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AUHSD forums address candidate funding, academic excellence

By Sora O'Doherty



Screenshot taken during Oct. 14 forum

candidates filed a joint Form 460 that lists 12 donors to their joint campaign, 10 of whom are out of district. The highest donation was for \$1,000 from Los Angeles attorney Daniel Brunt, followed by \$500 from San Francisco attorney Patrick Tostado. Other contributions came from Pennsylvania, Missouri, North Carolina, and Virginia. Total donations collected by the three candidates were listed as \$4,781 and total expenses as \$4,882.15 at the date of filing, Sept. 24.

Nowac, while stating that she had no idea who donated to her campaign nevertheless claimed that rumors of a \$25,000 donation to the campaign was "compete misinformation." Woolway said he had received donations from friends and family, in and out of the state. He acknowledged that the three candidates had received a donation of \$250 from Virginia Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. He also opined that it was easy for incumbents to say that they haven't accepted donations because incumbents generally don't need to. Ledeen said that the information was publicly available and that he didn't understand the question, but in an email received by Lamorinda Weekly after the forum, Ledeen elaborated on the question.

"It can be very challenging to fundraise for a first-time candidate with low name recognition in such a low profile local race ... so friends and family are a key source of donations," wrote Ledeen, who grew up in the D.C. area. "The accusers point to a small \$250 donation by Ginni Thomas as further evidence of involvement in a conspiracy to take over the local school board. To answer this directly: I did not solicit from her and have not spoken with her, but I assume she donated simply because she's an old friend of my family and wanted to show support. That's it."

The AUHSD board consists of five elected board members and one student member. Candidates Christopher Severson and Nancy Kendzierski are incumbents running for reelection, and are challenged by Ledeen, Nowac, and Woolway in addition to candidates Jennifer Chen who participated in both candidates' forums, and Clayton Gardner, who did not participate. Three seats are to be filled in the November general election.

During the Oct. 20 LHC forum, much of the conversation from participating candidates revolved around maintaining or improving academic excellence. Nowac and Gardner were not present.

When asked about the decision to keep schools closed during the pandemic, both Ledeen and Woolway said they disagreed with how the board handled the COVID situation, stating how the board kept students off campus more than they needed to. Severson noted he advocated for opening schools at every opportunity, but "we were under a set of health orders" and were "stuck with state and county restrictions." And Kendzierski added that when surveyed, 80% of parents wanted a hybrid option. Everyone agreed that the lockdown had consequences.

When asked about the AUHSD homework policy, Woolway said "the idea is that some students aren't as equipped to meet deadlines or do work at home and students get 50% credit no matter what. ... This is not something that should be touted by the board; it needs to be fixed immediately."

Kendzierski rebutted, saying "the board looked at homework policy and tried to both respect students' time without dropping the academic rigor," adding that with longer class times, students have more time to finish problems in class. "We don't want students doing homework until midnight," Severson said. Chen noted that as a mother of a son in the AP trenches, "homework is very much alive, and very challenging and engaging."

All of the candidates live in the district and all candidates Nowac have children who are either attending local schools, will attend local schools, or have graduated from local schools.

During introductions at the Oct. 14 forum, Chen focused on her background as a clinical social worker professionally trained as a "creator of positive change and community collaboration." She stated, "excellence can only happen if our students are feeling safe and supported and have a sense of belonging."

Acalanes Union High School District school board candidates recently met for two election forums. The first candidates' night was held on Oct. 14 at the Del Valle Education Center in Walnut Creek. It was co-sponsored by the League of Women's Voters Diablo Valley, the Las Trampas Creek Council of PTAs; and the Parents Clubs of Acalanes, Campolindo, and Miramonte; Las Lomas high schools. The event was moderated by Janet Hoy of the League of Women Voters, who neither lives nor votes in the district. The second, sponsored by the Lafayette Homeowners Council, was held via Zoom on Oct. 20 and was moderated by LHC president Bill Bucher.

During the Oct. 14 forum three of the candidates - Rene Nowac, Mark Woolway and Gabe Ledeen - were asked about contributions from donors outside the district to their campaigns.

A search of public records at the Contra Costa County Elections office revealed that these three

Kendzierski said, "Excellence is not maintained by standing still; new ideas and continuous improvements are an essential part of education." She listed among AUHSD improvements the introduction of block schedules, Academy periods, wellness centers, and new science standards and graduation requirements to enhance college and career readiness. She supports a student-centered culture with a strong academic focus. Kendzierski has served on the board nine years.

Ledeen said he was inspired to run by the "urgent need for leadership in service of our students and their families" and a strong belief that he can make a positive difference. Ledeen served four years as an officer in the Marine Corps including two tours in Iraq. He emphasized the leadership training he received and used in the Marines. Ledeen attended Stanford Law, clerked for a federal judge, and practices technology and data privacy law.

Nowac, a Moraga resident, has had a long career as a workplace investigator and specialized in investigation of sensitive matters such as harassment and discrimination. She said her priority is to strive for the best academic education for each student, including those who might have a learning disability or are suffering from learning loss from the past several years.

Severson has served on the board for eight years and works as an emergency medicine physician. He recently attended a 30th year Miramonte class reunion. He emphasized his reliance on science and wellness and noted that "that has never been more needed than in the last few years."

Woolway, a 10-year Lafayette resident, has been a head coach of several youth sports teams and in his 22-year career in tech, he's been an executive and investor in high growth companies. He wants to see greater transparency and responsible budget planning.

The candidates mostly agreed on diversity, equity and inclusion and social emotional learning, but differed on budgeting ideas. The Oct. 14 candidates' forum can be viewed on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_NIr9RnQP8. The Oct. 20 forum can be accessed at the Lafayette Homeowners Council website: <https://lafayettehomeownerscouncil.org/>

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