

7 Republicans in school board primary

Top 4 vote-getters in New Hanover race to move on to November election

By Cammie Bellamy

StarNews Staff

NEW HANOVER COUNTY — The race for New Hanover County Board of Education is one of the most contested in the region, with seven Republican candidates going head-to-head in the primary. The four top vote-getters will also face four Democrats in the November general election.

Incumbents Janice Cavanaugh, Don Hayes, Ed Higgins and Bruce Shell were joined in the primary contest by challengers Frank Christopher Meares, Chris Morgan and Bill Rivenbark. The position's salary is \$12,700.

Early voting ends May 5 and Primary Election Day is May 8.

1. When and how do you think students should be redistricted?

Cavanaugh: I support delaying redistricting until we can redistrict all three levels of school at the same time (elementary, middle and high school). I don't support redistricting every year thereby disrupting students' families every year.

Hayes: All redistricting decisions are very difficult. We have a new elementary school that will open in two years. Therefore, I would like to wait and address all redistricting concerns at that time. Choices exist at the high school level that may balance those numbers without redistricting and minor adjustments may be necessary on the middle school level. The driving force should be that children should attend the school nearest their home when possible.

Higgins: Redistricting has been a challenging issue over the past several months. I delayed the process for at least a year because this is too important to rush. In addition, we have had a demographer create a report of growth within the district. While the county is expecting to see a large population growth, the demographer has projected that school enrollment will likely level out and may decline. I believe it is important that the board have a clear understanding of growth and options before we start uprooting students.

Meares: I am for neighborhood schools and expect each school to offer equal educational standards for all students. When it comes to overcrowded schools, if the expansion of the preexisting school is not possible, then redistricting would be a last option.

Morgan: Redistricting is a hot topic, and it may occur within the next couple years. The population growth here is growing at an alarming rate. School safety is top priority, followed by teacher recruiting/retention.

Rivenbark: Unfortunately, the lack of planning and failure to keep pace with the tremendous growth our area has experienced makes redistricting inevitable. We cannot build schools fast enough to fix the overcrowding we are experiencing today. I am in favor of allowing current high school students to remain at their current school if they prefer, but to start the redistricting with those who would be rising high school students and have not yet settled into their new schools in an effort to ease the burden.

Shell: Redistricting of students should be done as soon as possible. The board must first have public discussions on facility needs as associated with condition, space, and efficiency to the service of education. For example, we spoke recently of relieving crowding at Laney and Ashley high schools. The plan was well intended but lacked complete communication with our students, parents, and community partners, (including) county commissioners. We can do better.

2. Do you feel the district's schools are adequately secured against threats?

Cavanaugh: We can always improve security. Many improvements for security have been made as a result of the most recent school safety audit that we completed. We have asked for a new audit to illuminate safety needs in our schools. A new audit will help us prepare for threats from within the school and from the outside.

Hayes: A safety audit was conducted several years ago and we are still implementing the recommendations that are improving school safety and security. There have been site improvements, building improvements, transportation improvements, emergency response improvements and continued efforts to improve building security at all of our facilities.

Higgins: I believe our schools are as safe as we can make them without making them look like a prison. We have multiple SROs in all our high schools, at least one SRO in each of our middle schools, and currently one SRO for zoned elementary school with a statement of support for additional SROs in the sheriff's budget request. The board will be seeking funds for an updated safety audit (last audit performed in 2013). Two new elementary schools Blair and College Park are being reconstructed

to make them safer.

Meares: While measures are being taken to make our schools safer, I know that there is much more that can be done. Being a student during the Columbine shooting, I am more than aware that we need to go much further in securing our children's safety than what has been done thus far. By collaborating with educators

and local law enforcement, we can put together a plan to prevent future tragedies from occurring.

Morgan: No. Safety in our schools can be enhanced significantly. Utilizing local law enforcement and the resources they have needs to be optimized. My educational and military career provides me with a lot of applicable experiences, effective rules of engagement, and safe deterrent methods.

Rivenbark: Absolutely not. Security is far tighter to enter many corporate workplaces, airports, courthouses and even some movie theaters than it is to enter our schools in most cases. A well-coordinated, well-executed strategy incorporating every resource available within our schools, from local law enforcement, mental health professionals, state and federal support services and most especially parents and students will be required in these times to prevent our children from becoming targets of the evils of our society.

Shell: Security is not considered adequate in light of recent tragedies. Before significant dollars are spent an update to the board's safety audit must be done. My understanding is this has been requested.

3. How can performance be raised in the district's nine "D" and "F"-graded schools?

Cavanaugh: Money isn't the answer to all problems but increased funding will help. We need to attract the best teachers and administrators to low-performing schools. Increased bonuses for teaching in those schools will help us attract better qualified teachers. We must find a way to increase parental involvement in those schools. Children with involved parents have more school success.

Hayes: We must continue to refine and improve the programs that are now in place. Additional funds are being allocated to those schools that allow for smaller classes, tutoring, improved technology and increased supplements for the teachers. Growth is occurring but the home and the community must also become more involved and support the teachers and administrators in all of our schools. Education must be valued.

Higgins: I am of the belief that when parents take a serious interest in their child's education ... I believe we will see improvement. The New Hanover School System spends nearly double per pupil in the priority school as is spent in the non-priority schools. We encourage our best teacher to go to priority schools by offering extra pay. We know that schools in poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods can be successful with good programs and strong leaders, but it also take an involved family.

Meares: We need to strive to promote community involvement in these schools by implementing programs that fit the individual needs of the students. As a school board member, I want to talk with the parents, students and the school faculty to

see that these problems are solved firsthand so that real solutions can be put into action.

Morgan: I've always been an advocate of parent and community involvement. As an educator, I often had to teach the parent as well as the child. If there are academic concerns in our low-performing schools, we must seek assistance from parents, incorporate a strong volunteer base, have local community organizations step up. There has to be a strong teacher and administrative base, also.

Shell: The board has increased teacher supplements to teachers dedicated to teach in these schools. Labeling schools "D" or "F" is not helpful in my opinion. Growth reports that focus on performance are essential to improving students for future success. The creation of J.C. Roe for discipline challenged students is helpful to the transferred student and the remaining school. Additionally, I am hopeful that the conversion of Virgo to a UNCW lab school will also serve these students.

Rivenbark: We need to understand the reasons for the shortcomings, audit our resource allocation to determine where are deficient (i.e. lack of books, lack of functioning technology, etc.) and develop a focused plan to correct the shortcomings. Additionally, working effectively with elected officials to ensure we receive the funding we need to give our schools the best and partnering with local industry with mentorship, internship and other collaborative programs would be a good start.

To see more candidate questions and previews of all of the contested primary races in the Cape Fear region, go to www.StarNewsOnline.com/news/politics.