

Statement on School Department Payment and Accounting Issues

I would like to put into perspective the problems that continue to plague relations between the municipal departments and the School Department that seem to be underscored by the pending questions surrounding the School Department's payroll. My refusal to sign the authorization for the Town Treasurer to issue checks for part of the School Department's payroll triggered the Town Accountant's audit of those records this week. The Town Accountant was unable to assure me that he had the backup necessary to support the disbursement of taxpayer money that the Selectmen were being requested to authorize. The statement by Superintendent Rizzi and School Committee Chair Sovinee that the School Department will cooperate with the audit is a welcome shift from earlier comments that the Town Accountant would be met at the door by the School Department's attorneys.

Before taking the position that I would not sign the warrant for this part of the School Department's payroll, I found that there was a significant disparity in the histories of what documentation had been provided to Town Hall to support disbursement requests. Because the Town Accountant is the officer responsible for preparing the warrant for the Selectmen, my inquiry stopped when the Town Accountant advised that he did not have documentation from the School Department to support all of the payroll checks that were within that particular request. To be more specific, the Town Accountant informed me that the payroll warrant included requests for some individuals who are under contract with the School Department, however, he had only been provided with the payment amounts but not the contracts themselves (by which to support and verify the payments). In other instances, he had copies of certain pages of contracts, but not the entire documents. State law requires that the Town Accountant have the contracts to support payments from your tax dollars. He assured me that requests for the missing contracts had been made and not honored. The School Department's public statements track the information I received from them. I was, and remained, stymied on why there is such a gap in describing what contracts have been received by the Town Accountant and why, even if all of the contracts had been provided before, there would be any question about doing so again simply because the Town Accountant stated he did not have them. Although there was sincere interest in having me understand when requests for the contracts were made or not, this would do nothing to get payroll checks out to the employees who deserve to be paid. To me, regardless of which department was correct on what was asked for, what was given or when, the backup for me to authorize tax money to be paid out was still not in the hands of the person whom the Selectmen rely on for that purpose and state law requires to have it.

This episode is an example of the "hangover" from the intoxicating but paralyzing conflict we have seen play out between the School Department and Town Hall. It will take some time for the medicine of the routine conduct of the public's business to cure that hangover. By way of example from this episode, delivering contracts to the Town Accountant promptly upon execution should happen as a matter of standard operating procedure. In my campaign earlier this year, I was not shy in pointing out that prior Boards of Selectmen had made mistakes that fostered bad relations with the School Department, and referred to the changes we need to make as a "new business as usual". Looking ahead from this experience, I am hopeful that through this budget process, the School Department and the Board of Selectmen work together, as the public rightly expects, as our forecasted revenues will not support significant budget increases desired by the municipal and School Departments, and to present a coherent set of proposed

capital expenditures to Town Meeting without use of petitioned warrant articles that so frustrated Town Meeting last year.

Bob O'Regan
Selectman

4838-2105-1410.1