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Easthampton teachers reject contract offer

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Thursday, June 19, 2008

EASTHAMPTON - For the second year in a row, Easthampton teachers will likely begin next school year without a new employment contract, despite the goal of both the School Committee and the Easthampton Education Association to settle one before the school year ends Friday.

On Tuesday, the Easthampton Education Association, by a margin of 4-to-1, rejected a proposed contract for 2008 to 2011.

EEA President Robert Parent said the vote means teachers will "more than likely" begin next school year without a contract. The EEA, representing teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians and secretaries, began negotiations with the School Committee and Mayor Michael Tautznik in March 2007, with the one-year contract expiring in June 2007.

School employees have been working under the terms of the expired contract since last June, and they are feeling "not good" about it, said Susan Syer, a member of the EEA and its negotiations committee.

"It affects everybody," Syer said. "The prices are going up everywhere in everything and it affects us across the board."

Stagnant salaries will "especially" affect people who are retiring, Syer said. Those retiring without a raise will have less money for one year and therefore a smaller pension, she noted.

Salary increases and working conditions in the proposed contract were not an issue, according to EEA President Robert Parent and School Committee labor relations consultant and negotiator James Connors.

"The offer we made we think is a very reasonable proposal for a three year contract," Connors said. "The School Committee feels they've met their goal for making a reasonable contract."

The problem the EEA had with the proposed contract was the unspecified changes in the health care plan design that allow the School Committee to garner an additional 5 percent, without defining what the changes might involve or what they might cost, according to Parent. Connors declined to comment on that part of the contract.

"Our members are worried that this language gives the mayor a blank check," Parent said. "It is as if someone went to buy a car, only to have the salesperson demand payment without showing the car and with no rationale."

The EEA inquired what the health care language means - representatives wanted to know if the 5 percent figure meant an increased deductible or higher copay, but a mutual understanding was not reached, according to Syer.

"Where's that extra 5 percent coming from that we don't know," Syer said. "We couldn't get an answer and we asked repeatedly - we just want to know where it is and we can't get an answer."

Parent asked that question in a letter he wrote to the Gazette last fall and a letter to Tautznik in April, both of which he didn't receive a response for, Syer said. The two sides countered back and forth for



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about 16 months, and the question was asked in negotiations, but a "clear answer" was not given, Syer said.

But Tautznik said Wednesday, "it's been explained to them." He declined to comment further, saying he can't explain contract negotiations to the newspaper.

"This belongs on the table," Tautznik said.

Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter said Wednesday that she is "not at liberty to talk about negotiations," and referred questions to Connors. In a telephone interview Wednesday, Connors said the panel's goal was to settle the contract before school ends Friday. He said the committee will "just keep plodding along" until an agreement is reached.

"We think we're very close," Connors said. "We're going to keep bargaining and schedule a new meeting as soon as we can."

Meanwhile, Parent said since the proposed contract was not ratified, both the EEA and School Committee will have to "start all over again" and submit new proposals. Most of the items, including salary, had been "ironed out" on the recently rejected proposal, but now the two sides will "have to go from square one as if nothing occurred," Parent said.

The association and the School Committee will return to the bargaining table in the next few weeks, in an attempt to negotiate a mutually acceptable agreement.

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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Lots of things that cant be

Lots of things that cant be talked about. Thats a "red flag" right from the get go.

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Thu, 06/19/2008 - 17:04 — [spike2199](#)

Mayor and School Committee pusy-footing around

The Mayor, Superintendent, and School committee need to knock off this political game of cat and mouse with our teachers. I think for now on, no more raises or contracts for the Mayor or the Superintendent until all issues/and contracts are in agreement with the city employees. As a matter of fact we should withhold the Mayors raise and the superintends increase until they do their jobs - see how they like it!

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