

Out of this world

## Planet Neshaminy

*The latest contract demands are so out of sync with the real world that the union negotiators must be from another planet.*

People don't naturally want to look bad. So it's mystifying that Neshaminy teachers have issued contract demands that make them look selfish and unreasonable — and disconnected from reality. We wish they would explain themselves so a community that is suffering the ravages of economic distress could understand, but they refuse.

Why not tell the taxpayers why their contract proposal is reasonable, affordable and workable within the district's budget?

We refer to Wednesday's story about the teachers rejecting the school board's latest contract offer. Considering the current economic climate, the board's proposal was reasonable, if not generous: 3 percent annual salary increases, plus step raises.

A lot of folks would jump at the offer. That's because many workers are either mired in salary freezes or have been hit with pay cuts — that's if they still have a job.

Neshaminy's teachers, who average \$76,000 a year in salary, were said to be demanding — are you ready? — 6 percent annual pay hikes, including step increases. Unbelievable!

Even more unbelievable is the union's demand, according to the school board, that teachers keep free health benefits. This, when folks working in the private sector — in other words, the real world — are bearing 25-35 percent of the cost of employer-subsidized health benefits, or about \$12,000 a year.

Could they be any more arrogant? Or dismissive of taxpayers, who, in the face of a \$14 million budget deficit, could be hit with an average tax increase of \$500?

The school board's rejected proposal was for teachers to begin contributing, incrementally, to the cost of health benefits: 15 percent the first year, 16 and 17 percent in the second and third years. Currently, the district pays \$22,000 a year to provide a teacher's family of four with health insurance. That means the average Neshaminy teacher-parent is compensated in the neighborhood of \$100,000 a year, if you consider salary plus health benefits. And that figure doesn't include the value of other fringe benefits.

"Unfortunately, [the union's] response ... indicates a clear unwillingness to recognize dire financial troubles that district and taxpayers face during these challenging economic times," the school board said in a prepared statement.

For the record, a union spokeswoman said in an e-mail to the newspaper that the union's demands as reported by the board aren't entirely accurate. However, she did not elaborate.

That's the other problem — all the secrecy.

Teacher contracts are negotiated behind closed doors, which means taxpayers usually have no idea what the district is offering or what the union is asking. And what the union finally accepts is subject to a vote by the teachers before taxpayers get a look. Essentially, the deal is done before taxpayers get a token opportunity to say what they think just minutes before the school board rubber-stamps what essentially is a done deal.

The whole system stinks.

Perhaps shedding some light on this dark process would cause people to act a little more responsibly. It's tempting to be selfish and unreasonable if you think nobody's watching, which is why state lawmakers need to change the rules of the game.

Under the current system, school boards and the taxpayers they represent are held hostage by the unions because they have the power to strike. The only power school boards have is to cut programs and raise taxes. Those are lousy choices and limp weapons in the battle for sensible teacher contracts.