

Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

Candidates of Dist. 15 debate union influence

By Ashok Selvam
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted Saturday, April 14, 2007

The president of the Classroom Teachers Council in Palatine Township Elementary District 15 is openly supporting Gerald Chapman, Richard Bokor and Dr. James Ekeberg in Tuesday's election — but the union she represents has been silent, at least officially.

The CTC, of which Jan Belzer is president, hasn't officially endorsed anyone this year.

But the three remaining candidates and their supporters say their silence is a cover, and the union is vigorously working behind the scenes for Chapman, Bokor and Ekeberg.

Belzer said she personally endorses the trio because they will help unify the district and because of their experience — Chapman is the former District 211 superintendent and Bokor is a retired history teacher.

Board member Tim Millar, who was elected in 2005 and is supporting Lisa Neal, Susan Quinn and Mary Vanek, said the bulk of the union is clearly supporting the male candidates, even without an official endorsement.

Exhibit A, he said, is a letter the CTC executive board mailed March 21 to union teachers who live in District 15 but work in other districts.

The CTC letter accused school board members elected in 2005 of interfering with the operation of schools and verbally attacking staff and teachers. It added morale in District 15 is at an "all-time" low.

The letter indicated these board members are allies of Neal, Quinn and Vanek, and asked teachers to work on behalf of Chapman, Ekeberg and Bokor.

Belzer acknowledged the letter, and said union teachers also have made phone calls and put up lawn signs. They've also used an existing PAC to raise \$3,500 for the Chapman slate, as reported Friday by the state board of elections.

But Belzer insisted the union has not made an official endorsement, largely because the CTC had no way of accurately assessing the wishes of all 825 members.

In 2005, when the union did endorse, it got only 200 responses to its teacher survey, she added.

Vanek, meanwhile, said she believes the union isn't openly endorsing Chapman, Ekeberg and Bokor for another reason — it is afraid of a voter backlash.

The same voting community that elected Millar, Kelly Keenan and Wendy Rowden in 2005 "is

kind of polarized and not really happy about the teachers union," Vanek said.

In 2005, Millar, Keenan and Rowden rode a wave of voter dissatisfaction, much of it financial in nature, to victory. They ousted three longtime school board members — only incumbent Nancy Carlson won re-election.

The new board was embroiled almost immediately in contract negotiations with the teachers. The contentious talks nearly resulted in a strike last October until an 11th-hour deal was reached and the board voted 4-3 to approve a pact.

Millar, along with Keenan and Rowden, voted against the contract.

He said Chapman, Ekeberg and Bokor having the union's backing indicates the teachers expect a more favorable deal from those candidates the next time around.

"There's a conflict of interest promoting the very people who will be setting your salary," he said.

Ekeberg, however, said as a board member he won't be controlled by the union or anyone else.

"Just because a group supports you, it doesn't mean you're going to do everything that they ask of you," he said.

He said his slate did not ask teachers for help with the campaign, but isn't surprised they stepped up.

"Many of their members looked upon our views favorably and volunteered," Ekeberg said.

Bokor said handing out raises recklessly isn't part of his platform, and he supports responsible budget spending.

Neal, meanwhile, said the union activities are a big boost for her opponents' campaigns.

"I really don't have that much money compared to them," Neal said.

Belzer, who is retiring at the end of the school year, said the election isn't about the contract but about restoring a positive atmosphere in the schools.

She said the union had a March 15 candidate forum, in which all six candidates were invited, but only Bokor, Chapman and Ekeberg attended.

"Imagine what kind of message that sends," Belzer said.

Neal, Quinn and Vanek said the forum would have been a waste of time, and the teachers had already made up their minds on who to endorse.