

Cloverdale seeks to move beyond contentious election

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

The contretemps that has embroiled the Cloverdale Fire District through a contentious board of directors election continued at the district's May 20 board meeting.

The election saw two contested seats, and a campaign that included insinuations of poor oversight of the district's recently approved \$2.475 million bond and accusations of "malicious misinformation" being disseminated by supporters of the challengers in the election. The vote wrapped up on May 19, with current board president Jerry Johnson garnering 54 percent to stave off a challenge from Rob Malone, and Alycia Downs securing 57 percent of the vote to unseat incumbent Tom Barrier.

Incumbent John Thomas ran unopposed and Keith Cyrus and Cindy Kettering were not up for election.

Thomas told the board, "I am sitting here with mixed feelings of shame, embarrassment, and anger." He said he feels the integrity of board members has been called into question, and the high level of trust in the community has been damaged.

He expressed frustration

with the conduct of his fellow board member Keith Cyrus, who voted in favor of the bond and to approve plans for its use, but called the board's oversight and the purchase of vehicles into question during the election campaign.

Vigorous debate is appropriate before a decision is made, Thomas noted, but once a decision is made, "each board member must respect the authority of the majority." And, he said, "board members are responsible to make sure that everything they tell the public is true."

Thomas moved that the board members commit to attending board training this summer, a motion that got unanimous approval.

"That's the first step in rectifying our bruised image," Thomas said.

Several district volunteers weighed in with pointed commentary regarding Cyrus' conduct during the election.

Clinton Weaver took particular issue with Cyrus' May 6 letter to the editor of *The Nugget* where Cyrus said, "Even though our two primary engines are older, I take exception with comments that we have substandard or unsafe equipment."

Weaver read into the record a lengthy description of the

deficiencies of the district's fire apparatus, which the bond will correct with the purchase of new equipment.

"You, sir, get to lie in bed and get a peaceful night's sleep every night. However, if the pager sounds, I don't," Weaver stated. "My fellow firefighters and I have to get up and ride in these trucks at 4 a.m. on roads sometimes covered in ice, and hope that the driver doesn't make a mistake, or that misfortune strikes. It is your duty to ensure our safety and it looks to me as if you are failing to do so."

Cyrus responded mildly to the criticism, saying, "I'd like to thank you for the update ... I better understand some of these issues that apply to these vehicles... Thank you. I've been a volunteer. I understand where you're coming from."

The board agreed that there should be regular safety updates as part of the fire chief's report.

Cyrus continued to advocate for citizen oversight of the district's use of bond funds. Fire Chief Thad Olsen said the citizen input he has received is that the fire professionals should decide what they need in a fire station. He also noted that he trimmed many "wants" out of the bond request to make the ask as

affordable as possible for district patrons.

"I have deleted so many things to reduce costs to save the constituents money ... but that never gets brought up," he said.

Olsen said he feels that his diligence as fire chief has been called into question.

"I take exception to it and quite frankly I was very upset," he said.

Cindy Kettering told Cyrus that if he wanted a citizen oversight committee, he should make a motion to create one and let the board vote it up or down. She also noted that Cyrus had voted to approve plans for the bond.

"It doesn't need to be rehashed over and over again," she said. "The majority has ruled. Move on. Please."

Several volunteers expressed dismay that Cyrus — a founding member of the district — had caused division in the district. Cyrus mostly remained silent. He provided *The Nugget* with a list of "dos and don'ts" for the district to regain public trust that included a list of what he

considers misrepresentations such as district concerns that modern apparatus won't fit through the doors of Station 2. He also dislikes the use of the term "pole barn" to describe the new fire station that will be constructed with bond funds.

The board and staff will have to find a way to move past abraded feelings and work together to complete the work laid out under the bond request. Newly elected board member Alycia Downs attended the meeting and set aside her previous duty of taking minutes to listen intently to the discussions.

Board President Jerry Johnson confessed to feeling "sick at heart" on the day of the election, but he said he was gratified to see that the taxpayers "looked through all the negativity."

Speaking directly to the firefighters in attendance, he said, "They realize the value of what you guys do in this district and a 20-year plan that ensures not only the safety of the district but of the firefighters as well."

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