

COMMENTARY

Behind the scenes of our election coverage

Election season is one of my favorite times to be a reporter and editor.

The races for village and school offices certainly doesn't generate as much interest — or as much acrimony — as a presidential race. But I've long believed citizens have the greatest opportunity to influence governance at the local level. And electing folks who live in your town or



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your school district to decide how to spend tens of millions of dollars in your property tax dollars is one of the best ways to do so.

We've been covering the April 4 election for more than a month already. Things got off to a pretty interesting start when Community Consolidated Elementary District 181 Board member Gary Clarin dropped out of that race, leaving it uncontested, and James "Fred" Hoch filed paperwork to run as a write-in candidate in Hinsdale High School District 86, making it a contested race.

Voters in Hinsdale also will have a choice of whom to elect for village president and whether to support a \$76 million facilities referendum in District 86.

We tweak our election coverage a bit each cycle, but our goals remain the same: to give voters as much information as we can about who the candidates are and where they stand on the issues and as many details as possible about any referendums on the ballot.

We also make it a practice to offer our opinions on which candidates we think are the best choices and whether voters should support a referendum. The process and criteria we use is outlined in the editorial to the right.

Endorsements can be sticky business. Some opponents question why a newspaper should offer its opinion on candidates. We're not exactly sure how it started, but offering candidate endorsements has been a tradition for more than a century. The New York Times supported Mr. Lincoln of Illinois in the presidential race way back in 1860.

I've been involved in endorsements as long as I've been in the business — approaching 30 years. I've easily interviewed more than 100 candidates running for office and spent literally hundreds of

hours observing village and school board meetings. Our associate editor, Ken Knutson, is no stranger to candidate interviews or meeting coverage, either.

Together we have developed a pretty good feel for what we believe will make a good elected official. Next week we'll share those recommendations — and our opin-

ion on the District 86 referendum — with you.

Some also might say we cannot be a fair broker for races in which we are acquainted with one or more of the candidates outside of the confines of the campaign. We are confident in our ability to approach this process professionally. And we believe it's unrealistic to think that, as fellow members of the community, we will not have had any prior contact with a candidate.

In this election, for example, District 181 candidate Margie Kleber is a former employee of the *The Hinsdalean*, and running mate Nathan Lucht is a former reader advisory board member of the paper. In the village president race, publisher Jim Slonoff and I have been castmates with Laura LaPlaca in several *Community Revue* shows.

If we did have a situation where one of us had a close personal relationship with a candidate, we would recuse ourselves from making endorsements in that particular race.

Some newspapers no longer publish endorsements, and we've talked about that option. But we see the endorsements as an opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of various candidates and ballot propositions. We try to be as detailed as we can in the space we have available. Residents are welcome to agree with, oppose or ignore what we have to say. We're running our endorsements early enough so readers have two opportunities to respond with a letter to the editor.

But we hope our assessments provide food for thought as people head to the polls.

Most importantly, we hope people head to the polls.

— Pamela Lannom is editor of *The Hinsdalean*. Readers can email her at plannom@thehinsdalean.com.



EDITORIAL

Help wanted? Take a peek into endorsement process

What is the measure of a worthy candidate for public office?

Well, that's certainly a loaded question, especially in these highly politicized times.

First of all, we think it's empowering to have a choice at all. No disrespect to the Hinsdale Caucus, which puts a lot of time and thought into picking its slate for both village and Community Consolidated Elementary District 181 boards. But there is resonance as citizens of a democracy in the experience of heading to the polls knowing the result is not a foregone conclusion.

As it stands, of course, the caucus slates are the only names that will be on the ballot for four village trustee seats, four library board spots and three District 181 board openings.

Hinsdale voters will, however, face a choice for the office of village president and in picking four new Hinsdale High School District 86 Board members, with a write-in candidate filing to join that race.

Three cheers for exercising one's franchise!

And we here at *The Hinsdalean* rejoice at another opportunity to issue endorsements (see Pam Lannom's adjacent column).

By way of teeing up those recommendations that will appear in this space next week, we want to shed some light on the criteria and qualifications we evaluate in arriving at those conclusions.

Not surprisingly, a candidate's stance on the pressing issues of the day weighs heavily. Does that position seem well considered and



broad-minded and not reflective of a narrow ideological bent?

We also take into account the level to which a candidate demonstrates a grasp of the desires and concerns of his or her prospective constituency. Has this person interacted with a representative cross-section of the community, attended a healthy share of board meetings, kept tabs on the evolution of the more consequential matters?

A collaborative spirit is a nice characteristic, too. How well will this individual work with those who will share the dais? Will this person's background, experiences and skill set complement those that already exist there and help add a fresh perspective and dimension of expertise?

Finally, we aim to endorse candidates who show an understanding that staff members are on the payroll for a reason and will not get lost in the weeds of micromanaging. Doing the pre-meeting homework and asking probing questions of administrators is vital to the business of crafting policies that promote success and prosperity. Questioning every move is a guidepost to stagnation, or worse.

Selecting the right candidates is not a perfect science, but we feel we've learned a thing or two over the years about the makeup that works best. The only thing that's assured is that a uncast ballot will make no difference at all.