

Boundary plan divides District 833 School Board candidates

By [Scott Wente](#) on Oct 8, 2017 at 9:53 p.m.

A recent attendance boundary vote not only split District 833 School Board members but also divided more than a dozen candidates for the school board in this fall's election.

The board's decision last month to establish new boundaries for its four middle schools proved the one topic that most differentiated candidates in a recent election forum. Fanned across the boardroom dais and a second table, 14 candidates fielded questions about their strengths and priorities, district finances and the fall referendum in a Sept. 26 League of Women Voters forum.

There are 10 candidates running for four seats on the board that are four-year terms. Among those 10 are the four incumbents and six challengers. Another five newcomers are running to fill a vacant seat for two years.

Few stood out with dramatically different views on issues, but the middle school attendance boundary changes highlighted some differences.

Some incumbents and challengers said they support the plan that board members approved last month on a 3-2 vote, while others either favored a competing plan or a do-over.

Challenger Alexandra Hedberg of Woodbury said it's difficult if people are only looking at the effect on their children. She supported the board's approval.

"I think in general they're looking at it long term — what's the best for our schools and how's it going to be the most fiscally responsible decision going forward," she said.

Among opponents of the approved plan was David Pyrz of Woodbury, a board challenger who was outspoken during the board's boundary plan debate. He said building capacity constraints were more favorable over time in competing plans, and the decision shouldn't have come down to just stacking up pros and cons.

"You have to have weighted priorities," he said.

Fellow challenger Doug Hoffman, also of Woodbury, said he would have voted against the plan that ultimately was approved, claiming no long-term data was provided by the district and the decision-making process was flawed.

"I don't think that the district made the correct decision, however if that is the decision that the district needs to make, moving forward I will support and implement that decision correctly," Hoffman said.

Another challenger, Patricia Driscoll of Cottage Grove, said she didn't have access to the same information, but she trusts board members had the information they needed, listened to people and asked the right questions.

"Once that decision's made, as a board member I would support that," Driscoll said.

Incumbent Katie Schwartz of St. Paul Park voted against the plan because she said it, and others that were considered, did not address overcrowding at some schools but left others under capacity.

"I don't think I agreed with any of them," she said of multiple proposals vetted, but Schwartz added that she'll be supportive of the approved plan.

The board's other dissenting vote, Sharon Van Leer of Woodbury said she listened to the community and read every email she received on the issue.

"I voted my conscience," she said of opposing the task force recommendation. But she added that the decision was made in the best interest of all children.

"I feel very comfortable with how we delivered that decision and I will stick by it," she said.

A few challengers didn't come out strongly for or against the favored boundary plan, which attempts to more evenly divide students in grades 6-8 among Cottage Grove, Lake, Oltman and Woodbury middle schools.

Thor Halverson of Woodbury said he would need more information before giving an answer.

However, Halverson added: "I know that it's nearly impossible when you're looking at trying to come up with an equitable solution, you're always going to have some people that are going to be unhappy with the decision, and I'm sure that the school board made the best decision they could."

Katy McElwee-Stevens of Newport said the original plan when building the new Oltman Middle School was to balance out the enrollment across the schools, and that plans for the building always included a future expansion. Balancing enrollment creates more opportunity for students, safer schools and more space for instruction, she said.

McElwee-Stevens was absent from the recent vote, but said she would have sided with the majority.

Challenger William Thurmes of Cottage Grove said he served on a previous middle school boundary committee. This time, he said, he heard parents who believed the process was the problem.

"You have a follow a process that's fair and genuine, and you go through that the whole way," he said. "Maybe we missed that a little bit on this one."

Thurmes said the board should have sent the proposal back for more work in order to get a different plan that will last longer.

Sean Brown of Woodbury said boundaries are "a touchy issue with a lot of parents." He said he grew up in a northern Twin Cities district that is split with areas of declining population and other growing areas. Brown said it's hard to say how he would have voted.

"Without more information, I can't make a real good decision," he said.

Heather Hirsch of Cottage Grove said she saw the challenge of setting boundaries while participating in the southern elementary school boundary decision.

"I think that with the information I have I'm not sure I would have supported the current plan that the school board voted on," she said, but it's now important to focus on the plan's long-term sustainability.

Hirsch also said it's clear families view schools differently and that the work is needed to change the perception of schools.

Duane Girard of Newport backed the decision of the board, which was "faced with a lot of pressure from the community."

"I don't believe I would have changed the decision and I don't think it's healthy to second-guess that since it's over," he said.

Steve Lagoon of Cottage Grove said he would have preferred an external, impartial task force from outside the district make a recommendation.

"This would have taken the emotion and politics out of the process and made it easier for all members of the community to accept the result," he said.

Lagoon said the 3-2 vote doesn't inspire confidence and a new school board should revisit the decision.

Wael Abdelkader of Woodbury said the board did its homework.

"It was a hard decision to make," he said, and the vote should not be revisited. Ultimately someone will not be happy with the plan.

Abdelkader wondered if the community can come together about how it can move forward as a community.

There was little disagreement among the candidates about the three-question referendum the district put before voters this fall.

All 14 candidates participating in the forum said they support the levy renewal.

Lagoon said he did not support the levy increase and technology spending that make up the second and third questions on the ballot. The other candidates supported all three questions.

Tracy Brunnette, an incumbent seeking re-election but who was not at the forum, voted as a board member in favor of putting the three questions on the ballot. Brunnette supported the middle school boundary plan.