

Opinions & Letters

August 13, 2010

Editorial

DISTRICT 1 AND 5 SCHOOL BOARD ENDORSEMENTS

Martin and Smith-Martin for school board

With seven candidates vying for two school board seats in the August primary, the question for voters is: Who can you trust to do the best job for our kids?

That's the unfortunate legacy left by last year's financial scandal, which emerged over painful months of investigations, forensic audits, even a grand jury indictment and ultimately, the criminal conviction of the former superintendent.

There are two seats on the ballot this time.

In District 5, three-term incumbent Debra Walker is hoping voters will give her a hall pass and another four years.

She's being challenged by a tough field of candidates. Of the three challengers, Richard Bradley, a nurse, is the most entertaining, firing rapid shots at his opponents in his British accent. Although fun, he's been in the Keys only a short time and articulates no concrete ideas about education or how to fix problems.

Bruce Swango, a recently-retired math teacher at Coral Shores, has run before and definitely brings a long classroom career to the table. But he comes across a bit too strident and wanting to "punish" administrators, whom he blames for much of what's wrong with today's system.

Walker has had her 12 years on the board and, unfortunately, failed to recognize that loyalty to her friends in the administration did not serve the interests of the students or the taxpayers. Until the bitter end, she defended the former superintendent and his hand-picked lieutenants, and even tried an 11th-hour maneuver to secure a contract extension for embattled acting superintendent Mike Henriquez (who is now the principal at Horace O'Bryant School in Key West).

Her public service is appreciated, but her time has come and gone.

In the District 5 match-up, Ron Martin, recently retired principal at Coral Shores High School, is clearly the best prepared, the best equipped and the most experienced to serve on the board. He's got 20 years in the classroom as a teacher before going into school administration. Martin is active in the Upper Keys community, has served as a scout leader, and volunteer on community groups and civic clubs like Rotary.

From the front lines, he knows the mistakes that were made by administrators too far removed from the classroom and vows to spend most of his time where the rubber meets the road, - in the schools, with teachers, students and parents.

In the District 1 contest, it's an open seat after incumbent Steve Pribramsky decided not to seek re-election. He's been a voice challenging the status quo and will be missed.

But voters have three strong candidates in the race to fill that countywide board post.

Judith Wild has an extensive teaching background in three different school systems and has been a substitute teacher in the Keys.

Barbara Bowers previously taught for seven years in the St. Louis area before her career moved into marketing and the medical services field. She served on Key West's sometimes contentious Historic Architecture and Restoration Committee, where she chaired the group, so she's used to controversy.

Robin "Rob" Smith-Martin is a business owner, financial advisor and Key West native who decided to give up the fast-pace on the mainland and return to Key West to raise his kids in a small town environment like he remembered as a child.

Smith-Martin focuses on the role of parents and believes firmly engaging parents is the key to making schools work effectively. He has challenged the group-think about pay-for-performance and understands the current system is broken and needs to be fixed.

But he's also smart enough to know that won't happen without all the stakeholders engaged — and he includes parents in that mix, not just school board, administrators and teachers.

Smith-Martin will bring a welcome perspective to the board as a parent with kids enrolled in our public schools. We heartily endorse him for the District 1 seat.

The Reporter

Publisher Wayne Markham
 Editor David Goodhue
 Deputy Editor David Hawkins
 Marketing Director Melanie Elder
 Office Manager Margie Whisenhunt
 Circulation Manager Carter Townshend

Published every Friday in the Florida Keys. Contents Copyright 2010 by The Reporter and Keynet Publishing Co., part of The McClatchy Company.

Letters to the Editor

Driver unfairly linked with deputy's death

To the editor:
 There are no words which can properly convey the sense of loss and pain that the community at large must feel, but especially those who protect and serve us on a daily basis, at the death of Deputy Melissa Powers — someone who devoted her working life to the protection and greater good of the citizenry. She leaves behind a grieving family and a grateful populace.

Grief however, must be tempered with logic. On Aug. 6, another tragedy occurred. Nearly a month and a half after the event in question, a young man, 23 year old Nicolas Briand was arrested in connection with this incident. His crime? Trying desperately to avoid collision with a police cruiser traveling at an estimated 106 mph, almost twice the legal speed limit, on a dark and rain swept road. Why would anyone be arrested for trying to keep themselves safe in what the sheriff's department itself has termed "a high speed response" that "was completely uncalled for?" Deputy Powers, was driving at this velocity because

another officer failed to respond to radio calls. He had made a private stop, while on public time, on personal property and forgot to switch his radio back to the proper frequency to receive calls. He also did not answer his cell phone at this time while engaged in non-police business. Powers and other officers involved in this search were clearly concerned for the safety of their comrade. This is entirely understandable and commendable. Yet, while everyone with a badge in this case (except unfortunately Deputy Powers) gets off scot-free, a young man's freedom and future is placed in jeopardy in part because of, "Making an improper right turn."

What exactly is a proper right turn when a vehicle traveling 106 mph comes streaking out of the rain in the dark behind you? Would you be able to turn prim-proper in those circumstances? Would anyone? The gist of such a charge is that you made a preventable error, you should have known better, you may have caused harm to another. How much more preventable though was the error which led to

this awful tragedy in the first place? A non-emergency call that came about because of an internal mistake in which several deputies respond, in several different cars at high speed is many times more inexcusable than an "improper" turn in defense of your life. Mr. Briand also apparently left "the scene of an accident involving a death." An accident that he was not involved in, in which he collided with no one and which actually happened in a parking lot, and not on the road where he was traveling. So what compelling evidence is stacked against him that proves his misdeeds? His own honesty and the testimony of another eyewitness.

No officer witnessed the accident and no police cam or security footage captured it.

The bottom line is this young man could have been killed. You, or I: my children, or your children could have been killed. These actions were reckless and entirely inconsistent with the protection and service of the community.

Eric Williams
 Islamorada

Explain man's involvement in crash

To the editor:
 It is always very upsetting when a life is lost in a terrible way like the loss of Deputy Melissa Powers in a June 22 car crash.

Now, reading about this crash, we see the police have arrested and charged a Key Largo man with leaving the scene of an accident involving a death. The man is 23 years old and described as a shift leader employed in Tavernier. He was not struck nor did he hit any vehicle.

It is also reported that he made an illegal right turn that may have contributed to this crash. The piece also stated the officer was traveling at 106 mph with siren and lights all on. There are some details missing in this piece that I hope will eventually get reported, such as to how the police came up with this man and why any officer would be going at that high rate of speed no matter what the emergency and passing a civilian vehicle on the right.

Overseas Highway is not set up for any vehicle to travel at 106 mph even if an officer of the law is suspected of being in harm's way and his fellow officers rush to him.

An experiment might be for

someone to get out on that stretch of road early one Sunday morning in daylight and, if possible, ease the speed of the car up to 70 or 80 mph, when there is no traffic, and see what attentions are required to maintain safety, if that's even possible.

Of course, someone may get stopped for doing this, but the point here is how very high risk this rate of speed actually is, and my comparison is at only 70 or 80 mph. Moving along at 106 mph as reported this officer was just an incalculable risk no matter who's behind the wheel and no matter what siren or lights are blaring.

It looks like the sheriff has taken steps with his force to protect everyone from this happening again, but I will be looking for a follow-up piece with more details of this horrible tragedy and the arrest of a 23-year-old man and what solid evidence was presented for that arrest.

Frank Simmons
 Delray Beach

Schools should keep counselors

To the editor:
 The Monroe County School

Board has decided to cut five of the seven Life Skills Counselors' positions. They want two counselors to cover three high schools. What about the other schools in the county? And, how do two people cover three high schools efficiently? Which high school goes without a counselor?

These positions are not even 100 percent funded by the school board. They are only responsible for about half of the funding for the Life Skill's counselors.

It is not the students' or parents' fault for that matter that the school board is scrambling for funds. Yet, it is the students who will suffer.

Don't our students deserve better? Life Skills Counselor's are a vital part of the school community. They help guide students through difficult times. Parents cannot always afford to send their child to a counselor. Having the Life Skills Counselor based in each school allows the student access to counseling that they might otherwise never receive.

That is why it is so important that these positions remain. Without their presence in all our schools, our students; and their families will suffer.

Janet Shepherd
 Key Largo

Editorial

Vote 'Yes' on proposal to employ, not elect, superintendent of schools

Keys voters have an opportunity to correct an antiquated political patronage system that dates back to the Jim Crow excesses post Civil War.

We're talking about the custom of electing a school superintendent instead of doing the smart thing and hiring the best and brightest to run our schools.

The August primary ballot referendum question appears on the reverse side of the ballot. So whether you vote early, absentee or at your precinct polling place on Tuesday, Aug. 24, be sure to vote yes and approve the referendum.

Last year's financial scandal, indictment and jury conviction of former superintendent Randy Acevedo, and the upcoming plea bargain hearing for his disgraced wife, Monique, ought to be enough to convince every voter the old system is broken.

Consider this. Under the elected superintendent model, the only qualification needed to run for school superintendent in Florida is to be over 18 years old. That's it.

You don't have to have any special training or education, just be able to garner enough votes to grab

four years at the helm of what is the largest political patronage system in most communities.

The proposed referendum would change that starting next year, moving to the modern school governance model where we recruit a hired education expert, not a career politician who owes political favors.

Voters still have their say by electing five members to the school board, which sets policy and does the vetting, recruiting, hiring and supervising of future superintendents.

This avoids dueling political agendas, witnessed the past few years when Acevedo butted heads with some elected school board members. And, don't forget, Acevedo went so far as to recruit two friends to run for school board in hopes of getting a veto-proof majority to back his every move.

Fortunately, his hand-picked candidates lost to John Dick and Steve Pribramsky — and we've seen the value of those two in ferreting out waste and questioning suspect financial reports.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for a hired education expert — not a politician — to run out schools comes from the collect-

ed wisdom of parents, educators and elected school boards throughout the country.

Out of 15,000 school districts nationwide, only 154 still elect a superintendent — and all of those are isolated in three southern states: Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.

Not so coincidentally perhaps, all three of those states rank near the bottom on national comparisons of high school graduation rates, percentage of graduates who pursue higher education and other measures of quality K-12 education.

Two former holdouts in the post Civil War model of electing superintendents - Georgia and Tennessee - moved entirely to hired superintendents in the past decade. Parents and lawmakers in both states got tired of the poor results they kept getting with politicians as school superintendents.

Isn't it time we join the modern era? Let's prove we have a shared vision to educate our kids the very best way we know how so they are prepared to succeed in life.

We urge all voters to support the referendum so henceforth we can hire the best and brightest to run our schools.