



School board trustees split 3-3 in endorsing candidates in June 7 election

Two factions supporting opposing candidates Arnett and Torrissi

Nicholas Preciado

May 11, 2016

Two fundraisers for school board candidates Pamela Torrissi and Tom Arnett held April 26 highlight the split choice between the six trustees on who they want to join them after the June 7 special election.

Morgan Hill Unified School District Board President Bob Benevento and trustees Donna Ruebusch and Ron Woolf endorsed Torrissi at her kick-off campaign event held at Mama Mia's Restaurant. Board members David Gerard, Gino Borgioli and Rick Badillo attended Arnett's event held at the southwest Morgan Hill residence of his friends, Steve and Julie Schilling. The three actively support his campaign, but Arnett stressed he did not seek out their support.

Trisha Parent attended Torrissi's campaign fundraiser with her 24-year old son Nick, who has known the candidate since he was 8. As a teacher's aide, Torrissi helped him at Paradise Valley Elementary School where he was a special education student for four years. After Nick moved on to middle school and high school, Torrissi continued tutoring him on basic life skills and continues to do so once a week at the Morgan Hill Library.

"Pam has the experience of an educator," Parent said. "She has a heart for seeking out what is best for the students."

At Arnett's fundraiser, MHUSD parent Lisa Ravesi said she supports the candidate because of his education research background and his family values. "Tom is a well-educated man in many facets in education, but not only that, he's a family man," she said. "We need someone on the board who cares about the kids and the teachers."

Arnett considers the "big picture" should include board support for teachers and the children, she said.

"Children learn from the teachers, and if we don't have everybody on the same page, then we're not gonna have the best situation for our children," she said.

All current board members have either endorsed or publicly stated which candidates they support.

Benevento has known Torrasi for ten years since he was appointed to the MHUSD Personnel Commission and she served the local classified employees union as president. After he was appointed to the board of trustees in 2012, he found Torrasi to be a “team player” who listens to all sides of a debate, he said.

“When faced with challenges, Pam took them head on, studied the issues and articulately presented her case to the board, to the Personnel Commission or to her fellow employees,” he said. “While we may not have always agreed on any given item, we always shared a mutual respect and understanding built on the bond developed in those earlier years.”

Arnett supporter Gerard did not respond to multiple requests for an interview for this story. In a podcast, however, he is heard sharing his thoughts with the candidate at an April 8 conference put on by the Cato Institute. At the libertarian think tank’s event in East Palo Alto, Arnett discussed “The Future of Education” with Cato’s policy analyst Jason Bedrick. Gerard said he likes the “disruptive innovation” philosophy promoted by the Clayton Christensen Institute where Arnett is a research fellow.

“My observation, having been a school board member for two years, is that I’ve seen a collusion between the state education bureaucracy, the teachers unions and also the district superintendents around the state, as I have seen in our own district. I think we have a huge opportunity with parents, particularly Latino parents, who are demanding charter schools, demanding innovation, but they don’t know about many of the more erudite (programs) today,” he said. “To shift our conversation from the policy to the organizational and political, don’t we have an opportunity to really disseminate these ideas more broadly and define allies who are there on the street, give them voice and give them power so we can make these changes not years from now, but today? ... These parents are begging, literally begging, for this innovation, this disruption.”

At Arnett’s April 26 fundraising event, board member Badillo explained why he was throwing his support behind Arnett. “We don’t need more union bosses. We need more parents!” he said.

Borgioli did not respond to multiple requests for an interview on why he supports Arnett.

Trustee Woolf has known Torrasi for 34 years since she was hired by the district. Her experience as a para-educator and Service Employees International Union leader during that time will enable her to understand district policy and procedure if elected, he said.

“She’s been in the district, she’s been president of the union, she knows about budgets, she’s been to endless numbers of board meetings. And that’s what it’s all about,” Woolf said. “Pam’s been to a lot of events in the community.... You should be visible (as a board member). People want to approach you, want to talk to you. And if there’s a concern that they have, you better be visible.”

Trustee Ruebusch endorses Torrasi because of her years of involvement in school board governance. Arnett phoned Ruebusch and had a chat with her to get to know each other, she said.

“He seems like a really smart guy and a nice person, but I can’t say I know him,” she said. “I have some concerns about who has been supporting him because there’s been people who’ve been advocating disruption in the district and not trying to solve problems.”

Her remark referred to activist group Parents for Positive Change, led by attorney Armando Benavides, which is supporting Arnett. Benavides drove the candidate to the Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters to file papers for the election. The activist group Community for Positive Governance is supporting Torrissi.

“I believe (Arnett) works for a charter school organization, or an organization that supports charters,” Ruebusch said. “That concerns me. I’m a supporter of public education. We have three charters operating in the district and I think that I’m not looking for somebody who wants to come in and advocate for those higher class sizes and only technology-driven curriculum.”

Several public officials and former elected representatives have endorsed either Arnett or Torrissi as candidates.

Supporting Torrissi are former MHUSD board members Kathy Sullivan, Julie Zintsmaster, Claudia Rossi (currently on the county’s board of education), Amina Khemici, Don Moody, Peter Mandel, Shelle Thomas, Del Foster and Amy Porter-Jensen and Morgan Hill Mayor Steve Tate and city council members Larry Carr and Rich Constantine. Supporting Arnett are former MHUSD board members Carol Neal, George Panos and Mike Hickey and former city council member Marby Lee.

“Tom is a very understanding young man,” Hickey said. “He gets along with people, which is very much needed. He’s the type of person who’ll get all the information before he makes a decision.”