

2 seek Farmington school board seat

Incumbent eyes 2nd term Politics—new to opponent

By Casey Hans
staff writer

SUSAN RENNELS' political interests have followed her through college studies, to membership in various public interest groups, to her current community and school board activities.

The first-term incumbent trustee is again vying for a seat on the Farmington school board, facing first-time challenger Jennifer Mart of Farmington Hills.

The 43-year-old candidate, also of Farmington Hills, seeks a second term to evaluate the new superintendent — a hiring process done while she was board president in 1986.

Enrollment growth and imbalances in various school buildings are the major concerns facing the board, she said. "Over the next four years, we're going to have to deal with that."

She supports others on the current board who want to build a new elementary school, or schools, to ease the overcrowding. She also supports an overall redistricting at all levels.

SUCH A change would require "a task force that involves a lot of parents," the candidate said. "They have to develop understanding and goals."

One thing Rennels doesn't want is "an island of high school students" surrounded by those attending another school, she said.

The next major concern for the board, according to Rennels, is the curriculum issue, which will naturally follow any redistricting, she said.

Rennels has taken an interest in community involvement as this year's chairwoman of the board's community relations committee. She advocates some type of community committee to keep information flowing between the board and constituents.

Reaching the estimated 70 percent of taxpayers in the district without children in Farmington schools, is also something to be tackled Rennels said.

'It disappoints me enormously . . . that very few non-parents attend school functions.'

— Susan Rennels



... that very few non-parents attend school functions." She advocates a community survey to help get these answers.

COMMUNITY OUTCRY arose during the past school year over the handling of kindergartners, including where they are housed and how they are taught.

Rennels supports the current optional, centralized program scheduled to begin this fall, but stresses she wants it to stay optional, and standard kindergarten classes to remain at each building.

She also said any curriculum changes "can be incorporated in the standard kindergarten, and that any sort of day care program should be offered to both employees of the district and the community."

As a district which spends a high per-pupil amount, Farmington will face tough times if the state equalizes the money given to school districts across the state. If that occurs, "we'd be back to picking and choosing," Rennels said. She would want the district to reduce capital improvements and anything "that would not affect the programs of the students."

The changing cultural picture of the community is another area Rennels would like to see the district ad-

dress.

"It's there — it's a reality," she said of the changes. "Just because someone is a teacher doesn't mean they are well-versed in ethnic and cultural differences. This is a problem that has to be addressed in the schools."

RENNELS SAID she is pleased overall with the operation of the district under the new administration of Superintendent Graham Lewis, especially the promotion of several women to key posts.

"I'm very pleased with a lot of the hiring that has involved more women," she said. "It was a long time in coming."

Rennels has lived in the Farmington district for 16 years, and has two children, Abby, 18, and Chris, 25, who both graduated from Farmington schools. She is an assistant vice president with First Federal of Michigan and manages the company's West Bloomfield office.

As part of her board duties, she is liaison to Farmington Youth Assistance and was recently elected co-chair of the Farmington Professional Women's Network.

She holds a bachelor's degree from Wayne State University in political science with emphasis on economics and public administration.

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E DUCATION IS Jennifer Mart's daily business.

The 36-year-old kindergarten teacher is challenging first-term incumbent Susan Rennels for a four-year seat on the Farmington Board of Education. The parent of a Wood Creek Elementary second grader, this is Mart's first run for political office.

Communication between board and community, plus the district's curriculum, are the issues the Farmington Hills resident is stressing in her campaign.

"I sometimes feel we don't get the whole story," she explained. "I want to see the steps on how they (the board) arrived at their decision."

On curriculum, she said: "I think our education here is adequate; I think it should be superior. We have to teach our children to think — to brainstorm. We have the tendency to keep building the house, without laying a strong foundation."

THE WAY to communicate better is to organize a community group.

"I'm definitely for more parent involvement. I don't think they should be making board decisions, but they should be involved," Mart said.

She believes the building-oriented parent groups should remain independent; a newly formed group would have different interests.

As a kindergarten teacher with the Birmingham school district, Mart is especially interested in recent developments involving kindergarten locations and curriculum within Farmington schools.

Mart served on a committee to revise the curriculum in the Birmingham kindergarten program for the coming school year and has followed the Farmington situation.

She agrees the optional, centralized program is "a nice option," but she remains concerned with the bus-ing of young students to early childhood centers. Farmington is offering an optional centralized kindergarten at both early childhood centers this fall.

She is opposed to placing all kin-

dergartners at one location, because the interaction with older students is important, she said.

'We have to teach our children to think — to brainstorm. We have the tendency to keep building the house, without laying a strong foundation.'

— Jennifer Mart



"They have to learn how to get along with their neighbors," she said.

"And, as a teacher, I enjoy interaction with the first grade teacher."

Mart would look seven-10 years ahead when reviewing the enrollment growth and in considering any redistricting, she said. Revamping buildings, or constructing new ones, whichever is the most cost-effective, should be done, she said.

SHE BELIEVES parents would understand a redistricting effort, if they were involved.

"You appeal to their reasonableness," she said. "Educate parents as to the reasons why it's necessary to do this."

If state efforts to equalize money between all school districts are approved, as proposed by the legislature, Farmington would be short money, according to recent reports. Mart believes cutbacks would have to be done in special programming such as music, athletics and art.

Because "they're such an important part of a child's total education," Mart would advocate raising local millage to cover the loss, if that were possible.

Mart takes a strong stance on the

cultural issues facing the Farmington communities.

"To me, that's a hot issue," she said. With parents who are first generation from Greece, and in-law who came directly from Italy, the issue is also a personal one.

"School systems can offer programs; I don't have any problems with that," she said. "I don't feel we should have special programs to maintain the cultures. They need to become Americans, if that's what they want to be."

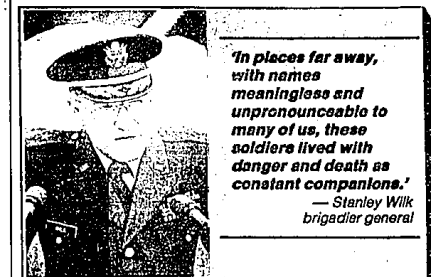
"We should be in the business of educating our children to be articulate, English-speaking Americans."

Mart has lived in the district with her husband, Richard, and son, Christopher, for the past eight years. She is involved with the Wood Creek parent/teacher organization and spent the past year involved with the district's OM Competition.

She holds a bachelor's degree in special education from Eastern Michigan University and a reading specialist degree from Wayne State University. She has additional schooling in clinical psychology.

In special education, she is certified to teach in grades kindergarten through 12, and in regular education from kindergarten through grade eight.

It's a time to remember



'In places far away, with names meaningless and unpronounceable to many of us, these soldiers lived with danger and death as constant companions.'

— Stanley Wilk
brigadier general



photos by LAURA CASTLE/staff photographer

The Memorial Day observance at the War Memorial was high on patriotism.

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MORE THAN 500 people turned out to listen to Brigadier Gen. Stanley Wilk, deputy commander of the Michigan Army National Guard, as he spoke of honor and the defense of our heritage.

Memorial Day serves as a reminder of fallen service men and women from the Civil War to the Vietnam War, and including others who have died in Grenada and Beirut, Wilk said.

Particularly poignant were references to the latest disaster to strike servicemen abroad, the death of 37 crewmen when an Iraqi warplane fired on the missile-guided frigate USS Stark.

"... In places far away, with names meaningless and unpronounceable to many of us, these soldiers lived with danger and death as constant companions ..."

Wilk told the somber crowd. "The soldiers we honor today loved peace. Willingly, without thought of material compensation, they turned their backs on things to defend another more precious. The right of people everywhere to live at peace and to determine their own futures ..."

FARMINGTON MAYOR William Hartstock said that flags flown at half staff last week in honor of the USS Stark crewmen would serve "as a constant reminder our peace is always at risk."

Tobin said it was important to recognize that service men and women are "on guard around the world," defending America and keeping peace.

"Those who think Memorial Day is to honor the military are missing the point," he said. "It is to honor those who made the supreme sacrifice, not to glorify war."

"The real purpose, if you want to philosophize about it, is to decorate those who have fallen in our defense. No matter what you think about their motives, you have to honor them for what they did for us."

Important, too, Tobin said, is to impress upon younger generations that have not witnessed war the meaning of memorial services.

"THE CROWD at the war monument was a mixture of young and old," Tobin said, adding that most of who stayed had a "more intimate reason — the loss of a loved one through war — for being there."

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