

Board sets limits on public input

By Tim Smith
staff writer

Input from residents at West Bloomfield School Board meetings is valued, but they won't be given free rein at the microphone.

According to an amended audience participation policy, introduced at Monday night's board meeting, someone wishing to speak on education-related topics in most cases will be given up to five minutes.

That allotment for audience participation followed some board discussion between amendment author Jeffrey Stewart and other trustees about how long residents can address the board.

In the first draft of the policy, Stewart intended to peg individual comment time at three minutes instead of the current range of 2-5 minutes.

"The only thing we ask is that what (residents) are speaking about be germane to the operation of the district or the board," Stewart said.

STEWART ALSO indicated that such comments can be critical of the board or school district.

"It's important for us to accept the fact (that) what we see as a personal attack... If it's connected with our performance then it's not a personal attack," Stewart said.

At a recent board meeting, resident Louis Kondur read a statement on behalf of a township senior citizens group that said "constructive opinions are not welcome or encouraged unless their comments are flattering to the superintendent and the board."

Meanwhile, in condensing what he described as a "cumbersome" original policy, Stewart also earmarked up to 30 minutes of regular meetings for public questions and comments; Monday's meeting had two 20-minute audience participation segments, one each near the beginning and end of the agenda.

"WHETHER ITS three or five minutes, it's not critical," Stewart said. "The time limit can be extended by the chair person (president Dede Andrea) without a vote of the board as long as the next person gets the same amount."

Agreeing after the meeting was

'The only thing we ask is that what (residents) are speaking about be germane to the operation of the board.'

— Jeffrey Stewart
board member

Superintendent Seymour Gretchko.

"Our intent is to encourage audience participation," Gretchko said. "As long as there's leeway from the chair to permit appropriate comments there won't be a problem." He added that five minutes is adequate for "average citizens."

But trustee Bruce Tobin said the time for individual comments should be flexible, because some speakers may not be able to make their points clearly and quickly.

"I feel quite strongly that the public should be encouraged to participate," Tobin said. "Some may not be articulate and might stumble with words."

ANOTHER WAY to address the limitation is to have participants put on (forms) before hand "how long they're going to need," Tobin said.

Because there would be 30 minutes allocated for audience participation, Tobin suggested that the length of someone's comments be determined by how many people fill out forms to speak to the board. Only Kondur spoke at Monday's meeting.

But Stewart said he didn't think that would be the solution.

"Is there anybody at this table who wants to invite one person to speak for half an hour if nobody else wants to talk? I think that's ludicrous," Stewart said.

Stewart said those who know they might want to make a lengthy presentation should either deal with their concerns administratively or request a slot on the regular meeting agenda.

A second policy amendment — on communication between the school district and public, including media — also was introduced at the meeting. Additional board readings of both policies are required for them to become official.

Meetings address year-round school

A series of meetings has been scheduled to get community reaction to the concept of giving students an option of going to school year-round in the Farmington Public Schools.

School board members directed the school administration to study the idea during the past year, both as a choice for the community and as a way to help alleviate some overcrowding. A mailing with some preliminary information was mailed to all elementary families in September.

Conducting the meetings will be an appointed Year-Round Education Committee composed of parents and community members, teachers, principals and two central office administrators.

School/community relations director Pamela O'Malley said the idea is currently being studied for elementary schools only.

Students have the same 180 days of school, but with 12 weeks of vacation divided into four, three-week segments throughout the calendar year.

Meetings have been scheduled to both present information to and get feedback from the community. All meetings start at 7:30 p.m.

• Tuesday, Oct. 22, at Flanders Elementary, 489-3673.

• Thursday, Oct. 24, at Hillside Elementary, 489-3773.

• Monday, Oct. 28, at Kenbrook Elementary, 489-3711.

• Tuesday, Oct. 29, at Forest Elementary, 489-3688.

• Monday, Nov. 4, at Wood Creek Elementary, 489-3755.

• Thursday, Nov. 7, at Larkshire Elementary, 489-3722. Child care will be available for children age 3 and older; those interested should contact the respective school where the meeting is being held to register.

Crosstalk program wins international award

A business/school partnership program involving Farmington Public Schools students has won a Silver Quill Award from the International Association of Business Communicators — the first time such an award has honored a public school system.

The award was given for a one-day competition last June between engineers from General Motors

Chevrolet-Pontiac-GM of Canada and an award-winning Odyssey of the Mind team from Harrison and North Farmington high schools.

The competition-part of a GM-tourism called Crosstalk, which regularly brings outsiders to the GM Tech center to offer a fresh perspective on the latest business issues. In it, the teams did a spontaneous brain-

storming session similar to one that might be used at an OM competition. The students won the competition, garnering 78 points with the GM engineers taking only 31.

The June session with the OM team was the last in a four-part series recognizing the growing importance of creativity in the workplace. The OM program is designed to help

students do creative problem-solving in a team environment.

Also in June, the students presented their winning Omer's Buggy Lite project, for which members were declared first in the state in their category in the OM competition. The seven students engineered a working vehicle for under \$75 and designed a creative skill in which to use the vehicle.

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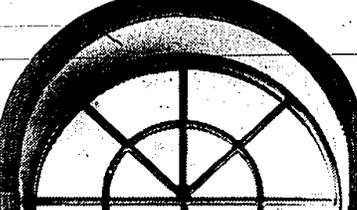
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