Board scandal questions not welcome

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For the 50 people attending Ward 11's first all-candidates Catholic school trustee meeting, it should have been an opportunity to hear disgraced former trustee Angela Kennedy explain why a judge removed her from office, why trustees were forced to repay almost $30,000 after audits revealed spending irregularities and why the Toronto board is operating under provincial supervision.

But Kennedy, who was found guilty of conflict-of-interest two months ago and removed from her seat as trustee and board chair of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, sidestepped discussion about her removal and the events which contributed to it. Particularly frustrating for many in attendance, the format of the event made it easy for her to do so.

For candidate Kevin Morrison, it was like avoiding the "big elephant in the room."

Others were less polite. Halfway into the meeting, the rigid proceedings were interrupted when a woman blurted out: "Why are you shielding these people?"

Another audience member hollered: "For an MP or MPP, there is nothing like this."

"Our board is under supervision. We should be able to ask questions," was another comment from the floor.

Former superintendent Paul Crawford, the event moderator, said the event was not intended to be a debate but was a forum for voters to meet candidates and have some questions answered. But not, as it turned out, if those questions pertained to the trustee scandals.

In late August, an Ontario Justice found Kennedy guilty of violating municipal conflict of interest laws when she voted against staff cuts that could have affected the employment of two of her sons with the board. In court, Kennedy claimed she was confused about the rules. The judge's ruling, which Kennedy is appealing, did not restrict her from running again.

During the volunteer-run meeting organized by the Catholic Parent Involvement Committee, candidates addressed three themes: allegiance and faith; ability and vision; and accessibility and trust. Audience members were invited to submit written questions that were vetted by the organizers. No one was permitted to speak from the floor but could approach candidates after the meeting.

When Morrison referred to Kennedy's case, the moderator asked him to "keep it on topic" and "talk about yourself."

Morrison received some of the night's loudest applause when he talked about the scandal and how Kennedy, along with other trustees, was required to repay some questionable expenses after a forensic audit.

"The simple truth of the matter is, you know what happened over the last two years," Morrison said. "You read the news, you see what's going on. Make your own decision."

Kennedy said the results of the forensic audit revealed there was "nothing at issue for me," adding her budget was spent on school programs to support local needs. Although the provincial government turned the 2008 audit over to police, trustees were never charged with criminal wrongdoing. As a group, trustees were found to have almost $30,000 in ineligible or questionable expenses which each trustee was asked to pay back.

Information on Ward 11 candidates is on their web sites:

Angela Kennedy: www.KennedyforTrustee.ca.

Brad McCabe: www.BradMcCabe.ca.

Kevin Morrison: www.TrusteeKevinForWard11.com.

Ryan Ward: www.RyanWard.ca.