



Board model blasted

Angry taxpayers demand changes, more transparency

By James Debilzen
Managing Editor

When members of the DeForest Area School District Board of Education met last Thursday for a special board meeting, they intended solely to write a letter to district staff addressing concerns over compensation and the upcoming budget process.

Before they could begin that process, however, they were given a stern warning from district residents to become more transparent or face big changes to the board's structure.

The tension comes in the midst of a controversy surrounding raises for district administrators the school board approved a year ago with the intention of bringing salaries in line with similar positions throughout Dane County. In some cases, the raises totaled more than \$10,000 for individual administrators.

DeForest resident Jeffrey Horn told board members he was concerned the board's public notices were vague and didn't give a clear picture of what they were discussing. He pointed to the notice issued for that night's meeting, which stated under "New Board Business," "Consider official Board communication to stakeholders (GP 1: Role of the Board)."

"No one knew what tonight's meeting was about ..." Horn said. "That doesn't mean anything to the people in this community. You should have said, 'We're all getting together to write a letter.' Then everyone would have known what was going on. This makes it sound like you're all keeping secrets or trying to do something in private."

School board president Jan Berg said during the meeting the board could do a better job clarifying what's on the agenda.

Horn had additional criticism for the public notice given during the June 14, 2010 school board meeting where board members dis-

Recalls being considered

By James Debilzen
Managing Editor

Could members of the DeForest Area School District's Board of Education face possible recalls?

DeForest resident Jeffrey Horn – who recently headed a failed effort to recall Sen. Mark Miller (D-Monona) – said it's a possibility, but he'd rather see the board "do the right thing" and move away from its policy governance model instead.

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School board, administrators seeking feedback on budget proposals

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cussed contracts for non-represented employees – including administrators – in closed session before giving final approval under the consent agenda, a board action that approves several items with one vote.

"I suppose that ... you're technically within the state open meetings law that you gave us notice, but you didn't really tell us what you were voting on," he said. "You didn't give the community here any opportunity to know how big these (raises) were or how small they were ... I understand you did it for equity. I understand in some specific cases you may have done it for merit or value-added. That should just be stated."

POLICY GOVERNANCE

Horn was also critical of the school board's "governance policy" model, which emphasizes the board's role

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of setting policy while taking a hands-off approach to the superintendent's decision-making duties, "accepting that the superintendent may do anything within the limits of board policy to achieve the ends," according to the DeForest Area School District website.

Horn said the policy governance model doesn't allow for dissent against the board's collective decisions outside the walls of the board meetings. He said the model may work well for corporate boards and non-profits, but not for elected officials.

"The current make-up of this whole structure, the whole model you're working on here, I find stifles free speech, stifles dissent, stifles the democratic process," Horn said. "You've really lost the trust of this community and I think big changes need to be made to fix both how you guys operate structurally and how each and every one of you fulfills the oath you gave when you took these offices."

Berg defended the policy governance model, adding the board of education uses a modified "hybrid" version that gives them more flexibility in their duties.

"What's the alternative? What kind of governance do people want us to engage in? There isn't really another model out there," Berg said.



James Debilzen photo

With Madison TV cameras rolling behind him, DeForest resident Jeff Horn addresses his concerns about the school board's governance policy model and the recent controversy over administrative raises that were approved last June.

"... We've tried to make it work in the school district so we can have our hands much deeper into what's actually happening. It's a big district and we can't micro-manage all that's happening. We're using a model that puts responsibility on the superintendent and holds him accountable."

PAST DECISIONS

Amy Julson, another DeForest resident, said news of the administrative raises reminded her of the school board's decision in October 2010 to increase the 2010-11 tax levy by 8.49 percent despite a failed vote of support by the electorate at the annual meeting.

"Even after we said no ... all of the board members unanimously went ahead and said, 'Eh, we don't care they said no to those tax increases. We're going to do it anyway,'" Julson said. "I know those tax increases had very little to do with the current debate that is going on with the administrative salaries, but to me it shows you guys are going to do whatever you want, however you want, regardless of how we feel."

Julson encouraged the board to nullify the administrative raises, adding she wasn't concerned about DeForest administrators leaving for jobs in other districts. Superintendent Jon

Bales recently said the board wanted to keep salaries competitive to reduce administrative turnover.

"I think a true show of leadership would be to give up your raises so we can keep a few more teachers and maybe we wouldn't have to cut some of the programs that are being discussed," she said. "I moved here four years ago because I thought DeForest schools would be a good fit for our family. Now, I'm not so sure anymore and I don't what's going to be left for my children in six years if we keep giving raises like this."

Former school board president Dan Wendtland also was critical of the board's

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Dan Wendtland,
Former school board president

decisions to give raises to administrators and to approve the tax levy increase.

"It's a wake up call. It's time for you, the board, to start listening to the community," Wendtland said. "Last year at the annual meeting, you had a message. You didn't listen ... You need to be fiscally frugal now. We need to be having some leadership."

Wendtland asked to be placed on the next school board agenda to discuss board realignment and term limits.

"If not, I'll be ... giving you a petition that we'll sign for the annual meeting," he said. "Please listen to the citizens. We've got Windsor and DeForest finally burying the hatchet. We don't need you guys upsetting things so our businesses flee also."

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"I've looked into what would be necessary," Horn said. "... I also need to identify candidates who would run, and there have been a few people who have stepped forward who are willing to run either in a recall election or the next time these people come up for re-election."

Horn gained experience with the recall process this spring when he started a grassroots attempt to recall Miller, one of 14 Wisconsin senators who fled the state in February to delay a vote

"... I'm not pulling the trigger too soon."

Jeff Horn,
DeForest resident
considering recalling school
board members

on Gov. Scott Walker's controversial budget repair bill.

During the Miller recall effort, Horn's group needed to collect 20,325 signatures to submit petitions to the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board to force a recall election, but

fell short of the goal.

Horn said collecting signatures for recall petitions within the DeForest Area School District would be much more manageable, but he'd have his hands full if he attempted to recall the entire seven-member school board.

"It's an option," Horn said. "In some ways it would be easier. On one hand, there's seven of them, but on the other hand, I don't need 20,000 signatures."

"I have experience in (the recall process) and I'm definitely in it if that's the way we go, but I'm not pulling the trigger too soon," he said. "I want (the school board) to do the right thing."

Bleacher blues

Amid safety concerns, board looking at options

By James Debilzen
Managing Editor

Mike McHugh is worried. As the next school year approaches, the DeForest Area High School athletic director is trying to determine the best course of action to address capacity and safety concerns for the aging wood-plank bleachers on the home side of the school's football field.

"In recent years, it's been really difficult to fit all of our fans into the bleachers," McHugh said. "When we have big events here like homecoming games or when we play Waunakee, we can't physically fit the amount of fans we have

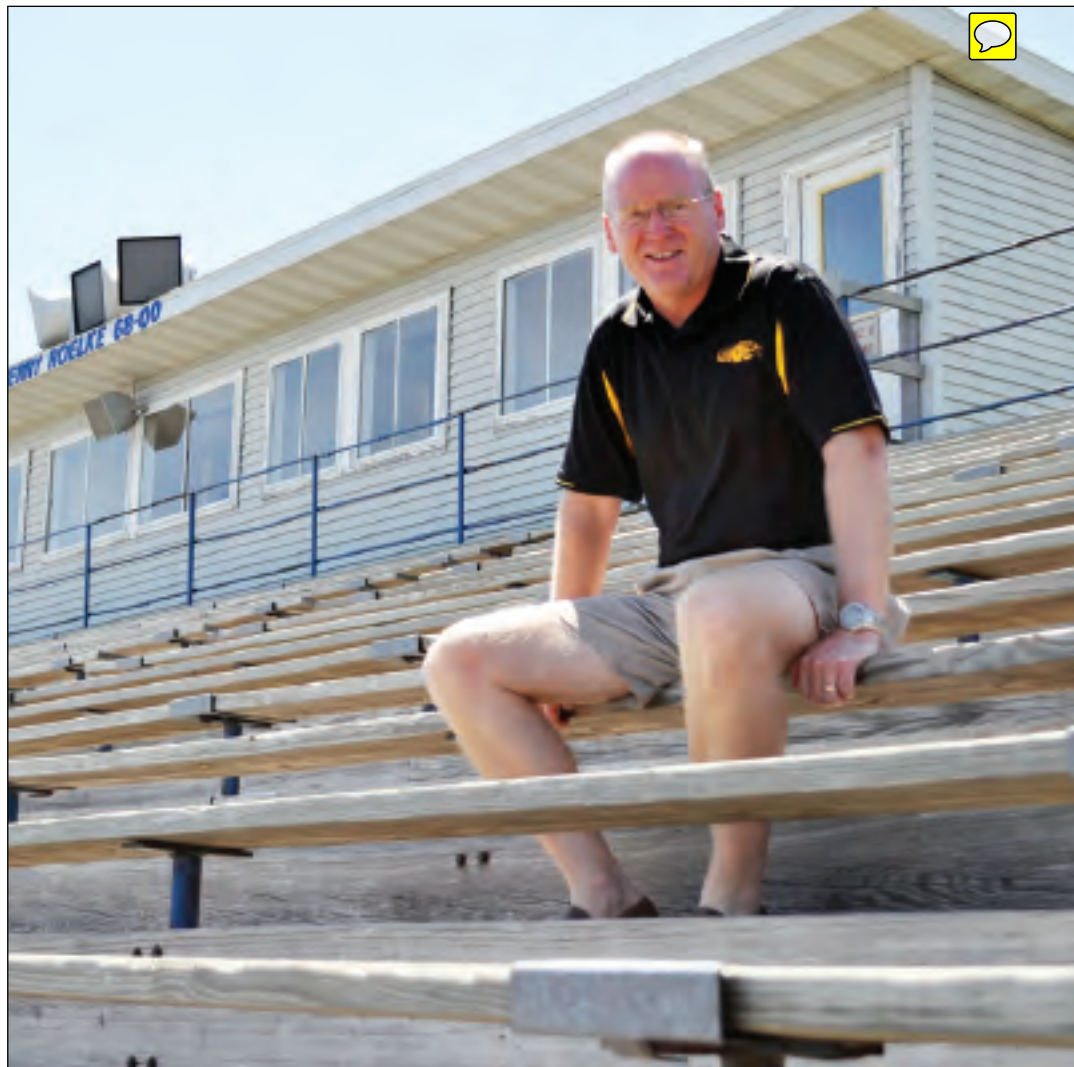
"... I'm really nervous about the safety of fans."

Mike McHugh,
DAHS athletic director

into the bleachers, so for years, we've been borrowing temporary bleachers from the village."

Twice in the last two years, portions of the structure have been roped off because of soil erosion under structural supports. Access for fans with disabilities is nonexistent, with most being brought onto the track to accommodate their needs during games.

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James Debilzen photo

DeForest Area High School Athletic Director Mike McHugh sits on the wooden bleachers next to the school's football field. The DeForest School Board is evaluating options for replacing the aging structure.

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"Now it's become a real safety issue," McHugh said. "Many of the boards have been repaired and replaced, but you still worry about some of the current ones ... Not being an engineer, my personal opinion, I'm really nervous when we have big crowds and I'm really nervous about the safety of fans."

Heeding those concerns, the DeForest School Board on Monday heard a preliminary proposal from an architect to replace the bleachers with a new structure that could address storage needs as well.

Board members informally gave administrators approval to have an inspection performed on the current home bleachers to evaluate safety, structural integrity and useful life, but said they wanted more information and alternative plans before moving forward on a replacement.

"There's a lot to do here before we can move dirt," said superintendent Jon Bales.

PROPOSAL

Robin Roberts of Roberts Construction Associates presented a plan that would include a 1,850-seat grandstand and press box facility with storage underneath, a new parking lot with 80 parking stalls, improved handicap access, additional storage facilities for the tennis courts and softball/baseball fields

and expanded bathroom facilities for an estimated cost of \$1.7 million.

The district has nearly \$1.12 million set aside that could be used for the project, including \$852,000 in the capital projects fund and \$266,000 from the Chase family, which was gifted to the district for use at the high school, said Diane Pertzborn, director of business and auxiliary services for the district.

Capital project funds can only be used for construction and building additions and improvements within the district and are not part of the general fund, meaning capital funds do not impact and can not be used to modify the tax levy, Pertzborn said.

The district could borrow up to \$1 million for the plan without voter approval, but Pertzborn advised against the practice, adding a project like new grandstand bleachers needs broad community support.

School board president Jan Berg said she wanted to establish different tiers for the project to offer a wide variety of options and set benchmarks for fundraising efforts. Fundraising efforts could possibly include sponsorships and naming rights.

"If you give people the opportunity to buy into it, I think they will (support the project)," Bales said.

If a plan is eventually approved, Roberts said he anticipated beginning construction after the last home football game of that season with the goal of finishing by

the following July.

District administrators plan to present more information to the board at its next meeting on Aug. 8.

BUDGET

The latest projections by district staff indicate the DeForest Area School District should be able to make up the \$1.6 million reduction in state aid in its next budget.

Bales told board members Monday the district will be able to avoid teacher layoffs through staff attrition, which includes the retirement of about 19 staff members this year.

The district will make up more than \$1 million in revenue cuts through increased retirement contributions from staff, who will pay 5.8 percent of their annual salaries toward the program. The adjustments were made as part of Gov. Scott Walker's controversial collective bargaining bill this spring.

The district will also make up some of the cuts through a 10 percent contribution from staff members on single-user health insurance plans. Until now, the district has covered 100 percent of the costs.

New sources of revenue being considered include an increase in athletic fees, which Bales said have remained flat for the last 20 years, and the addition of a 4-year-old kindergarten program this fall, which brings in additional state dollars for students.

"This is a balanced budget," Bales said.