

Board-teacher talks are revealed to public

By JOAN GAYLORD

With the defeat of the Katonah-Lewisboro school budget, many residents are looking for reasons and answers. Rather than speculate, Katonah parent and financial planner Jason Waxler wanted facts. He filed Freedom of Information requests that compelled the district to reveal the negotiations between the school board and the teachers union in the weeks leading up to the final budget proposal.

Early in the budget process, the school board had asked the Katonah-Lewisboro District Teachers' Association, the union that represents the faculty, to voluntarily accept a one-year pay freeze. Citing the ongoing recession

and the inability of the community to sustain a significant tax increase, the document that the board drafted in January asks the teachers to forgo both the 3.5 percent increase that was part of the negotiated contract as well as the step increases awarded to teachers as they gain experience. In return, the board said the savings would be used to preserve 25 to 30 teaching positions.

Based upon the documents obtained in the FOIL request, it appears the teachers union had agreed to reopen portions of its labor contract as the board had requested. However, the union's counteroffer insisted any agreements pertaining to the existing

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contract would be dependent upon conditions placed on a future contract the two parties had not yet negotiated. The current contract expires in 2011. The board declined the union's offer and drafted a budget that cut teaching positions.

"My father was a founder of the United Federation of Teachers," said Mr. Waxler. "He taught in New York City for decades, and he always said the first focus of a union has to be preserving jobs."

Prior to the FOIL request, the only information released to the public by either the school board and administration or the teachers union was that the two sides were unable to reach an agreement. The announcement was made in a joint press release issued in April and provided no reasons. This week, Katonah teachers association president Sandy Grebinar declined to comment on the released documents, citing legal restrictions.

The documents obtained by Mr.

Waxler include a proposed addendum to the existing labor contract submitted by the union. It would grant teachers a 2 percent pay increase for both 2011-12 and 2012-13. The current contract includes a 3.5 percent pay increase. In the existing contract, teachers pay 10 percent of their health care premiums. In the proposed addendum, teachers would pay a flat fee. The charge to an individual would be \$760 the first year and \$836 the second. The addendum would also provide free lifetime health care to teachers who retire on or before June 30, 2014.

"If the cost of health care decreases, the union would have made a bad decision," said Mr. Waxler, who is a professional financial planner. "If costs go up, the district is screwed."

In March, the school board submit-

ted a counteroffer to Ms. Grebinar. Rather than the flat salary schedule the board had initially requested, the district offered a 1.75 percent pay increase for the 2010-11 school

year. Those teachers who notify the district by the end of this school year of their intent to retire by the conclusion of the 2013 school year would receive the 3.5 percent salary increase stipulated in the existing contract. Retirement benefits are based upon a teacher's accrued salary.

The letter drafted by the school board states,

"The board of education is committed to using 100 percent of all savings resulting from the above to restore teaching positions which otherwise might be eliminated due to the financial crisis."

Two days later, the union wrote to the school board declining to con-

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the new budget, and that its failure will be avoided," Michael said.

sider the board's amended offer. As Mr. Waxler points out, though, the letter from the teachers association says the offer was a unanimous decision of the "Association Representative Group." The letter also says the terms would be shared two weeks later with "members of the bargaining unit." It appears the teachers of the Katonah-Lewisboro School District were not informed of the counteroffer from the school board.

"I know of factory workers who will voluntarily reduce their hours to preserve jobs," said Mr. Waxler. "That is solidarity."

Mr. Waxler said he is concerned the issue will reflect negatively on the district's teachers, which is not his intent. While the country is struggling to emerge from the recession and everyone he knows is economizing, he said, the investment in education will be critical and he does not want to see it compromised.

"This is not fair to the teachers," he said. "It is not fair to the community. It is not fair to any of us."