

Two School Board candidates don't differ much on stances

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NAPLES — As Joe Paterno and Julie Sprague sat next to one another Wednesday evening, it felt more like they were old friends than political rivals.

They agree on many things, but disagree on one important point — who should be the newest Collier County School Board member.

The District 4 seat candidates met for the last time Wednesday evening during a League of Women Voters of Collier County forum.

Both spoke about issues they have discussed a lot this election season — accreditation, the district's budget, Superintendent Dennis Thompson. At the same time, they had new questions to answer for the viewing public.

When asked to share three things that they would discuss with state legislators to help Collier schools if elected, Paterno said it was important to discuss the funding of education.

"Not funding education properly impacts the success of our students. I would make that my top priority," he said. "I would also like to see us have some flexibility. We need to look at how we teach students and how we can better serve every student. ... Finally, I would like the Legislature to find a way to hold school districts harmless."

Sprague said she would like the legislators to look at unfunded mandates.

"I would like them to come up with the dollars to back up what they want us to do," she said, using the class-size amendment as an example. "The philosophy is great, but we don't have enough money to fund it properly."

Like Paterno, Sprague also said she would like the legislators to hold the school districts harmless. She would also like the state to look at how lottery dollars are used for education.

"I think we should look at how they are allocated. I know that some of them are used for Bright Futures Scholarships. I think that should be continued, but not at the expense of other programs," she said.

On the issue of subcommittees, both candidates said they like the idea, but were concerned about the implementation. Thompson proposed the idea of subcommittees as a way to get public input outside of School Board meetings and make the meetings more efficient.

"If it will make us more efficient, I am in favor of it," said Paterno. "But I am concerned that we are not putting people on the committee who should be on the committee. I think we need to look at that."

Sprague said no one on the education subcommittee is a current educator.

"That leaves out some important pieces to the puzzle. I think parents, students and teachers should be represented on the committees," she said.

Both candidates support the district's proposed referendum. The measure, which is the last item on the Nov. 4 ballot, is a tax-neutral initiative that will allow the district to transfer .25 mills from its capital budget to its operations budget. The result is that the district's operations budget would increase by \$16 million to \$19 million each year for four years. District officials have said that the referendum is needed to maintain the status quo, as the district will face more budget cuts next year.

Moderator Chris Straton, the president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County, asked the candidates what they would like to see done with the money.

Sprague, a teacher at Gulf Coast High School, said her budget has decreased by 35 percent this year at the same time she has more students to serve. She said if there is money to be spent on the referendum, she would like to see the locational school budgets increase.

"I don't think it is right for teachers to scramble for paper," she said. "I think teachers spend an inordinate amount of their own money getting things for their classrooms."

Paterno said he would like to see classroom needs addressed with the money. He said he believes the district should have included that language in the amendment before putting it on the ballot.

"If we had the opportunity to say it must be used for the classroom, I think it would be a bigger selling point for us," he said.

When asked what question they wished they'd been asked in forums, Sprague said she wishes she was asked what she will do about her teaching position.

"I have asked for a leave of absence and it has been granted. So, after the election, I will leave my teaching position and will work full-time as a board member," she said. "I will be in the schools and I will look at the good things. ... I want to heal this community."

Paterno, who is the executive director of the Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board, said he wishes he had been asked why he was running.

"I am concerned about the accreditation of this school district. Not only do we have the potential to lose all of our scholarship dollars, but ... when companies want to come in and bring in clean, high-tech jobs and they ask us about our schools and we say we are on warned status or that our schools aren't accredited, we have lost them as a potential employer."

The entire candidate forum will be rebroadcast on Comcast channel 11 and can be seen on the League of Women Voters of Collier County's Web site, www.lwvcolliercounty.org.