

Indian River teachers declare impasse

Superintendent still hopeful for contract amid multiple cancellations of negotiating sessions

Colleen Wixon
 Treasure Coast Newspapers
 USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY - Teachers say contract negotiations have stalled, claiming the school district's cancellation of multiple negotiation sessions this year has made resolving the talks

difficult. "The district has expressed their appreciation and respect of teachers, but their actions clearly express the absolute opposite," Indian River County Education Association President Liz Cannon said in a statement. The union represents the district's 1,100 teachers.

On Monday, the union issued declared an impasse, or stalemate, in negotiations. However, teachers, as with other Florida public employees, are prohibited by state law from striking. During an impasse, negotiations can continue, but either party can request mediation or a special magistrate to intervene, according to state law. Both the teachers and the school district could waive both these steps and ask the School Board to decide unresolved issues.

The union said in its statement it planned to resolve non-economic issues before asking for a special magistrate. For his part, though, school Superintendent Mark Rendell said the union's action was a surprise because he thought the two groups were moving forward now that a new chief negotiator is on board. Since negotiations began in April, six

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PATRICK DOVE/TCPALM

Expansion of learning

Freddie Woolfork, right, public relations and facilities operations director for the Gifford Youth Achievement Center, gives a tour of the new expansion project currently under construction on Thursday to a group of about 30 people. The 14,000-square-foot expansion will add eight multipurpose learning rooms, including a computer lab and two rooms geared toward teenagers. "The building will be used for our middle and high school after school program that has doubled in population over the last few years," said Angelia Perry, executive director for the center. "The new building will allow us to serve an additional 140 kids than we are currently serving bring us to about 300 kids annually."

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Tax revenues are up in Indian River County

Janet Begley
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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY - Taxpayers may be spared an increase in the property-tax rate next year, thanks to a strong economy and limited debt on the county's books.

That's what County Administrator Jason Brown told members of the Indian River County Taxpayers' Association Wednesday in his state-of-the-county update.

"We are thinking the economy is going very strong right now," said Brown, who was county budget director for 12 years before becoming county administrator in 2017. "I don't see any reason for a millage (tax) rate increase next year. I can't see why we can't put together a budget that keeps the millage



The Indian River Lagoon will be a major focus of Indian River County in 2019, County Administrator Jason Brown said Wednesday. ERIC HASERT/TCPALM

rate stable." Other factors Brown cited for the strong economic picture include sales-tax revenues, up 6.2 percent; tourist

taxes up 11 percent; and building-permit revenue up 25.2 percent. In 2017-18, 1,181 single-family building permits were issued, up from 953 in 2016-17.

"They are rocking and rolling out there," said Brown. "We have some good things happening right now in the county."

Among those good things are an increased focus on the Indian River Lagoon, with the county developing a master plan for water-quality projects. The plan provide a road map for improvement going forward, Brown said.

"One of the most important things we're working on is the lagoon," said Brown. "We've done four major storm-water projects to remove nitrogen and phosphorus, and are working on a fifth at Osprey Acres to treat water from the

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DeSantis: SFWMD board should resign

Ali Schmitz
 Treasure Coast Newspapers
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Gov. Ron DeSantis, on his third day on the job, asked for the immediate resignations of all South Florida Water Management District board members during a news conference in Stuart.

The Senate would have to remove any board members who refuse, such as Vice Chair Brandon Tucker of Palm City, who said he plans to serve the last two years of his term.

"I believe I made a commitment to serve out my term," Tucker told TCPalm. "I haven't had an opportunity to meet with the governor and his staff and tell them about the issues and my positions on them."

Tucker said he wasn't surprised by DeSantis' request. "Everybody figured it was coming," Tucker said. "But I don't believe it was correct."

Tucker said he had "no idea" how the other members of the board will react to the governor's request. "I can't speak for them," he said.

Former Vice Chair Melanie Peterson, a Realtor in Palm Beach County, resigned Jan. 1.

Terms of three other members expire in March:

- Sam Acursio, a Miami-Dade County farmer
- Rick Barber, a Lee County engineer
- James Moran, a Palm Beach County attorney

Thursday's action was the result of a controversial Nov. 8 vote to lease land needed for the EAA reservoir to a Florida Crystals subsidiary — after DeSantis asked the board to postpone the vote to give him and the public more time to vet the lease.

U.S. Rep. Brian Mast, R-Palm City and chair of DeSantis' environmental advisory committee, called the board members "arrogant" and "derelict in their duties."

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On his third day in office, Gov. Ron DeSantis called for the immediate resignations of all South Florida Water Management District board members. LEAH VOSS/TCPALM