

# Douglas candidates' forum exposes differences

By Susan Wood

GARDNERVILLE – It's been said: The personal is the political.

When five of the seven candidates running for four seats on the Douglas County School District board of trustees took up the question of transgender access in restrooms at Monday night's forum at the Carson Valley Inn, the usually tame venue got slightly raucous.

Amid the laughter, groans and mumbling of attendees, each candidate tried to delicately express their views on the controversial subject affecting the schools. The federal mandate requires schools to allow students who identify with a gender other than the one they're born with to use the bathroom of choice.

Leading up to that subject, the panel discussion appeared mild and typical of most political forums. But moderator Jerry Evans, who owns KKFT 99.1-FM, baited the candidates with the inquiry at the non-partisan forum sponsored by the Good Governance Group of Douglas County. The primary is June 14. If no one receives 50 percent of the vote plus one, the top two candidates will face each other in November.



Michael Kiger

Retired teacher Michael Eugene Kiger of Zephyr Cove, who's challenging Keith Byer of Glenbrook and Nicholas Shepack of Zephyr Cove in Area 3, said he doesn't support the mandate and added that it's "not something we can decide on immediately." It was difficult to tell whether he was speaking of choosing one's gender or challenging the rule.

(Cindy Trigg, who represents the area now, is being termed out.)

Ambiguity may be a survival mechanism in times like these.

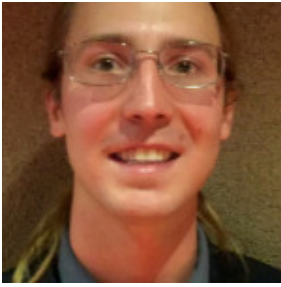


Keith Byer

Shepack, a small businessman who went to the Lake Tahoe schools, said he doesn't like that it's a federal mandate, but was open to further discussion.

Gardnerville resident Linda Gilkerson, who works for Tahoe Youth & Family Services as a mentor coordinator, told listeners that perhaps the conversation should be made with the younger set.

"I can tell you that millennials look at this differently," the first-time office seeker said, suggesting that young people appear more open to diversity



Nicholas  
shepack

than older generations.

To that, Evans piped in that it seemed hard to fathom a teenage girl not minding showering with a boy.

But to that, Gilkerson held her own, countering: “That’s not what we’re talking about here,” despite the sneers from the approximately 40 people in the audience.

“Before you pass judgment, ask the children. They’re a lot more open than a lot of people in this room,” she said, while never wavering.

Incumbent Karen Chessell of Minden, who’s running unopposed for the Area 1 seat, came to Gilkerson’s defense. The veteran school board trustee, who also works for the Nevada Department of Education, insisted she agrees that children are not occupied with transgender issues.

The bigger challenge to her is creating policy.

Larry Lippmann, up for the Area 5 seat against Gilkerson, stopped short of covering the policy and politics.

Instead, the Gardnerville resident – who has logged 35 years in education starting out as a bus driver – simply stated he’s “in support of people who are in transition” and that he has sympathy and empathy.

Byer and Gardnerville resident Neal Freitas, the latter running unopposed for the Area 4 seat, were absent.

Other than the small disturbance during the May 16 panel discussion, the night came off as a friendly meet-and-greet gathering, where the candidates mingled with those interested in Douglas County schools.

Four county commissioner candidates also participated in the forum – Greg Lynn, Dave Nelson, Frank Godecke and Larry Walsh. They fielded questions ranging from green energy and flooding to conflicts of interest along with water and growth.

But it was the school board candidates who took center stage first.

### **The lake as an island of Douglas**

When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* how they view school issues at the lake, Lippman declared he sees no separation between the valley and the lake.

“We’re all in this together,” the former mathematics teacher said. Lippman taught at South Tahoe High School in 1986.

Chessell, who said she showed up to hear what the other candidates had to say, said she’s “concerned about the success of all (Douglas County) citizens.” She pointed out how she was on the board during radon mitigation, an issue facing the granite-based mountain area.

She noted the selling of the former Kingsbury Middle School “has been a challenge,” especially since it needs a new roof.

As a teacher and administrator, Chessell may put her 150 hours of specific training in education budget and finance to work in finding a solution there.

“I feel the taxpayers have invested in me,” she said. “I look forward to four more years.”

In respect to Area 3, Shepack has ideas of his own.

“There’s a lot we could do with that property,” Shepack told *Lake Tahoe News* of the Stateline property. He’d like to see a recreation center or large community space that would generate money for the community. Shepack runs the concessionaire company Friar on the Mountain.

Beyond the business angle, Shepack said he brings a unique perspective – one of being a student. He spent all 12 grades at lake schools.

Gilkerson noted she takes the perspective of a parent and longtime resident of 24 years in the county. She raised two sons in Douglas schools and worked as a substitute teacher, along with working for nonprofits.

“Every job has led me back to our community,” she said.

Kiger endorses the idea of giving back to the community and through awareness and greater access being retired wants to avail himself to the citizenry. Like Lippmann, Kiger taught math.

### **Common ground?**

The candidates provided some diversity in the ranks when the question came up of Common Core, the U.S. initiative that details what K-12 students should know in English/language arts and math.

Chessell and Gilkerson offered their support for the consistency standards. Shepack hesitated, saying he’s not quite ready “to scrap it.” Kiger wants to enhance it, while Lippmann is against it.

“I’m way in favor of local control. I don’t know if I want the people in the federal government telling us what to teach,” the teacher said. To that, he gained applause from the audience.

### **Does money rule?**

When Evans posed a question from the audience about whether money helps education, most of the candidates affirmed the almighty dollar is necessary.

“Money does make a difference,” a stern Lippmann insisted.

Kiger explained how a small ratio of students to teachers brings better results. Chessell declared the state’s support of the dollars also provides “better results.”

Shepack would like to see more funding go to the arts, while Gilkerson leans toward improvements in technology.

Byer, who was in Chicago on the night of the forum, specifically told *Lake Tahoe News* that our investment in technology will help shape students’ futures since they “will face a dynamic work environment.” He added: “Every career will be intertwined with technology.”

Byer pledged to be diligent about making up for reduced student enrollment factors as a businessman eager to find creative solutions.

Freitas did not respond to an inquiry from *LTN*.