

Citizens for 210 Frequently Asked Questions

Question: What are the 1st five things you plan to address if elected?

Answer: The number one item is rebuilding the trust of the community. Regardless of the outcome of the election, a significant number of people will be disappointed that their candidate(s) did not win. Our contract with the community sets out our immediate plans to transform the operating culture of the board to do things that build trust. It includes providing greater visibility to district finances within the community, broadening the governance process to include members of the community, administrators, teachers, other 210 staff, and students, and in addition to making sure we are responsive to the community on regular basis.

Question: One of the biggest criticisms of the board is that they are too like-minded. I'm concerned that this slate will continue that pattern. Please explain to me why my concerns aren't valid.

Answer: The reality is that the problem with the board isn't that they are like-minded, it's that they failed to act as an adequate check and balance on the superintendent. They didn't do the jobs they were elected by the community to do. We are like-minded only when it comes to how we believe the district should operate: 1) In the best interests of the kids 2) With the active engagement and support of the community, and 3) Focused on long-term financial sustainability. Beyond this, we are different people with different backgrounds and in different stages of our lives. You will see us engage in healthy debate with one another because we believe that this is how governmental bodies get to the best answers – not just by accepting or rejecting a recommendation that comes to them.

Question: What are your plans for the schools? Do we stay with 3? Do we go to 2? Do we re-open North and close another school?

Answer: First and foremost our slate is focused on the students. It is difficult to answer your question as we don't know how much each school truly costs to operate. We currently do not have budgeting by individual school, so there is no way to see which school "performs" financially better than the other. Also, we would be remiss in telling you exact plans as we feel that the original decision by the board was made hastily and without proper independent information that would have allowed a fiscally responsible decision, and one that was fully transparent to the community. We feel that we need to get in and see what the true finances show, what we can do to restructure our debt, and what the population projections show. This will be the way to look at a true picture before any decisions are made. It goes without saying that all of this will be done with a lot of involvement of the citizens.

Question: I am hearing rumors that your group may have a hidden agenda to close Lincoln-Way West and re-open Lincoln-Way North. Is this true?

Answer: A scenario where we would close West and re-open North is completely unthinkable to us. We've seen the divisiveness created within the community by what the board has already done and the last thing we want to do is create more of that.

All four of our buildings are assets to the district and we need to figure out how to make the most of them. Our position is that we want to take a look at the entire issue of how we use our buildings and determine whether the last board came up with right answer when they closed North or whether there are better options. We do know that the decision was made very quickly without a lot of analysis or opportunity to gather community input. That said, one of the things we all feel strongly about is that Lincoln-Way West should remain open under any scenario.

Question: Do you feel that the financial crisis that hit the U.S. in 2008 caused any of the issues within the district?

Answer: There's no question that the real estate crash had an impact on the District. But the bust affected the entire country and not every school district landed on their state's watch list.

The reality is that local property taxes have risen in each of the past 10 years, except for one. In total, local property taxes have increased by 53% during that time, an average of 4.4% per year even while housing values were dropping. Despite this, in eight of the past ten years, the Board has spent more than it has taken in – even when you exclude capital projects. As a result, the board is forced to borrow against its future tax revenues to pay bills because they have depleted all the reserves.

It's clear that there are different opinions in our community on how big a problem this all is. The Citizens for 210 slate believes being on the watch list, closing a high school, and having multiple investigations by different governmental bodies constitutes a crisis that requires a dramatic change. Our current board President, on the other hand, has referred to it as a "bump in the road". It's up to everyone to reach their own conclusion and follow their conscience when they vote on April 4th.

Question: I've heard you evolved from either Lincoln-Way Area Taxpayers Unite or Save Lincoln-Way North Facebook page. What was the vetting process for your group and how did you come to be?

We're going to give you both the short answer and the long answer to your question.

The short answer is that there were a few folks that took the time to identify and recruit potential board candidates, but these folks were part of LWATU and not SLWN. During that process, as often is the case in election campaigns, there were differences of opinions. The slate and LWATU parted ways and in time, additional slate candidates were added who had no connection to LWATU whatsoever.

Now for the long answer. The first point to make clear is that Save Lincoln-Way North and Lincoln-Way Area Taxpayers Unite are separate groups. While both groups were formed in reaction to Lincoln-Way North being closed, and have been focused on identifying where things went wrong in Lincoln-Way, the groups have used different methods and tactics to accomplish their goals.

In addition to the lawsuit against the board for which it is known, LWATU also sought long term change by identifying a slate of candidates to run during this current election. A small group began a process of identifying potential candidates and introducing them to one another to see if there was there was a collective interest in running together. The goal was to find candidates from throughout the district, both parents of students and non-parents. Most of us didn't know each other before this began. Ultimately, the organizers/candidates and LWATU concluded that they had different ideas on how the process should work, how the slate should be put together, and what the level of association should be between the slate and LWATU, so each went in their own direction.

From an elementary district standpoint, the slate is comprised of representatives from Frankfort 157-C (Cathy), New Lenox 122 (Ben) and Summit Hill 161 (Gus, Karen, Lee). As we mentioned before, it did ultimately come down to the candidates having a comfort level with one another because the platform and transparency, openness, and community involvement direction of the slate come from the candidates and no one else.

Question: You say you're not like-minded, yet here you have one set of answers to all of your questions. What can I do if I'm interested in hearing the individual perspective of just one of you?

Answer: If you send us an email to citizens4d210@gmail.com and indicate that you'd like an answer from one of us, that person will reply to you.

Question: With a balanced budget and a surplus, do you still feel a need to cut activities and explore a teacher pay freeze?

Answer: We feel the need to make sure that we're making the best use of the resources that the taxpayers provide us. There are several intermediate items, such as a state legislated property tax freeze, that may adversely impact our ability to maintain surpluses. We need to make sure that every dollar is spent wisely and in the best interests of the students and the community. This is why we argue for the need to look at everything—we don't want to cut any activities and we don't want to look at freezing anyone's salaries, but everyone needs to understand the financial ramifications of every decision that's made.

Question: What level of financial knowledge and success do you think every board member should possess before serving as a board member?

Answer: It's critical for every board member to understand that there's not a bottomless pit of money available to fund the schools. Almost every dollar spent is a dollar provided by a local, state, or federal taxpayer. It's also important to understand that there's an increasing frustration about how the district uses those dollars. The board needs to be accountable to the taxpayers for the impact of each and every financial decision. Lastly, it's important for board members to understand that spending growth CAN NOT exceed revenue growth for the district to remain financially sustainable.

Question: How do you plan to help heal the broken trust between the community and the administration?

Answer: Repairing trust will not happen overnight. Trust will only be restored once the new board is able to prove over a period of time that they truly have the students' and the community's best interest at heart. We've created our Contract with the Community as a way of demonstrating exactly what we want to be held accountable for, and as a way for the community to gauge whether we are living up to our promises.

Question: Do you have a deficit reduction plan?

Answer: Lee Talley worked on putting together a community deficit reduction plan as part his involvement with LWATU. This plan was put together at that time in the context of trying to find a way to keep all four high schools open. In our current situation, we don't believe that improving our financial status is a project for the board and administration to try to tackle exclusively on their own. It's important that the plan be community-driven so that the community will support it versus it just being the ideas of administrators and school board members.

Question: I'm frustrated that a lot of your plans are short on specifics. I want to really understand what I can expect you all to do as board members and your answers feel like vague generalizations. Your answer to every issue seems to be that you want to study it vs. having specific ideas.

Answer: We completely understand your frustration – the reason that we aren't more specific is that we are looking to implement a different model of school governance than has been done in the past. We believe that the district belongs to the entire community, not just a group of elected citizens. We want to involve you in major decisions and give you a say in the process – not take on anything with a pre-conceived notion of what the outcome will be.

Question: When does the increase for the construction bond payments begin? How much is the increase? What effect will it have on the taxes of a \$300,000 home?

Answer: Previous boards have unfortunately agreed to a bizarre repayment structure which causes taxpayer payments to begin increasing by 5% per year starting in 2019. You can see a chart of these payments on our website. The incremental increases will depend on many factors, but mostly on how much growth we experience within the Lincoln-Way community. If we increase the number of households and businesses contributing, the burden will be less per household. One estimation suggests an annual increase of around \$20 per year for a \$300,000 home, with a big jump in 2020 that will be over \$150 per home. While this may not seem like a huge amount of money, imagine if your mortgage payment was typically increasing by 5% per year and increased by over 35% in one particular year.

Question: Do you see our schools as being successful? Do you see any weakness in our academic departments?

Answer: The great news is that our schools are successful academically. We need to make sure that we continue to cultivate an environment of academic success in the classroom. The big challenge we face is that this success has been put at risk by a school board that doesn't make sure the business side of the district is run in a financially responsible way.

Question: I've witnessed several of you berating the board time and time again. You say your goal is to unite the district, yet your behavior suggests otherwise. Am I missing something?

Answer: Having sharp disagreements with people in positions of power is not inconsistent with wanting to unite the district. We believe that the current board members are not governing the district in the best way possible to meet the needs of the entire community. This has less to do with WHAT decisions they've made than HOW they've made decisions – very little transparency, poor communication, very little community involvement. That's what we are out to do differently. It's our hope that by doing so, we will unite the community once again.

Question: In what quadrant of the district do you see the most growth?

Answer: There is no crystal ball available for predicting community growth, even by professional demographers. The natural follow up question to this is to what extent should this play into facility decisions that are made in the district. This is one of many factors to be taken into account as part of a long range facility planning process. The good news is that the district has buildings that are accessible to all four quadrants of the district today.

Question: Some folks will probably vote for some other candidates. What distinguishes each of you individually for those not voting for all 5 of you? What do you offer, if you are the only one elected from the slate?

Answer: This is a great opportunity to point out that the ballot is a bit complicated. Our names will be spread out over two different sections of the ballot – one where you will select two candidates for a 2-year term and another where you will select three candidates for a 4-year term. We've identified which term each candidate is running for below.

- **KAREN TOWN** (2-year term): As a marketing specialist at Moraine Valley Community College, I have worked in an institution of higher education for 13 years. I am in daily contact with college students and faculty members, and have a good understanding of what high school students need to be successful at the next level. I have served as an adjunct faculty member at Moraine Valley, as well. I have a master's degree in education and am passionate about how important education is in a person's life. I was a very active volunteer when my two children were Lincoln-Way students. And although both are L-W grads, I am committed to ensuring that future students get the same types of educational and extracurricular opportunities my kids had when they attended.
- **LEE TALLEY** (2-year term): I'm a retiree who spent my entire career in high school education in both instructional and administrative capacities. I've worked on the development of several school strategic plans and know the ins and outs of how high schools are run.
- **GUS YIAKOS** (4-year term): I work as a high school educator and know the ins and out of what works and doesn't from both a teacher and administrator perspective. My son is a future student of Lincoln-Way
- **BEN YOMTOOB** (4-year term): I'm an empty nester with eight years of recent school board experience from Lake County and a newcomer to the community. I bring both experience and a fresh pair of eyes to the challenges that Lincoln-Way faces.
- **CATHY VASILAKIS PLEASANT** (4-year term): I serve as the deputy auditor of Will County and have experience detecting fraud and improving governmental transparency. My kids are current students of Lincoln-Way.