

THE COLLEGE VOICE

SPECIAL EDITION

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Mercer County Community College's student newspaper, serving the college community since 1969

Trustees Terminate Rose

Story reported and written by Marc Daubert, Michelle Treanor and Matt Witkowski.

The Mercer County Community College board of trustees fired President Robert Rose Tuesday, after failing in almost four hours of negotiations to reach a contract buyout agreement with Rose and his attorney.

The 9-1 vote provided Rose six months' severance pay, or about \$77,500. It sparked outrage from faculty members, who walked out of the college's conference center en masse after directing several harsh comments at the board and its chairman, Anthony Cimino.

The firing, unprecedented in the college's 39-year history, followed the board's release last week of a report by Mercer County Inspector General Robert Farkas. The report alleges Rose cheated the college by improperly billing for lavish parties, as well as overseeing lax financial accounting and other possible violations.

Farkas sent the information to Mercer County prosecutors to consider criminal charges against Rose. Trustees had put the president on paid leave in June when they launched their own financial investigation, a month after Farkas began investigating.

Kevin Hart, Rose's attorney, said Wednesday that he planned to file a lawsuit on Friday or Monday alleging that trustees wrongfully fired the president. Rose could not be reached for comment.

Hart said the board's public release of the Farkas report on Oct. 18 violated the state's

open records law and Rose's employee rights. He said the trustee decision "smacks of political cronyism."

Only trustee Concetta Maglione voted against the motion. She is the lone remaining trustee from the board that hired Rose in 2001, the majority of whose members were appointed by Republicans. Most of the 11 current trustees, including Cimino, have been appointed by Democrats, including six by Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes. Inspector general Farkas also works for Hughes.

Cimino said that while Rose "was a very good cheerleader for the college, he also has an additional responsibility as the CEO, which is to ensure that the college functions properly. There are a number of areas where the college was not functioning properly."

Maglione said Rose shouldn't have been fired "because he was so valued by faculty and staff." She added, "I don't know that the charges against him were totally validated" and said she believed Rose had "no intent" to do anything wrong.

Cimino said that trustees will consider at their Nov. 17 board meeting recommendations for how the college should reorganize "operationally, financially and organizationally." He said the board would begin to search for a permanent replacement "relatively soon."

Speculation before the



Former
MCCC
President
Robert Rose
at the
Tuesday
night board of
trustees
meeting,
where his fate
was deter-
mined.

Staff photo by
Francois Priaile

meeting was that trustees might agree to buy out the remainder of Rose's contract, which was set to run through spring 2007. A buy-out would have avoided a lawsuit and allowed Rose to leave without being fired.

But more than three-and-a-half hours of private negotiation Tuesday night proved fruitless. At 10:22 p.m., trustees filed back into the conference center, reconvened in public session and voted to fire Rose.

After the vote, trustee Robert DiFalco said that Rose and Hart had approached the board "to work out a deal."

Standing with Rose in the back of the auditorium, Hart hollered in response that "the board requested that we come to this meeting." Rocky Peterson, the board's attorney, responded that Hart had on Friday given the board a proposal to negotiate.

"It's water over the dam. We'll see you guys in court," Hart said. He and Rose then shook their heads and walked out.

Leaders of the MCCC Faculty Association said they would meet Thursday to consider a vote of no-confidence in Cimino.

Faculty members had voted 75-2 last week to ask trustees to reinstate Rose. Many of the more than 100 attendees Tuesday wore yellow ribbons to show support for the president.

Association President Bob Pugh told Cimino after the

vote, "One thing you've lost is trust. Nobody trusts you now. And you've lost respect, with the way you've bungled this investigation. You will never get that back. Your ability to run this college is just about nil."

Pugh told Cimino that faculty and other community members would not let Mercer become a "dumping ground for politicians," adding, "We've got our eye on you."

After the meeting, Cimino said, "We will work very hard to regain the trust of the college."

"You've put this man through hell for months," Art Schwartz, an MCCC math professor, told trustees. "As you go through a search for a new president, and you find no one who matches up to Dr. Rose, I hope you do the honorable thing and resign."

Shortly afterward, most faculty members left in a group protest.

DiFalco said that failure to investigate the allegations against Rose "would have been gross negligence on the part of the board of trustees."

Mel Leipzig, an MCCC art professor, said that by acting politically trustees "have ruined the reputation of the Democratic party in this area." He called for the board to divorce itself from politics, with appointees evenly divided between Democrats, Republi-



Staff photo by Francois Priaile

Board of Trustees Chairman Anthony Cimino.

Continued on reverse

Continued from front

cans and independents.

Leaders of two other MCCC employee unions expressed support for the trustees.

"We had faith in the board all along," said Marie Mendez, president of the college's Federation of Secretarial, Clerical and Technical Employees.

Maria Tazza, president of the MCCC Professional Staff Federation, said, "We would have liked to see this end more quickly than it did, but we have had trust in the board, we support MCCC, and we hope to move on and continue to move forward."

The allegations against Rose in Farkas' report include:

- Overpayment for on- and off-campus events, including at least eight parties, some at Rose's residence. Rose improperly took home alco-

hol after some parties.

- Use of college funds to pay expenses of the college foundation, which provides money for student scholarships.

- OVERRUNS AND QUESTIONABLE USE OF THE COLLEGE ACCOUNT FOR CEREMONIES AND GIFTS, SUCH AS FOR RETIRING FACULTY MEMBERS.

- Use of MCCC credit cards for personal expenses, though Rose repaid almost all of them within the normal billing cycle.

- Questionable repayment by the college of Rose's \$18,000 in legal fees from a 2003 criminal investigation of the president that resulted in no charges being filed.

- Failure to keep appropriate receipts, records and expense reports.

- Violation of campus travel policies.

Farkas' report wrongly said that Rose was fired from Massasoit

Community College before being hired at Mercer. Rose left Massasoit voluntarily to take the Mercer job.

English professor Jim Franklin characterized the Farkas report as "a naked attempt by a few politicians to grab power and undermine the autonomy of the college for their own purposes."

A separate forensic audit ordered by trustees determined that college accounting procedures were out of date and recommended changes such as canceling credit cards for college staff and creating centralized purchasing. It noted that many of the accounting problems predate Rose.

Dr. Tom Wilfrid, vice president for academic affairs and acting president in Rose's absence, compared the impact of Rose's firing to "the day after a hurricane. We're in a time of mourning, healing and reconciliation."

ROSE TIMELINE

August 2001

Mercer County Community College board of trustees hires Dr. Robert Rose as president. Trustees make the move despite knowing of a Massachusetts auditor's report that criticized Rose for lax financial practices while president at Massasoit Community College.

Spring 2003

Rose is suspended for six months after an 18-year-old woman alleges that he fondled her in his office. Mercer County prosecutors find insufficient evidence to press criminal charges, and Rose is reinstated.

January 2005

Brian Hughes, a Democrat, is elected Mercer County executive, creating an office of inspector general to investigate corruption charges.

March 2005

A state Superior Court judge rules that five MCCC trustees appointed by former County Executive Robert Prunetti, a Republican, were illegally appointed without consent of the county board of chosen freeholders. With an additional resignation, Hughes is able to appoint six trustees on the 11-person board, including Chairman Anthony Cimino.

May 2005

Hughes announces that Robert Farkas, his inspector general, will investigate allegations of financial misdealings at MCCC involving Rose.

June 2005

Trustees launch their own investigation of Rose by hiring a forensic accountant. They suspend Rose with pay from his \$155,000-a-year job.

Oct. 18, 2005

Cimino releases reports of Farkas and the forensic accountant. Farkas alleges that Rose cheated the college by improperly billing for lavish parties, as well as overseeing lax financial accounting and other possible violations. Farkas sends his report to county prosecutors for possible criminal sanctions.

Oct. 25, 2005

Citing the Farkas report, trustees fire Rose for cause, with six months' severance pay. Rose's attorney vows to sue the board for wrongful termination.

Campus Reaction

"This is the saddest 24 hours of my career at MCCC."

Arthur Schwartz, MCCC math professor

"The board did the right thing. Rose misused college funds. He was given a second chance here, after what he had done in Massachusetts, and he failed at that chance."

Jacob Copland, MCCC student

"It's like a wake on campus today."

- Bob Pugh, president, MCCC Faculty Association

"It cannot be political. If Rose didn't do anything wrong, he wouldn't be gone."

- Joan DeLucia, administrative specialist

"Not much has been said about Rose to the students, and most of the information distributed about Rose was to the faculty."

- Jennifer Tarbay, MCCC sophomore

"Rose did a lot for the school. But wherever there is mishandled money, there are bound to be problems. I would have liked him to stay."

- Rich Wright, campus security officer

ABOUT THIS ISSUE OF THE COLLEGE VOICE

The editing staff of The Voice rushed this special issue to print to provide the MCCC campus community with accurate and complete information about the extraordinary events of Oct. 25, 2005. We would also like to thank MCTV for their cooperation and assistance in covering this story.

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