

GMCS forum showcases candidates

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 03 February 2017 06:59



Jeff, Long are no-shows

As next week's Gallup-McKinley County Board of Education election date nears closer, a candidate forum was held Feb. 1 at the school district's main office on Boardman Drive. The forum was sponsored by the *Gallup Sun*, the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation and the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce.

The event was attended by close to 100 people and was centered upon a 90-minute question-and-answer session for those running for seats in districts 2, 4 and 5.

Improving teacher quality and transparency were two issues that dominated the forum – the first of its kind in recent memory as it relates to school board seats. Candidates Freda Joe, Brenda Chicharello, Christopher Mortensen, Ester Macias, Gerald O'Hara and Michael Schaaf attended the forum.

Each has either ties to Gallup's education or business community.

Sandra Jeff and Charles Long did not attend the forum.

"I thought the forum was a very good opportunity for the candidates to present themselves to the public," Bill Lee, an event moderator and executive director of the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce, said.

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Babette Herrmann, the editor and publisher of the *Sun*, also served as a moderator.

“We got a chance to hear a lot of different views on a lot of different subjects,” she said. “I’d say it was a success.”

Questions put to the candidates ranged from how can GMCS better prepare students to enter the local and national work force to students’ readiness to enter post-secondary education.

Ester Macias, a Silver City native and a former assistant superintendent at GMCS, and a teacher advocate, said, “We have to make sure teachers have good resources and institute best practices.”

Macias was questioned about on why she no longer works for the district, but said she can’t comment because of pending litigation.

“Student academic progress must be monitored and teacher quality is a must,” Macias said.

Freda Joe, a Crownpoint native and graduate of Crownpoint High School and the dual credit coordinator at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint, said, “We have to make sure students have the necessary tools upon graduation to succeed in the work force. We lack reading and writing skills in this area.”

Joe also spoke of giving reservation schools more academic resources.

Sonasta Jim, a policy analyst who monitors Gallup schools, said she was pleased with the outcome of the forum. She said transparency was paramount in terms of what she took out of the meeting.

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The Gallup school district is the fifth largest in New Mexico. It has a current graduation rate of 66 percent, and got rid of its most recent superintendent, Frank Chiapetti, a little more than a month ago.

Chiapetti remains on paid administrative leave until the end of June 2017.

O'Hara, Macias and Schaaf are running for the District 5 seat vacated by former Gallup high teacher and administrator Joe Menini. Jeff, Joe and Long are candidates for the District 2 board seat currently held by Lynn Huenemann.

Neither Menini nor Huenemann chose to run again. Mortensen and Chicharello are pitted against Jeff.

Mortensen is a Gallup high graduate and local businessman. Chicharello is a Gallup High graduate and vice president of the district's Indian Education Committee.

Jeff, who is from Crownpoint, was appointed to the post when former board member Titus Nez resigned. Jeff is a former six-year member of the New Mexico House of Representatives and a former staff assistant with the state Public Regulation Commission in Santa Fe. Jeff has come under stern criticism for living in Albuquerque and Crownpoint. Jeff, a Democrat, is a close friend of New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, who is a Republican.

Long is a former McKinley County Treasurer. O'Hara is a Pennsylvania native and is a retired administrator with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He possesses a master's degree from the State University of New York. In his closing statements, O'Hara said he's "here to make Gallup more palatable for incoming (prospective) teachers."

The election is Feb. 7. The original filing date for school board seats was Dec. 20.

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Attending Wednesday's forum were Huenemann, board president Priscilla Manuelito and board vice president Kevin Mitchell. Gallup City Councilor Fran Palochak attended the forum.

Members of the Gallup-McKinley County Board of Education serve four-year volunteer terms. The Local Advisory Board of the University of New Mexico-Gallup and the Pueblo of Zuni will also elect board seats on Feb. 7.

By Bernie Dotson
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