

RCS D may target pay in budget cuts

Unions guard against givebacks

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Faced with the need to pare \$24 million more from an already scoured budget proposal, several Rochester school board members this week floated the idea of aggressive cuts in personnel costs, including concessions from the district’s four unions.

Salary and benefits for the district’s 6,000 or so employees make up 57% of the \$949 million 2020-21 budget proposal. Most of them are unionized, and the two largest unions have effectively insulated their members from changes in pay or employment conditions in the district’s time of need.

At a meeting Tuesday night, school board member Natalie Sheppard suggested the district might seek a state order that would allow it to withhold automatic raises contained in collectively bargained contracts.

“I know our staff are working very hard in the district,” she said. “At this point, if I have to choose between giving staff raises and having to cut programs, unfortunately I’m going to choose not to give raises for a year.”

Willa Powell and Van White said the district should at least approach the four bargaining units about furloughs. Powell pointed in particular to elementary school teachers, who she said may be having less direct contact with students than secondary teachers.

“There are no sacred cows; nothing should be left off the table,” White said. “We are, again, living in unusual times.”

Union leaders said both those ideas would be illegal: the former, because pay raises are collectively bargained, the latter because Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s recent executive order regarding education during the COVID-19 pandemic requires that educators continue being paid.

the time for bargaining.

The RTA formally declared an impasse to negotiations in mid-March, just as the consequences of COVID-19 were becoming clear, and is awaiting the appointment of a mediator. That pause in negotiations effectively blocks any concessions for 2020-21.

“There’s a right time and place for collective bargaining and we will honor that,” Urbanski said. “The district has not approached us with a proposal and we will not be negotiating with individual school board members, or in public.”

ASAR has not declared a formal impasse, but President Tim Cliby said finalizing a new deal “just isn’t a priority for anyone right now.”

“We’re going to get there eventually,” he said. “But I think the priority is to continue to evolve through the situation we’re in, and at the same time try to figure out the budget for next year.”

The RTA had annual raises of 3.6% until its contract expired last June and now gets raises averaging about 2.3%,



“A lot of what was brainstormed during the (school board) meeting on Tuesday fails to live up to the word ‘brainstorm,’ ” Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski said.

Bargaining at a standstill

Theoretically, the timing is right for the district to seek concessions from its labor units. The largest one, the RTA, and the highest paid, the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester (ASAR), have both operated since June 2019 under expired contracts, meaning terms can be negotiated for a new deal.

Concessions, though, can only come through collective bargaining. And both RTA and ASAR have said this is not

School 23 could be on the chopping block as the district looks to cut costs to cover its funding gap. LISA HUGHES/ FILE PHOTO 2005

RCSD

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RTA President Adam Urbanski said. ASAR received annual 3% raises until its contract expired, with its members’ pay staying flat since then. In both cases, employees could get a retroactive boost once a new contract is in place.

The other two unions, as well as the school board and non-unionized toplevel administrators, have gotten annual raises of 3%. Contracts for RAP, the paraprofessionals union, and BENTE, the non-educators union, both run through June 2021.

RCSD did not respond to a request for comment on its position regarding budget cuts and the expired labor contracts.

Another school closure likely

With union givebacks essentially off the table, the district seems to have little choice but to close at least one more school and eliminate a proportionate number of teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals and civil service employees.

Cliby pointed to East High School, which receives substantially more money than other district high schools. The school board recently approved a five-year renewal of the school’s relationship with the University of Rochester.

He also agreed that more schools should be closed — particularly if the alternative is “continuing to try to whittle down the stick” with pay reductions.

“I don’t think talking about a percent cut to salaries is a solution,” he said. “We’re going to have to take big chops at things. ...

“When you think about, years ago, when we had 40,000 kids in the district, we had basically the same footprint in terms of real estate. Let’s find a way to ... capitalize on the problem we’ve got right now and say: ‘This is the time to downsize and get our footprint right.’ ” To the extent that more layoffs are coming, the impact will be softened by a large crop of retiring educators. Both Urbanski and Cliby said they have had record numbers of members indicating they will retire or resign at the end of the school year.

As RCSD human resources director Harry Kennedy said when Dade unveiled his initial budget proposal last month: “ The climate right now

Based on physical building condition, the most likely elementary schools to close would be School 23, in the Park Avenue neighborhood; School 43, on Lyell Avenue; and School 25, on North Goodman Street.

Urbanski said the district should address its deficit by cutting deeper into “administrative overhead, especially at central office.” Proposed reductions in social workers and special education teachers, he said, were indicative of a pattern of harm done to “the most vulnerable student populations.”

is not the best for RCSD. People are choosing to retire and resign because of that.”

Dade will offer his second proposal, with another \$24 million in cuts, on April 14.

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