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Insurance a stumbling block for Cass City

By TRACI L. WEISENBACH, Tribune Staff Writer

CASS CITY — One thing that's agreed upon between this school district's teacher's union and the board of education is that health insurance is a stumbling block in contract negotiations.

The board wants the Cass City Education Association (CCEA) to switch to a different plan it believes would save the district money. The CCEA doesn't believe such a switch would be good for the union or the district.

According to Superintendent Ron Wilson, the board proposed replacing the current Michigan Education Special Services Association (MESSA) health insurance plan for teachers with a similar quality, but significantly less expensive plan. He said the current MESSA plan costs the district more than \$1 million per year, while the proposed plan would cost \$838,161 per year. The total cost difference is \$203,196 per year.

He said the proposed insurance plan covers nearly everything the MESSA plan covers. As an incentive, the school board offered to give the teachers the \$203,196 savings for one year, in the form of a raise. The board also offered to keep MESSA coverage if the teachers agree to pay the difference in cost.

"We certainly appreciate what (the teachers) are doing (for students), but look at what's going on (in our economy)," Wilson said. "The board has a responsibility (to this district). We can't enter into a contract we can't afford to pay for."

He said many people in the community have lost their jobs or taken cuts in wages and benefits.

"I believe our community would not be sympathetic to teachers striking because they want the district to pay \$200,000 more than necessary for health insurance," Wilson said.

In a press release issued Thursday, Cass City Board of Education President Doug Lautner said MESSA insurance is no longer affordable for the district, and there are viable alternatives available that cost much less.

"The Cass City Board of Education is charged with making sure the taxpayers' money is wisely spent," he said. "I see no justification for pushing the district to the financial brink to fund an overpriced union-sponsored insurance carrier."

MESSA is owned and operated by the Michigan Education Association.

John Folsom, MEA Uniserv director, represents CCEA in negotiations. He said the CCEA disputes that the alternative insurance plan would save the district \$203,196 per year and that the coverage is similar to MESSA.

Folsom said insurance is not the only sticking point. He said salary issues and many contract language items need to be worked on, as well.

Along with Folsom, the CCEA's bargaining team includes teachers Jim Green, Jane Reis and Mary Keroson. CCEA has 71 members.

Bargaining for the school board are Wilson, board members Danny Haag, Randy Severance and Jim Turner, and lead negotiator Al Luce, who is from a labor law firm.