

## GMCS welcomes new board members

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 10 March 2017 07:00

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## Thoreau Elementary to be re-constructed

THOREAU, N.M. - No doubt the past few months have been professionally painful for members of the Gallup-McKinley County Board of Education, the former members of which went through the ups and downs of having to get rid of a former superintendent.

If that wasn't enough, there was constant uproar that one of the board's members didn't actually live in the district that she represented.

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But at the March 6 regular board meeting at Thoreau Elementary School, the Thoreau High School band played a splendid rendition of the national anthem as new school board members Michael Schaaf, Christopher Mortensen and Charles Long took the oath of office.

The swearing-in of the new school board members was done by Gallup Magistrate Judge April Silversmith.

“It was a great way to welcome the new board members,” board vice president Kevin Mitchell said. “A great way to start the first meeting.”

Schaaf, Mortensen and Long were welcomed by dozens of community members and district administrators and teachers and by members of the McKinley County Federation of United School Employees. The union, headed by Brian Bernard, endorsed the three during the buildup to the Feb. 7 election. As a surprise to most in attendance, Long, a former McKinley County Treasurer, delivered introductory remarks in Navajo and English.

“I think it’s going to be an effort upon everybody to move the school district forward,” Long said. “There are a lot of aspirations that we have as board members, but one of the things that’s key is that we hope to achieve a point where students will exceed all requirements.”

Mortensen, a local business owner and graduate of Gallup High, stressed the notion of working together. “I feel I have a shared kinship to each of you because I have children in the school district as well,” he said. “I look forward to working with you in the future and look forward to seeing that students achieve their personal dreams and aspirations. I hope to help them be successful in whatever endeavors they have in their life.”

When members of the community had their time to speak, there were welcoming remarks, and words of caution against alleged past discriminatory behavior against some board members.

“I have witnessed attacks against the Navajo members of the school board,” Sonlatsa Jim-Martin, a Tohatchi native and self-proclaimed “education activist” and parent of four students who attend district schools said. “I hope we don’t see the same mistakes that came

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from the former superintendent. It was a fear-based environment and we can't let that happen."

Maggie Benally, president of the Thoreau Chapter of the Navajo Nation, gave welcoming remarks and said decisions must be made in the best educational interests of the students attending Gallup-McKinley schools. Benally, elected within the past four months, equated educational success with "the climbing of a ladder."

"Yes, I do think education is important," Benally said during a break in the meeting. "That's what we have to have as the primary goal."

## **NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Mike Hyatt, chosen as the new Gallup-McKinley County Schools Superintendent about two weeks ago, said preliminary plans are in the works for the re-construction of Thoreau Elementary. The building process could start as early as 2019, Hyatt said. The idea for the new elementary school came to Hyatt upon a recent drive through the Thoreau area.

"We will be going out for bid hopefully this summer or later this winter," Hyatt said. "We'll be able to seek funding from the state and begin construction."

Also at the meeting, board members met in executive session to talk about the buyout of former superintendent Frank Chiapetti's \$132,000 contract. There was no action taken on the matter.

Technically, Chiapetti was placed on paid administrative leave by the old school board until June 30, 2017, which makes Hyatt the interim superintendent until that date.

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