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Some UMass trustees put off by Caret's departure

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 02, 2015

As University of Massachusetts trustees prepare to launch a search for a new president, some board members say they were blindsided by president Robert Caret's announcement that he was leaving to become chancellor of the University of Maryland system.

Criticism has surfaced over the secrecy leading up to Caret's decision in December as well as the timing of it — just weeks after he had signed a three-year contract extension with UMass and just before a new governor took office.

“Do I wish we



EDWIN AGUIRRE, UMASS LOWELL OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Robert Caret.



knew more about it? Yes,” said one university system trustee who did not want to be identified because of the sensitive nature of the discussions. “Am I angry? No; that’s too strong. But I’m disappointed.”

“Crushed is a word that comes to mind,” the trustee added.

The trustee and others on the 22-member board said that before Caret’s announcement they had received no indication he might leave.

“To my knowledge, none of us on the board had any advanced notice,” said trustee Philip W. Johnston.

Johnston praised Caret’s three-and-a-half year tenure at the helm of UMass, a time of rising enrollment, increased public and private funding, and dramatic gains on prominent college ranking lists.

“We were distressed about [Caret’s decision to leave] because we value his leadership,” Johnston said.

He said, however, that trustees don’t blame him for making the decision.

“I think the University of Maryland made him an offer he couldn’t refuse,” said Johnston, citing how Caret will

oversee a larger university system and will be closer to family.

Before coming to Massachusetts, Caret had spent 29 years of his career at Towson University, near Baltimore.

“I could not say no to the opportunity to be closer to my family in Maryland,” Caret said in a statement to the Globe.

Caret said he informed the UMass board chairman at the time, Henry M. Thomas III, that he was in discussions with the University of Maryland, “and I kept him up to date periodically.”

But, he added, “The confidential nature of the search precluded broader dissemination of that information.

“My departure is consistent with my UMass contract, which calls for me to provide six months’ notice to the Board of Trustees,” Caret’s statement continued. “That is what I have done, and I will continue to work closely with the leadership to ensure a smooth and successful transition.”

Thomas, who resigned as chairman Jan. 26 but remains on the board, said Caret had told him Maryland was pursuing him about a month before Caret’s Dec. 17 announcement he had accepted the position.

“He gave me a courtesy notice, not that he was contemplating leaving, but that he was being pursued,” Thomas recalled. “The first time was just kind of FYI, and the second time he said they were being pretty aggressive in approaching him, and then [about a week before the announcement] he let me know they had given him an offer that he was going to have a hard time walking away from.”

Thomas said he raised the prospect that UMass could present Caret with a counter offer for him to stay, though no numbers were discussed and a formal offer was never made.

“I asked him if he was looking for a counter offer,” Thomas recalled. “He kind of hesitated and said, ‘No, I don’t think so.’”

Thomas added: “I certainly would have liked to have had more time to manage the . . . process without feeling like you’re in a fire drill. I think there was a lot of disappointment he was leaving, but I don’t think there were feelings of betrayal.”

When he officially steps down this summer, Caret will have served as president for four years. His predecessor, Jack Wilson, held the job for eight years. Before that, William M. Bulger led UMass for seven years.

In resigning as chairman, Thomas said he wanted to give new Governor Charlie Baker the chance to pick his own leader. He said Caret’s exit, or any fallout from it, did not influence his decision.

Baker tapped board member Victor Woolridge as the chairman. Woolridge said he does not have any hard feelings about the timing of Caret’s move. “Normally, with these kinds of things, someone might give more notice, but as I understand how this progressed it wasn’t something that was on his radar, those folks [from the

University of Maryland] came at him aggressively,” Woolridge said in a phone interview.

“It’s not ideal. But when is anything ever ideal?,” he added.

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