

Still no progress in teachers union talks

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By Christian Menno

Staff writer

Another negotiation session between the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers and the school board Wednesday failed to produce any major developments that could lead toward a settlement, according to board President Ritchie Webb.

While both sides met with state mediator John Cairns over the course of the two-hour session, Webb said little progress was made.

"It was the opinion of the board after discussion with the mediator that the NFT was not serious in negotiating any matters of importance ... so the session was ended," he said in the email.

Union President Louise Boyd, however, said the meeting ended because the board needed more time to review the NFT's counteroffer.

The board did indicate that it was willing to alter its position on the handling of grievances and "drug testing details," Webb added.

Boyd said Wednesday's meeting "was clearly the first time in nearly four years that the district showed some level of willingness to actually negotiate with the NFT about the issues at hand.

"The district did not come to the table with the substantive counter proposal we hoped for," Boyd added, "but we did exchange several proposal modifications through the state appointed mediator."

However, financial issues continue to separate the union and the school board.

"The board explained to the mediator why (the board) cannot accept the NFT proposal, making sure he had an understanding of district finances," Webb said.

Union officials, according to Webb, reiterated their assertion that the district has the finances and ability to put an end to the impasse. He said the union again expressed its stance that a tax increase and the use of funds the board has set aside for capital improvements and a possible spike in teachers' state pension contributions from school districts could be utilized.

But Webb continues to dispute these claims, citing state projections for the pension fund and the \$40 million the board says is needed in building repairs.

Regardless of the lack any major headway toward a deal, Boyd said that teachers believe the union should continue to press forward with the talks.

"We offered to meet over the holiday break, but the district was unavailable so we've agreed to meet again on Jan. 12 and 16," she added. "Teachers remain committed to the bargaining process, but everyone should understand that time is running out."

NFT members earlier this year voted to authorize the leadership group to call for a teacher strike at some point in the future but Boyd has said that this does not mean a work stoppage is imminent.

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