Ousted UTA dean LaGess returns fire

By DAVID DILLON
Architecture Critic

ARLINGTON — A visibly tense Martha LaGess, fired last week as architecture dean at the University of Texas at Arlington, shot back at her critics Thursday in a news conference at the Wyndham Hotel overlooking Six Flags.

"I am truly shocked by the sudden action of the university administration," she said. "[It] has not undertaken any formal review ... of my work nor indicated that my overall performance was unsatisfactory. To the contrary, I was told I was to be given the standard merit raise and only a few weeks ago, the provost told me that I was 'truly the one' to lead the School of Architecture."

Ms. LaGess went on to say that provost George C. Wright had not discussed the "substance of alleged faculty complaints" with her or revealed the extent of the support she had received from students, faculty, staff and alumni. She said the provost had also withdrawn a job offer made to her husband, Michael McNamara.

Dr. Wright agreed that no formal review had occurred but noted that he had repeatedly "given Dean LaGess very specific comments about what she was doing and not doing." He denied telling her that she was "truly the one" to lead the School of Architecture. He wouldn't comment on discussions with Mr. McNamara.

Ms. LaGess, 48, was hired last August to succeed Edward Baum, who had served as dean for the previous 12 years. She arrived with an ambitious agenda for turning the school into a regional design center grounded in research and computer technology and committed to integrating architecture and urban design.

As she indicated Thursday, the transition had been rocky. While some faculty enthusiastically backed her agenda, others balked, saying that she was arrogant, insensitive and a lax administrator. She was also the only tenured woman on a faculty of 18 men.

"What I needed was to be treated fairly, to be given enough time to do the job I came home to Texas to do and to be held to the same standards and expectations regardless of gender," she said.

Ms. LaGess would not comment on whether she planned to sue the university. "I have retained legal counsel to advise me on those matters," she said.

Her lawyer, Ted Anderson, said, "We have to conduct a review to make sure the university acted fairly and with due process, and acted in the interest of the university and not a narrow-minded few who might hamper the progress of the university."

Though no longer dean, Ms. LaGess is still a tenured professor and will teach a graduate studio this semester. The provost has appointed Martin Dodge, formerly associate dean at the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture, as interim dean. The search for a permanent replacement will begin later this year.

Staff critic Scott Cantrell contributed to this report.

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