

St. Clair hosts school board candidate forum

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Four candidates running for three seats on the St. Clair R-XIII Board of Education met Thursday evening for a candidate forum at the local branch of the Scenic Regional Library, hosted in coordination with *The Missourian*.

The forum participants included two incumbents, Brian Hinson and David Berkel, and two new candidates, Heather Ann Van Ness and Jason Gaszak. Parents and teachers submitted the questions asked during the forum, which was moderated by Scenic Regional Library Assistant Director Megan Maurer and *Missourian* Editor Ethan Colbert.

Hinson and Berkel both noted that they are lifelong St. Clair residents whose wives and children also attended school in the district, and Van Ness and Gaszak similarly touted their longtime ties to the community.

"I'm running for school board because I think our children are struggling, I think our teachers are needing some assistance and some support, and I'm here to make sure that our school district is the best that it can be," said Van Ness.

"I don't have any problem speaking my mind for the things that I believe, that I'm passionate about, but at the same time, I'm not one to just say 'no' or create controversy just to create controversy," said Gaszak. "That's not what I do, I'm a team player, I buy in once a decision is made like it's my own decision."

In response to a question about STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education, Berkel said the district has been working on providing those opportunities.

"We do have a program right now that's being run by an actual rocket scientist, and he is doing great things with a lot of our students with getting them interested in engineering and robotics and things like that," Berkel said, adding that the district is also working closely with local industries.

"The way our world is going right now, it's very important, and we're trying to be on the cutting edge of that," he said.

Hinson said he has been an advocate for teaching building trades, because part of the district's job is to prepare students for life beyond school.

"We have recognized

that higher education isn't for everybody, we understand that," Hinson said. "So we wanted to bring back building trades to give those kids an opportunity so they can go on to have successful lives as well."

Asked about a lack of reliable internet access in rural areas of the district, Van Ness, like other candidates, said she would encourage state legislators to incentivize service providers to expand internet access in the area, but the district's options are limited.

"There's not much more than trying to lobby and get it all taken care of so we can get our students what they need," she said.

Citing a study that found Missouri teachers to be among the lowest paid in the U.S., candidates were asked what they would do to retain high quality teachers. All four said that while the district's finances are limited, one thing the district can do is try to provide the best work environment possible for teachers.

"Right now, the way that the economy is, I just don't see any way that our tax base is going to increase enough that we're going to be able to



Communicating with the public

St. Clair R-XIII school board candidates, from left, Brian Hinson, David A. Berkel, both incumbents; Heather Ann Van Ness; and Jason Gaszak, both challengers; answer questions during a candidate forum March 16 at Scenic Regional Library's St. Clair Branch. The event was hosted by Scenic Regional Library and *The Missourian* and featured questions submitted by parents and teachers.

Missourian Photo/Julia Hansen.

catch up with some of the schools around us," said Berkel. "We might get close, but I don't think we can get up to exactly where they are."

Asked about an open enrollment bill currently under consideration by the Missouri Senate, Berkel said the district could lose \$400,000 per year or more due to students leaving the district.

Gaszak said his initial response to hearing about the open enrollment bill was to oppose it, but after further research, he can see arguments for both sides.

"I know we say we'll lose \$400,000 but we also would lose teachers as well, which would offset some of that cost from

what I understand," he said. "Nobody wants to see that. Nobody wants to lose students, nobody wants to lose teachers, but it's one of these questions where we really don't have any say in it."

Gaszak added, though, that "if it creates competition, which is the other side of, you know, open enrollment, I actually think that can be a good thing. I mean if St. Clair has a great school with great teachers and great education and it's safe and it's fun, then why wouldn't other kids want to come to that if there was open enrollment?"

Calling open enrollment "a really hot-button issue," Hinson, meanwhile, said that "being

from this small little town, I think this could be a community killer."

In their closing remarks, the candidates brought up some topics that weren't previously covered. Hinson and Gaszak both said that safety of students and staff should be a priority. Berkel said he has a record of being a watchdog over public money, noting he was involved in uncovering embezzled funds while serving on another board.

"I just want to say that I love the kids, I love the teachers, I love the community," said Van Ness. "Anything that I can do to better all of it, I'm in. I just want to do what's best for everyone."