

## Neary set to polish School Board image

By JJ DeForest/The Willits News The Willits News

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The "tarnished image" of the Willits Unified School District Board of Trustees prompted Willits attorney Christopher Neary to apply for an open seat on the school board earlier this year. He now seeks election to a full term.

Neary was appointed in January to fill the seat left open on the board following the resignation of Trustee Barbara Starr in December 2012. He also serves as legal counsel to the Brooktrails Community Services District as well as other public entities.

Neary is an experienced WUSD Board member, having served from 1980 to 1992 although he admits his priorities have changed.

"I was more interested in returning Willits to a regional football power than education," he said with a smile.

Times have changed.

"Now I am focused on the big financial challenge facing the district. That is getting through this litigation, getting through this bond measure and getting through the situation prevailing with the teacher's association," he said. "Those three things over the next 12 months are going to be critical."

Neary has taken the lead in ongoing litigation between the district and Caldwell Flores Winters, the financial advisor to the district during the bond issue of 2010. A settlement conference is scheduled for Oct. 17.

The district's financial distress has exacerbated tensions with the Willits Teachers Association during this year's contract negotiations. The WTA and the district are at an impasse as both sides attempt to reconcile the needs of teachers and students. At issue are wage increases, compensation for post-graduate degrees, and a reduction in the number of days of instruction.

"I personally believe it's in the interests of the district to pay the teachers as much as they can possibly pay them," Neary said. "Most teachers here are happy. They come here. They stay here a long time and it's in our interest that they do."

Neary points out teachers are looking for an increase in a year where the financial survival of the district is at issue.

"They are analyzing it from a traditional management labor perspective, to get better wages for the rank and file," he said. "To view it as a labor/management thing in the first place is a misplaced analysis."

Neary is confident the situation will end soon.

"I think what's going to end up happening is there's going to be a resolution, whether negotiated or coming out through fact-finding," he said. "The teachers association needs to have the understanding that the

people who are making the decision aren't mean spirited."

Neary believes both sides are negotiating in good faith and the improving financial situation of the district will help the district move forward without any ill-effects.

"Things are starting to get better, by coincidence, by fortunate coincidence," he said. "I think actions speak louder than words. I think if the teachers see the board acting in response to an improving financial situation that will restore, as much as possible, any bad feelings that might exist from the current situation."

While Average Daily Attendance numbers seem to be showing slight improvement, the district still faces a \$4.9 million bond payment next year. Exactly how that payment will be made is still being studied.

"I think we'll be able to do it in a way that will not distress the district. But it remains to be seen. That's number one and it overshadows everything else," he said. "When we survive that then it turns out we've got improving attendance here. Teachers are being taxed by having more kids in their classes. We're going to have to intelligently prime the pump with extra money that's coming in from additional attendance and from the states improving economy and educational formula. The fact of the matter is a year from now we're going to have substantially more money than we have now."

Neary plans to add staff and other support positions as stable funding becomes available.

The continuing question of maintaining reserves above the state minimum is counter-intuitive to Neary.

"While the maintenance of reserves is a very noble, the fact of the matter is we're emerging from a situation where we're almost running aground," he said. "In the context of that and what I see as an improving economy we need to adopt a plan to return the reserves to effective levels but we can trespass upon what might be prudent in normal circumstances to re-prime the school district."

Aiding the board in its efforts to put the district back on a firm financial footing is new superintendent, Patricia Johnson. Neary said Johnson was selected from a group of highly-qualified candidates.

"What I saw in Pat, was she had communications skills. From what I've observed communication skills are about as important an attribute for that position as you can have," he said. "I think she's a good communicator."

Although he said it was "too early to tell" how Johnson's work would shape the district, he likes what he sees so far.

"I'm impressed with Pat's ability and attention to detail," he said.

Neary has worked with several superintendents during his work with the board and said some were detail-oriented and others were good at managing the big picture.

"What I've noticed about Pat is a combination of those abilities," he said.

Neary said he's brought several issues to Johnson's attention and they were handled promptly.

"I've been impressed by that," he said.

As the election approaches, Neary is focused on his abilities and the experience he brings to the position of trustee.

"After almost 40 years of practicing law at a fairly high level, I bring some intangibles to the analysis of things where you're not relying on your hired lawyers," he said. "When you have lawyers working for you it takes somebody who understands the process to manage that process. I think that I'm bringing some of that so we're not having to rely on what the lawyers tell us."

Neary said reliance on outside consultants is fine but skepticism is required.

"Skepticism is the watchword of the legal mind," he said. "Even the things that you believe in the most, you have to step back and say 'now are you sure?'"

Neary plans to use his legal experience and skills to continue to work collectively with other board members. He said the ability to accept somebody else's views and to accept criticism of your views in good humor is one key to being a success

"Flexibility and adeptness of analysis is the most important thing for a member of a collective decision-making body," he said.

Flexibility is just one attribute required to navigate the choppy fiscal waters the district will face in the next year.

"The public may not understand the depth of the crisis and that it's a crisis that requires problem-solving. I bring a record of problem solving. Sometimes successful and sometimes not, but at least I do it with passion," he said. "I'm far away from my days of emphasis on football. Those kinds of preoccupations are in my past and now I'm sort of worried this district could fail to survive these crises. It's very disturbing to me This isn't just something that might happen; it's something that could happen. If it did happen somebody would say 'I wish somebody would have done something'. That's why I'm stepping up, for that reason alone."