote on the agreement.

If the case goes to arbitration, the district likely will be forced to give significant raises because paraprofessionals — the largest group in the union — are underpaid compared to those in similar school districts, Zimmer said.

"We had to give a pay increase because if you compare us to other regions or other areas, we do not pay too well."

Of the Region 8 towns, Andover paid its paraprofessionals the best at \$14.75 hourly in 2008, and Hebron paid the least, at \$13.38 hourly.

Superintendent Robert Siminski did not give a recommendation on whether the board should have accepted the agreement. He was a part of the negotiating team. The board also hires a lawyer, he said.

The additional costs under the agreement would be covered under this year's school budget, Siminski said.

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