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University of Oregon President Is Ousted

By TAMAR LEWIN

The Oregon State Board of Higher Education voted Monday afternoon to terminate the contract of the University of Oregon president, Richard W. Lariviere.

At the start of the emergency board meeting, when the chancellor, George Pernsteiner, recommended that Dr. Lariviere's contract be ended as of Dec. 28, the room erupted in boos.

The decision came after a public comment hour in which speaker after speaker implored the board to retain the president, or at least defer the decision.

"This has been a long dysfunctional ride," said Matt Donegan, the board president. "It is heartbreaking to be here right now."

Still, the decision came as no surprise; indeed, news media reports last week said Dr. Lariviere had already been notified that his contract would not be renewed when it expired on June 30. But at Monday's meeting, the board said that last week's discussions were confidential consultations, and that no decision had been reached before the meeting.

At the meeting, the University Senate president, Robert Kyr, presented a petition with 6,300 signatures, asking the board to renew Dr. Lariviere's contract, and saying that his departure would shatter morale and lead many employees to leave the university.

Speakers were passionate about how much Dr. Lariviere had accomplished since arriving at the university two years ago, calling him "the embodiment of hope at the university."

In his own statement, Dr. Lariviere said the university had been impoverished by decades of disinvestment by the state. "The demand for fresh thinking and new models has never been more urgent," he said.

Dr. Lariviere annoyed the board during the last legislative session, when he proposed that his flagship university form its own governing board and become more financially independent of the state.

The board renewed his contract in June, but only for one year — and with several conditions, including that he no longer push for a separate board. Tensions with the board were exacerbated further this year, when Dr. Lariviere gave raises to some administrators and faculty members, at a time when the university system was in the midst of contract negotiations with the union representing clerical and support staff.

Over the weekend, Gov. John Kitzhaber said the board would be “fully justified” in ending Dr. Lariviere’s reign.

“There have been a number of well-publicized incidents involving Dr. Lariviere that have eroded trust and confidence with the Board of Higher Education,” said the governor, a Democrat. “His decision to bypass the board and lobby for increased independence for the University of Oregon was a clear violation of policy and made our larger, collective efforts to advance systemwide reform much more difficult.”

The governor also said Dr. Lariviere’s salary increases “disregarded my specific direction on holding tight and delaying discussion about retention and equity pay increases until the next biennium to allow for a consistent, systemwide policy on salaries.”

Over the weekend, there was an outpouring of support for Dr. Lariviere.

Early Sunday morning, vandals struck the home of Mr. Pernsteiner, the Oregon University System chancellor, with eggs and a spray-painted message, “The Hat,” referring to the fedora Dr. Lariviere often wears. At the university’s football game Saturday, the stadium was decorated with posters and banners saying, “I Stand With the Hat.”

Phil Knight, the chairman of Nike and an important university donor, standing with Dr. Lariviere’s campus supporters, has said the ouster was an “astonishingly bad decision” that amounted to an “application of Oregon’s assisted suicide law.”