

Voters' choice

Five candidates vie for three seats in Board of Education election

By Al Sullivan

Reporter senior staff writer.

Few elections for Board of Education in the past have pitted such a diverse group of candidates against each other as those whom voters must choose from on April 17.

Although the number of potential candidates shrank sharply in the month since paperwork for petitions was drawn, the five remaining candidates present voters with hard choices over philosophy. While the two incumbents, Anthony Rinaldi and Michael Schlemm, bring with them a string of accomplishments that include the ongoing expansion of two elementary schools and numerous upgrades to the infrastructure of the schools, they also both bring to this election responsibility to the highest increases in a proposed school budget in a decade, as well as the stigma of raises to administrators that were criticized by town officials as excessive.

The choice by Douglas MacCormack not to run for re-election guarantees that at least one of the three challengers will take a seat on the board.

From among these three, voters must choose the very differing philosophies presented by Michael Harper, Thomas Troyer, and Kathleen McFarlane.

In selecting the makeup the board for the next year and electing three of these five candidates to office for three year terms, voters will be selecting people who will be making additional hard choices such as the financing for the expansion of the high school/middle school complex and the probable selection of a new superintendent of schools.

Anthony Rinaldi

In the last year of Rinaldi's current term on the board, Rinaldi, as chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, has been



Anthony Rinaldi

responsible for shepherding the expansion of the two elementary schools, a duty that would shift to someone else in mid-construction if he was to lose his seat on the board.

As part of the school board over the last three years, Rinaldi helped approve the financial and construction plans that allowed the school district to meet the needs of student enrollment that had plagued the elementary schools since the early 1990s.

Rinaldi said he brings to the board experience as a businessman, someone who has dealt with budgets as well as people, and can help make the system work as a business.

Saying he wanted to give back something to the school system that had provided him with an education,

Rinaldi was elected to the board in 1998.



Michael Schlemm

Rinaldi graduated Secaucus High School in 1983, and is among five current board members who came through the Secaucus educational system.

The father of two, Rinaldi also claims pride in his own family attending Secaucus schools, giving him a strong interest in keeping up the quality of the schools. He said that his education allowed him to take on his career. He is a partner in Crane Construction Company.

Rinaldi said going through the school system here has allowed him to see the school district, not only as a board member, but also as a student. He knows many of the teachers and many of the concerns these teachers have.

Rinaldi said that since being elected in 1998, he has been part of one of the most active and productive boards in Secaucus history, a board that has accomplished many of the things other boards struggled to

address. The installation of technology into the schools is one of the big accomplishments of this board, he said, and so was the expansion of the two elementary schools. He said the board managed to get one of the best architects in the state as well as one of the best contractors, getting them as lowest bidders.

"The big challenge right now is making sure the schools are done on time," he said, noting that Huber Street School is due to open its new wing in August, and Clarendon School, in January, 2002. "It has been a rough winter, and yet the contractor has agreed to bring both projects in on time."

Because there is a chance the current superintendent of schools will retire during the next three years, each board member was asked what kind of person he or she would like in a future replacement. Rinaldi said he would like someone who knows the school system well.

"I would like someone who is as hardworking as Gus Scerbo is," Rinaldi said, "someone in tune with the many changes going on, and someone who understands issues like advanced placement, block scheduling, and technology. That person would also have to have a good relationship with the community as well as the school system."

Michael Schlemm

Like Rinaldi, Schlemm was elected in 1998 — after being appointed earlier that year to fill a vacated post — and he has helped shape the \$6.5 million bond package that allowed the elementary schools to expand. Yet his claim to fame goes deeper in some ways as he helped to significantly alter the technological landscape for students in all the schools. Schlemm — as a member of the board's tech-

see **BOARD** page 5

3 • www.secaucusreporter.com • April 8, 2001

nology committee — helped guide the school district's computer upgrade, providing additional and more modern computers in each of the classrooms, helping to network the school district, providing an information resource anyone anywhere in the school district can draw from at need.

Schlemm, like Rinaldi, was part of a board of education that helped deal with many of the smaller, yet nagging capital improvements, providing repairs and replacements of ailing facilities. Under the watch of the current board, the heating system at the high school/middle school complex was changed from an exorbitantly expensive electric power to a system based on gas. And though utility costs have risen sharply over the last year, without the change, the school district would have faced an even more significant hike.

As with Rinaldi, Schlemm also graduated from Secaucus High School in 1983, after having moved up through the Secaucus school system. He went on to attend Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, where he got his degree and is currently involved in helping organizations with the infusion of technology into their systems.

Among the things accomplished by the board over the last three years, Schlemm lists greater financial accountability through new systems for tracking money, purchasing through cooperative agreements with other school districts, and the hiring of the current school administrator. Foresight by the board allowed the district to take advantage of a state refund for expansion, saving local taxpayers over half the projected \$6.5 million construction cost.

Schlemm is particularly grateful for the public's trust three years ago when it passed a special referendum to allow the school district to upgrade its computer technology. As a result, the schools currently boast 251 computers and computer labs. Schlemm said that he is seeking to take that technological advance to the next level.

"We have the technology in place; now I would like to see higher usage," he said. "This means providing teachers with training."

He said projects on the horizon include teleconferencing and advanced use of the Internet for homework assignments, web page programs and e-mail.

The future also presents the board with additional challenges, Schlemm said. Although the district has managed to begin expansion on its two elementary schools, the increased student enrollment that created the need for this expansion has begun to move up into the Middle School, and he foresees the need for expansion at the middle school/high school complex to handle these students.

If reelected, Schlemm will likely be a member of a board charged with having to select a new superintendent of schools when the current superintendent retires. Schlemm said he would look for many of the same qualities in a future candidate for the job as the current superintendent has now.

"Gus Scerbo is very good at balancing the interests of the community and the schools," Schlemm said. "He is always involved, always attends school functions and is always there when someone needs him. That's the kind of person I would like to see as his replacement."