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To the Editor, Ridgewood News:

Last Friday, the Board submitted our final brief to the state-appointed Fact-finder. The Board's brief clearly articulates the rationale for our salary and benefit proposals and the district's financial constraints under the 2 percent cap with recognition of the taxpayers' burden. Our final brief is available to the public. It has been posted to the district's web site at www.ridgewood.k12.nj.us.

In mid-March, Sheila Brogan and Jim Morgan met with REA president, Mike Yannone, and the REA chief negotiator, Laura Grasso. In these informal meetings we discussed a variety of possible settlement scenarios. We initiated these discussions with the goal of concluding negotiations and settling the contract. It became clear through these discussions that settlement was not attainable unless the Board was willing to agree to a salary equal to county average (2.7 percent or higher), continuing with NJ Direct 10 as the base health plan with \$10 copays for primary doctors and specialists, and reducing the REA members' health benefit contributions. Reducing the health care contribution would require the district to pay a higher percentage of the health insurance premium.

Our "what if" scenarios were generous, and included discussion of an alternative health plan, NJ Direct 15. NJ Direct 15 with copays of \$15 for primary care doctors and specialists is a high quality medical plan with benefits that exceed those offered in many private sector settings. Agreement with the REA members on this plan would provide cost savings for both the district and the REA members and contribute to the financial wellbeing of the district. Without any change to the health care plan, the Board could not agree to a higher salary or reduced health care contributions. The REA's demands would put the district in a financially untenable position in year three of the contract. If the Board agreed to the REA's salary and benefit requests, personnel costs would crowd out other budget areas requiring significant reductions in all cost areas.

As the REA and Board's teams saw that settlement was unlikely, we agreed that we would submit our final briefs to the Fact-finder and await his recommendations. We expect to receive the Fact-finder's report by mid to late May.

In the meantime, all of the terms and conditions of the expired contract continue. The teachers and support staff continue to receive their full salaries and benefits and there has not been, nor will there be, any interruption or reduction in their salaries or benefits.

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