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argues over email notifications
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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Board of education members approve checks, hire and fire employees and work to manage the district's business. And sometimes, they also have to mediate arguments.

That's what happened at the Monday night meeting, when emotions heated and accusations began. After nearly 20 minutes, board member Matt Friederich intervened to stop the quarrel.

"I'd like the conversation to cease right now, and let's move on to our agenda," Friederich said.

The conflict was sparked by USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, who claimed she was intentionally left out of a Sunday afternoon meeting between Liberal City Commissioners and the board of education.



“I wondered why I was excluded from the meeting,” said Sutherland-Abbott.

“The meeting on Sunday?” asked USD 480 board president Delvin Kinser. “As far as I know, you weren’t excluded. We sent out an email over the weekend —“

“— to my work email,” Sutherland-Abbott interrupted, “and I don’t work on weekends.”

That set off a debate about how the weekend unfolded and the way board members and the Central Office communicate.

Sunday afternoon, five of the seven USD 480 board of education members attended the signing of an interlocal agreement connected to today’s bond election. Lawyers representing both bodies worked for two months before completing the document as the weekend began. City and school board officials felt it was critical to finalize the agreement before voters went to the polls: the interlocal agreement defines how sales-tax money collected for the project would actually be used.

According to an article published on the Leader & Times website Sunday, “Steve Helm attended the meeting over the phone, and after making a statement about the joint meeting being a publicity stunt, chose to abstain. Tammy Sutherland-Abbott was absent.”

Sutherland-Abbott maintained that she did not know about the meeting, despite a preliminary exchange of messages. In response to an exploratory email asking all board members whether or not they might be able to attend a joint meeting, Sutherland-Abbott fired back the following message, which she read from a printed copy at the Monday meeting:

“I have a copy,” Sutherland-Abbott said. “At this point, it was ‘we’re getting close, the city has offered to meet over the weekend, if we can get it finalized ... I never got anything that said we had finalized it so we could review (the interlocal agreement) ... And I said, really? A special meeting on Sunday? Do you think the public hasn’t made their decision by now? Sunday is the

only day I'm able to devote to church and family. No, I would not attend a Sunday meeting just for show."

The five board members who did attend the Sunday event seemed perplexed by Sutherland-Abbott's insistence that she would have attended if she'd known the joint meeting was set.

"We had asked on Friday if you were available for a meeting," Kinser said. "We were trying to see who was available for a meeting. And at that point, you said you didn't want to come to a meeting on Sunday."

"My perception was that I was deliberately left out," Sutherland-Abbott said. Though a message was sent to her usual (and only listed) email address late Friday night, Sutherland-Abbott did not check her email over the weekend, so she did not see the message until Monday morning, when she went to work.

She said board members should have phoned her Sunday afternoon to find out why she was absent.

"It goes both ways, Tammy," board member Nick Hatcher said.

"The reason we didn't call you, Tammy, is because you told us you wouldn't come to a Sunday meeting," Kinser said.

Sutherland-Abbott said she preferred the previous method, when Jerry Clay, USD 480 Finance Director and board clerk, telephoned each board member to notify him or her of meetings. She also said emails should include a request for reply, so that the sender knows if a recipient has not gotten the information.

"I guess each one of us have to declare how you want to be notified. If there's a glitch, let's

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define it," Friederich said. "Now let's move on."

In the following discussion about communication methods, Helm, too, said he felt he has been left out of the loop from routine notifications.

"I haven't gotten the last two board agendas," he said.

"This is the first time I've known about that," said Jerry Clay, USD 480 Finance Director and board clerk.

USD 480 school board agendas and the attached reports are posted on the district's website the Friday afternoon before each board meeting. All documents may be viewed and downloaded by the public, including board members. However, Helm and Sutherland-Abbott maintained that they have not been notified properly of the agenda items for the last two meetings.

"If you, as a board, will tell me how you wish to have things communicated ... I've always sent things to the same email address," Clay said. "I knew it was going to your work (Sutherland-Abbott) I knew that, but I didn't realize you weren't (checking) it at home. I also check my work email 24-7, and that's just me. If you want a different email, sent to your home address, however you so like."

No action was taken in response to the communication problem. However, Clay said he would update information for each board member, in an effort to avoid future problems.

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