

County, union set talks on health issues

LOCKPORT - Contract talks between Niagara County and its largest union, which weren't held for three months, resumed last week and seem to be getting off the dime.

County Manager Gregory D. Lewis said he has scheduled four more sessions before the end of September with Local 832, Civil Service Employees Association, and all will deal with health insurance, which has emerged as the most contentious issue.

CSEA members turned down a proposed new contract in January, largely because of concerns about changes in their health coverage. They are working under terms of a contract that ran out at the end of 2002.

Lewis said last Monday's session was "productive and we said, "If we could do something in the health care redesign, it would really break the ice.' "

Union President Frances E. Faery, who has been harshly critical of Lewis and the County Legislature in recent months, declined detailed comment on the latest developments, but said from her point of view, there's little progress so far.

"I won't talk about what's going on in the negotiations until something happens.

Nothing's happening right now. We have some dates," Faery said. Lewis said those meeting dates are Aug. 30 and Sept. 9, 16 and 30.

"They expressed interest in getting together and defining the terms of the redesign," Lewis said. "We'd like to be able to get to a single carrier, but we want to preserve choice."

The answer, he said, is lining up a company that offers multiple plans. He said Flexcare, the company hired as the county's insurance broker earlier this year, is still "doing their homework" and hasn't

made recommendations yet.

Lewis said, "We want to define what we want and give companies an opportunity to respond to it."

At present, the county offers a self-funded traditional package and a Blue Cross preferred provider plan. Flexcare and Niagara Insurance Group are competing for a contract to carry out the redesign of the health offerings. The Legislature is expected to make a choice next month.

Meanwhile, Lewis said he has scheduled an Aug. 26 bargaining session with the second-largest county union, Local 182, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

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