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Priorities questioned after School Board debate

By JOHN L. GUERRA Citizen Staff

The Monroe County School Board recently reduced the number of district vehicles employees can take home at night after hammering out a compromise plan that lets some employees drive school cars part of the way home.

The complex compromise has prompted a plea from board member Debra Walker to concentrate on larger issues.

The debate focused on whether maintenance, construction and transportation staff, as well as some department heads and assistants, need 24-hour use of cars and pickups paid for by taxpayers. The conclusion was to make a small reduction in the number of vehicles available to employees for after-school and weekend use.

But instead of driving cars home, some department heads will park their school vehicles at the nearest school and then drive their personal cars home.

If a school's plumbing suddenly burst or a school bus broke down, the responsible manager would have to drive their own car from home to the nearest school and switch to the school vehicle.

From there, they would drive the school vehicle to whichever school had the problem.

"We have huge issues hanging over us and they're arguing over \$12 savings for a car, or \$200 that would be saved by limiting the use of that car," Walker told The Citizen. "We're talking about a very small dollar value."

Board member John Dick also was unsatisfied by the decision. He'd have preferred the cars be stopped altogether for some district managers.

"I don't believe in a \$90 savings here or there; I don't know why some of these people even need a take-home vehicle. Some of these big gas-guzzlers are not needed."

Walker and board member Andy Griffiths believe the board spends too much time "micromanaging" Superintendent Randy Acevedo on some issues; Griffiths has backed away from managing travel for personnel, for instance, and Walker points to the take-home car issue as the latest instance of focusing on minutiae.

She'd like the board to institute bilingual studies in earlier grades, so students could learn

a second language sooner. Spanish and French typically are taught in high school instead of in earlier grades, when children could learn it faster and it could make a difference in test scores for younger Spanish-speaking students, for instance.

"The age for learning languages is grades 6 [to] 12," she said. "It could help close the achievement gap in our schools. By teaching Spanish literature, social studies in Spanish, we can help non-English speaking students improve their test scores."

The board can do both, Dick said. During the debate at the Sept. 30 meeting, the board focused on smaller issues (reducing take-home cars) and the larger picture (student achievement), Dick said.

"We did spend a lot of time at the beginning of the meeting on a long conversation about closing the achievement gap," he said.

Dick was the lone vote against approving the 2008-2009 budget during that meeting, because he wants the board to concentrate on cutting much bigger items on the budget.

"I voted 'no' to the expenditure part; we're still spending too much money," he said. "I think we need to get the culture of the district to understand that people have to start tightening their belts and cutting back on the luxuries."

"There's always been a priority on smaller budget issues and other crises when we meet," Walker said, "like on the \$12 saved when a person drives a car an extra mile or not, rather than spending time affecting all these kids' lives and closing the achievement gap."

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