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## **Meredith union petition weighed**

CONCORD — Details, arguments and negotiations for a possible unionization of some Meredith departments were discussed in depth at a hearing before a state employment board.

A hearing was held on Wednesday at the office of the state's Public Employee Labor Relations Board in Concord regarding the petition filed by several Meredith employees to form a collective bargaining unit. Jeffrey Brown, field representative and negotiator with the Service Employees International Union, represented the town employees on the petition and labor and employment attorney Mark Broth represented the town.

The petition calls for included workers with public works, the water and sewer department and the financial officer and Geographic Information Systems specialist to join as one collective bargaining group.

Brown said he received a call on July 1 regarding the proposed unionization. A hearing was held before Wednesday's hearing to discuss a settlement offer with the town, though the town declined the offer.

Broth said the town does not contest the petition, but takes issue with the inclusion of the water and sewer department, department supervisors and the financial officer and GIS specialist, as both employees work in the town hall.

Both parties have agreed that the financial officer, GIS specialist, the public works director and the water and sewer superintendent will not be included.

Wednesday's hearing included testimony by Public Works Director Mike Faller, water and sewer Operations Manager Bob Hill, who previously held the position of water and sewer superintendent until earlier this year, and administrative services director and co-interim Town Manager Brenda Vittner. Current water and sewer Superintendent Brian Carroll was also at the hearing.

"We need to work together on a lot of projects," said Faller, who said, along with Hill, that the two departments work hand-in-hand on a regular basis.

Hill, under Brown's questioning, said the water and sewer department works more frequently with public works than any other department. If there is work with a water main, public works digs and water and sewer takes care of the line, though public works workers may help with digging around the area or putting a chain around the pipe.

"Even the vehicles are ordered in the same color," Hill said.

Faller said he has met with the water and sewer superintendent on a regular basis to discuss projects and ideas and public works would help with small maintenance jobs and repairs, such as valve replacement.

Faller said former Town Manager Carol Granfield had discussed merging the water and sewer department with public works in late 2007 and asked him to come up with a possible plan for how the two departments could be merged. Faller said this plan "went by the wayside." Granfield retired from her position in October.

The Capital Improvements Plan, according to department representatives, also mentions possible joint public works and water department projects and has encouraged the two departments to work together whenever possible. The recently completed bundled project around the area of Red Gate Lane is an example of this.

Brown made the point that the two departments have the same policies, budget procedures and town warrant for appropriations as well as other standard procedures each town department has. Brown's line of questioning with Hill also pointed out that employees of both departments go through similar safety training, including a chain-saw safety course.

Broth's questioning of all three witnesses, however, indicated the two departments perform separate functions and have separate supervisors who manage their own employees. Employees for both departments have their own break rooms and do not take their breaks at the other facility. Broth also noted the distance between the water and sewer and public works buildings.

Additionally, the supervisors for one department do not take disciplinary action on the other's employees and are responsible for scheduling overtime or vacation time for the other's employees.

Hill did say that if a public works employee works overtime on a water and sewer project, the overtime comes out of the water and sewer budget and the superintendent must sign off on it.

According to Broth's questioning, any shared work between the two departments is part of interdepartmental cooperation and efficiency in working that any departments have in shared situations while much larger projects are contracted out. Public works officials also are not required to have certification for water department duties.

The role of Assistant Public Works Director Al Bolduc was debated by both representatives. Faller said Bolduc and two other supervisors had the power to conduct employee evaluations until around February of this year. Bolduc served as public works director in Faller's stead while Faller was on paid leave.

Broth pointed out that Bolduc did conduct an evaluation during that six-week period, though Faller said the evaluation did not result in a pay decrease or disciplinary action. Bolduc is usually part of a review panel by which all employment decisions are made with other higher-ranking employees. Both representatives have 30 days to respond with post-hearing briefs. Any decision should be made within 30 days of the receipt of the briefs and the final decision should be made within the next 60 days.

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