

Rochester Business Alliance declines to endorse school board candidates

The political arm of the Rochester Business Alliance will not endorse any candidates in the city school board election, despite RBA's role in a prominent get-out-the-vote campaign targeting the race.

RBA President Sandy Parker said members of the political action group The Committee for a Strong Economy knew that an endorsement would not have much effect on the race, since school board elections are historically decided during the Democratic primary.

Parker said the committee made the decision after a meeting with the four candidates on the Democratic party ticket — Mary Adams, Melisza Campos, Malik Evans and Willa Powell — clarifying her earlier suggestion that the group never intended its school board candidate interviews to result in an endorsement.

"We went into the endorsement process with the school board candidates feeling that our endorsement would not make a huge difference because the four candidates who won the primary would likely be the candidates to win the election," Parker said.

The race also includes Working Families candidates Mia Hodgins and Glenny Williams. Howard Eagle and Wallace Smith are running on the Green Party line. Parker said RBA does not typically include third-party candidates in their endorsement process.

The decision not to endorse raised new questions among critics of the Vote and Be Heard campaign, which business alliance leaders launched last month in partnership with the Faith Community Alliance of Greater Rochester. Leaders of the two groups say the campaign aims to increase voter registration and turnout in all races.

The effort targets the school board races in particular, with promotional materials that read "Let your voice be heard at the next school board election." The ads, which include billboards throughout the city, feature images of minority children and adults with duct tape over their mouths.

Parker said last month that the alliances wanted to energize voters for the

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November elections. But leaders of both groups say their effort might make little difference in who wins the school board race this season.

"Whoever wins the primary election typically wins the November election," said Bishop Willie Davis, staff administrator with the Faith Community Alliance of Greater Rochester and a minister at Emanuel Baptist Church. "The voter registration drive is going much better than I thought. Having said that, getting people registered to vote and actually getting people to the polls are two different issues. And we can't determine who people vote for."

Some school board candidates wondered why, if the business alliance was taking an interest in the board election through the pro-voting campaign, it would choose not to recommend candidates.

"This kind of goes against their Vote and Be Heard campaign," Hodgins said. "I would think that they're trying to prevent that sort of one-party race for the school board."

A news release sent out by the alliance stated that the committee, which is made up of about a dozen members of RBA, did not make endorsements in races where they had insufficient information, or when the candidates either did not participate or meet the group's expectations.

While the four Democratic school board candidates all participated in the endorsement process, Parker said that the committee did not have enough information

to make an educated endorsement — and the candidates did not meet the group's standards.

"I think you could say that that probably did apply in the school board races," she said. "But at the same time, we want to at least begin a dialogue with them."

The committee also chose not to endorse candidates in several races for the County Legislature.

RBA has been a vocal critic of the current school board, supporting the push to turn control of the schools over to the mayor.

Parker said the committee viewed the meeting with candidates as an opportunity to discuss hot issues facing city schools.

Some candidates interviewed, however, did not feel the meeting was conducive to a meaningful dialogue about the issues, and some questioned the group's motives.

"The process did not lend itself to

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substantial dialogue," said Malik Evans, currently school board president. "There were four candidates for a 30-minute time slot. It was like having duct tape over your mouth. I hope that in the future we can have a conversation in good faith."

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