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Board discusses Morris job

After 3-hour meeting Friday, city school board makes no statements or decisions

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Baltimore school officials met in an unscheduled, three-hour session Friday as debate intensified over newly selected schools executive Brian D. Morris, and whether the hiring process and revelations about his troubled financial history should cost him the six-figure job.

The meeting of school board members and school system CEO Andrés Alonso followed a report in *The Baltimore Sun* on Friday detailing a 15-year record of lawsuits and bad-debt claims against Morris, including foreclosures, garnisheed wages and unpaid taxes. That report came two days after public officials began questioning whether Morris' appointment to the newly created and unadvertised \$175,000 position was proper.

School officials left the meeting in the early evening and made no statements about their discussions or Morris' status. Reached last night by phone, Morris said he had no comment.

Schools spokeswoman Edie House said school officials had been unaware of Morris' financial problems until the published report. "We are looking into its accuracy and relevancy," she said.

The Baltimore Teachers Union held a news conference Friday to express concern over the appointment.

Marietta English, the union's co-president, said that after Friday's article about Morris' financial problems, members of her union asked how he could be trusted to oversee school funds.

English said the members are "outraged" over the board's decision to hire Morris to the high-paying post of deputy CEO of operations, particularly when they see so many financial needs in the schools.

"My phone started ringing at 7 a.m. ... My BlackBerry has been going off all morning long," she said.

The prevailing feeling among members, she said, was that Morris should step down, although the teachers union did not formally call for his resignation.

But at least one city official, Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, called Friday on Morris to resign,

pointing primarily to the fact that the position had been neither advertised nor included in the school system budget.

"Brian Morris has been very loyal to the school system, and I would think he would want to perhaps withdraw his application and give everyone a chance to get back to business," said Clarke.

Despite the news about the real estate developer's financial problems, officials seemed most concerned about the hiring process. The school board voted him into the district job Tuesday, a day after he resigned as its chairman. The appointment was based on the recommendation of Alonso, whom Morris had a hand in hiring.

City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake said Morris' financial troubles should have no bearing on his appointment to the administrative position. In an interview Friday on the Anthony McCarthy Show on radio station WEAA, she said Morris could still be effective in his new position. She also questioned whether Morris' financial issues became an issue only because he is African-American.

"He is a professional. ... Many of the top-level positions were created for individuals and not advertised. But we are living in a city where a brown person can't get that treatment. If a job is created for one of us, your credentials are questioned, your background is questioned, the process is questioned," she said.

Alonso "looked at his integrity, his drive, what he knew of his capabilities. You take a person with ambition, and not every person has a skyrocket to the stars without having bumps along the way," she said.

At school board headquarters on North Avenue, staff who spoke on the condition of anonymity said most attention focused on what might happen during the school board meeting, which the school Web site reported shortly before it began at 2:15 p.m.

School sources said they feared the Morris appointment could become a distraction for top school officials, who would be dealing with public concerns rather than academic issues and disrupt what they see as positive momentum for the school system over the past year.

Jill P. Carter, a city delegate in the Maryland General Assembly, said the appointment "smacks of cronyism" and that the city delegation is planning to meet to discuss what action it might take. Carter said the delegation might consider calling Alonso to Annapolis to explain the hiring.

"The question should be directed at the decision makers: Schools are closing and other staff is being laid off ... yet we can afford to create this new position for someone of questionable qualifications?" she said.

Del. Cheryl D. Glenn, a Baltimore Democrat and former city teachers union leader, said Alonso's appointment of Morris "has the appearance of impropriety bordering on an ethics situation.

"I don't know of anyone else who had an active position on the board while negotiating a job with the system," she said.

Glenn said she wants Alonso to explain to state lawmakers why the system needs another administrator who makes six figures. "We need to ask for the rationale behind this and demand accountability," she said. She urged Alonso to cut another six-figure administrative position if he insists on keeping his newly created one.

She also said lawmakers, who had fought hard to maintain funding for city schools in a difficult budget year, were "blind-sided" by the Morris appointment. "If we're fighting for the funding of the school system, we should be given a heads-up with something this controversial."

The reaction came the same day that details of Morris' financial troubles emerged. A Baltimore Sun review of dozens of court records shows a lengthy struggle by Morris to manage his businesses and affairs. Bill collectors garnisheed his wages and bank accounts, and tried to repossess his cars. Creditors won judgments against him for rent payments, medical bills and homeowners association dues. In one case, a potential business partner said Morris walked off with \$12,500 intended for a new venture. In another, a couple said he rented them a house he didn't own and collected their monthly payments until the real owner ordered them to leave.

Friday, it appeared that Morris' financial problems were not letting up. Neil Steinhorn, an attorney representing a community association trying to collect \$2,500 in back dues, fees and interest from Morris, said he sent Morris a letter when he heard about his new school system job, reminding him that he intended to collect the money. Steinhorn is the third attorney to tell The Baltimore Sun he intended to garnishee Morris' wages from the government.

"A lot of creditors' attorneys are pulling for him to keep that job," Steinhorn said.

While he doesn't remember all of the debtors he's chased after, Steinhorn said he remembers Morris well, because of his high public profile and also his skill at avoiding the attorney's attempt to serve papers.

"We had to get him at an Exxon gas station one time," Steinhorn said. "People have been after him for years, and anyone in city government who wanted to find out about that could have looked it up in a few minutes. It's easy."

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