

TEACHERS PACK COUNCIL CHAMBERS AS PROTEST THREATENS TO SNOWBALL



Harford County's public school teachers protest was expanding with teachers at Bel Air High School staging a job action Tuesday, to show solidarity over no raises and other contract issues. Some of them marched outside the Harford County Council's building in Bel Air. Many of these teachers filed into the chamber where the council was going to take its final vote on 2013 county budget. However, this budget contained a very small increase in local funding for the school system. The teachers had begun their protest on Friday afternoon, after the school was over, by over a 100 teachers picketing outside the Ring Factory Elementary School. This spread to Bel Air and to the council meeting. Harford County Executive David Craig had tried to give a \$1,250 bonus, in two installments to all employees this year. However, the first payment was caught up in union disputes whilst the second half never came through as Craig said that the money had been used to fund the teacher pension shift coming from the state. Ryan Burbey, who regularly advocates rights for teachers at government meetings, doubted the \$5.5 million teacher pension shift from the state to the county that Craig had cited. He said there is "no way" the cost is that high, adding it might only be \$1.8 million. "It's shameful to cloud these issues in false facts. Teachers are put in the middle of this political manipulation." "Every single member of this council holds responsibility for this budget and that is shameful," he said. "Fifteen percent of the county is children. Did they get 15 percent of the budget? The answer is no," he concluded. The protests began after teachers received a letter on May 24th that stated the following: "While the Board of Education blames the Harford County fiscal authorities for not providing adequate funds for a pay increase, HCEA has evidence from an independent auditor (Pellicoro Associates) that HCPS does in fact have the necessary funds. Additionally, Jim Jewel, the chief financial officer of HCPS, in his third quarter financial report indicated that the school system will again finish the school year with a surplus. " Many teachers have said that they have no intentions to go slow on their agitations and plan to continue applying as much pressure as possible on concerned officials, to draw attention and to seek resolutions to inequities in salaries and other economic issues. Anthony Blackburn, an English teacher at Bel Air High, sent an email to the local media, writing, "These BAHS teachers are choosing to comply to the exact language of their contracts in response to several instances over the past several years of HCPS violating this same contract and not negotiating with the HCEA in 'good faith. These teachers will be entering school at 6:50 a.m. to begin the duty day, and leaving the building at 2:20 p.m., as a group. " "What this basically means is that these teachers will begin to follow their contracts to the letter of the law," he clarified in his email. Von Volen, a fourth-year teacher, who was one of the teachers who had walked out exactly at 2.30, just as Blackburn's email had predicted, said the walk-out was a result of many accumulated worries, the revoking of the second part of the county bonus plan, an extra work day and no raises for the fourth year running, were among the contentious issues. The extra calendar day for teachers, Von Volen said, is "the straw that broke the camel's back." He also said that even though he was a fourth year teacher, he still drew the salary of a first-year teacher. Taylor, who has taught at Bel Air High for 10 years, said that the policies will "drive talented teachers away from the profession" or to other counties. He added that he and the other teachers "do everything we can for the kids," but the "people who pay our wages" don't understand that. "It stinks," Taylor said. "I love my job and I love my students." The work to rule policy means that Supervising clubs and extracurricular activity, that take place after school hours will stop. When asked how long the "working to rule" policy will be followed, Von Volen said: "As long as it takes until we're recognized." The teachers intend to adhere to the policy for the rest of this school year and possibly into the next, he said. Councilwoman Mary Ann Lisanti says she really does not know what to do, "I look at all of you, I hear you. I really do," she said, explaining she has met with the board of education. "The bottom line is, I don't know how to fix it," she said. "If we write a check, there's no guarantee it will go to your salaries. I think we still have a long way to go so we don't find ourselves in the same situation every year: a war on public employees," she said. "I really am frustrated, like all of you, that this year it's the teachers, last year it was the deputies. At the end of the day we're all public employees," she said. "Somehow and some way, we're going to have to put all these swords down and work together."