School officials defend secret vote, payraise

A News staff report

SEVERAL -- School officials Tuesday defended their closed-door vote earlier this year to give Assistant Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian an 11 percent salary increase, a decision that has angered teachers who saw their own raises cancelled.

The 5-3 vote giving Harutunian an increase from $62,000 to $68,500 was made at an executive session meeting held in June and only disclosed last week.

Teachers, after hearing the news, said they would cut back on activities outside of regular school hours to call attention to the pay increase they lost because of budget cuts.

School Committee Chairman Constance C. Krueger said a raise for the assistant superintendent was approved because the committee felt that Harutunian "should not have been making less than the high school principal."

When Harutunian assumed the job in 1991, he received a $62,000 salary. Beverly High School Principal Keith M. Manville earns about $75,000, while Superintendent Jean Perron makes about $72,000.

School Committee member Donald K. Hummable took the blame, saying he misread figures in determining Harutunian's salary.

"We were going to remedy the situation at the time," Krueger said.

She said money had been put in last year's budget to increase Harutunian's salary, but the money was cut.

"Rather than anger people, we backed down," she said.

Then, the School Committee met June 29 behind closed doors to discuss Harutunian's contract.

He had a three-year contract with the final two years to be negotiated.

Harutunian reportedly requested that his salary be set halfway between that of the superintendent and high school principal for the year.

Harutunian also reportedly sought a three-year contract with a rollover provision, meaning that he would keep working a three-year contract, attend conferences for professional development, and work for his position without the endorsement of the superintendent.

The committee voted 5-3 to approve the contract with Elizabeth H. Fritiger, Nancy M. Winter and Hummable voting against it.

Voting in favor were Kenneth H. Broderick, Linda B. Goodnough, Russell C. Bjork, Prunella J. Pollard and Krueger.

Mayor F. John Monica was absent.

Hummable said Tuesday he voted against the contract because he opposed the rollover clause. "I wholeheartedly supported the raise," he said, adding, "I think it is too easy to guarantee a three-year contract."

Fritiger said she "felt somewhat of a raise was in order," although she thought it should have been less than what was approved. She added that she would support the majority decision.

"At the time we voted on it, we felt the city was in good financial shape," Fritiger said.

But in June, it also was clear that the School Committee would have to cut its budget request of $24.1 million this school year.

The budget for the schools was trimmed by $1 million by Monica and the Board of Aldermen.

To accomplish that, the committee reopened negotiations with teachers, which was related to an effort to make up the $1 million shortfall.

Krueger said she had not been called by any residents about the decision.

Perron said the decision was kept quiet because "Frankly, it has an impact on other negotiations ... We wanted to protect the school system because we would probably invoke the funding clause."

By invoking the clause and cutting the under-funded budget, the committee was able to renegotiate its contract with the teachers.

Harutunian was "very sensitive about the raise."

"This is a very sensitive issue," he said. "Obviously, it is an uncomfortable issue for me."

"I'm real uncomfortable talking about myself because it is such a hot potato," he said.