

Harrison back in the saddle at LMC

Former president named acting CEO

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BENTON HARBOR — Former Lake Michigan College President Bob Harrison will return temporarily until board members decide how to fill the void left by the recent firing of Jen-

nifer Spielvogel. L M C Board members unanimously agreed Monday at a special meeting to name Harrison as president emeritus/acting CEO, until they've made that decision.

"This was a very unan-

anticipated and unfortunate thing that has happened, but Dr. Harrison loves Lake Michigan College and wants to come back," LMC Board Chair Mary Jo Tomasini said, before the vote. The board also agreed, without taking a formal vote, to decide soon if it will reconsider Montcalm Community College President Bob Spohr — who was the other finalist for Har-

risson's job — or launch another national search. Board members voiced hopes of deciding on Spohr's candidacy — or launching another search — by the May 24 regular meeting, but did not set a timeline. Whatever decision the board makes won't be done in a rush, Tomasini said after Monday's meeting. "We definitely are go-

ing to be analyzing how we move forward, and move carefully. That's why I didn't want to be bound to a timeline," Tomasini said. "We need to feel sure, but the community also needs to feel sure, too." Trustee Paul Bergan and Vice President Michael Lindley voiced similar feelings before the vote. "We don't need to rush to judgment here. If takes

a month, it takes a month. Let's be confident here," Bergan said. Lindley suggested additional background and non-reference checks — among other measures — to see if the college should look further at Spohr, or start another search. "We need to make sure we're showing our due

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diligence," he said.

As part of that effort, board members heard a 30-minute presentation from Spohr, who described himself as a "Type A leader, with a servant mentality."

"Our mission is to serve our community. That means asking, when we go out there, 'What can we do for you?' If we fulfill our mission, the community will take care of us," he said.

Harrison will earn \$5,000 a month for a 30-hour work-week, said Anne Erdman, vice president of administration. Harrison retired in December 2015. He'd led the college since 2009.

Harrison said that he'll focus on day-to-day operations while the board works through its decision.

"This is a great organization. I'm here to help, and it's the least I can do. We'll work with the cabinet on the things that need to be done and keep things moving forward. We've got great people, and I'll be here to help them be successful," he said.

The board then re-hired him as a consultant to ease the transition from himself to Spielvogel, whom it fired earlier this month, amid allegations that she'd treated employees poorly, and spent money inappropriately.

Spielvogel previously served as Cuyahoga Community College's vice president of evidence and inquiry before taking over at LMC in January.

As part of its decision, the board has pointed to \$20,625 in unapproved expenses – which it alleges included renovations to the presidential office, as well as the planning of a large inaugural ceremony and purchasing a chain of office medallion for herself.

The board is seeking reimbursement of those expenses from Spielvogel, who has claimed that the board usurped her own authority and froze her out of day-to-day decision-making.

Spielvogel also alleged, at the May 5 public hearing that resulted in her dismissal, that LMC fired her when she discovered that the college wasn't in compliance with regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education,

the agency that oversees student financial aid.

Spielvogel's statements came as a surprise to Doug Schaffer, vice president of students and enrollment management.

Schaffer told the board that a review of the financial aids and record department's operations – which he, Spielvogel and two former colleagues from Cuyahoga Community College conducted, in the first week of March – found nothing out of place.

The review came a month before the board suspended Spielvogel with pay.

"Their findings weren't causing us to be in jeopardy of not being able to award Pell Grants, offer student loans, or participate in the federal work/study program," Schaffer said after Monday's meeting. "There was really nothing to be concerned about."

The college also obtained a legal opinion from Washington, D.C.-based education and labor law attorneys Brustein & Mansevit, PLLC, which came to the same conclusion, Schaffer said.

"It's just not us being confident of our policies and procedures," he said.

Spielvogel's attorneys have said they may challenge the board's decision in the Court of Claims, where they could argue that she's entitled to a payout on her contract, which ends on June 30, 2018.

LMC officials have indicated that the college doesn't owe Spielvogel severance pay, or continued payment of her benefits, since she was fired for just cause.

Tomasini stands by the board's decision to fire Spielvogel, based on the issues that it has documented so far, she said.

"I have had several people come up and talk to me about boards that didn't take action," Tomasini said. "One person said, 'We had to live with a president that treated us poorly, tore the place apart, and when that president left, we were \$17 million in debt. Thank God the board took quick action.'"

But that doesn't mean the decision was simple, Tomasini said.

"When I was in the middle of it, I knew why people (from other boards) turned their heads the other way. It was not easy work," she said.