Former Morehead State University President Morris Norfleet has given an ultimatum to the governing board of the college: Dissolve the freeze on his current contract and cough up his $72,000 salary, office, secretary, car and housing allowance by this Friday.

Otherwise, he'll sue.

If the board doesn't take action, Louisville attorney M. Stephen Pitt said in an Aug. 1 letter to the Morehead regents, "Dr. Norfleet will have no choice but to seek relief in court."

That relief would include "full compensation which will include interest on the amounts withheld and consequential damages he has suffered, including damage to his reputation."

Neither Norfleet nor current Morehead President Herb Reinhard could be reached for comment.

The regents' committee designated to renegotiate downward the controversial Norfleet contract is scheduled to meet today in Morehead. But Norfleet's attorney said he and his client weren't interested in negotiations.

"We think the contracts that the board entered into with Dr. Norfleet are binding and enforceable," Pitt said yesterday.

However, he added: "It would not be in the best interest of any of the parties to be embroiled in litigation on this. . . . (But) we are prepared to put his position forward in litigation if necessary."

Forrest Skaggs of Lynch, chairman of the negotiations committee, said yesterday that although he still hoped for a negotiated settlement, the board was in a position to go to court if necessary.

"There's no telling if this thing is ever going to go to court or not - hopefully not," he said. "(But) our lawyer tells us if we want to sue, he will accept this case."
"We don't want to give him a contract that is not aboveboard," Skaggs added. "Norfleet has made us a good president. I can't see doing him dirt."

Skaggs said the committee might formulate its own proposal and notify Norfleet and his lawyer to see if it is acceptable.

The university's attorney is F.C. Bryan of Mount Sterling, who told the board July 24 that the contract "is in a negotiable area as to all concerned."

Here's a brief summary of the complicated and increasingly bitter saga of Morehead State University, its former president and the contract that is the subject of the dispute:

Norfleet told the board last fall that he planned to give up the presidency, effective July 1. The regents on June 27 approved a four-year contract for Norfleet, under which he would receive his president's salary of $72,000 during his first year out of office and $49,500 for three years after that, when he would work in the newly created post of chancellor for corporate relations.

During the first year, Norfleet was to have been on paid leave as an unpaid consultant to the Washington-based American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

However, the contract drew widespread criticism because of the salary during the first year - more than what three of the eight working presidents in the state's public university system now make - and because of the fringe benefits and the creation of a new position in a period of tight budgets.

The regents on July 24 had second thoughts about the contract and voted in a rare 6-4 public split to authorize a three-member regents' committee to renegotiate its terms downward. That froze payments on salary and sabbatical leave for Norfleet until a new contract was signed.

Expenditures on the office, secretary and car, among other items, had earlier been frozen by Reinhard, the new Morehead president.

Norfleet made a brief appearance before the board at the July 24 meeting, offering to take a cut of $12,000 in his first year's salary and eliminate his housing allowance. But his attorney's letter said he was withdrawing that offer.

Robert M. Duncan of Inez, the board chairman, said a Norfleet lawsuit would be "expensive and time-consuming and just a long process."

"Reasonable men and women can negotiate things and settle them much better than the litigation process," Duncan said. "I'm disappointed that they (Norfleet and his attorney) are not at this moment ready to sit down and negotiate."
He said the negotiations committee would report back to the full board in a special meeting, but no date has been set.