

School panel snubs privatization plan

By James A. Johnson
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A proposal to privatize custodial and maintenance services in Portsmouth schools was rejected Tuesday night in the

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face of strong opposition from the workers themselves and several other unions.

School Committee member Jonathan H. Harris had proposed studying the idea of outsourcing those services as a way to cut expenses in view of declining state aid and the challenges facing the town from the unfunded liability for pensions and other post-retirement benefits.

In response to the critics of his proposal, Harris said he did not know if there would be any financial advantages to outsourcing those functions, but it was the School Committee's duty to look at every option.

"You are all looking at me like the bad guy, but I am not trying to take your jobs away," he told almost 100 people in the Portsmouth High School auditorium. "I know darn well what is going on with the state, what is going on with our budget and

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JONATHAN H. HARRIS

Portsmouth School Committee member

how much money is going to come in."

By seeking proposals from contractors, the committee would get the information it needs to weigh the merits of privatizing, he said.

The only support he received came from School Committee Chairwoman Cynthia S. Perrotti, who said she was shocked to learn that a recently retired custodian was receiving 144 percent of his or her salary in pension and Social Security benefits.

She called that unfair to taxpayers who cannot afford healthcare coverage or who are unemployed, especially when the pensions are compared to teachers, who do not collect Social Security.

"They make more money than we do," someone in the audience shouted.

The 5-2 vote to reject the effort was greeted by loud

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applause from those in the audience, many of whom were wearing green T-shirts with AFSCME written across the front. They were members of Council 94 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Some carried signs reading, "Keep our custodians" or "Down with privatization."

The audience included no sign of a group calling itself Occupy Portsmouth, which had said it would "occupy" the meeting to show support for the custodians. The group has claimed that an outbreak of chickenpox among its facilitators forced it to cancel activities it had announced this week. On its Facebook page last night, the group said it needed to "re-evaluate" whether to continue to try to have a local movement or to join with another "Occupy" group in Providence or Fall River, Mass.

Georgiana Murphy, president of Portsmouth's Local 2669, was the first to speak out for the custodians and maintenance workers.

She said the union had come to the School Committee's aid in taking a voluntary pay freeze and has gone for two years with no pay raise.

"I ask you to stop trying to bully or intimidate us," she said. "Just as bullying should not be allowed in schools, it should not be done at the bargaining table."

Richard Weida, head custodian at the high school, talked about how custodians have found and returned iPhones, iPods, wallets and even a retainer to students.

Also supporting the custodial workers was Joseph Cassidy, president of the Portsmouth chapter of the National Education Association, which represents the district's teachers.

The custodial staff is as dedicated to the students as the teachers are, he said.

"They dedicate their lives to this profession," he said. "What you are doing is a disservice to the entire community."

He told the committee to demand the funds it needs from the Town Council.

"Draw a hard line and stop accepting the idea that you are going to get less and less money every year," he said. "Get a backbone."

J. Michael Downing, president of Rhode Island Council

94, told the committee that it could talk about the pension problem without privatizing the jobs.

"We are prepared to negotiate changes," he said. "You don't have to privatize these jobs. I ask you to honor these workers. They deserve to be honored."

Also speaking in support of the custodians was David Rodriguez, president of the same union in Middletown schools.

Committee member David D. Croston was the most outspoken critic of the proposal on the School Committee. He said Portsmouth has so much heart because it is a community and a movement such as this would start to destroy that community.

"A statement like this from this School Committee will put a dagger in the heart of this system," Croston said. "It will vilify our employees. It will send a statement not only to our kids, but to every single staff member, every single teacher."

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