

Board members share insights on the job

D86 incumbents say listening and keeping an open mind are key to being effective

By Pamela Lannom

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Kathleen Hirsman thought the 25 years she spent as an attorney representing school districts would prepare her fully for serving on the Hinsdale High School District 86 Board.

“Now as a board member I really appreciate the difference in the two roles,” said Hirsman, who was elected to the board in 2015.

As an attorney, she would listen to board members’ questions and present them with a response and alternatives.

“When you’re sitting at the table

as a board member, it’s much messier,” she said.

In addition to having to work to reach consensus, board members also need to be prepared to address multiple issues in a single meeting.

“It’s a lot harder being a board member than I thought,” she said. “I’m looking forward to the next two years because I feel as if I have a much better understanding of this board.”

Reading board packets, which often contain materials outside of a board member’s area of expertise, and attending meetings can take 20 to 30 hours a month, depending on how many special meetings are

scheduled.

“The time commitment is a lot more than I suspected it to be,” said Bill Carpenter, who also was elected in 2015.

Away from the board room, board members spend time interacting with their constituents at various times throughout the year.

“If there’s a hot issue going on in the district, we will receive emails from constituents,” said Jennifer Planson, who was elected to her second term in 2015. “If they have something on their mind, yes, they will share something. If things are running smoothly, you generally don’t hear from people.”



In addition to listening to district residents, Hirsman said it’s extremely important to listen to what’s being said around the board table.

“One of the most important things about being an effective board member is learning to listen to your fellow board members and suppressing the urge to immediately speak out,” she said. “Part of running an efficient meeting is temper-

Please turn to Page 36

Board members share insights on the job

Continued from Page 7

ing your comments so what you say is not a repetition of what you said before and listening to what the others have to say so you're not asking about something that already has been said."

Board members may bring different agendas to the table, making it more difficult to reach a decision, Carpenter said.

Managing the budget without affecting programs or students has become increasingly more difficult, Planson said.

"I see that more and more each year as our revenue decreases or

stays the same and our expenses increase," she said. "It gets harder to fill the gap."

All three agree the work is rewarding. Carpenter has enjoyed learning more about how the district works and having the opportunity to share his knowledge with other district residents.

"I get lots of people that will bring up an issue but they don't know the other side of it," he said. "It's interesting because I get to see the whole picture, and that's been really enlightening and it's been helpful to me."

Planson has appreciated the time she spends in the school for graduation ceremonies, recognition assemblies and other events.

"That is the best part, seeing perhaps the results of some of your decisions," she said.

Hirsman agreed.

"I love being involved with the schools. I really enjoy that and I really enjoy working with our administration," she said. "It's such a fulfilling experience.

Challenging, but a fulfilling experience, and for someone who has the interest and the time, I would

recommend it. It's a great way to be involved in your community."

As they join their neighbors in heading to the polls this spring, they intend to cast their ballots for candidates who do not have a specific agenda or ax to grind, who are good listeners and who have the time to serve.

"They need to have an open mind when it comes to making decisions because there are a lot of facets that go into a decision that perhaps the public doesn't see," Planson said.