

Five-plus-hour school board meeting turned 'Wild West'

Written by Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent
Friday, 19 August 2016 03:53



Heated topic: Teachers who hail from abroad

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The Gallup McKinley County Schools Board of Education meeting started at 6 pm Aug. 15 and dragged on for more than five hours, ending after 11 pm.

But not a lot of business was taken care of during that long span, with some agenda items tabled until next meeting.

At the start of the meeting, it was standing room only. Scores of Filipino teachers, staff, and supporters were there to speak out against alleged comments made to the media by recently appointed board member Sandra Jeff.

Heckling from the audience – from calling out Jeff on her questionable residency in McKinley County to making derogatory remarks about a Gallup-based newspaper – only fueled the tension as the board mulled over agenda items and listened to public comments.

The meeting was capped off with a shoot-from-the-hip commentary from Sen. George Munoz, D-Gallup.

JEFF’S DILEMMA

The bulk of the meeting’s public comment portion came from Filipino teachers and supporters who specifically attended the meeting to confront Jeff on alleged comments she made to a local media group July 28.

Jeff reportedly told the Navajo Times that teachers who hail from the Philippines don’t speak English “as well as they should.”

Several Filipinos spoke, addressing what they believed were false assumptions made by Jeff about Filipino teachers. Dr. Christopher Gonzaga, a local Filipino physician, explained the positive impact Filipinos have made on the Gallup community.

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Board Secretary Lynn Huenemann responded to Gonzaga’s comments with praise.

“The Filipino community is setting an example by maintaining their own community, while at the same time being a part of the larger community they find themselves in,” he said.

After public comments concluded, more than 40 individuals exited en masse; they did not stay to hear Jeff’s reply. Jeff told the handful of Filipino attendees left that she was misquoted by the media, and deeply respects the Filipino teachers and their educational investment in students.

Jeff said that because she is a Navajo, she thinks she is also part Filipino and feels like she can relate to them.

Later on, when talking about the decline in use of the Navajo language and cultural awareness, Jeff hoped to relate to another racial community.

“Navajos are in the same category as Jews... because their language was taken from them,” she said.

Jeff declined to comment when the Sun asked for clarification on her comments.

Aside from a few random shouts from the audience questioning Jeff’s residency and qualifications to be a board member, there were no other discussion points aimed at her.

UNDER THE BUS

During the meeting a discussion involving buses not being able to cross certain rural area

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bridges would take a wobbly turn.

The board focused on the standard-size school buses not being able to cross bridges that can only support 10 tons at a time. The standard size bus is nearly 10 tons, but add fuel and students, and it's over the capacity limit, Transportation Director Jeff Bond explained.

Bond noted that Superintendent Frank Chiapetti has been accused by community members of unnecessarily closing these bridges to buses, even though he is following the law.

"Mr. Chiapetti did not close those roads down last school year, it was the law," Bond said. "It would make everyone's life easier if we could use those roads, including my own, but he has to obey the laws."

Prior to the close of the meeting, Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup gave a no-holds-barred speech. He primarily addressed what he considered the district's misuse of funds found in the results of an independent audit conducted by Manning Accounting and Consulting Services, LLC.

He also strongly criticized the board's lack of awareness regarding the alleged misuse of Indian Education Committee funds listed in the independent audit, and that they did not recognize the legitimacy of the audit.

Muñoz also took a moment to comment on the negative disagreements that had characterized the board meeting up to that point.

"It's like I'm in the Wild West and the School Board and the Superintendent are two gun-slingers," Muñoz said. "I don't know if the superintendent needs to be fired or if the board needs to be fired, but something has got to change."

In response, Jeff claimed Muñoz was harassing and threatening the board. She said they are

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both elected officials and should work together. Board President Priscilla Manuelito redirected some of Muñoz’s critiques to Chiapetti, who she held ultimately responsible for the independent audit.

“I’m gonna go ahead and crawl out from underneath this bus now,” Chiapetti said after Manuelito’s comments.

Chiapetti defended the independent audit, and suggested the board hire another auditor who they feel is legitimate. He also mentioned that some of the blame was to be shared by the board.

However, he didn’t receive any leeway from Manuelito.

“Now our lines are drawn as [to] what we have to do as a board,” Manuelito told Chiapetti. “And you have broken that line.”

Chiapetti said the board meeting didn’t go as he expected, but said in response to board comments that he wants to “focus on moving forward.”

In response, board Vice President Kevin Mitchell said he was “sorry it didn’t work out the way [Chiapetti] wanted, because it would have been [the board] under the bus.”

***Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III
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