

Benefit critics carry the day in PW-S School Board primary

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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Larsson, Kelley finish first and second; Mueller, Fritsch also advance

Ross Larsson and Earl Kelley, the two self-described conservative candidates for the Port Washington-Saukville School Board who have been critical of teacher benefits, received the most votes in Tuesday's five-candidate primary race for two City of Port Washington seats on the board.

Also advancing to the April 3 general election are Michelle Mueller and Brenda Fritsch. Leo Duffrin was eliminated from the race.

Larsson, a 41-year-old real estate appraiser, received 865 votes (21.9%), while Kelly, a 74-year-old retiree, garnered 840 votes (21.2%), according to unofficial results from the Ozaukee County Clerk.

Mueller, a 43-year-old technology consultant, finished a close third with 837 votes (21.2%), while Fritsch, a 44-year-old residential designer, received 752 votes (19%).

Duffrin garnered 644 votes (16.2%).

A total of 3,955 ballots were cast in the school board primary election.

The results are unofficial until certified by the school district's Board of Canvass and could change slightly because of outstanding absentee ballots.

On April 3, voters will chose two of the four remaining candidates to replace longtime board members Patty Ruth, who is the current president of the board, and Myron Praeger, both of whom are stepping down at the end of their terms.

Larsson and Kelley have worked to distinguish themselves as the conservative candidates for the board. They have been critical of the School Board's decision to approve a teacher contract extension and outspoken about their desire to further curb benefits.

Larsson, Kelley and John Soper, who is challenging incumbent Carey Gremminger for her Village of Saukville seat on the board in the general election, collaborated on a mailing to voters titled, "Your conservative School Board candidates."

That message, Kelley said Wednesday, resonated with voters.

"I think it must have because the candidates have similar positions when it comes to academics," he said. "Where we differ is on the teacher benefit issue."

Fritsch, who has defended the teacher contract extension as being fair to employees and taxpayers, conceded that the issue of teacher benefits was undoubtedly a factor in the election returns.

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“It remains a very hot topic in this state, so I think it could have been a factor, particularly in a primary where voter turnout isn’t always so high,” she said. “I think that might change in the April election.”

In a pre-election interview with Ozaukee Press, Kelley said the contract extension approved last year, which included a pay freeze and brought health insurance and pension contributions in line with the state’s budget-repair law, did not go far enough to reduce teacher benefits.

“Teachers — and even they seem to admit this — have a Cadillac benefit package. I’m not talking about changing it overnight, but taking one, two, even three years to bring teacher benefits in line with those of the general public,” he said.

Kelley is also calling for the creation of an ad-hoc committee consisting of district taxpayers to oversee the creation of an employee handbook, which will replace teacher contracts next school year.

Larsson said he sees the current board as “a group of people who are sympathetic to teachers and the unions when instead they should be sympathetic to parents.”

Fritsch said her focus is on continuing the academic and extracurricular programs the district offers.

Mueller and Duffrin pegged their campaigns on the need to expand the use of technology in schools, specifically saying the district needs to find the means within its budget to replace textbooks with tablet computers and electronic texts.

“Our generation hasn’t prepared itself for the challenges we now face,” Mueller said in an interview. “Not changing that for our children would be an even greater mistake.”