

**MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING
OF THE COMMON COUNCIL
VALPARAISO, INDIANA
SCHOOL BOARD APPOINTMENT INTERVIEWS
May 21, 2024**

The Common Council of the City of Valparaiso, Indiana, met in special session on Monday, May 21, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. in City Hall. Council President Kapitan took roll call. Present were Councilmembers Reed, Cotton, Domer, Pupillo, Anderson, Hunt, and Kapitan.

MOTION: Councilmember Hunt moved to approve the minutes for the Council Special Meeting for School Board Appointment Round One. Councilmember Reed seconded the motion. Upon roll call vote the motion passed with a 7-0 vote.

Councilmember Kapitan thanked the candidates for their support and dedication to the Valparaiso Community Schools. She also thanked the School Board liaison Councilmember Hunt for her work in putting together this process and her commitment to the schools.

Councilmember Hunt – There is a great slate of candidates. It will not be an easy decision but any one of the candidates will make a great addition to the school board.

Attorney Lyp thanked Sam Camp. Her memory of how this has been put together over the past five years is what has made it easier and makes him look good.

Attorney Lyp – This is round two. The applicants were done alphabetically. Each applicant will be given 30 minutes to answer questions. That is slightly more than the 25 minutes we have done previously. Some of the questions are long and it was thought that reading them would cut into the allotted time to answer. All questions were provided in advance. Each applicant will be asked the same questions in the same order. He will read the questions. It will be up to the applicant to manage their time. The City attorney will indicate when there is ten minutes, five minutes and one minute remaining. If the applicant is answering a question when time runs out, they will be given time to finish that answer but no additional questions will be asked. There will be five minutes between applicants to allow for one applicant to leave and one to enter the council chambers.

Q 1 – Do you have experience evaluating the effectiveness of a program? Provide a specific example of your approach in evaluating a school program or a program related to your vocation?

RON DONAHUE - He is in the medical field. They are always doing re-education. He sits down with the people to let them understand what is changing. He gets their feedback. It is good at the beginning to get their buy in on what's new. What the expectations are and along the way provide feedback and audits. Then relevancy at the end of it. Always look at things and ways to make them better.

BRETT MILLER – Working in mental health as a Performance Director it was his responsibility to ensure the facility was always survey ready. He was given a template from corporate that he continued to tweak as he went through surveys. In his final survey with the

Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services they ended up with four perfect surveys which unheard of. He holds the record for one standard cited by the joint commission

Q 2 - Do you have experience acting as a liaison in your community? Provide specific examples of past effectiveness as a liaison and your communication strategy with different stakeholder groups.

RON DONAHUE - At the Porter County United Way he had to deal with a lot of different groups. Overall it is just maintain a positive, honest relationship. People may not like answers but it is good to provide feedback and listen. Listening is a huge part of being on any board or organization. Make sure people know they are being heard. That is the main objective. Then be able to take that back to your group and see what processes you might have already or things to fulfill their need. He has done continuing education for social workers.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 3 - Do you have experience completing a performance review? How do you approach the review process?

RON DONAHUE - He has employees and supervisors. They look at this as an annual review. To him it is an ongoing process. Clear expectations should be initially and then as you go along. Don't wait until a specific date. People should know how they are doing all along the way.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 4 - How will you approach the topic of school safety? Do you support allocating funds for security and technology upgrades and adding School Resources Officers?

RON DONAHUE - Ensuring we have adequate safety is all of our responsibilities. There is a lot more than physical safety. Create a positive environment. Look at bullying, to mental health, to opioids. We always think of school safety as violence. There is a lot more to it. What is the stability in our home. Community programs. Relationship with police and fire departments and City Council. School safety is all of our responsibilities. There is the violence component but there is a lot that has to be done to prevent that.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 5 - Do you intend to seek higher political office while appointed to this board?

RON DONAHUE - No. He feels this is his way in life now to help the community. He thinks people on the school board should have kids in the schools. He has one in elementary, middle and high school. While he is doing this, he does not plan on running for anything else.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 6 - Given the national concern that divisive political issues are entering schools and shaping curriculum, how do you plan to ensure that our schools remain focused on educational excellence, especially as VCS faces increased competition from charter and parochial schools as alternatives?

RON DONAHUE - He thinks it is important to take a proactive approach. Do not wait until there is an issue with charter schools or people leaving. He thinks doing surveys is important, not just for why they are going to a charter school but other things as well. The only way to make ourselves better is to understand where our community is and what they need. If we do not know what people's needs are we will not be able to fulfill them.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 7 - What is the benefit of public education compared to charter or private schools. How do the standards differ?

RON DONAHUE - Public Schools follow State and District guidelines. Charters can set their parameters a little differently. Public schools offer diversity. It is not just kids we are teaching. It is the future of Valparaiso. Public schools tend to be more community focused. Charter schools might be more mission focused. There are definitely pros and cons to all. There might be specific reasons people have for charter schools and it is not that he is against them. He just thinks the diverse community aspect is what we need.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 8 - In the first round interviews, all candidates appeared to support ideas for greater communication by the board and town-hall-like meetings on topics important to VCS. Have you personally requested these or other changes of the Board and if not, what prevented you from doing so?

For standing board member, Ms. Watkins: you said, "We can do better in this regard." So what has prevented the Board from doing better?

BRETT MILLER -

RON DONAHUE - He has talked to one of the board members throughout the year. They are not really approachable. He is sure if he went up to them they would talk. He thinks it is going to take somebody on the Board working with them, letting them see the perspective of what a parent has and why those are important. He thinks someone who has kids in the schools and lives it every day is important so they can bring that perspective to the board and superintendent. He thinks then they will see how important those town hall meetings can be.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 9 - Our current Superintendent is a conservative manager of school affairs – which has kept VCS on an even keel. However, suggestions for town hall forums, greater two-way communications with city residents, and interactive board meetings have not historically garnered much interest from him. How would you suggest bridging that divide between conservative management and greater transparency with our parents, students, and stakeholders?

RON DONAHUE - Transparency leads to trust and ultimately increased stability because what we are doing now works but he doesn't know what they are doing to prepare for the future or understand what the needs are going to be. He wants to bring that to the table and let people hear why that is so important. It is not that we are going to do everything we are told but if we hear it enough and we understand what our parents are dealing with, we are going to come to solutions and we are going to tailor our ideals towards that. He has been to some of the meetings and he feels if parents came to events, had conversations or asked questions, it would be huge so they could really see what the needs are. It has to start somewhere and he thinks surveys and town hall meetings are a great place to start.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 10 - Please discuss your position on the prolific use of school choice vouchers and how it will impact traditional public schools. Please be as specific and detailed as possible.

RON DONAHUE - We need to stay dynamic and meet the needs of our kids. The people leaving have not had their needs met in some way. They need to concentrate on building the best schools they can. Outside influences are always going to happen. There are always going to be vouchers, budgets or all these types of things. Listening to people. Having these meetings. Being a little bit more flexible. Getting out there more. This is not the one silver bullet to fix it. There are situations where Charter Schools are good. VCS needs to build the best product it can. We do not need to force people here. We need to build a product where people want to come to our school system.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 11 - How important is the relationship between the school board and other government entities, including the City Council, and what should this relationship look like?

RON DONAHUE - All of us in this room have the same goals. We want to create the best community we can whether that is through our schools, our laws, our fire department, or EMS. There should be more dialog. Sharing trends. Sharing data. Working in the medical field you see different things like bullying and opioids. Collaboration on safety issues. Bus routes. After school programs. Mental health and substance abuse are big factors that we should all work together on. He doesn't know the best route but that conversation needs to start in smaller groups

on what information do we have that we could share with parents, law enforcement or psychologists. The more engagement we can have the better we are going to be.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 12 - Have you experienced sexism or racism or other prejudice in your capacity as a professional, and how have you navigated that?

RON DONAHUE - Unfortunately we all have. Corrective action and all of those things occur. Hitting it head on, setting clear policies and defining what the expectations are and what the reporting methods are. Regular training. You can't just do the set orientation one time in the career. It has to be something that we focus on and not just racism or sexism, but respect for each other. Building a foundation of respect is key to the kids. Bullying will occur. Opening our eyes to this and helping our kids build a foundation, and teachers and workforce is important.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 13 - What specific strategies would you implement to promote diversity and inclusion within VCS, including hiring practices, curriculum development, and student support systems?

RON DONAHUE - Active listening to students. Valuing everybody's perspectives. Being involved in the community. Learn about other cultures at a young age. If we start building that at a young age, then they won't look at it as different but as unique or interesting culture. Don't try to make everyone the same but look at differences and celebrate that.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 14 – Considering VCS's recent initiatives in energy efficiency, how do you plan to continue promoting environmental sustainability within the district's operations and curriculum?

RON DONAHUE - When the monarch butterfly project went on, his kids were part of the art project. He saw the City compost awareness week is in May. Tree recognition. A give back night at a restaurant. We can do this relatively easily and build upon what is already there. This builds a sense of community. It teaches kids the lesson of conserving.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 15 – How do you plan to support academic achievement and close learning gaps, especially for underserved or struggling students?

RON DONAHUE – Family engagement. Hearing what families' issues are. Regular communication back. Let parents know they are an equal partner in educating kids. All they can

do at home is so important. Invite them to school events. Make sure they are involved in things. That way they will see what their kids are learning and be more engaged when they come home.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 16 – How do you plan to ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate support and resources?

BRETT MILLER -

RON DONAHUE - All the ADA and technology are there. Professional development for our teachers and staff is an area we can improve on. Let them know we do classes for special things. Let them know some actions may be because of a learning disability or challenge a student might have. Make sure they do not feel uncomfortable dealing with these issues.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 17 – How would you approach budget decisions, especially when faced with limited resources? What areas would you prioritize for funding?

RON DONAHUE – Without knowing all the finances it is hard to say. I would say that we need to start doing things before we have to do them. Every organization needs to stay dynamic. Get stakeholders involved. If budget cuts or layoffs or downsizing has to occur anywhere, they need to be as upfront as possible. The worst thing is to surprise somebody with that. Have them engaged in the process. Don't wait until it's looming over their head. The best ideas come from the people who are doing the job. We need to listen to that while there is time to make changes.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 18 – Can you describe a time when you engaged with state elected officials on legislation that affected or had the potential to affect – our public schools or local community? How can the school board address legislation that impacts our public schools?

RON DONAHUE – He has a relative that is a State Senator and he talks with him a lot. It is important to reach out. A lot of our elected officials want to hear from us. They need to hear the school board's perspective and the Council's perspective of what is going on. Just like he thinks the school board should be engaged with the parents and the teachers. As intimidating as that might be, he thinks it is something they need to do.

BRETT MILLER -

Q 19 - In the past, Indiana's Teacher Appreciation Grant program allowed nearly all teachers to receive a small stipend in recognition of their hard work and dedication. However, recent changes by our state legislators has reduced this funding and districts are

now limited to awarding the grant to no more than 20% of their teachers—if they qualify at all.

- a. What positive or negative impacts do you anticipate with this change and do you support it?**
- b. Given these changes, would you support the idea of opting out of the state grant and instead creating a locally funded teacher appreciation initiative? Why or why not?**

RON DONAHUE – He has had this conversation with his relative. It is important to reward our teachers. There is a lot of different criteria to do that. The teachers he talked to in our district, not all of them knew about this. He thinks a workshop for the school board, teachers and students would be appropriate. This is something we all need to be a little bit more knowledgeable of. Rewarding teachers is hugely important.

Additional Time Questions:

Councilmember Cotton – He asked Ron to talk about the second part of the question with respect to given those changes, would you support the idea of opting out. You said it was important for all of the teachers to be engaged and have incentives.

Ron Donahue – He needs to know more before he can say an opinion. Where would the fund come from and what are the pros and cons of opting out. He supports rewarding teachers and building a strong process for that. He does not want to say it should be done locally without further knowledge.

Councilmember Cotton – On question 10 you said we are always going to have vouchers. You feel the best fix is internal and building the best product that we can offer. The question might be more to the point of what is the actual impact of having no income cap and entitlement to pick your school. There is an impact on what was formerly funds that went to public schools and people paid for their private or alternative choices. Now that money is leaving schools and he is looking for an understanding of what Ron's sense of that whole dynamic is?

Ron Donahue – If we lose more it is going to deplete the diversity and opportunities our kids have. We need to encourage our families to stay here. We need to look at surveys and see why people are leaving.

Ron Donahue – He discussed how important he feels it is to have kids in the school system if you are on the school board. The school board needs to be approachable. The school system is great but need to prepare for challenges. Need to listen to hear other people's opinion.

BRETT MILLER -

