Niagara-Wheatfield, North Tonawanda school districts hold reorganization meetings

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO
Interim Tribune Editor

The Niagara-Wheatfield and North Tonawanda school districts held their annual reorganization meetings this week, marking the official start of the 2020-21 school year. Amidst a slew of appointments and procedural matters, both school boards took time to discuss questions related to fall reopening plans.

Niagara-Wheatfield

At the Niagara-Wheatfield School Board reorganization meeting on Wednesday, board members met in person for the first time since March. Newly elected board members Michael Lee and John Forcucci, as well as incumbent board member Jason Myers, were sworn in to begin their three-year terms. Daniel G. Ljiljanich was once again sworn in as superintendent while Steven Sabo was reelected board president.

For vice president, two candidates were nominated: Robert McDermott, nominated by Julie Fago, seconded by Sabo; and Richard Sirianni, nominated by Myers, seconded by Forcucci. The vote took place by secret ballot with Sirianni winning 5 votes to 2.

Other notable appointments included:

√ Maureen Mack – district clerk, purchasing agent

√ Marjorie Strobel – district treasurer

√ Rebecca Ashby – district tax collector at a $4,000 annual salary

√ Kristine Hill – internal claims auditor at a $5,500 annual salary

√ Kelsey Kraft – deputy treasurer, faculty auditor

√ Margaret Beebe – district attendance clerk at an annual salary of $3,000.00

√ NYSIR – insurance agent of record

√ Haylor, Freyer & Coon Inc. – student accident insurance agent

The board also approved the 2020-21 regular board meeting schedule. Meetings will be held the first and third Wednesday of each month at the Adult Learning Center, located at the high school. Meetings will commence at 6 p.m. with anticipated executive sessions and public sessions to be at 7 p.m.

The schedule was approved as follows:

•Summer Meeting Dates

√ July 29 and Aug. 19 at 7 p.m. in the high school ALC

√ Regular business action dates: Sept. 2 and 16, Oct. 7 and 21, Nov. 4 and 18, Dec. 16, *Jan. 6, *Feb. 3 and 17, *March 3 and 17, *April 7 and 21, May 5 and 19, June 2 and 16.

*Additional budget workshops may be scheduled in January, February, March, and April.

√ The annual district meeting (budget vote and school board election) is Tuesday, May 18.

•Athletic Director

During the regular meeting, the board approved the tenure appointment of Matthew McKenna as athletic director effective July 28. Speaking on the decision, Ljiljanich said, "From really the day he stepped in here, he became a Falcon. He's always wearing his Falcon gear. He's very proud to be a part of this district, and it shows in the time that he spends here.

"I know he was instrumental in the work that the (capital) project committee has going on out there today. One of the other really great accomplishments – and I mentioned this to the board – was Wellness Day, that we put on for all of our staff this past fall. There were three or four people who really invested a lot of time in that. Mr. McKenna was one of them.

"He's just had a really positive impact on our district and I'm and I'm happy to be recommending him for athletic director."

•Capital Projects

Amid updates on the school's capital projects, Ljiljanich said that based on conversations with the company hired to do a "touch-up" on the athletic field's running track, they recommended resurfacing the track. He said if the resurfacing work was done now it would cost the district $120,000, versus $187,000 in three to five years when the track's surface begins to fail from age. Ljiljanich said the new surface had a 15-20-year lifespan and noted that the track currently exceeds that age. The touch up was currently slated to cost $50,000, to "clean and maintain the surface of the track."

Ljiljanich indicated he would like the district to move forward with the resurfacing, paying the difference with surplus reserve funds that rolled over from last year. Near the meeting's end, the board unanimously approved the resurfacing.

•New Equity Committee

Ljiljanich announced the district was forming an "Equity in education steering committee. He said the committee would focus on three areas: equity with race, equity with poverty, and equity with regard to the digital divide– an area of which "We knew was a problem in the past, but didn't realize how serious the number of students who, digitally, just are not on the same playing field as their classmates."

The committee will consist of administrators, high school students and community members.

"It will be an exciting endeavour for us as a district to really look at some of these issues as a group and see what we can do to improve," Ljiljanich said.

•Fall Reopening

On Wednesday Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that, on July 13, the state will deliver its finalized guidance regarding reopening schools in the fall. Local school districts will then have until July 31 to deliver their reopening plans, which should include what their precautions will be, if they want to have a phased reopening or if they want to have a partial reopening. Between Aug. 1 to 7, the state will then announce a decision on whether or not those schools reopen.

Ljiljanich shared some details how the district is putting together its fall reopening plan. He says the district has formed three subcommittees to break up the task– one in regards to district safety, one on continuity of learning, and a "pandemic response team," which he says will work on the "HR side and even, to some degree, the student and pupil side, when we get back and start having outbreaks."

He said one of the difficulties is that the district must come up with different plans for not only a normal, in-person reopening, but also if the district chooses an online-only model, or a hybrid model.

"There's a lot of planning going on, but we'll make sure we're in the best place possible come September," Ljiljanich said.

However, one lingering question is upending reopening discussions.

"I think the most important question, that we do not have an answer to, that I believe we really need some guidance on, whether it's from the governor's office, the state Health Department or even the county Health Department– what percentage, or what number of students and staff in a building who contract COVID, would force us to close the building?" Ljiljanich said.

"If that number is incredibly low, I would ask why would we do anything but virtual? And listen to me: I do not want virtual. But if we're going to do this and make it work, there has to be an expectation that a percentage of our population is going to come down with this (virus). And if we're shuttering the doors the second we have, two three, four students – and if you remember the initial CDC guidelines said if you have a student (confirmed with COVID) you close for two to five days. We can't do that," Ljiljanich.

The point was driven home when Ljiljanich fielded a question about whether the school should hire additional cleaning staff. He noted that it's difficult to plan for because if an outbreak occurs and a school is shut down, the district would still be on the hook to pay them.

North Tonawanda

The North Tonawanda Board of Education voted to rename Matthew Kennedy as board president at its July 1 reorganization meeting, which was held via teleconference. Colleen Angelhow was also renamed vice president. Both Kennedy and fellow board member Zachary Niemiec were sworn in to the board following their successful reelection bids last month.

Elsewhere, Gregory J. Woytila was renamed superintendent; Debra Bundt was reappointed as district clerk at an annual stipend of $4,675.

After these appointments, Woytilla commented, "I have to say I think in the 10 years that (I've) been here, we've never had the president, vice president, board members, everything, the same for two years. So I just have to put it out there again that this is very powerful because we're continuing. We're not stopping and starting, which doesn't happen often in a board of education. So I'm really looking forward to the retreat and growing and getting into some deeper business this year because we can kind of get into that next level without maybe getting sidetracked into some other areas."

Other notable appointments for the 2020-21 school year included:

√ District Treasurer: Jennifer Heiler

√ District Deputy Treasurer: Patricia DiVirgilio

√ District Deputy Clerk: Woytila

√ Internal Claims Auditor: Erie 1 BOCES

√ School Purchasing Agent: Anthony Montoro

√ School Physician: Health Works

√ Fiscal Adviser: Capital Markets Advisors, LLC

√ Bond Counsel: Hodgson Russ Hawkins, Delafield & Wood

√ Internal Auditor: Lumsden McCormick

√ External Auditor: Drescher & Malecki

√ Student Residency Determinations: Michael Tambroni

√ Civil Rights Compliance Officers Title IX: Gregory Burgess, Katie Smith

√ ADA Coordinator: JoAnn Johnston, Katie Smith (alternate)

√ Section 504 Coordinator/ Attendance Officer: Michael Tambroni

√ Records Access Officer: Bundt

√ Records Retention/Disposition Officer: Kristopher Clester

√ Chief Information Officer: Patrick Holesko, Clester

√ Audit Committee: Angelhow, Erik Herbert and Erica Robinson, who was named committee chairperson.

√ Key Bank, M&T Bank, JP Morgan Chase Bank, NYLAF, and Northwest Bank are designated as the official depositories for the school district funds during the school year 2020-2021.

The board also approved the 2020-21 regular meeting schedule, which is as follows: July 1, Aug. 5, Sept. 2, Oct. 7, Nov. 4 and Dec. 2; and Jan. 6, Feb. 3, March 3, April 14, May 11 (Tuesday) and June 2, 2021.

√ Budget hearing – May 11 at 7 p.m.

√ Budget vote – May 18, from noon to 9 p.m.

During the regular meeting, Woytilla briefly discussed reopening plans. He indicated local school officials were going to meet this week to begin getting plans together before guidance comes out from New York state. Based on preliminary discussion, Woytilla said officials would be looking to the official reopening guidelines put out by Maryland and Connecticut as a guide for local reopening plans, noting that "since Gov. Cuomo tends to lump in with Maryland and Connecticut, we feel that New York state probably won't look too much differently."

Woytila also expressed frustration that the state was seemingly "dragging its feet" on reopening when other states have provided guidance to districts already.

"So we're basically gonna build a plane and then, in August, they're gonna say 'forget that we're taking a helicopter and we need you to redesign it,'" Woytila joked. "But we're meeting starting next week and we're gonna start with elementary schools (and see) what's it look like, what do our unions need, what do we need, and start planning. Each week, we're gonna take a grade level. So through July, I'll have elementary, middle school and then high school; we'll have a preliminary plan (regarding) the bussing, the cleaning, all that stuff for what we think we're gonna do."

Woytila said he will continue to do his Wednesday Facebook Live discussions to help keep parents abreast of all the changes.

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