

Layoffs latest in long story of turmoil for Pleasantville schools

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PLEASANTVILLE — Leadership turnover and alleged financial irregularities have long plagued the Board of Education, which voted Tuesday night to lay off 21 staff members to close a \$1.5 million budget hole.

The history of problems in the district goes back decades, but 2007 was supposed to mark a new era of better management under a state monitor. Instead, a torrent of criminal and civil legal actions followed.

The decision to lay off the employees was “gut-wrenching,” Superintendent Clarence Alston said during the meeting, but the district has a responsibility to address the shortfall.

In a rare moment of public comment, state-appointed fiscal monitor Constance Bauer addressed concerns from Board President Carla Thomas over the projected deficit.

“How come now we’re coming to this? How come there was no one from the state that said, ‘Listen, Pleasantville (school board), this is what needs to be done?’” Thomas asked.

Bauer said that when the budget was approved in April, it was balanced, but actions taken by the board after that, as well as the loss in state aid, culminated in the current situation.

“Going back to April, I had started to ask the questions about how is this going to be paid,” Bauer said, referring to expected union salary increases.

She said a state-appointed budget manager has come back to the district to help resolve the issues.

Alston read a letter from the state Department of Education outlining its concerns about the budget and threatening to take away all further state aid if the budget was not brought back into balance.

The board approved a resolution for a reduction in force for 21 employees effective Oct. 5, including 11 custodians, five secretaries, two maintenance workers and a computer technician.

Most of the employees affected earn less than \$40,000 a year.

Included on the resolution was Atlantic City Councilman William “Speedy” Marsh, the district’s facilities coordinator who earns a salary of \$138,145, and Carmen Torres, the district’s Title I Family Involvement Coordinator, who earns a salary of \$71,642.

Marsh has successfully fought previous attempts to terminate his employment, including a 2016 suspension.

Board member Lawrence “Tony” Davenport chastised the board for trying to blame others for its problems.

“It’s decisions that we make that cause these problems,” he said, adding the board’s actions affect both the budget and the students’ education.

“On both of them, we’re failing,” he said and urged the board to look at making cuts to the “third floor,” where the administration offices are located in the middle school building, which he said is bloated.

Business Administrator Elisha Thompkins said the district’s budget problems come from a variety of places. He said out-of-district placements, including tuition to the county vocational school, cost the district more than \$5 million each year.

The recent additions that threw the budget out of balance included hiring new staff, signing a contract with the Pleasantville Education Association that gave raises retroactive to 2016, and reinstating 13 custodians and nine other workers scheduled to be laid off in July.

Teachers and support staff flooded the cafeteria inside the high school Tuesday evening to fight what they say are violations of their hard-won contract signed by the district and the union in May.

Pleasantville Education Association President Tim Newkirk said the district notified several employees in the district by email late Friday evening that their positions would be up for discussion at the Tuesday meeting. According to Newkirk, employees were caught off guard when they returned to work Monday, and at least one who was out on medical leave never received a notification.

Several had received similar notices in June, but most had their positions reinstated at a July 10 meeting after several executive session meetings. After the board meeting, Alston said the district was working on a plan for maintaining the buildings, but that it couldn’t outsource the positions to a third party per its contract with the union. He said Thompkins would now be in charge of the maintenance department.