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# Robarts gets the treatment

## Money woes intensify dissident member's isolation

**A**s the Madison Board of Education weighs a referendum package to raise up to \$50 million in new funds, members are worrying about the public impact of their own internal disputes.

"What it does is give fuel to the doubters and skeptics about the public school system," says Board President Bill Keys, adding that dissent among members sometimes causes him to "just shake my head and say, 'What's the point in this? What's your agenda here?'"

Two weeks ago, Keys rejected a request by board member Ruth Robarts for a meeting to discuss Superintendent Art Rainwater's decision to forgo a \$2 million federal grant for a controversial reading program.

"I have polled all other board members, and all feel the same: The superintendent's action does not need their approval," Keys stated in an e-mail to Robarts. "Thus I won't arrange for the board to discuss" the decision.

It was a telling exchange: An elected official asks to discuss the loss of \$2 million at a time when the district is screaming for money, and her six colleagues agree not to go there. Reflects Robarts, "It feels like my colleagues are saying, 'A good person who supports schools wouldn't ask these kinds of questions and make these kinds of points.'"

Last week, the board approved a \$317 million budget for the 2004-05 school year, which will hike school taxes on the average Madison home by \$54, to a total of \$2,362.

Next Monday, the board will begin looking ahead to the 2005-06 school budget. Early predictions are that more than \$6 million will have to be trimmed to stay within state spending caps. This on top of \$38 million in cuts over the last 11 years.

"This last round of budget cuts had some impacts on the district," says Rainwater. "We're at a point now where anything we cut is going to change how we operate."

Several board members are eyeing a possible April referendum, likely divided into three parts: \$11 million for a new school next to Leopold Elementary; \$27 million for maintenance costs over the next five years; and \$5 million to \$15 million for operating expenses in 2005-06.

One key to winning community support for all three questions, board members say, is minimizing dissent. Translation: Put a muzzle on Robarts, the dissident board member who has the audacity to ask questions.

"Ruth thinks she should be running the district instead of Art," complains board member Juan Jose Lopez. "She's not into negotiations. She doesn't try to extend an olive branch to anybody. She isolates herself, and that's her own doing."

At a recent meeting, Lopez lectured Robarts: "We cannot show that kind of distraction, division, of the district." He linked her to the Republican-led attempt to pass the Taxpayer Bills of Rights (TABOR), a constitutional amendment to limit local spending.

"Either we come together or support each other, or we're going to be a vulnerable community when the attacks come," warned Lopez. "When the onslaught comes through, and we're not together as a unit, it's going to be tougher and harsher, espe-



**Can the board tolerate Ruth Robarts' dissent?**

cially for kids who are poor and...not doing well academically in this community."

Robarts resents being tarred with this broad brush.

"Juan considers 'Republican' to be a dirty word and wants to attach it to me," says Robarts, a registered Democrat who voted for John Kerry, supports gay marriage and gun control and opposes TABOR. Her voice conveys not just anger but sadness.

"Do you think I like eating dinner on Monday nights with people who hate me?"

**Robarts' opposition to a previous school referendum** led to her being branded Public Enemy No. 1 by the head of the Madison teachers union. In fact, she's better described as Public Ally No. 1.

It's never good to have a governmental body that seems to be of one mind on public issues. Robarts is hardly a bomb-thrower, and her probing is often on the mark.

She says the district must keep teachers' salaries in line with what it can afford, reduce the maintenance jobs contracted to high-paying union companies, carefully analyze expensive curriculum choices, and do a better job communicating to the public.

Robarts supports the Leopold referendum, but is "not persuaded we need or could pass" the referendums for maintenance and operating expenses. She thinks the board may be in for a surprise if it thinks the community will believe it's done everything possible to keep spending under control: "There was a lot of spin in the last referendum that in my opinion is going to catch up to us."

Veteran board member Carol Carstensen acknowledges frictions on the board ("some have been widely acknowledged and some have not"), but insists she and others are not crying wolf when they make doomsday predictions.

"We are increasingly destroying the parts of our district that have made it unique," she says. "There are always those who believe we can find \$6 million without affecting the core of what's important. I just don't think that's possible. All the easy cuts have been made."

Keys agrees: "If the referendum doesn't fly, I'm prepared to cut wherever it's necessary. And I'll do so with clean conscience. It's painful and it's going to hurt." ♦

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