Quakertown school board candidate challenges board on pensions, facilities

- By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer

As Quakertown Community school board members continued to vent about increasing pension costs and criticize past directors for the poor physical condition of several schools, a resident hoping to claim one of their seats told them to take responsibility for the situation.

"We're in a perpetual state of financial crisis, it seems," said Kaylyn Mitchell, a school board candidate in Tuesday's primary. "That's an easy way to escape from responsibility."

Mitchell, who debated directors for more than 20 minutes during the final public comment session of the board's Thursday night meeting, at one point left the microphone and walked in front of the dais to point out when each member was elected. Each director's name and the year they took office can be viewed by the audience.

She accused the board of using the escalating costs for state-mandated school employees' retirements "as a way to scapegoat," allowing facilities to fall into disrepair. "If you've been on this board for more than one year you should have known (that capital improvements could not wait)," she said.

Mitchell and David Ochmanowicz are challenging board President Paul Stepanoff and Stephen Ripper, chairman of the facilities committee, in Region 1, comprising Richlandtown, Haycock and Richland districts 1, 2 and 3. All candidates are cross-filed except for Ripper, a Republican.

For years school officials have spoken of the need to better maintain their facilities. It wasn't until the last year, however, that a group of residents, administrators and board members were directed by the board to come up with a plan to do so. One option, to bring all facilities up to code, would cost $66
million. Another, which included building a new elementary and middle school, would double that cost.

- Late last year, however, the PSERS board announced that the expected 30.03 percent retirement contribution rate would be 32.57 percent, up from this year's 25.8 percent. The change increased future payments, which are projected to be above next year's number for more than two decades.

- In 2011, taxpayers paid $2.3 million toward pensions for district employees. That number is scheduled to rise to $14.5 million next year. In the last five years, the total pension cost has been $44.1 million.

- The higher retirement expenses are part of a $4.7 million structural budget deficit that changed the board's plans. They called on Superintendent William Harner to phase out the deficit without cutting academic programs. He has essentially done so, over a two-year period, assuming the closing of Milford Middle School and Tohickon Valley Elementary School, two of the district's more deteriorated buildings.

- Harner has proposed merging seventh- and eighth-graders into one middle school, shifting all sixth-graders to the freshman center and moving ninth-graders to the high school.

- If Milford Middle School is officially closed by the board in July, officials have said that would save $1 million in operational costs. And if Tohickon Valley Elementary School is closed the following year — a decision could be made late this year — that would save another $1 million.

- Mitchell said she's spoken with parents and teachers who said Milford "holds a lot of sentimental value" and "what we consider a last-minute decision makes people feel uneasy."
Ripper said the district comprises four other communities besides Milford, and if they were presented with the same facts, "they would recognize the financial position we're in and what we're forced to look at. ... A lot of parents, I think, are working their kids up."

Mitchell said "this is about our kids so it's going to be personal. ... There's a lot of things that make the community feel they don't have a voice."

The back-and-forth between Mitchell and the board became contentious with each side interrupting the other.

Stepanoff: "You have accused this board of not paying attention to the facilities ..."

Mitchell: "If you don't want to take responsibility, fine ..."

Stepanoff: "We acted within the first two months of being president ..."

Mitchell: "That's not necessarily a good answer ..."

Director Ronald Jackson said Stepanoff and board Vice President Charles Shermer "have constantly said we should do something about the facilities. We enacted the committee. ... You implied we have been lax with our facilities."

Mitchell responded that purchasing a $1 million artificial turf field and "some nice, bright and shiny things ... and now we're going to close schools. There's frustration."

Stepanoff said the board's been doing a good job on behalf of the district's students.

Quakertown Community High School finished with the top score among all Bucks County schools in the Pennsylvania School Performance Profile, one way for the state to measure school improvement.
• Last month, in the U.S. News & World Report Best High Schools rankings for Pennsylvania, the high school finished 60th among all high schools in Pennsylvania's 500 districts.

• "We wouldn't put that in jeopardy," he said. "One thing we're most proud of is the educational opportunity we've given the kids in this district."

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