

Ione school board backlash over complaints against former board chair

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Ione School District Superintendent and Elementary School Principal Tracey Johnson discusses the district's goals with the board at a work session before the regular meeting Aug. 15. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

hired Scott Whittington of CSW Investigations in La Grande to investigate the matter. Whittington determined Crum had violated board policies with an email written to Ogden in May of this year.

The bombshell came when Rietmann said the council would not be discussing the complaint that night.

"We are not ready to take this on tonight," Rietmann said, adding that the school district had not had a chance to consult with legal counsel.

According to Rietmann at the meeting, the school board had thought the district's existing legal counsel, Steven Corey, could guide them through the process. The attorney had been on vacation and unreachable for several weeks, however. Upon returning home, she said he had informed the board the day before the meeting that he had a conflict of interest and would not be able to counsel them after all.

Rietmann said she had immediately reached out to another attorney but had yet to hear back.

"I'm really confused as to why you guys aren't able to make a fairly simple decision based on that report," responded Ogden, visibly upset at the turn of events.

"I don't think it's as simple as you think it is," replied Rietmann. "I think we need to get our own legal counsel to give us advice before we move forward."

"There was some confusion in the process. I'll give you that," she added.

Ogden replied that she was frustrated because she felt the delay tied her hands.

"I've been told what you decide, decides what I do next," she said.

"I'm not sure we have a decision to make," Rietmann replied.

"I hope not," Ogden responded. "It seems pretty

clear."

"I have a huge problem with this," added audience member Erin Rietmann. "Why is it so difficult of a situation that you need legal counsel?"

Lisa Rietmann responded that the board intended to consult with legal counsel as soon as possible. She said the issue would not need to wait for the September board meeting and suggested scheduling another public meeting at the attorney's earliest availability.

"I can't give you a date," she said, but promised the meeting would be well publicized.

Since then, Lisa Rietmann has told the Gazette-Times that the board consulted with an attorney but that she couldn't speak about the details of the complaint, citing legal constraints. She did confirm that three individuals—a staff member, and community member and another board member—had all filed complaints against one of the Ione school board members.

Rietmann said the school board had not taken final action on the matter, but that legal counsel had advised that the board cannot remove an elected member.

"Any board action would be limited to a statement of censure regarding the actions that resulted in the complaints," said Rietmann.

Censure refers to a public statement by the board saying they disapprove of the board member's actions.

Ogden was not optimistic about even that, saying Rietmann had told her the board was unwilling to either censure Crum or take steps toward a recall. Ogden said she is giving notice of resignation to the school, saying she now feels scared to go to work.

"I can't live under constant fear of what the board

will do or say," she said. "I feel scared here and I've never felt scared at work."

Silent throughout the meeting was Crum, who also seemed shocked by the direction the meeting took. He told the Gazette-Times after the meeting that he had been unaware they wouldn't have legal counsel present.

"I literally thought our attorney was going to show up tonight so we could get to the bottom of it," he said. After consulting with the district's attorney, he declined to comment further.

Other Business

The board also heard its share of complaints during the public comment period at the beginning of the meeting, from parents who stressed the need for better communication to those who worried the dual role of principal and superintendent might have new ISD Superintendent Tracey Johnson stretched too thin.

Parent Erin Rietmann was one who spoke up about the need for better communication. She said the robocalls the district implemented last year worked well "once everyone started getting on there."

However, she suggested using it for a wider variety of communication, as well as using "snail mail" to keep the community informed.

"When I first started coming to this community, there was a lot more communication," she said. "I think you have kind of lost that."

On the topic of communication, residents like Madison Rietmann said she didn't feel the recent board opening was communicated well enough, and others agreed.

"I feel like it's been a very hushed over deal, and I don't like that," said Erin Rietmann.

Lisa Rietmann replied that former board member Tricia Rollins had stepped down unexpectedly only a few weeks before the election, leading to the write-in election of Elizabeth Peterson. Audience members replied that elections should be better publicized whether there was a vacancy or not.

"You should have been talking about those months before," said Brandi Orem.

"I don't think it was intentional. We've never really publicized," replied Lisa Rietmann.

Crum added that there were always ways for citizens to be involved and in the know, such as attending board meetings and volunteering for committees.

In other business at the meeting, the board unanimously approved a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Ione Community Church for the church to serve as a second

reunification site in case of emergencies.

Johnson said she and Ione secondary school Dean of Studetn Ryan Rudolph had attended a school safety summit in Pendleton Aug. 7. Representatives from Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Boardman PD and Oregon State Police were also on hand.

School district staff from around the region had worked on plans for relocation and reunification, the portion of an emergency response where students are evacuated from a school building and are reunited with their families at an alternative, secure location.

With the MOU in place, the Ione church will be one such location for the Ione school. Johnson said the next step will be to assign emergency roles for district staff and volunteers.

"It's really hard in a small school where you don't have a lot of people," she said.

The board also approved a cooperative agreement with Morrow County School District for Ione students to play football at Riverside High School. Johnson said Arlington chose not to co-op with Ione as in the past, and Ione did not end up with enough players for a team. The paperwork had already been filed with the Oregon Student Activities Association (OSAA) and approved.

"Riverside was gracious enough to help us out," she said.

Johnson also reported that the state audit of Ione's English Language Learner (ELL) program showed the school wasn't meeting all the requirement, but she had worked with the Oregon Dept. of Education to correct the shortcomings.

The board deferred approval of the staff handbook until the board and staff could go through it and update it. However, the board approved the student handbook since it was just updated and the board was concerned that parents need the handbook sooner rather than later. Ogden addressed

the board and said that, if changes were to be made after approval, parents should be told of proposed changes before the board met to discuss them.

The board also heard an update on the school bond project. Johnson said at least 20 people, five of whom were major contractors, had participated in the school walk-through Aug. 9. The school district will accept bids until Aug. 22. The school still hopes to begin construction this fall.

Johnson said she would be mailing updates to families, including maps, as construction plans made progress.

"It's going to be messy, probably," she admitted.

At a work session prior to the meeting, the board also discussed policies. ISD

Board Secretary Kim Thul suggested the board should have set guidelines for reading and adopting policies.

"I think it's a great idea to have guidelines on everything," agreed board member Elizabeth Peterson.

Lisa Rietmann noted that there are also optional policies recommended by the Oregon School Employees Association that the school should consider.

Peterson also brought up the issue of the school's drug policy. She said she had it on "good authority" that there is drug use in the student body, including by athletes. Crum and Lisa Rietmann responded that the school does have a good drug policy, but it probably has not been well enforced since before Covid-19.

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