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Public input rules cause rupture in school board

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

After months of substantial amounts of criticism and verbal attacks during public comment, the Salem-Keizer school board voted to give board chair Satya Chandragiri additional authority to manage public comments during meetings.

Despite receiving numerous complaints about the proposal from the community since October, the policy passed with a 4-3 vote — Paul Kylo, Jesse Lippold and Sheronne Blasi were the dissenting votes.

Danielle Bethell, Kathy Goss and Marty Heyen sided with Chandragiri in passing the policy.

“I don’t want to silence the community. They have a right to call in a speak. I want to hear from them. There is nothing wrong with asking them to be polite. We’re human beings with feelings. We’re here to serve, but there’s no reason to be mean. There just isn’t,” Heyen said. “I don’t understand why people have a problem with it.”

Since June, hundreds of citizens have been calling into board meetings accusing multiple board members of racism and calling for the removal of Student Resource Officers (SROs) from schools.

The new policy allows the board chair to cut off comments that are “obscene, derogatory, name-calling, racist, threatening” or criticize district employees by name.

Before the vote, Paul Dakopolos, the Salem-Keizer School District’s attorney, warned the board that the new policy could present a number of legal issues.

“The central problem with trying to define comments that are not civil and respectful is that the more language we use, the harder it is to not apply our own subjective lens to the comment,” Dakopolos said. “Applying this policy consistently will be a chore. You’ll need

to apply it consistently because if you don’t, the claim will be that you’re censoring the message — messages you like versus messages you don’t like. That’s what the community is saying.”

Chandragiri cited safety concerns as the main reasons for this proposal and said that the policy isn’t meant to silence anyone. He compared board meetings over the last several months to being in a domestic violence relationship.

“I felt like I was walking into a domestic violence relationship every time I sat in this board meeting. Words were hurtful. It was like walking on eggshells. Our ability to bring up or even entertain an alternative point of view was completely stifled,” Chandragiri said. “It was important to create an atmosphere where the rest of the community would feel safe to ask questions in the public comment section without fear of being doxed, threatened, humiliated or misunderstood.”

Chandragiri’s comments drew the ire of Blasi, who has been openly critical of the board chair since he brought forward this proposal two months ago.

“Quite frankly, I’m appalled that you would compare the criticism you receive as a board chair to domestic violence,” Blasi said.

Lippold also offered pushback to Chandragiri’s comments.

“I don’t think it was your intention at all, but I do think we want to be careful when speaking about domestic violence victims. To compare that to what we are going through I think could be viewed as demeaning to domestic violence victims,” Lippold said. “We don’t want to do that.”

Although the Oregon School Boards Association encourages boards to provide opportunities for input, Oregon law doesn’t require school boards to take public comment during meetings.



Keizer lights a holiday hit

The Keizer Miracle of Christmas Lights Display is drawing enormous weekend crowds this year.

The display will continue through Saturday Dec. 26. The route is approximately 3.5 miles and runs through the Gubser neighborhood, beginning at 14th Avenue NE and Lockhaven Drive.

The Miracle of Lights Display serves as a fundraiser for Marion Polk Food Share. While admission is free, people are encouraged to donate non-perishable food or cash at the tent on Mistwood Drive Northeast.

Follow the SnoCop barriers. Since it is a residential



neighborhood, be aware and courteous to pedestrians and residents attempting to get in and out of their driveways.

Public restrooms are not available and drivers should keep their headlights on at all times. People who want to walk the route will be allowed to do so. Those who choose to walk should park at Gubser Elementary (6610 14th Ave. NE) or Whiteaker Middle School (1605 Lockhaven Dr. NE).



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