

Three vie for two spots on Pownal board

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POWNAL — All three residents running for two one-year seats on the Pownal School Board of Directors have some experience on school boards.

Randy Monhollen, who is challenging incumbent board members Marilyn Gardner and Angie Rawling, is the truancy officer for the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union and served on the school board for the Indian River Central School District in Philadelphia, N.Y., during the 1980s. He ran unsuccessfully for the Pownal board in 2008.

Pownal School Board

Monhollen said he is waiting on a decision from Superintendent George Carpenter on whether or not, and to what degree, his position as truancy officer might conflict with a position on the Pownal board. Monhollen said he believes that under the worst case scenario, he wouldn't be able to perform his work duties in Pownal, but added he would step down as truancy officer if necessary to take a position on the board because that is where he would be able to do the most good.

"I don't see where that conflict would come into play," he said.

Monhollen is a retired Army officer and has been living in Pownal for nine years. He said fiscal responsibility is a concern of his, and added that many of the problems and issues Pownal Elementary is facing he dealt with while on the school board in New York.

He said his old school district had undergone a transition from a school-owned bus system to a contractor, and said the issue is one that has to be researched before a change occurs. He said a committee of Pownal residents should be formed to investigate the issue.

In regard to the possibility of consolidating schools, Monhollen said Indian River had also undergone something similar. He said his concerns for such a change would be fair representation from all towns involved, and he would like to know what the benefits would be for the children's education.

Angie Rawling has been on the Pownal board for the past 11 years. She said in an interview that she has had two children go through Pownal Elementary, with her youngest graduating sixth grade last year. "I've always been interested in child care," Rawling said.

She said many people don't realize until they get on the board that most of the school's spending is mandated by the state. She said the board only has roughly 5 to 10 percent control of the school budget.

Rawling said her main focus would be to maintain the level of education offered by the school and ensure that the facility itself stays up to par. She said children need up-to-date computers and qualified teachers. Rawling said the school must also continue with upgrades, adding that a new ceiling and lights are planned for the gym.

The school's elevator must also be upgraded, which Rawling said is mandated by the state. She said keeping control of the school is important, as the number of unfunded mandates from the state has increased over the years.

Rawling said she serves as the board's clerk when the secretary is not present, is the board's representative to the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union Board, and serves on the Pownal board's policy committee.

Marilyn Gardner has been on the Pownal board for one year. She served as a town lister nearly 20 years ago and has served on the Select Board.

"I just think we need a change," Gardner said of the school board post. She said she feels the board could cut a few more things from its budget, including some personnel.

She said each class has at least one para-educator, and one class has two. Gardner said the teachers can be doing most of the work, and that more time needs to be spent on the basic curriculum. Gardner said what is learned in the reading and math labs can be taught in the classroom.

The solution to unfunded mandates, Gardner said, is to not do them. She said that if the government isn't going to pay for the things it mandates, school boards need to stand up and say no.

She said there are elements of the transportation system that could change, along with improvements to the school.

She said the gym ceiling might not be able to wait, but some window replacements and new kitchen equipment are not essential and can be put off until another year.

The amounts might not seem like much on the line items, she said, but together they add up.

Gardner has been a farmer in Pownal for 29 years, and has been driving a school bus for Dufour Inc. since 2000. Dufour is a private bus contractor that serves many schools in the Bennington County area. Dufour does not have a contract with Pownal Elementary, which maintains its own buses.

Voting will be March 3 at the Pownal Center Firehouse. Polls are open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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