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EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools board member scolds administration for delay in redistricting vote

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An Akron Public Schools board member is demanding the administration and board leadership account for the delay of a planned vote on the district's redistricting and rezoning plan, which impacts the school assignments for thousands of Akron students this fall.

The board was slated to vote Monday night on the plan, which has been in the works for months, but for the second time in two meetings, it was pulled off the agenda.

Board member Barbara Sykes said she believed the board or the administration had committed an "illegal" act by removing the item from the agenda the same day as the meeting. The agenda for the meeting had been posted for several days, and had included the third and final reading of the board's redistricting plan.

"Even though our bylaws may not mention how soon we should expect an item to be pulled from the agenda, I would think that it would certainly not be the day of the meeting," Sykes said during the meeting. "So I would like an explanation to what has happened to our redistricting and restructuring plan."

Board members were notified that afternoon, Board President Diana Autry said, noting she learned of it the same time as the rest of the board.

Superintendent Michael Robinson said there was a legal issue and possibly a board policy issue, and in consultation with the district's attorneys, they pulled the item off the agenda for a vote. He did not explain what the legal or policy issue was. He did say it would come back on the board's next regular meeting agenda, but also that it would be discussed in a committee meeting.

"After we spoke with our attorney today, we will be bringing the plan to the committee meeting, and there's some discussion that we're going to have to have around the policy that

the board has, so that we're able to move forward to get the work done," he said.

Sykes responded that she was "really concerned about this."

"There should be adequate time given not only to the board members but to the public, to the media," she said.

A spokesman sent an email to members of the media about the agenda change about an hour before the start of the meeting. A board member said during the meeting she had received the email in the 1 p.m. hour.

Autry said after the meeting the concern had to do with the board's policy on assigning students to schools and redistricting processes, a policy that was updated in 2022, but she did not say which part of that policy was of possible concern. She noted this was the first time the board had voted on a major redistricting initiative since the policy had changed.

"If there's any question at all, we're going to pull it because we don't want to make any mistakes," Autry said.

Sykes said afterward she still had concerns.

"It's one thing to not vote on an item but to pull it from the agenda is something totally different," she said. "But still, we need to be concerned about the Sunshine Law and the adequate notification of the public, of the media, and of the board. And that clearly did not take place."

The redistricting vote affects thousands of Akron students, determining what school they are assigned to this fall.

The plan would move boundary lines for several schools to relieve over crowding, particularly in the North cluster of schools, but also calls for STEM High School to be relocated to Robinson Community Learning Center, closing that school as an elementary building and distributing those students across other schools.

It also determines the fate of two other buildings, Essex and Stewart Early Learning Centers. Because the future of those buildings is up in the air, so too is registration for the district's new full-day pre-kindergarten program slated to start this fall.

The plan originally called for closing those buildings, but now Robinson said he wants to leave open the possibility that they will be needed as the district expands its pre-K options.

But board member Rene Molenaar raised the issue at a previous meeting and again at Monday's meeting that the board had already voted to close Essex and Stewart. That vote was part of a broader vote over the summer on the district's Long-Term Operational Plan, or LTOP. The wording of that resolution including the construction of a school in Kenmore as well as the closing of Essex and Stewart.

This story will be updated.

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