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Our View

Secret meeting proves board can't be trusted

The majority of the Avonworth School Board on Tuesday ignored the state open meetings law and the public's interest.

Worse yet, three of the people who likely are to be part of a new majority on the board after November's election showed the same disregard.

The school board broke the law by holding a closed-door meeting to discuss a proposed building project with three members of the Avonworth Taxpayers Association who won nominations to run for school board. Only school board member Marybeth Sommers declined to participate in the meeting because she knew it was wrong.

The illegal meeting is yet another sign to district residents that the building project should be scrapped.

The building project, which involves renovations to district's elementary school and the junior-senior high school, was the key issue in May's primary election. The taxpayers association opposes the school board's plan to move sixth-grade classes to the junior-senior high. The association also believes the construction project could be done for less than the \$17 million estimated cost.

In the primary, voters agreed with the taxpayers association candidates. All six won both the Democratic and Republican nominations over five incumbents seeking re-election. Unless there is a successful write-in campaign in November, the six primary winners will win election.

The primary winners have been trying to convince the incumbent school board to alter the building project to reflect the taxpayers association's position. After one public meeting between the two sides, there was little sign of compromise.

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Avonworth School District

The taxpayers association decided to give it another shot, this time in a letter written by Gary Short, one of the six nominees. Short resigned from the school board last year because he wasn't getting his way with the building project and then decided to run for election again.

The letter, addressed to board president Larry Moehring and board member Peter Herchenroether, outlined the taxpayers association position and referred to a potential compromise offered by Moehring at a June 10 meeting.

In reference to discussing a compromise, Short wrote, "... the nominees are willing to meet with the board on short notice and as often as necessary to work out a compromise. We do request, however, that any future settlement negotiation meetings be held in executive session in order to encourage a more free exchange of ideas by all of the participants. The community's right to know is not impaired from negotiating in executive session." The letter goes on to say that any compromise decision would, of course, be completely disclosed and discussed in public.

And so, on Tuesday night the Avonworth School Board — without Sommers — met in private with Short and fellow nominees Jack Connors and Susan Abramowich.

The state open meetings law says school board meetings are public. There are exceptions to discuss personnel, litigation and real estate purchases. A board meeting to discuss the particulars of a building project doesn't fit under the exceptions, no matter how hard the board and Short might try to convince Avonworth residents otherwise.

We'd also like to know exactly what ideas about a building project could not be shared freely in public. When board members talk about the use of taxpayers' money, that's public business.

Following the secret meeting, the school board voted to move ahead with its plan and to float \$9.9 million in bonds.

Too bad. After Tuesday night's violation of public trust, Avonworth residents should wonder whether either side can responsibly carry out such an expensive and important expansion.

The state Department of Education has refused a taxpayers association request to delay the project. The state should reconsider, but not because the association has a legitimate grievance.

The state should delay the project because both sides still are fighting an election campaign that ended a month ago instead of moving forward in the best interests of students and the public.