



Advocacy

Music Boosters Local Politics and Music Education by Mark Gitch

The music programs in Owatonna have been supported by a Boosters organization since 1982. The original organization funded staff to replace cut positions, but as the district gradually reassumed the positions their focus turned towards enrichment of the curricular offerings in grades 1-12. Along the way, the Music Boosters board, and quite honestly the district faculty, became very comfortable with this arrangement. However, when the budget axe began its almost inevitable swing in the late 90's, we found ourselves unable to respond effectively to an administration and board who saw the Music Boosters as a fundraiser instead of an advocate.

Over the past few months, the MBO board has begun the process of redefining itself as an advocacy organization while maintaining the important job of raising funds. Their initial goals have been 1) to develop a larger membership base and 2) raise community awareness of the presence and role of the organization.

One immediate area of success has come through a list of questions submitted to candidates in the local school board election. The questions aimed to be non-confrontational, but still addressed the issue of arts education as a valued part of a student's education. Members of the MBO board, school faculty and Doug Orzolek and Mike Hiatt all contributed suggestions for questions, with the board co-presidents creating the final list and sending them to the candidates. The candidates were then invited to attend a Boosters board

meeting. (Two of five attended and two more returned written comments in time for discussion at the meeting). While the board stopped short of endorsing any of the candidates (that would beg more trouble in the long run), it was a great opportunity to hear the candidates and voice the concerns and dreams of the musical community in our district. One of the MBO questions was also used as part of the city wide League of Women Voter's forum.

As the role of public opinion plays an ever increasing role in the day-to-day operations of our schools it is hoped that, in part through this dialogue with candidates, the Music Boosters of Owatonna will again be identified as a key community voice.

Note: The school board race — 5 candidates for 4 positions — was very close. Approximately 350 votes separated first place from last place. Although one of the strong music supporters was not elected, another strong advocate was. Although the budget axe is looming for the district this spring, at least five of the eight board members have given specific vocal support for the arts. With a little luck and a lot of work, we expect that the arts will be treated fairly in the budgeting process.

Mark Gitch is in his eleventh year as Director of Orchestras at Owatonna High School, his third as director of the Owatonna Community Orchestra, and he is active as a free-lance violinist and violist. Mark has also served on the MNSOTA board as the

out-state representative. He and three other faculty serve as ex-officio members of the Music Boosters of Owatonna Board. †

Some of the questions the Music Boosters of Owatonna asked their school board candidates before the last election:

- What do you perceive to be the economic issues associated with a quality arts education?
- What are your own experiences in the arts? How have they affected you?
- What is your general impression of arts education in our district and how do you perceive that changing as a result of your membership on the board?
- What do you see as the best approach or position for arts advocates in our community who support arts education in our schools?
- What do you view as the most important goals of our school district? What role do the arts play in meeting those goals?
- What role do the arts play in our lives? Do the arts have a place in the schools? In what way?
- When the board, administration, staff and community have differing opinions or desires, what process will you use to make a decision?