

## Board members offer job insights prior to election

By Ken Knutson  
and Pamela Lannom

With a family of educators and school administrators, Bo Blackburn was no stranger to education when he was appointed to the Hinsdale High School District 86 Board in October. But the attention to policy details board members must exert still surprised him.

"You expect the 50,000-foot view and vision, but there are some real intricacies," the Willowbrook resident said. "Obviously we've seen a number of those play out over the years in regard to larger issues."

Newcomers have a steep learning curve from the outset, Blackburn said, and all board members must sacrifice weekend time before Monday board meetings.

"The ramp up is the largest challenge any new board member is going to face," he remarked.

Community Consolidated Elementary District 181 Board member Rich Giltner said finding consensus can be tricky among a diverse group of elected officials.

"It is not easy to get seven people with differing backgrounds, opinions and motivations to come to an agreement on the important issues of the district," he said.

Deliberations can be tense at times — and they have to take place in public.

"These decisions must be made within the constraints of the Open Meetings Act, which severely limits the ability of board members to discuss the issues, seek compromises and come to a consensus," Giltner said. "I do not find this to be a natural process, and it is not conducive to effective decision making."

Hinsdale Trustee Neale Byrnes commented half-jokingly that an empty audience section is a good sign.

"You want it to be boring so people won't want to come," he quipped.

Controversial topics do arise, of course. Byrnes said zoning matters can generate strong



feelings among village residents. He said when a property is being considered for some type of relief, neighbors' viewpoints should carry weight.

"I really listen to the neighbors, the people who live right in the area," he said. "Nobody knows the area better than they do."

Giltner pointed out that about 70 percent of District 181 voters do not have students in the schools, but they are constituents to the same degree as enrolled families. And board members can be assured of interacting with voters on regular basis.

"Unlike on a corporate board, your constituents are the same people you run across at school, at your kid's activities and at the local Starbucks," Giltner said.

Communicating with those constituents takes time, Blackburn said. After spending two to three hours preparing for a meeting, he might spend an hour a day returning emails in the days after a meeting.

Leaning on fellow board members with expertise in certain areas is a good lesson in trust, he said.

"You learn to share that load," Blackburn said.

Byrnes cited other traits that come to the fore.

"Patience," he said, "and you have to question things."

Especially gratifying for Giltner has been his up-close vantage point of the work of district staff.

"I have been impressed with the passion and commitment of the teachers, administrators and other staff members of D181," he said.

Byrnes has appreciated the absence of partisan politics at the local governance level.

"There's no red state or blue state," he said. "It's just doing what's right."