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Metuchen BOE candidates get chance to address public

Board of Education election is April 21

BY ENID WEISS Correspondent

Roughly 50 people attended a candidates forum hosted by the Metuchen Parent Teacher Council on April 1 in the Metuchen High School cafeteria.

Incumbents Fran Brennan, Eileen Frowenfeld and Mary (Terry) Kohl stressed their experience in discussing their qualifications, while challengers Tanya Andrews and JoAnn Sabatino-Falkenstein expressed their commitment to education and the borough.

Questions were taken in advance from audience members, and a few were posed by forum moderator Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. Instead of debate, candidates were given equal time for opening statements, answering questions and closing statements. Issues discussed included the high school, full-day kindergarten, the school budgets, and how Metuchen High School compares to other high schools statewide.

Reed posed her own question, asking candidates, "If you had \$1 million to spend on schools, how would you spend it?"

Andrews, who is a graduate of Metuchen High School and a teacher, said she'd like to see school technology improved, more math and science labs, "Anything to help and improve curriculum."

Frowenfeld, who previously worked as an academic relations officer at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and who is a former PTO vice president and classroom volunteer, called herself a pragmatist in terms of spending Reed's hypothetical \$1 million.

"Is it a one-time thing or will we get it every year?" Frowenfeld said. "I'd like to see an expansion of program offerings, especially at the high school. It would be wonderful to say [to principals and teachers], 'What would you like to do?' and give it to them."

Sabatino-Falkenstein, who worked in the publishing industry before becoming a fulltime mother, drew laughs when she said she would look for matching grants. She said she would "study growth in the community."

"We may have to expand our kindergarten and first grade [classes]," Sabatino-Falkenstein said. "We're developing in town, and we'll have to develop in our schools as well."

Kohl said that full-day kindergarten would cost more than \$1 million, so "we'll put that aside. I'd like to see laptop computers for every child, more science labs. So, I could spend a lot of million dollars."

Brennan, who has an accounting background, said she can't accept the money without asking where it is coming from. She said she'd like to see lights at the high school football field (which would not shine into neighbors' windows) and state-of-the-art technology at the high school. She also would put some into reserves for contingencies such as roof repair.

Kohl, who is currently the board president and a Realtor by trade, said she has been on previous teacher contract negotiation teams. She pointed to greater student class time, flex time and holding the line on health insurance costs as concessions the board gained in the last contract. But during budget meetings in the weeks before the forum, Kohl reminded residents that teacher and other employee raises represented in the budget were granted not by the current board, but by a previous board.

All five candidates supported the budget, and said they had voted in the past for school budgets and the recent high school capital improvement project. Their biggest split on the issues was full-day kindergarten.

Sabatino-Falkenstein called it a "hot-button issue" and said it would benefit children to have more instructional time, but she stopped short of full support. She said the district would have to examine both the costs and educational merits of full-day kindergarten.

Brennan said she wasn't against it but would study it first, and expected many parents would be against it because there were be little time left for young children to participate in activities such as ballet, martial arts or play dates, and that she didn't see it being practical in the near future.

Frowenfeld also would research the costs involved first.

Kohl said that while she wasn't against it philosophically, "it's not something we can just jump into" and suggested that the board would need to appoint an ad hoc committee to examine the issue.

Andrews was fully in favor of full-day kindergarten and said the cost would be worth it educationally.

"I don't think we need to skimp on education," Andrews said.

The crowd included several current school board members who are not up for re-election, board employees and other borough officials as well as candidates' friends and family members. The board drew a bigger crowd at a meeting several months ago in which residents attended to complain about the high school's number ranking on a statewide list published in a several-months-old New Jersey Monthly magazine article.---

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