

School officials target law firm

Travel expenses also on board agenda

BY JOHN L. GUERRA, Citizen Staff

Today's Monroe County School Board workshop won't be boring.

First, the public will hear detailed reasons at the board's 10 a.m. meeting in Tavernier why some School Board members are trying to replace Vernis & Bowling, the school district's legal team. Board member John Dick claims the firm double-billed the district, billed the district for work done for other clients, failed to use due diligence and didn't tell the board important information.

Dick and Board Chairman Steve Pribramsky have complained that the law firm has defended lawsuits against the district that could have been settled out of court.

The workshop also will give Vernis & Bowling attorneys a chance to defend their work and fee schedule. They've told Dick that they'll review all bills carefully before sending them to the district, but it's not clear whether that will stave off a move by Dick and School Board Attorney Richard Collins some weeks ago to fire the law firm and hire another to represent the district.

There could be more fireworks over travel policy.

The district sent 17 school district employees to an education technology trade show in Orlando in January, which raised questions about who should approve travel. Dick and other board members say travel should be greatly reduced, or even halted, until the economy and the school budget improve.

"In tight budget times as we are now experiencing, everything must be on the table, particularly travel outside the county," board member Duncan Mathewson said. "If department heads and school principals do not understand that everyone is responsible for staying within an overall operational budget of \$88 million, some measure of extended control by the School Board will be necessary. Sending all those people to the tech conference is definitely not what taxpayers want to see."

Acevedo argues that the board should approve an overall travel budget, then let him decide when and where to send employees to out-of-town events.

Still another bone of contention: Should district employees be allowed to take school system cars and other vehicles home after work and use them after hours? School Board member John Dick says no.

"I don't think in this time of high gas prices that it's something that we can afford to continue to do," Dick said.

In addition, the board wants to find out what happened during an annual Grad Nite trip to Orlando a couple of weeks ago, when some students were forced to come home earlier than others. Some parents picketed Marathon High School after the trip, claiming that black students were told to return to the buses and forced to return from Orlando for misbehaving, while white students — who also were misbehaving — were allowed to stay and enjoy the Disney-sponsored event. The board is asking for an accounting of what occurred.

Teacher layoffs, budget and program cuts, and the status of retirees who have returned to full-time jobs at the district headquarters also are expected to be discussed.

jguerra@keysnews.com