

# SCHOOLS SPOTLIGHT

## The June 11 election

### *Will the winners back the plan to fight high school crowding?*

**B**ob Rasmussen is sticking his neck out. As the lone incumbent in the June 11 schools election, he'll be a human bull's-eye for those who want to skewer the board for its slow decision making—most notably, its seemingly endless discussion over what, if anything, to do about the district's overcrowded high schools. And to some extent, Rasmussen won't disagree. "We've suffered far too long from paralysis by analysis," he says.

Rasmussen, Ellen Daniel, and Brad Orr rode into office three years ago on a tidal wave of voter anger over elementary school redistricting. While Daniel and Orr are now stepping down to spend more time with their families, Rasmussen hopes to spend three more years at what he calls the "important, thankless job" of serving on the board. "If I wasn't willing to step up to the plate," he explains, "I would lose some of my right to complain."

Given the purge that followed the elementary redistricting—every trustee who supported it either quit or was defeated—the board's caution in tackling high school overcrowding is understandable. Trustees considered building a new comprehensive school, grade reconfiguration, and converting a middle school to a high school, but ruled out all three options for political and fiscal reasons. Finally, in May, the board members made their move and voted to put an \$86–\$90 million bond proposal before the voters. (They will decide next month when to hold the vote, which could be scheduled anytime between September 10 and January 31.)

Most of the proposed bond would fund a very unsexy \$53 million infrastructure update for the district's aging schools, which now average forty-seven years old—for example, replacing original boilers and overloaded electrical systems in elementary, middle, and high schools. Another \$3 million would go to computer upgrades, money that otherwise would have to come from the district's tight operating budget. Finally, \$30 million would be used to accommodate increased enrollment at Pioneer and Huron: \$10 million for permanent classrooms to replace the portables now in use, and \$20 million to reduce congestion by modifying hallways.

Considering that nearly all of this year's newcomers mention managing state-mandated budget restraints as their number-one issue, you'd think they'd be happy that the

infrastructure improvements will free up over \$7.8 million from the operating budget over ten years—money that can be used to pay for more teachers. But in fact, all six oppose all or part of the bond issue. Even the two candidates campaigning jointly with Rasmussen, Katherine Griswold and Theresa Han-Markey, aren't in favor (Griswold is opposed, while Han-Markey supports some elements but not others). Griswold explains that the three share campaign resources and a mutual respect, "but not a common platform."

Although Rasmussen spearheaded the board's decision, even his fellow trustees aren't all standing up and cheering: Bill Browning, Kathleen Conway, and Bob Rorke voted against placing the issue on the ballot. When Daniel and Orr step down, Rasmussen will lose his two strongest allies on the board. It appears that supporters of the bond issue will be a minority on the newly elected board even if Rasmussen is

one of the three winners on June 11—raising the bizarre prospect that the schools may go before voters with a plan that the board of education doesn't support.

Without strong backing from the trustees, the prospects of the bond issue are uncertain—and the projected high school enrollment peak is just a few years away. If the bond

issue fails, the board will have to quickly reconsider what Ann Arbor can—or will—do for its overcrowded high schools. That will be the "important, thankless" decision confronting the winners of this year's election.

### The incumbent



**Bob Rasmussen**, forty-two, has a B.S. in computer science, mathematics, and statistics from the U-M. The cofounder of

SRT Solutions, a software consulting firm, he has a daughter in eighth grade at Slauson.

Rasmussen has been on the school board for the past three years and president for the last year. He admits that the need to build consensus means that "it takes us a long time to make decisions," but he stresses the current board's accomplishments. He's led support for the planned school bond proposal and was a primary author of the new policy that opens the doors of schools with extra space to students from all over the district.

Rasmussen says he brings openness and skill at facilitation to the board: "I make an honest effort to understand opposing viewpoints. If I find the arguments compelling, I'll alter my position."

In a time of fiscal constraint, "the budget is the policy," Rasmussen says. Next term he'd like the board to create a "zero-based budget," critically examining every line item in the district's current spending.

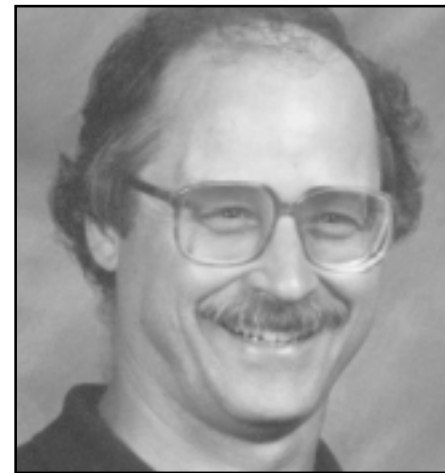
### The six challengers



**Sabra Briere**, fifty, has an A.B. in history from the U-M; she is office manager for Old House Gardens, a historic flower bulb catalog. Her son graduated from Community High in 1987. A former PTO president at Bach, Cub Scout leader, secretary of the Washtenaw County Democratic Party, and chair of the Ann Arbor Democratic Party, she currently is the president of the Washtenaw County American Civil Liberties Union. "Though I do have a political viewpoint, I don't have my own agenda, and I'm not trying to protect a [school] program," Briere says.

Briere was asked to run for the school board by a group of parents, including incumbent trustee Karen Cross. She says the most important school issue right now is to make sure that "in an effort to save money we don't throw away valuable programs." She opposes the planned school bond issue because it would "not resolve our need for lower-density schools, including our need for a new high school."

**Gary Gatin**, fifty-three, who has a master's degree in English from Western State College of Colorado and a bachelor's in political science from the U-M, organizes and authors research reports for the U-M's chief information officer. His three children are all at Pattengill.



Gatin has three years of experience on Bryant Elementary's School Improvement Team. He says he found himself increasingly concerned about the district's management—"the substitute teacher fiasco . . . reports to the board that always seem to be coming but rarely done . . . the overall lack of communication . . . and the need to ensure that *all* children learn. Eventually, I decided that I could either sit back and complain, or I could try and help turn things around."

Gatin opposes the bond issue on the grounds that it "simply trades one type of crowded environment for another," and that the district should instead "consider a paradigm shift to smaller schools." He rejects the conventional wisdom that smaller schools are too costly. "Our educational mission needs to drive our financial decisions, not the other way around," Gatin says. "The board needs to identify clearly where we need to be in five years and formulate plans to get there."



**Joseph Gelinas**, forty-four, is a computer systems consultant for the U-M. He has a B.A. in ancient and biblical studies from the U-M; served from 1975 to 1987 in the marines, where he rose to staff sergeant; and is currently U-M Sailing Club treasurer. His two children attend Forsythe Middle School.

Gelinas (pronounced jel-LYE-nus) says he's been regularly attending board meetings and reading agendas and background materials for the past five years. He ran unsuccessfully for the board in 1996 and 1998; he says he decided to run again this year "because I wanted to make sure we had some good candidates to choose from."

Gelinas says he doesn't "like the way

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[the trustees have] stalled on the high school overcrowding problem for the last three years,” but he’s unimpressed with the bond proposal, calling it “a whole lot of money for a whole lot of nothing.” While he would support the infrastructure upgrades, Gelinas says the replacements of portables with permanent classrooms won’t meaningfully alleviate high school overcrowding. “Saying we can’t afford to operate another high school is, in my opinion, saying we can’t afford to educate our kids,” he says.



disparities” between elementary schools and across student groups within a given school.

Like Gelinas, Han-Markey has mixed feelings about the proposed school bond issue. While she supports the infrastructure updates, she says she has questions about whether the high school expansion is the best solution to overcrowding.



**Katherine Griswold**, forty-eight, has masters’ degrees in business and social work, both from the U-M. A former counselor for problem children and director of internal customer support at Unisys, she is currently a management consultant. Her son is a senior at Huron, and her daughter is a sixth-grader at Clague.

Griswold has served as PTO president and School Improvement Team chair at King and on the AAPS Safety Committee and Strategic Planning Committee. She says it will take “a clear vision and quality information” to solve what she sees as the main issues before the board—managing the budget within the fiscal constraints of proposal A, and competition from charters and private schools. “Many families report that they are leaving Ann Arbor and moving to Dexter and Saline because of their high schools,” she says.

She does not support the planned bond proposal, saying that “it provides seventy-five percent of what we need in the district.” Instead, Griswold advocates building a new, 1,000-student high school on the Pioneer campus, a districtwide facility analysis, and closing buildings that are not energy efficient. “How can we say no to another high school,” she asks, “when we have three administration buildings?”

**Theresa Han-Markey**, thirty-eight, has an M.S. in clinical nutrition from the University of Kentucky and a B.S. in psychology from the U-M. A lecturer in nutrition at both Michigan and Eastern, she has two elementary-age daughters at Bryant/Pattengill.

Han-Markey is a former president and vice-president of the PTO at Bryant and currently chairs the district’s PTO Council. Like most of the other candidates, she sees the budget as the major issue facing the board. “Expenses must continue to be reduced in all areas outside of the core mission of this school district,” she says. At the same time, she also wants to address “significant achievement



**Craig Warburton**, forty-six, has a B.S. in theater arts from EMU. He and his wife, Brenda, own Austin & Warburton Jewelry; they have two daughters, one at Wines Elementary, the other a preschooler.

Warburton has been a volunteer with the March of Dimes and a trustee of Webster Church. Though his campaign materials don’t indicate any history of involvement with the schools, he does have the support of Bob Rorke, the trustee who recently filed a Freedom of Information Act request to obtain details of top administrators’ compensation. Warburton’s campaign literature sounds a similar theme, promising that he is “willing and anxious to ask hard questions about administration and expenses.”

“The intense way we hold a magnifying glass to building staffs and program expenses is not [consistent] with the way administrative costs and expenses are examined,” Warburton explains. “The administration has to be held to the same standard.” He does not support the planned bond issue, and he says he is “vehemently opposed” to any expansion of the existing high schools.



*The Ann Arbor school board election is on Monday, June 11. Polls are open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Applications for absentee ballots are available by calling 994-2233 before 2 p.m. June 9.*

—Debbie Eisenberg Merion