



Incumbent and acclaimed Coldstream trustee Robert Lee (left), Mark Rivette, Mark Olsen, Nicole Makohoniuk, Jenn Comazzatto, Mollie Bono, Ron Burton, Tom Williamson, Christie Tujik, Paula Harned, Sheri Minard and Gen Acton field questions from moderator Mel Maglio at a Vernon School District trustee public forum at Vernon Secondary School Oct. 11. (Parker Crook/Morning Star)

Vernon School District trustee hopefuls face off in public forum

Nine Vernon candidates, three Lumby area seek spot on board

PARKER CROOK / Oct. 12, 2018 5:00 a.m. / MUNICIPAL ELECTION

Budget, transparency and a trustee's code of ethics dominated the conversation as School District 22 candidates from Vernon, Coldstream, Lumby and Cherryville met in public forum.

The two-hour forum, co-hosted by the Vernon Teachers' Association, CUPE 523 and the Vernon and District Parent Advisory Council, filled the Vernon Secondary School theatre Oct. 11.

After a brief introduction from the evening's moderator and retired teacher Mel Maglio and VTA president Lisa LaBoucane, Vernon's nine candidates alongside acclaimed Coldstream trustee Robert Lee and Lumby and area candidates Sheri Minard and Gen Acton – with incumbent Lumby Coun. and trustee hopeful Lori Mindnich not in attendance – had two minutes to delve into their background and touch on their goals should they be elected into office.

Forum co-hosts CUPE sought to hear candidates' thoughts on changes to allowing CUPE and VTA to further participate in the budget process.

Related: Forums dot short week

Incumbent and acclaimed trustee Lee started the conversation by suggesting that the process could begin much earlier in the year – a sentiment shared by all candidates.

Mark Rivette, who is seeking one of four Vernon seats, said he has been heavily involved in the budgeting process in both private and public sectors.

“It's really important to define what your first budget looks like. All business units that have an expenditure budget need to be engaged,” Rivette said, adding that partners should receive budget information at the beginning of the process.

Vernon area candidate Mark Olsen, a longtime Vernon resident who was employed by the district for more than three decades, agreed.

“Starting the process earlier is one thing that needs to be done. Partner groups need to understand the (financial) situation. If it's just a blind approach, they're just making random proposals. In our strategic plan for the district, part of that is to involve people more. If we're not doing that, we're not engaging the strategic plan,” Olsen said.

“Gone are the days of getting our budget in March for a decision that needs to be done at the end of April,” Vernon hopeful Nicole Makohoniuk said.

Jenn Comazzetto, also seeking a Vernon spot, said there are multiple ways that groups can enter earlier discussions.

“We can talk earlier. We can talk better. We can talk with more open ears,” Comazzetto said.

Incumbent Mollie Bono said, in addition to beginning the process earlier, she would like to see more representation from within the community.

“We need to include all the players within the district,” Bono said. “We need your help. We need your guidance.”

Minard, however, disagreed with Bono’s recommendation to implement a roundtable discussion.

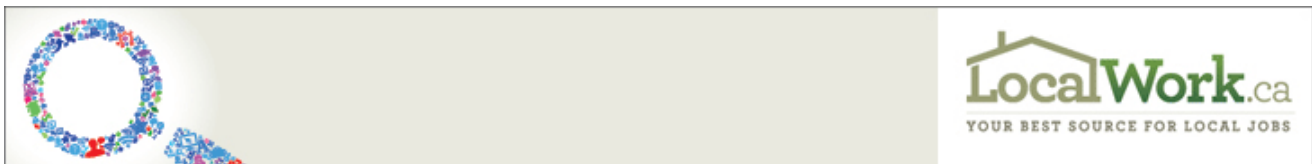
“The roundtable is great, but I think you have more meaningful conversations when trustees and partners can talk one on one,” she said. “I think sitting down with partners is really important. I think that’s the best place to start.”

Ron Burton, a current and longtime school district trustee in Burnaby, said he would like to implement a three-year rolling budget and that the district needs to begin to look elsewhere for funding.

“We would project out for three years – then you can start your decision very early,” Burton said. “In the three-year rolling budget, there are no secrets. You can discuss where money is and where it is going.”

Tom Williamson, a Vernon-born and raised candidate with more than 40 years of experience working with the district, said he shared many of the sentiments of other trustees concerning the timing and alternative forms of fundraising.

Read more below



“One thing I’d like to do is register every student in Grade 10 in work experience,” Williamson said of a way to bring in extra funding. “There are a lot of different creative ways we can go on.”

Beairsto district parent advisory council representative and Vernon hopeful Christie Tujik agreed with Burton on the need of including students in the process.

“I think we’re missing the boat on that,” Tujik said of the lack of student involvement in the budget process. “We (also) need a longer window to discuss the budget.”

“There’s no doubt about it, the timeline needs to be looked at,” Vernon area candidate Paula Harned agreed, adding that she would enter discussions with other trustees from across the province to uncover their budget processes.

Gen Acton, a registered professional counsellor and former Kidston PAC president, agreed with her fellow candidates but urged simplicity.

“We need to start early. We need to engage everybody. This is a stakeholder’s project” Acton said. “We’re not reinventing the wheel. Let’s take what we know works and move forward.”

Related: Advanced voting begins

Transparency was also a key point of discussion for the trustee hopefuls, with little agenda availability prior to meetings and in-camera meeting topics dominating the floor.

Lee said the board of education has recently implemented steps to increase transparency.

“The board, in terms of its agenda, is continuing to work towards that,” Lee said, adding that there are now two question periods in each public meeting and the district has hired a communications coordinator.

While all candidates spoke in favour of improving transparency, all agreed that certain personal matters should remain in-camera.

Harned said she would hope for the agenda to be released to the public at the same time it is given to trustees to allow parents and other members of the public equal opportunity to read the often lengthy minutes.

“It’s a lot to read. We’ve (trustees) read all the reports so there might not be a lot of discussion. The public doesn’t have the opportunity to be on the same page as we are. I think we might need to do some tweaking in the timeline,” Harned said.

Read more below

Williamson, however, kept his answer short and to the point suggesting that meetings be recorded and released for the public to view at their leisure.

Comazzetto agreed and said it would go far to educating the public as to why a decision was made or not made.

“I would like to see us being more of a team, talking with each other and understanding how we got to that spot and why we got to that spot,” Comazzetto said.

“I believe transparency can happen by creating an atmosphere of trust,” Makohoniuk added.

Bono said a pivotal issue in the apparent transparency is getting community members further involved in the process.

“I’m not sure how we can improve the inclusion of other people, which I believe is what we’re looking for,” Bono said. “The meetings are open and there is a small opportunity for discussions, which is certainly taken advantage of at meetings. Maybe we need more. Maybe we need another way of meeting with co-partners. I’m certainly open to doing that.”

Closing off the evening, the DPAC asked trustees how they would ensure that their actions as trustees support the oath of office and code of ethics they will be required to sign at the inaugural meeting if elected.

“I signed one when I was president of BCCPAC and I upheld it. I’ve proven that it’s important to me. Showing up, being there and being involved, having those discussions. Reading them, an important thing, I have to admit I’ve only glanced I haven’t had a chance to look at them but I assume they’d be pretty similar,” Makohoniuk said.

“I don’t think you should start running in the election if you haven’t already read them,” Rivette countered after he requested that the microphone moves in his direction across the table. “I wouldn’t have run if I didn’t think I could maintain these roles of ethics. It’s not only on the first day, it’s every year after. I wouldn’t run if I didn’t think they were important.”

Olsen took the opportunity to reflect on a message passed down through his family.

“Oaths mean something. You’re giving your word; you’re making a promise,” he said. “My dad said, ‘Your word is your bond.’”

Lee said he looks hopes to continue the ethics he has demonstrated over the past term.

“I have been acclaimed by you which, as I said before, is an honour,” Lee said. “I hope to continue with that.”

Board commitments are not a new idea for Comazzetto, she said.

“It’s part of life. It’s part of my second nature,” Comazzetto said before handing the microphone to Bono.

“I think the key thing for me has to do with commitment. It also has to do with living what I say and sometimes that’s pretty hard to do, but it’s important for each of us to follow our own personal code of ethics in addition to this board of education one,” Bono said, adding that supporting the team is part of her personal code.

Both Burton and Williamson kept their answers short. Burton said he has sworn 10 times and feels that he has a good track record. Williamson has been governed by a code of ethics for four decades, he said.

“Over the years, I think some of my actions have spoken louder than my words, and some of my words have been pretty loud,” Tujik said.

Harned said it’s a matter of character.

“Anybody who knows me, I do what I say I’m going to do. Sometimes to the death of me, but I do it,” Harned said.

“For me, I know I’ll be an enthusiastic and informed trustee,” Minard said. “I would love to be able to demonstrate to you all my values and traits as a trustee.”

Acton closed the conversation by saying that she is already governed by a strict code through her work as a counsellor.

“The word trustee comes with trust. As such, we will be judged by our actions,” she said.

Trustee candidates also answered questionnaires prior to the evening, the answers from which will be shared on the Vernon Teacher’s Association website, www.vernonta.com. Advanced voting began Oct. 10. Election day is set for Oct. 20.

[@VernonNews](#)

parker.crook@vernonmorningstar.com

Like us on [Facebook](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#).