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Erie Times-News (PA)

Rumor diverts board's focus

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Tag: 0c9091ed

Section: News Page: 1 ERICA ERWIN

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Millcreek taxpayers are paying for an investigation into who spread a rumor that Millcreek School Board President Bill Cobert is allegedly having an affair with a district administrator.

The information came during a heated exchange at the end of Monday's School Board meeting, during which board member Judy Wheaton called for Cobert to step down as president.

Wheaton said she lost confidence in Cobert's leadership during the "cheerleading fiasco," a reference to a June story by the Erie Times-News that raised questions about whether Cobert had any improper influence in landing his two daughters spots on Walnut Creek Middle School's cheerleading team.

Wheaton said this question and, to a lesser extent, the rumor of the alleged affair, have taken the board's focus off of education.

"We're not doing our job for Millcreek ... and I have to say I put it at your feet, Bill," she said.

"I want new leadership," she said.

Cobert responded by saying that Wheaton is responsible for spreading the rumor that he is allegedly having an affair with Maryann Anderson, the district's personnel director. Anderson is also the plaintiff in a federal whistle-blower lawsuit against the district. Oral arguments in that case are scheduled to begin today in Erie federal court.

When Wheaton denied the charge, Cobert asked her why she hadn't spoken to the investigator.

He later confirmed that he was referring to **William Weichler**, an Erie lawyer the board hired in June to investigate what the board had until now been calling a "personnel matter."

"If there's anyone who should step down, it's you," Cobert told Wheaton.

The board quickly adjourned the meeting after district lawyer Tim Sennett said the board would have to show cause and hold a hearing before a vote to remove Cobert as president.

Two board members -- Tom Albert and Terry Scutella -- said they would have supported a change in leadership.

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Albert said he believes it's necessary for Cobert to step down in order for the district to move forward.

"I would think I would become ineffectual in the midst of all that controversy and, quite frankly, if I were embroiled in something like that, I would be gone," Albert said.

Some of the controversy stems from questions about Cobert's influence after cheerleading tryouts at Walnut Creek Middle School in May.

Cobert's two daughters did not make the original roster but were later included, along with every other girl who tried out, after the district decided to allow every girl to participate. Cobert did not comment on the issue then, except to say the decision to include all of the girls was an administrative one.

"I've been involved on school boards and school board-related activities for 15 years now, and my feeling is it's never been this bad," Albert said. "There's always some measure of controversy, but I've never experienced it at this level before."

Board member Brian Kramer said he wasn't ready to call for Cobert to step down but said he is open to discussing a change in leadership.

Board members Gary Winschel and Ron Wilga called for the adjournment of the meeting and said the question should be addressed in a closed-door, secret session.

Board members Michael Palermo and Jane Ann Rastatter did not attend the meeting. Rastatter had said earlier that she would not vote for Cobert to step down.

Monday was not the first time the rumor of an alleged affair between Cobert and Anderson was discussed in public.

The lawyer representing Anderson in her lawsuit said in a July 13 court filing that Rebecca Mancini, the district's supervisor of special education and a defendant in the case, falsely told Anderson's colleagues and a Millcreek School Board member that Anderson was having "illicit and intimate relations" with Cobert.

Anderson said Monday she is "outraged" by the allegation.

"This is continued harassment," she said. "The whole thing is absolutely preposterous."

Anderson claims in her lawsuit that she faced retaliation after she complained about nepotism and inappropriate spending. U.S. District Judge Sean J. McLaughlin will decide today whether her claims can move forward.

Wheaton, meanwhile, said she still intends to push for a hearing to have Cobert removed as president.

"It's not personal," she said. "For the best interests of the district, he needs to step aside."

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