

# School employees' travel now must be vetted by board

BY JOHN L. GUERRA , Citizen Staff

Out-of-county trips by school district employees and teachers will now have to come before the School Board for approval.

During an all-day board workshop in Tavernier Tuesday, the board and Schools Superintendent Randy Acevedo not only worked out differences in travel policy, but board members also said they'd no longer seek to fire the legal firm that represents the school system.

"We agreed to amend our [travel] policy; all out-of-county travel comes before School Board from now on," said board Chairman Steve Pribramsky. "The staff will try to plan out certain [education] conferences and give us advance notice for our approval."

The new travel rules will be included in an update of the district's policy manual.

Last-minute trips that occur between board meetings won't have to be pre-approved by the board; those trips will be explained at the next board meeting. Safe Schools Coordinator Sunny Booker told the board that the state Department of Education often gives three-day notice for meetings where safety and other compliance policy changes are discussed.

The change in trip approval won't hamper business, Acevedo said.

"I'm sure principals and others will adjust their travel plans accordingly," he said, but it doesn't necessarily mean fewer people will attend certain meetings. If a large group travels to a meeting elsewhere in the state, as 17 did to the Florida Education Technology Conference in Orlando in January, it would come at the expense of sending employees to another meeting. Board member John Dick has complained that the district should reduce travel to save money.

"I truly believe by coming before the board, those who seem to travel constantly will pull back [on the number of trips]," he said.

Dirk Smits of Vernis & Bowling was on the hot seat today as Pribramsky and Dick questioned his billing practices, his openness with the board on lawsuits and e-mails and comments Smits made during the last School Board race while he was the school system attorney.

Pribramsky said Smits publicly accused him of unsavory business practices as Pribramsky ran for the board.

"During my campaign, [Smits] was a disseminator of what were really attacks on me, personal and professional," he said. As an attorney, he knew what [he was] saying was wrong. But it's important to say that he apologized to me personally, and certainly I've accepted it."

Smits told the board Tuesday that he would be sure not to get involved in campaigns while being school district lawyer.

Dick was upset that Smits didn't tell board members about a case that has lasted nearly two years, in which a school safety officer is suing the district for defamation and other complaints. The board is supposed to review all legal disputes that involve the school system and determine whether to fight them or not. They depend on the law firm to inform them of all cases.

"In a year and a half, he [Smits] was getting bills [paid] and never came to the board and said 'This case is against you,'" Dick said.

Smits told the board he'll communicate better with the board and review his billing practices, another point of contention for board members.

The live television feed from the board meeting didn't occur because of power outages in the city of Key West and Coral Shores High School, Acevedo said.

The blackout was doubly disappointing because the public didn't get a chance to see architectural renderings of how the new Glynn R. Archer Elementary School or Sigsbee Charter School might look.

The board heard from the Rick Smith, who presented the drawings as part of the district's feasibility study of Key West schools. The board decided several months ago to keep Glynn Archer open and renovate and modernize the aging building. The district plans to close the Sigsbee school and transfer the students to Glynn Archer. Turning Sigsbee into a charter school also is a possibility, a move under discussion with the Navy, which operates the Sigsbee Park area.

According to Acevedo, a rebuilt Glynn Archer will have a state-of-the-art broadband network, a new cafeteria and new media center where students can broadcast closed-circuit news and morning announcements to classrooms from a modern TV studio.

Another set of drawings showed what a combined Glynn Archer and Sigsbee school campus would look like on the Horace O'Bryant Middle School campus on Stock Island. That one was requested by board member Andy Griffiths, who considers the HOB site as a third option in the streamlining of schools in Key West.

**[jguerra@keysnews.com](mailto:jguerra@keysnews.com)**