

Bedford-KatonahPatch

SCHOOLS

Bedford BOE Candidates Gather At Public Forum

Questions from the audience and moderator given.

By **Tom Auchterlonie** May 13, 2010

The candidates running for open seats on the Bedford Central School District Board of Education gathered at Fox Lane Middle School on Monday to take part in a candidates' forum supported by the League of Women Voters.

The three candidates – Suzanne Grant, Michael Solomon and Jennifer Gerken – were present, while Erika Long, who is running unopposed and is an incumbent, did not participate and instead watched as a spectator. After the candidates gave their introductions, Grant, who is also running unopposed, did likewise, and the bulk of the event involved Gerken and Solomon taking questions from the audience and the moderator, Polly Kuhn.

Fiscal issues and union negotiations (currently unresolved for a new contract between the district and Bedford Teachers Association) played large roles in the debate and took up many of questions.

Solomon, who sat on a state commission named for then-Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi, touted his experience on that entity and emphasized the need for the district to improve financially, citing the long-term rise in the school budgets since 2003 as a reason. Furthermore, Solomon talked at several points about repealing the Triborough Amendment to give unions an incentive to negotiate with the district. He also called for having teachers teach more school periods during the day.

"We can no longer afford to pay every teacher and give them the same amount of raises every year," he said. "We need to be able to differentiate between the strongest performing professionals, and really give incentives to perform well, and those not performing well."

Gerken also supports repealing Triborough, but noted that reform in Albany is slow, and talked about the board's responsibilities in the meantime in terms of educating the children. At another point in the discussion, she supported restructuring and settling agreements with the union as a way to control costs.

Both candidates also said that they support the proposed school budget.

Scott Vallar, a Bedford Hills resident, asked them what they feel is a reasonable average tax increase level over the next three years. Gerken responded that the current rate is reasonable, but also said that it is important to note that the community defines what is tax affordability. She also said it's important to reach out and continue to involve people. Solomon said they are on a better trajectory – referring to school taxes as they stand – but talked about the need to get it lower, while also citing differences in tax changes between towns in the district.

Two outgoing members, Paula Kumar and Donna Marino, each asked the candidates questions at different points in the event.

Marino asked Solomon why he thought there would be change immediately with state government, and said that none of the Suozzi commission recommendations have been enacted. Solomon responded that he hopes the recommendations are addressed and emphasized the need for change, citing the problems of General Motors and Chrysler as examples of companies being warned to change the way they did business. Gerkin responded to Marino's question, too, saying that change – repeal of the Triborough Amendment being brought up – wasn't going to happen in short order, but also said it did not mean that they should not continue to fight for it.

Kumar also asked Solomon what had been implemented with the commission. Solomon said that it is still being discussed in Albany, while talking about major parts of the recommendations, such as a property tax cap.

After the debate, Kumar brought up concerns about backing that Solomon has received from a site called bedfordtownmeeting.com, which is run by [Camillo Santomero](#), a former school board member who is a local critic of the district. Kumar said that the site has come out against the school budget while Solomon supports it (it should be noted that the site has now come out in support of the budget but with concerns about it).

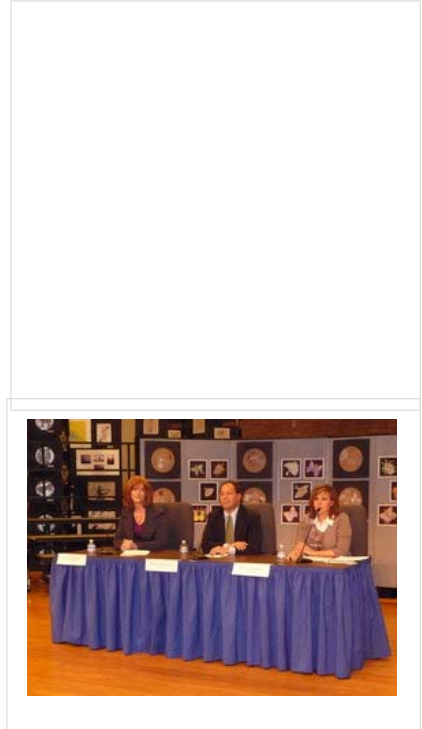
When asked for a response, Solomon said that he wants everyone's support and had no problem in having theirs.

Solomon, who has two older boys in nearby private schools and a daughter in Bedford Village Elementary School, also faced questions that tied into the out-of-district enrollment status of his older children.

One woman wanted to know why his sons were in private school, and if he saw any deficiencies in the public school system. Solomon responded that it was a family decision and that they made a decision they thought was best for their children, and not one based on how he felt about the school district.

A man asked both candidates if having children in public school should be a qualification for being on the board. Solomon and Gerken disagreed and each said it should not be a requirement.

Other education issues were discussed that took up less time. Both candidates said that they support technology use in the classroom, and each supported "going green" and tackling issues of sustainability.



Erika Long also asked a question, asking the candidates if they would be willing to join citizens' subcommittees that help the school board. Both candidates said they were.

"I thought it was great that they had people come out and ask questions of the candidates or email questions in to have those questions," Long said in an interview after.

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