

Board Retracts Lease for Headquarters

Canceled Deal, Which Will Cost System \$11 Million, Succumbed to Legislative Pressure

By Nelson Hernandez

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, May 19, 2009

The Prince George's County Board of Education last night voted to back out of a lease for a new headquarters, in response to the Maryland General Assembly's passage of a bill that would strip the school system of millions of dollars in education aid unless officials killed the project.

But the school board's 5 to 2 vote to terminate the deal will draw a penalty of \$4.8 million, officials said, bringing the school system's total cost for the venture in rent and other expenses to \$11 million. The move into a new headquarters will be canceled, and the old headquarters will remain operating.

As they debated what to do, board members voiced dismay.

"So it's a total of \$11 million, that if the board votes on this, we have nothing to show for?" asked board member Pat Fletcher (District 3).

"This is nothing more than blackmail," said board member Rosalind A. Johnson (District 1). She and Fletcher voted against the lease-termination measure in the meeting at Laurel High School.

Board Chairman Verjeana M. Jacobs (At Large) abstained, and board member R. Owen Johnson Jr. (District 5) was absent.

Board Vice Chairman Ron Watson (At Large), part of the five-member majority in the vote, said his goal was to cut losses. "At this point, it's all about minimizing further exposure to the county," Watson said. "I still think the legislature has overstepped."

The plan to move into an office complex in Upper Marlboro along the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor, near Andrews Air Force Base, became a target of criticism from state lawmakers and county residents soon after the sharply divided school board approved a \$36 million lease-purchase deal for the buildings last June.

The buildings were supposed to have consolidated scattered school offices into a central place, saving the system money long-term. The project also was meant to replace the aging, decrepit Sasscer Administration Building in Upper Marlboro with attractive buildings befitting a 128,000-student school system that is the state's second-largest.

But the complex has been nearly vacant for almost a year, even as the school system paid \$262,500 a month in rent. The initial \$36 million price tag, spread over 10 years, also did not include millions of dollars in moving and renovation costs.

State legislators said spending on the buildings could not be justified when the school system was closing eight schools and eliminating 900 jobs because of the economy. The General Assembly pressed forward with a bill that essentially orders the school system to cancel the headquarters plan, or lose \$36 million in education funding. The bill passed in April. As of last night, Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) had not acted on it.

Jacobs and Watson signed the agreement immediately after the meeting. The agreement had already been signed by the building's owner, Dean F. Morehouse, president of MTM Builder/Developer Inc.

Asked about the \$11 million cost to the school system for a project that went off the rails, Jacobs said: "It's bothersome. It's very bothersome."

PermaLink:[5/19/2009](#) 

Labels: [Daily](#), [High.Point.HS](#), [PG.Education](#), [PG.Oathbreakers](#), [Rosalind.Johnson](#), [S26.Muse](#)