

LOCAL NEWS / GOVERNMENT

Candidates dislike idea of appointed board

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Five Pittsburgh school board candidates tackled a range of weighty topics during a forum last night, including mayor-appointed boards and school closings.

A Republican and two Democratic candidates for Allegheny County controller also debated their ideas during the session, sponsored by the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania.

But city school board candidates Mark Brentley Sr., Patrick Dowd, Bill Isler, Jacob Minsinger and Alan Perry, who have cross-filed on both party tickets for the May 20 primary, took advantage of the timeliness of school issues to dominate the forum at The Rivers Club, Downtown.

A commission Mayor Tom Murphy appointed to study the Pittsburgh Public Schools will release its recommendations for improvements next month. The panel is considering several options in selecting board members, including appointments by the mayor.

None of the five school board candidates last night endorsed having the mayor appoint all or some board members.

Brentley, an incumbent, and Perry, Brentley's District 8 challenger, agreed an elected board is best. Brentley added that he believed Murphy's support of the board's majority contributed to the disharmony among some board members and between members and school administrators, saying "the craziness has the fingerprints of the mayor."

Dowd, who is challenging board President

Darlene Harris in District 2, accused Harris of being a major culprit in the board's disunity but insisted voters should still have their say.

"We have the tools of change in our hands," he said.

Minsinger, who's seeking the District 6 board seat, complained the school board is so contentious, they "may need a General Patton to come in and straighten out this mess."

Isler, an incumbent running unopposed in District 4, said that the public should debate the idea of a mayoral appointed board, if it is proposed, as long as the focus is what's best for educating children.

Harris was absent because of a scheduling conflict. Minsinger's opponents Eileen Papale and Dan Romanello also did not attend.

All five candidates who were present last night agreed that the district had too many school buildings for the number of students and that a study should be conducted.

But Perry and Dowd emphasized that residents need to be included in the discussion, with Dowd adding that the criteria for making decisions should be clearly explained to avoid the anger and mistrust that surrounded closings in the past.

Minsinger plugged consolidating more elementary and middle schools to save money and to maintain a sense of neighborhood schools.

Former County Council President James Simms launched the first attack of the controller debate, criticizing the 20 percent property-tax cut his fellow candidate Larry Dunn approved as

a county commissioner in 1996.

"Last time taxes were cut, you couldn't take your kids to North Park because the grass was so high they got lost," Simms said, eliciting chuckles from the audience. "The mantra of 'cutting taxes, cutting taxes' does not play well when we have people, old folks, and folks who need services in this county."

Dunn said after the debate that he was "very proud of that tax cut."

"Yes, naturally, there were growing pains as you cut the budget," he said. "The employees didn't like it. People who were laid off didn't like it. People who were forced to do more work didn't like it. But it's absolutely necessary that we cut taxes in this county. We need to cut taxes because what they are now."

Mark Patrick Flaherty, the county Democratic Party's endorsed candidate for controller, was missing last night because he was holding a fund-raiser at the Duquesne Club, Downtown.

Bellevue Councilman Joe Scioscia, the lone controller candidate in the Republican primary, attended the forum.

While Simms and Dunn touted their experience in county government, Scioscia listed different qualifications.

"Seriously, the most qualifying experience I have is ripping my peers [on Bellevue Council] to little pieces in the press and explaining in great detail when they waste the public's money," Scioscia said.

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