



SaveGirdValley.com
CANDIDATES QUESTIONNAIRE
September 1, 2018

**Questions for Candidates for the Bonsall Unified School District's
2018 November Election**

Good Day, Candidate!

Thank you for choosing to run for office. We appreciate your commitment and would like to know more about you!

We are seeking candidates with the following qualities:

- “The ability to work well with a team and support group decisions, along with an understanding that the board sets a climate for the entire district;
- A desire to work toward a stronger relationship between the district and the public it serves;
- A keen eye toward serving the needs of all students, regardless of abilities or backgrounds;
- A professional, poised demeanor and respectful behavior;
- Respect for diverse points of view;
- Commitment to the time and energy required each week for meetings, phone calls, conversations, visits to schools, and professional development seminars and workshops;
- Knowledge about district policies, guidelines, needs, challenges and strengths.

“At the heart of it all, members of a district’s board of education must believe, unequivocally, in the value of public education. They must be dedicated to serving and teaching all children. They must believe in the democratic process and understand that their role is to act strategically, in line with the interests of the entire school community.”

[Source: www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/school-board-candidates/]

Please take the time to complete this Candidates Questionnaire. You have unlimited space, can add documents, refer us to your website or URLs. Answer them all or skip questions.

Please return to SaveGirdValley@gmail.com by 5 PM September 10, 2018. Thank you!

Candidates Questionnaire

Please tell us about yourself:

Do you live within Bonsall Unified School District (BUSD)? Since what year?

Yes, I have lived within BUSD for 15 years. My son attended Bonsall Elementary, Sullivan Middle School, and Fallbrook High School

Have you ever run for public office? What was the result?

I have never run for Public office before, and I had no intention of running for the School Board when I attended my first meeting at the request of a neighbor. I was shocked at how unprepared Board members were to make important decisions on our children's education and fiscal matters.

Prior to committing to run for Bonsall Board, I have attended Bonsall Board meetings for the past 18 months. I am very aware of the challenges facing the School District.

Are you and your family active in community organizations? Which ones?

Fallbrook Land Conservancy
Angel's Society
Casa De Luz
Tables for Tots (Ronald McDonald House)
PTA when my son was in school

I was also a volunteer coach for tee ball, baseball, and basketball

Do you have the time to devote to school Board work, estimated to be at least 10 hours a week and often more?

I have the time to be a responsible and contributing board member. I have committed to taking ½ day of vacation on the day of each regularly scheduled board meeting (12 meetings = 6 days of vacation). This will ensure I have extra time to prepare prior to the meeting, and I can make each meeting on time.

Some Board Members sometimes show up to meetings unprepared. Do you commit to being prepared for meetings?

I will come prepared to each meeting. I will read all the information provided and do the additional research that is required utilizing all resources at my disposal including but not limited to my brother who is on Mira Costa Community College Board and my sister who is a retired attorney from the Sonoma Board of Education who represented school districts throughout Northern California. I will be prepared to ask questions and hear all voices on agenda items before voting in a fiscally responsible manner to ensure the best education for our children.

I have committed to taking ½ day of vacation on the day of each regularly schedule board meeting (12 meetings = 6 days of vacation). This will ensure I have extra time to prepare prior to the meeting, and I can make each meeting on time.

Have you prepared yourself by attending school meetings, workshops, reading budgets and audits?

By the time of the election, I will have attended board meetings for nearly two years. I have read many reports pertaining to the District's finances and projections.

How many Bonsall School Board meetings have you attended in the last year? Did you stay for the entire meeting(s)?

I have attended all the regularly scheduled meetings except for one in the last 18 months, and I stay for the entire open session.

What motivated you to run this year?

When I attended my first board meeting nearly two years ago, I was shocked at how unprepared Board members were to make important decisions on our children's education and fiscal matters. I have been attending Board meeting for the past 18 months plus and I am aware of the challenges facing the District. I want to help. and I need your help to get elected in November. Vote for Roger Merchat, Bonsall School Board, on November 6th

Tell us about your financial acumen:

Are you comfortable reading financial statements and budgets, creating conservative fiscal projections?

I am comfortable reading the school's financial statements and budgets. I regularly invest in bonds (over 100 individual bonds) for school districts, and prior to investing, I read the financial statements to ensure the financial health of our family's investment.

BUSD has been deficit spending for over seven years. Its reserves are hovering around the legal limit and it has to borrow millions of dollars short term each fall just to cover operating expenses and payroll. What is meant by "legal limit"? What were BUSD's reserves before unification? How much did BUSD's Board approve as a short-term loan in the Fall of 2018?

BUSD's finances are a mess. At a recent meeting, Board member Dick Olson (not related to candidate Brian Olson), stated "the Board needs to stop spending money since the District was going Bankrupt..." The response from board member. Dr. Cohen, we are not bankrupt, there is still some money left.

In 2012 prior to unification, the district had reserves of 30.8%, presently the District has terminated employees to keep the reserves above the legal requirement of 3%. Once the District

reserves go below 3%, the District is subject to losing control of the District to the County and the State.

The District's low reserves require the BUSD to borrow money each fall prior to receiving their property tax money. The District will borrow \$2.7 Million dollars for 3 months. The cost (interest) to the District will be approximately \$15,000. As interest rates increase in the upcoming years, these interest costs will increase unless the District can increase reserves.

The District is financially challenged. How do you plan to set BUSD on the correct fiscal course? Please be specific. For example, to bring more students into the District, do you support high density development like Lilac Hills Ranch? Do you support limiting Board Member medical benefits? Was it excessive for BUSD to pay its Superintendent more than the Governor of California received in 2016?

There are two ways to resolve the District's financial challenges. We can obtain more revenue, and/or we can cut costs.

First, let's look at more revenue. More revenue can be obtained by bringing in more students, and we can look at obtaining more grants to support the educational experience at BUSD.

I do not support high density development outside San Diego's General Plan to bring on more students. The past Superintendent along with Bonsall Board President, Lou Riddle Jr., were large supporters of Lilac Hills Ranch. Lou Riddle JR was a signee on measure DD and wrote a letter to the San Diego County Board of Supervisors urging them to approve Lilac Hills Ranch.

An additional avenue of more revenue would be to pursue more grants. I would encourage volunteers to help with the submittal process and the pursuit of additional money.

The second item in improving the District's financial is to cut costs.

As a Board member, I will learn intricately how the entire District works and learn how each employee and outside vendor brings value to our children's education.

Cutting people would be a last resort. First on the list would be to take a second look at our vendors and the costs associated with these expenses. It appears from attending meetings that outside vendor costs are rubber stamped without looking at alternatives. These "rubber stamped" high cost items which include software (over \$500,000) and legal fees.

What do you think about the financial challenges related to the high percentage of disabled students attending BUSD, substantially higher than the national average?

We are morally and legally obligated to provide all children with the best education possible. This would be part of the process described above.

In August, BUSD's Board approved 11 of its administrators attending a \$16k two-day, three-night cutting edge teaching conference in Long Beach. The conference is to be hold on school

days in September, just a few weeks after the new school year begins. The administrators will teach the teachers how to cover their administrative duties including how to address emergency situations (wildfire and other threats). The Superintendent promises to teach the teachers what he learned at the teaching conference, delivering a 10% improvement in student scores in two years. Included in the cost is \$2,000 for mileage and parking for 11 cars, one for each attendee. What is your position on having administrators, who do not teach, attending teaching conferences? Do you support hotel room sharing and carpooling to such events? Do you support/oppose BUSD paying for bar bills at such conferences? As a Board Member, would you have asked for proof to substantiate the claim that a two-day conference will deliver a 10% improvement in student scores?

I would have voted “no” on this expense.

Since transportation is the second largest school expense, after payroll/benefits, do you believe the sharing economy can deliver cost reductions? Other thoughts?

This is part of the education process. I am open to all ideas and proposed solutions that can bring down costs without jeopardizing safety.

Any thoughts on online learning and its current and future impact on brick and mortar learning centers such as BUSD?

Online learning can be a great supplement to our brick and mortar schools, making available classes that would be unavailable to small school districts such as BUSD

Additionally, online learning makes “home schooling” more available which may affect School District’s enrollment figures.

Tell us about your thoughts on maintaining assets and expansion:

According to state projections, student enrollment “will rise until 2021, when declining birth rates and lower in-migration rates will send school enrollment on a continuous decline..” [www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/sd-me-enrollment-changes-20180822-story.html] BUSD is facing declining enrollment in the near future along with competition from dozens of private and public schools plus online learning options. With a 2018 graduating class of just 57 students, do you believe BUSD should invest in large scale brick and mortar expansion?

The shrinking enrollment at BUSD does not warrant new construction at this time. Based on numbers provided by the School District at the September board meeting, the School District is down 23 students from last year despite claims that enrollment would be increasing. This is 100 students less than budgeted. Likewise, Fallbrook High School has shrinking enrollment and they will be taking out classroom space as part of their \$45 million-dollar remodel.

The District’s projections appear to be based on a document designed to obtain higher development fees rather than what’s happening in the District. As a board member, I will work with the administration to get reliable projections as part of a Master Plan.

BUSD has no Master Plan. Do you support creating one?

As a board member, we need to plan for the future. Prior to any major construction, a Master Plan that is updated annually should be part of the process.

What are your thoughts on deferred maintenance of BUSD facilities?

Maintenance needs to be part of the budget. Maintenance not done in a timely manner will lead to our schools becoming eyesores and lead to substantially higher repair costs.

Bonds to build a high school in Fallbrook's Gird Valley have failed five times, back to 1978 and as recently as 2016 (\$58M Measure DD). Do you support passage of Measure EE, Attempt #6?

I do not support the passage of Measure EE. I will be voting NO on this measure.

However, if the bond is passed, I will work with the community and all parties to build a new high school that:

1. Blends with the community
2. Has flexible learning space for learning today and into the future.
3. Is safe
4. Is Low Maintenance

Are you aware that Measure EE is for Phase I of III and will be the first of three bonds needed to build a 1,500-student high school?

A comprehensive high school costs approximately \$150 million dollars. The initial bond of \$38 million will pay for some initial classrooms, cafeteria, and administrative offices, and have less space than the existing High School and will not be able support services presently handled at the present high school.

If building a new high school increases the financial strain on the already financially challenged District, are you comfortable with overseeing cutbacks and staff/teacher layoffs?

In my mind layoffs are done as a last resort, however they may become necessary.

Are you aware that San Diego County Office of Education can take over Districts unable to meet financial obligations?

Yes

During unification, State/County reports recommended BUSD sell the Gird Road property (in Fallbrook, just 1.1 miles from the northern edge of the District) and build in the 13.5 sq. mile Bonsall core area. Members of the Fallbrook Community Planning Group have also criticized the

Gird Road site as being too far north, not a centralized location, inconvenient for most District residents. What are your thoughts?

I am not in favor of a new high school at this time which would include the Gird site.

Should Measure EE fail, will you see this as a mandate for BUSD to divest itself of the Gird Road property, to rethink the situation, possibly build out slowly in the core of Bonsall? Or will you work on Attempt #7, another bond attempting to build in Fallbrook's Gird Valley?

I would not support a 7th attempt at the Gird Rd. site, and I would support selling the Gird Road site.

Should Measure EE pass this November, will you attempt to build a new high school on Gird Road in Fallbrook or in the Bonsall core?

If Measure EE is passed, I would look to follow the wishes of the community and build a new high school on the Gird site.

What are your qualifications to make decisions on new construction including a new high school in the District?

I am a licensed Engineer in the State of California, and I have been in the construction industry for nearly 34 years. I am also extremely comfortable with bonds which will be used to finance any construction in the District.

BUSD has predicted that 30% of its new students would come from the homes to be developed on the Ocean Breeze property and the owner of this 1,400-acre property publicly committed to helping BUSD with building as needed. Do you think building out on this property, located adjacent to Bonsall Elementary School and Sullivan Campus, makes sense?

Until you have a Master Plan that incorporates accurate predictions for future enrollment, a "heat" map indicating where the students live in relation to the proposed building site, plus a budget for operating the new school, it is pre-mature to pick a building site.

If Ocean Breeze becomes the site for any necessary BUSD future expansion, would you work with the County to create good access roads combined with walking/bike/horse trails to/from the residences to the elementary, middle and high schools?

Absolutely

Transparency:

Do you support transparency?

Yes

Do you support an online archive of key school documents such as EIR/CEQA reports, audits, budgets? Do you support an online archive of recording/videos of meetings and workshops going back at least five years?

Yes for both items provided there is not a substantial cost associated with the archiving.

BUSD is consistently late in uploading payroll data to TransparentCalifornia.com. As of August 30, 2018, 2017's data is still not available. Will you work to change this?

Yes, this should be done in a timely manner.

Have you, your family, or any entities owned by you or your family, ever received payment or financial benefit from the campaign committees for Measure BB, DD or EE, Lilac Hills Ranch or other large developers, Erickson-Hall Construction, any of their subsidiaries or affiliates or other entities that have funded BUSD-related Measures?

No

Are you or your family affiliated with or work at BUSD, any of the teachers' unions or receive funding, payment or any form of benefits from the unions, BUSD, union or BUSD employees?

My wife and I have a \$10,000 General Obligation municipal bond supporting the Bonsall School District that pays 4% interest. This bond was purchased thru Vanguard.

Share your thoughts on student/teacher safety, efficiencies:

The Sullivan Campus in Bonsall is located in a Moderate Wildfire Zone while Fallbrook's Gird Valley is in a Very High Wildfire Hazard Zone. Do you think moving the students from a Moderate to a Very High Wildfire Hazard Zone makes sense as far as safety is concerned?

Not at this time

BUSD's proposed high school designs include only one entrance/exit. Do you support having one entrance/exit for any school located in a Moderate to Very High Wildfire Zone? What are your thoughts on wildfire and evacuation plans or other safety-related issues?

Wild Fires are part of our rural community. Wherever our schools are built, we need to be prepared to evacuate the students and all personnel. In high winds, any nearby fire poses a risk, and evacuation should proceed ASAP. I would support having two entrance/exits in the case of a fire.

Traffic generated by schools is a key concern to District residents. During the Draft Environmental Impact Report process (ongoing) required under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), it was estimated that a 1,500-student high school would generate a 73% increase in traffic. Do you support a reduction in traffic, accidents, parking and greenhouse gases (GHGs), District-wide, via the use of carpooling apps?

Yes

The Fallbrook and Bonsall School Districts do not have aligning school years. This puts hardships on Bonsall District single parents and dual income parents without adequate vacation time. If elected, would you support, aligning the Bonsall School year with Fallbrook?

Yes. I have heard one gentleman speak twice on the matter, and I see no reason why this can't be accomplished.

At the present time, school paperwork for parents is done via hard copy. Do you commit to supporting an option to have school paperwork submitted electronically?

Yes

Do you have any other ideas you'd like to share about how to improve student/teacher safety or efficiency?

I do not believe Top-Down management works.

Bonsall District employs many fantastic individuals that are experts in the field of education. Listening and asking questions followed by more listening to these employees will bring solutions that all stake holders can embrace improving our children's education, safety at our schools, and employee satisfaction.

And finally:

What do you offer District residents? Why should we vote for you? Anything else you'd like to add?

As my career is winding down, I have the time and energy to serve as a Bonsall Board member. I am a licensed Engineer with 33 years in the construction industry, and I am very familiar with the bonds that finance construction. I have attended Board Meeting for nearly two years, so I am aware of the District's challenges and I am prepared to be a responsible and contributing Board member.

Whatever the decision made by the community on Measure EE, I look forward to consensus building to provide great education and a great education system for our children.

Vote Roger Merchat for Bonsall Board on November 6th.

Thank you for your time!

The Volunteers at SaveGirdValley.com