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Tuesday, April 11, 2006

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School Committee to decide Harutunian's fate tonight

By Davin Wilfrid*Staff writer*

NORTH ANDOVER — As the School Committee edged closer to a decision on the future of Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian yesterday, town and school officials were busy preparing for a legal showdown they hope to avoid.

School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry said he spoke via telephone with Town Manager Mark H. Rees and insurance consultant Michael Cusack to ensure the town was protected no matter what the result of tonight's final disciplinary hearing on the embattled superintendent.

Harutunian has been on paid vacation for more than two weeks as the School Committee investigates his affair with a school employee and whether a 29 percent raise he gave the woman was tied to the relationship.

The School Committee is expected to discuss whether to keep Harutunian in place during a private session after a public committee meeting tonight at 7 at the middle school. Harutunian's contract says he can be fired for "good cause," but he has the right to appeal the decision to an arbitrator.

Harutunian's \$163,000-a-year contract is valid through 2010, meaning he could argue for a full payout worth more than \$600,000 if he is fired over his recent actions.

Perry said yesterday the town's insurance policy would cover the cost of defending the firing in arbitration, or the agency would split the cost with the town of paying out a negotiated settlement to Harutunian. If Harutunian resigns, the School Department alone would be responsible for paying out any negotiated settlement.

In March, the School Committee began investigating

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Harutunian's relationship with special education secretary and gymnastics coach Brenda A. Shea. In July 2005, Harutunian asked the School Committee to remove Shea from the secretarial union. After the committee complied, Shea was given a \$10,000 raise.

Harutunian later admitted to having an affair with Shea, but through his lawyer he said the relationship started after she received her job change and raise.

The allegations have prompted demands from some residents that Harutunian be fired.

"My view is he ought to be dismissed without discussion of any kind of payoff. The actions are egregious enough," said Mark S. DiSalvo, a former School Committee member who served on the search committee that brought Harutunian to North Andover.

Harutunian was hired to run the schools in February 2003 after eight years as superintendent of the Reading school system. Prior to Reading, Harutunian was assistant superintendent of the Beverly school system.



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