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OUSD Candidate Forum

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Sarah Butler, Tyson Krumholz, Julie Rossiter, Chris Severson, and Bekki Van Voorhis-Gilbert, the five candidates for Orinda Union School District's Board of Trustees, met before an audience of about 70 residents, teachers, and administrators last week to answer questions posed in a forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Diablo Valley. Three of the five will replace departing Board members Jack Bontemps, Riki Sorenson, and Pam West.

The three female candidates presented resumes replete with volunteer experience in the classroom and parent clubs; the men had more limited on-site school involvement. The candidates' responses were consistent on some issues including the support of small class sizes, the need to improve communication, and the problem of bullying and the need to address it.

The candidates did not, however, agree on everything.

In response to why they want to serve on the Board: Butler and Rossiter stressed their experience as legislative representatives and their focus on the budget process. Krumholz cited his professional background as a civil engineer and desire to encourage participation and listen as he leads. Severson, who was typically concise in his answers, said he was invested in the tradition of excellence in the OUSD school system, which he attended and will educate his five children. Van Voorhis-Gilbert identified herself as a new voice, one that was ready to infuse a little more debate. She described the addition of three new members as an opportunity to change the complexion of a board that has had a number of the same trustees for a long time.

On curriculum decisions: Van Voorhis-Gilbert was supportive of more teacher input and control in driving the curriculum, noting that her impression has been that the District administration has taken a top-down approach and provided limited ways for teachers to provide feedback on what is working in the classroom. Krumholz felt teachers should be using technology in a more integrated way. Butler, Rossiter, and Severson agreed that teachers are a valuable resource to curriculum enhancement and identified open communication as the answer.

On budget cuts: Krumholz and Van Voorhis-Gilbert both supported incremental reductions across the budget versus the elimination of entire programs. Van Voorhis-Gilbert added that she would support the elimination of administrative bonuses over other budget cuts. Rossiter stated the current school board has done an amazing job of handling the cuts given the significant budget shortfalls, and she anticipated more difficult budget decisions in the future. Butler concurred that further budget reductions by the State were likely and emphasized that she has followed the budget issue closely, adding that the decision between incremental reductions and eliminating a program can be difficult and multi-factored. Severson would look to first go leaner with support staff and maintenance and work to keep cuts away from the classroom.

On changing the Board's meeting time: Van Voorhis-Gilbert was outspoken, stating, "A 4:00 meeting is a staff meeting, not a Board meeting. It's inconvenient to both working and stay-at-home parents." She advocated moving the meeting to the evening. Butler, Krumholz, and Severson were amenable to a meeting time change; Rossiter said she was not sure that a later time would work well for teachers and staff who live outside of Orinda.

On a new parcel tax: Severson stated that parent contributions already cover 30% of the OUSD budget, and he would not be in favor of an additional parcel tax at this time. Krumholz was not sure residents would accept another parcel tax and felt the District needed to explore other options. Rossiter noted that the community is very generous to the schools and a survey to gauge residents' views was needed. Butler felt that the potential for budget reductions was quite real but that consideration of a new parcel tax required a thorough review process. Through her own informal survey, Van Voorhis-Gilbert said she believed that residents would support a parcel tax if they believed the District was spending well, but that a new tax should have a two to three-year sunset.

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