

Linn R-2 hears suggestions, engages more with patrons

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The addition of newly-elected Linn R-2 board members Patrick Muenks and Larry Hunt had a visible impact at Monday's meeting as there was much more interaction with patrons and teachers of the district.

Three people signed up to speak in the public forum portion of the agenda, and Muenks engaged Linn Community Teachers Association president Beth Parrish in a 15-minute conversation about the education value of the Career Ladder program.

First to speak was former board member James Krueger, who presented each board member with a copy of the 2009 Missouri Sunshine Law booklet, highlighted for their perusal in areas of concern to Krueger.

"I appreciate you allowing this group to address the board on this issue because it will save you some dollars," said Krueger, noting

the board would not have to refer to its attorney all the time. "You can refer to the

book yourself, and it's written in fairly plain English. I think Larry's complaint cost the district \$1,200 in legal fees and we don't know what the latest accusations will cost."

Krueger first presented a court case in which he showed the board is not free of liability just because its members followed the advice of an attorney, making a reference to a letter read by Superintendent Mary Elsensohn earlier from Mickes, Goldman, O'Toole, the legal firm which represents Linn R-2.

In that letter, attorney Tom Mickes wrote that the board's March 15 vote to affirm the closed-session vote of March 10 was not an admission that the district violated the Sunshine Law.

"The vote in question was to reduce work hours for food service employees," Mickes wrote. "The net effect of this vote was to

reduce the compensation of specific employees. Of necessity, the discussion had to involve the impact of this decision on individual employees."

Mickes added in his letter than in light of previous allegations, he advised the board reaffirm the March 10 vote, and that the March 15 vote reflected an attempt to err on the side of disclosure.

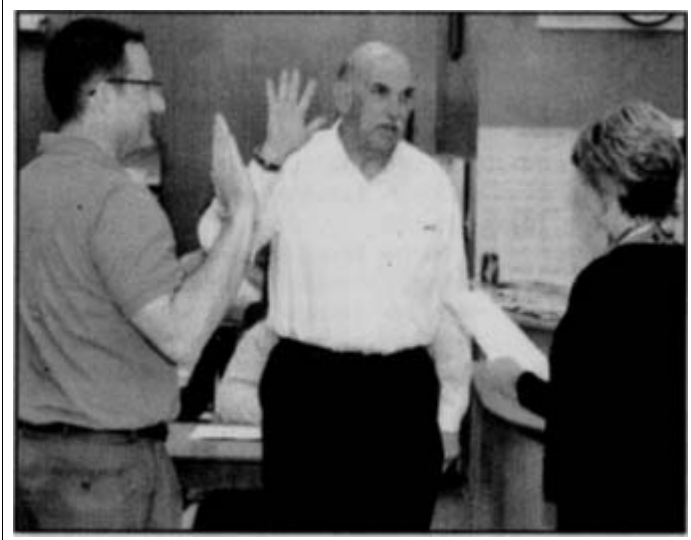
"Even were there to have been an inadvertent and technical violation, which is far from clear, the matter was fully rectified at the next open session [meeting]," Mickes wrote.

Further, according to Mickes, the allegations put forth by Larry Hunt in December of last year are closed and will not result in action taken by the state, nor will there be an advisory to the board which would indicate a violation.

Krueger added that the responsibility for following

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Patrick Muenks and Larry Hunt are sworn in before taking their place on the Linn R-2 school board Monday night by Audrey Meyer.





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this law is not the school's; each individual board member is responsible because, Krueger said, "while the law allows you to pay for the attorney's bills to advise you, it does not allow, if you're taken to court and found guilty of violating this law, to pay your personal fines."

Krueger also noted the Attorney General's opinion is that the Sunshine Law should be liberally construed and the exceptions should be strictly construed to promote public caution.

"We want to hear what you have to say, so we're asking you to be strict in keeping your meetings closed," he said.

Krueger also told the board that the exceptions allowing for closed session are limited to an individual employee's merit, performance or personal records.

"So any time you're behind closed doors, you need to be talking about an individual, their performance, merit or their personal records," Krueger said. "Nothing else. Not how much they're costing the school or anything like that. In other words, just because you talked about an individual is not sufficient."

The board did not have any questions regarding Krueger's statements and suggestions.

Next to speak was Dennis Gravedoni, who said HB 2447 has passed through committee and is on hold, but would be a boon to districts.

"It would allow school districts to charge up to one percent in sales tax," he said. "I urge everyone to get ahold of our local representatives and support it. It would be a lot easier to pass a sales tax than a property tax in these financial times."

Gravedoni also said meeting agendas should be more highly visible and at more locations, including the district's website and the high school.

President Dale Sallin said the plan is to post a tentative agenda ahead of the minimum requirement to be

placed on the agenda to give people a chance to see what's to be discussed and have more opportunity to address the board.

Gravedoni also asked that a packet of information be made available in the library prior to the meeting for patrons to peruse before the meeting starts.

Finally, Gravedoni provided the board with information on a company called OPPA, which is a contracted food-service firm.

"This does a couple things," he said. "First, it takes your cooks off your payroll, and second, it provides nutritious food that tastes better and has more variety. Studies have shown kids in the districts that use this company eat more food at school."

Joyce Dudenhoeffer asked for consideration for patrons who attend the meeting by holding closed session after the open portion.

"It would be a lot nicer to serve the patrons first," she said.

Hunt said that when Dennis Hopke was president, he had to leave at a certain time because he worked nights, and that was when closed session moved to the front of the meeting.

Dudenhoeffer also noted it was difficult to hear at times, particularly when the air conditioner kicks on, coupled with low-speaking board members.

As for questions to the board, answers have not been posted yet, and Superintendent Mary Elsensohn said she was working on them.

Dudenhoeffer next suggested a teacher-student liaison be given a 10-minute slot to address the board at every meeting to update members with happenings or concerns at the school.

The proposed schedule posted April 2 is still being compiled at this time, Elsensohn said in response to Dudenhoeffer's question.

Muenks engaged Parrish with a question about the educational value of Career Ladder.

"It appeared the teachers felt strongly about their support of the Career Ladder program," Muenks said. "I understand the financial

argument. What I haven't heard is the educational argument, the benefit to our kids. Can you touch upon that?"

Parrish said the hours that are provided to students in terms of tutoring cover a wide range of activities.

"There are all kinds of programs teachers have implemented for kids in this district as well as for kids in other districts around the state," she said. "I know that it makes us continually look for ways to help students in classes they may be falling behind in by using enrichment programs with them. It also pushes you beyond the classroom hours to look at your curriculum and tie it into projects you're doing within your classroom. There are so many different avenues."

Parrish said she's looking at it from the elementary aspect, and there is a lot of planning to have those kids after school because they can't drive themselves home.

"It's the above and beyond that you get for the children in the district," she added. "And I know that as teachers, we feel like it's part of our salary because we're pushing ourselves, and I think sometimes our feelings get hurt or sensitive due to the fact that some people in the state view it as a stipend and not part of everything we're doing, if that makes sense to you."

Muenks agreed that it made perfect sense. "I've been curious how interwoven it's become within the design of our educational services," he said. "I wanted to hear that case made versus the financial loss of earning, because I understand that."

Hunt said that speaking from experience, he knows first-hand that teachers put in a lot more hours to the program than those required.

"There are hundreds of hours unlocked because they go above and beyond," he said.

Parrish said as of now, she has logged 170 hours, which is 50 hours more than required for compensation through Career Ladder.

Career Ladder was thought to be on its last legs in the legislature, but now it

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appears there may be hope for it in next year's budget.

"All we have now is agreement between the two houses that they would pay for work done this year," said Elsensohn. "But it's not May 7 yet, so we'll have to wait and see."

Board member Sherry Cleveland asked Parrish if teachers would be in favor of receiving only the district's portion of Career Ladder, should the state do away with the program.

"Absolutely," Parrish replied.

"I feel the extra effort needs to be rewarded," Cleveland added.

Parrish explained the program was originally intended to help districts that could not afford to pay teachers as much in salary, serving as a supplement. "A person getting this pay who is close to retirement would be really hurt without the program because retirement is based on your best years."

Board member Roger Bauman interjected. "My comment is we can only pay for so much," he said. "It's a great program and I know it helps. Your opinion to me is outstanding. We only have so much money. To keep Career Ladder, what else are we going to cut? I'm looking

we going to cut? I'm looking for ideas."

"You guys will have to make the decision, but as teachers, we're saying that it affects more than just the number on someone's paycheck," said Parrish. "It will have an impact on students in K-12, and you will have to weigh that."

"We know it's important," said Bauman. "And I'm not saying we can't afford it. What I'm saying is where else can we find the money?"

Parrish suggested that any number of teachers would be more than happy to sit down with Bauman and brainstorm for ways to find the money.

"It needs to be talked about," Parrish added. "We just want to make sure it's not something you decide lightly because it's very important to us and to the students in this district."

Muenks said he appreciated all the comments, and had a few more of his own to close out the topic.

"I can recall when Career Ladder was instituted," he said. "And the board has discussed previously the fact that DESE will often provide seed monies hoping that districts find sufficient value so that when the state

dollars are removed, the local districts will take up that expense and continue to sustain a program.

"And part of my questioning is whether this is a sustainable program with proven educational value," Muenks said. "That is the question."

"Yes it is," Parrish said.

"From the standpoint of where we find the money, that's a board decision with respect to where priorities are established," Muenks continued. "What I wanted was an affirmed sense that this is a valuable program with educational benefit."

"And have you been affirmed?" Parrish asked.

"You're presenting a more convincing case, yes," Muenks replied.

"I'm totally convinced we need it," Bauman added. "I just want to know how we're going to pay for it?"

Cleveland suggested a group meeting in which ideas could be discussed, and Hunt reminded board members that was the way the deficit was handled in 2002.

Action items, discussion of budget concerns and the four-day week, will be presented next week.

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