

Gumina to receive a severance package

Webster seems to excuse him from paying penalty

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The Webster school board appears to have excused former superintendent Carmen Gumina from paying a \$22,000 penalty for his hasty departure and instead is negotiating a severance package for him, even as a new instance of an apparent abuse of power came to light last week. Gumina announced April 29 that he would retire effective April 30. The news came just days after former teacher and coach Kali Watkins sued the district in federal court, alleging that Gumina had orchestrated a biased (and ultimately unsuccessful) prosecution of him on sexual assault charges.

Gumina’s employment contract stipulates that if he leaves his position without giving 90 days’ notice, he must pay the district 10% of his annual salary, which in 2020-21 was \$223,993.

That sum is meant to compensate the district for “damage to the district which is difficult or impossible to calculate” stemming from an abrupt transition. The board, however, can waive the penalty.

A district spokeswoman and School Board President Tammy Gurowski declined to say Thursday whether it had in fact waived it. Instead, spokeswoman Krista Grose said the district would provide relevant documents in response to a Freedom of Information request filed last month by the *Democrat and Chronicle* — a response almost certain to arrive after Tuesday’s school board election, in which Gumina has come to represent a major issue.

Board member Sue Casey, though, confirmed that Gumina will receive a severance package — a payment from the district to him, rather than the other way around.

“The attorneys are just reviewing,” Casey said. She did not outline the terms of the potential agreement.

LaDelfa provided documents confirming that Gumina contacted LaBella to raise concerns about LaDelfa’s candidacy. After some internal deliberation, the company wrote back to the district and “affirmed LaBella’s core principle of empowering our employees to practice leadership in the community,” according to an email LaDelfa provided.

“I could not believe the superintendent would call a private company with the intention of getting them to interfere in a public election because he did not want me on the board of education because I had criticized some of his decisions,” LaDelfa said.

LaDelfa said her boss at LaBella had told her that Gumina said he was calling on behalf of the school board. Board member Casey said she had “no knowledge of that occurring.”

The district declined to comment on the matter. Gumina did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

LaDelfa’s situation bears similarity to another case where Gumina reached outside the district to exercise influence over the school board. In 2019 he used a Freedom of Information request with the Greece Central School District to obtain the emails of board member Dave Metzger, who was a teacher there.

Questions about supervision

More broadly, LaDelfa accused the school board of forsaking its supervisory responsibilities over the superintendent for political benefit.

“When Carm approached untenured teachers to put signs in their yard, the board defended it,” LaDelfa said. “Our board members benefit directly from this bad behavior because it keeps them on the BOE.”

Shortly before Gumina left, Gurowski said at a meeting that the board had an obligation to “protect our district superintendent” and criticized those who shared “rumors and negativity” regarding him and the district on social media or elsewhere.

The question of a severance package for Gumina was one of several issues at a heated school board meeting on May 6 where parents lambasted the board for a lack of transparency.

“Everyone here is afraid that this budget is also paying off whatever you had to do to get rid of Carm,” one parent said at that meeting. “I’m not paying for whatever he did that was wrong, and neither should anybody else here. ... If there was some agreement to make him go away, we should all know what it was.”

New accusation against Gumina

Casey is the only incumbent in a seven- candidate school board election that has focused increasingly on transparency, abuse-of-authority allegations against Gumina and how well the board supervised him.

One of the challengers is Shanna La-Delfa. Last week she added a new allegation against Gumina relating to her school board run in 2020.

She was employed at the time at La-Bella Associates, an engineering firm that works with Webster and many other local school districts. In a video on her website, LaDelfa said Gumina called the company and told them that if she was elected, the district would likely not award future business to LaBella because of “potential perceived conflicts of interest.”

Casey said the board’s evaluations of Gumina, positive and negative, were done behind closed doors and were not appropriate for public disclosure.

“Any conversations we had would have been in private,” Casey said. “I don’t think any employee anywhere would want to be reprimanded publicly.”

Casey said she wouldn’t change anything about the way she handled the allegations against Gumina or the board’s oversight of him.

Regarding Watkins’ claims about the former superintendent’s coercion, she said: “Anybody can accuse anyone of anything. And unfortunately, for this to go through the courts will take a year or so and the election is next week. ... So it’s pretty unfortunate.”



Gumina