Rice faculty divided on whether to unite with Baylor

Fifteen months into negotiations, the long wait for a decision on the proposed merger of Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine keeps dragging on, but some news emerged from Rice's faculty last week.

Unfortunately, the news was just as inconclusive as everything else about the deal.

Merger critics who’ve wanted an official faculty vote on the merger - an unofficial poll made public in September found 55 percent of professors thought the merger a bad idea - finally got their wish Thursday. But in a blow to critics, a slight majority narrowly rejected a resolution saying the deal "poses unnecessary and unacceptable risks to the university and is incompatible with the vision that has served (Rice) so well." Fifty-nine professors voted for the resolution, sixty-one against it.

This being academia, the vote was not without its internal squabbling. Rice President David Leebron and three other faculty administrators voted against the resolution, raising some eyebrows even though as tenured faculty members they're entitled to cast votes. Noting the resolution would have passed without their votes, one merger critic called the final result "a moral victory."

Still, with or without their votes, the resolution's narrow margin suggested something else: no faculty consensus for or against the deal.

A more definitive word is expected in the next few days when Rice's faculty senate is expected to have results from a written survey. The survey gave professors a range of opinions to describe their opinions of the merger.

The schools' boards are expected to make a decision on whether to merge by Jan. 31, the expiration date for the memorandum of understanding guiding talks. But since a September statement by the school's presidents reported "substantive progress" on a deal, there has been no indication of how things are going.