

## In Your Times...

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## Independence board split on gender/sexuality alliance

By Benjamin Pierce  
Times Staff

The Independence School Board appears split on the school district possibly creating a group that would allow students who are navigating their sexuality and gender to be surrounded by peers in a similar situation as well as those who want to help.

The topic led to an animated conversation at the board's meeting last week, as board members Deb Bork and Robert Guza spoke against the group as presented, while board president Joe Bragger, vice president Jen Rombalski and clerk Leah Matchey shared positive thoughts on the idea.

The group was originally presented as a "gender/sexuality club" to the board at its regular October meeting. The group would be known as an alliance instead of a club if created, said prospective alliance staff advisor Alie Bultman, who teaches Spanish in the district.

The idea came up after a student found an old yearbook of Bultman's and saw that her alma mater had such a group and she was involved. Within a few days of the discovery, Bultman said about 13 students had expressed interest in forming such a group in Independence.

Bultman, who told the board on Wednesday that she is bisexual, said adding this group could be a big help to students who want a place to feel safe with who they are because they don't feel they have that in Independence

schools or at home right now.

"The big thing is that it is an alliance. It is a club for all students of all genders, all sexualities, (those) that are in support of all. Being an ally is just as important. When I talk to the students about what they really are hoping for, the biggest thing is more of that social aspect of the support," Bultman said.

Bultman said Title IX training repeatedly talks about how students in the LGBTQ community are

at highest risk for suicide attempts, bullying and violence. She has 13 kids on an email list for the group, and other kids have expressed interest.

Student safety and protection of identity would be of "utmost" importance in such a group, Bultman said.

"I think that if we want all of our kids to feel safe and welcome in the building, this is a very easy thing that we can provide for them so they can have that sense of inclusion and community,"

she said.

Any education or events shared by the group with others would be at the discretion of students, and identity protection would be a priority. It probably wouldn't be in the yearbook unless some member students wanted to be in it, she said.

Board members Deb Bork and Robert Guza said they think the group would fall short in helping more students.

Bork asked why the support group had to be about a

topic such as sexuality. She thinks a safety net is a good idea for students, but she repeatedly said she is against a group just for the topic of gender and sexuality.

"I'm not comfortable with just having a focus on gender and sexuality," Bork said. "I don't understand why, there may be other issues people (are) wanting to be talking about, maybe their faith and maybe their political beliefs."

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### Justice Center Making Progress

Work on the new Trempealeau County Justice Center continues behind the current county government center in Whitehall. The total project — including renovations to the current building — has a price tag of \$43.5 million. The new center, which broke ground on May 17, will include a 78-bed jail, two courtrooms, judges' offices, clerk of courts, child support and the district attorney's office. The building is expected to be completed in 2023.

(Times photograph by Andrew Dannehy)

## Arcadia mayor opts to not seek re-election

By Debbie Foss  
Times Staff

Rob Reichwein, the mayor of Arcadia since 2015, has announced he will not seek re-election.

"I wanted to make my plans known so someone else would have time to decide whether to run," Reichwein told the city council last Wednesday.

Reichwein first became Arcadia's mayor by defeating former Mayor John Kimmel in a recall election in November 2015 driven in large part by the controversy over sand mines. Reichwein has won re-election since. He was previously a member of the Trempealeau County Board of Supervisors.

Prospective candidates for Arcadia mayor and other local races can begin circulating nomination papers for the April 2022 election on Dec. 1.

The council last week was again unable to vote on which health insurance to offer employees, but appeared to be leaning toward the state plan. Because of that plans limited number of categories for coverage, some city employees could see higher rates even though the overall cost to the city would be more constant with the state proposal.

The council could decide the question next week or at a special session this week. City Administra-

tor Chad Hawkins said selecting a plan soon would allow those employees who can't qualify to find alternatives before the beginning of the year.

The council also set a public hearing on the city's 2022 budget for Dec. 1. The \$3.4 million budget includes, for the first time, a separate tax category for \$100,000 in city debt service payments, according to Hawkins. The city's 2021 budget was \$3.2 million. The city's mill rate has not yet been calculated, but it could be affected by that \$100,000 levy for general obligation.

The city has about \$5.5 million in general obligation debt, just over half the debt limits set by the state.

The city's revenue for 2021 includes \$156,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds, but the city has not yet designated how that money will be spent.

The council also:

- Approved the city's share of the Arcadia Ambulance Service budget. Arcadia's payment of \$72,856 could change depending on how the city's population is reported.

- Agreed to annex half an acre off North Sobotta Court as requested by Jordan Putz.

- Agreed to rezone property near the intersection of Wanek Avenue and North Sobotta Court from commercial to medium-density residential.



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# Independence school board split on gender/sexuality alliance

(continued from Page 1)

Guza asked Bultman what experience she had with the topic, to which she told him she is bisexual herself.

"So I have been a part of the community," she said. "I know other people that are part of the community, I know how helpful this can be."

Bork said she isn't comfortable having such a group in schools without someone who is an expert in psychology, and Guza said being in the group may put a target on students' backs.

"Some kids might not feel safe at home for who they are," Bultman said. "And unfortunately, I know many people like that who have stayed in the closet, who have not been outed or who have gotten outed before they were ready to and have been kicked out of their home, things like that. So I don't want anything like that to happen to any of our kids. I care about them very deeply."

Guza said he doesn't think this is the right time for such a group, adding he likes that students can come to Bultman at school. But he thinks she should be sending them to someone more medically qualified if she feels they require intervention.

Guza asked if the school has a club for depressed students, saying he wants the group focused on mental health issues instead of just about gender/sexuality. But Bultman pointed to the district handbook, which says employees and students will not discriminate against sex. That guideline includes all sexes and genders, she said.

Adding this group — one requested by students — would only help to support that guideline, she said.

"It's for anyone who is in support of fighting against homophobia and transphobia. And unfortunately, we have had reports of that in our schools," Bultman said. "We know that education is a way to get beyond some of those things. It is a way

for students to feel like they have a place and that they have a voice. Because without something like this, without the school being able to say, 'We have a place for you', some of those kids will never feel like they have a place."

Guza said the labeling of the group could leave out students who have mental health issues or aren't struggling with their gender or identity.

"Why does this have to be a gender or sexuality club? Why can't this be a club for kids that are depressed, are confused about their gender? Why can't it be a broader picture than narrowing it down," he asked.

But a majority of the board's members were in favor of the group.

Rombalski said it would be a good idea, pointing to her Master's Degree project on suicidal ideation that opened her eyes to how serious mental health issues can be, saying not being there for children is a problem.

"I am very concerned about kids these days and what they're going through, so if a club like this can help support them," Rombalski said. "I would argue you do not have to be a professional counselor or psychiatrist to support kids. The research very much shows that a caring adult (is all you need)."

"We may not agree with the sexuality pieces, there might be disagreement personally with that. But it is what it is for the kids. They do not feel the same as other students, and if they don't have a safe place to be, then we're not doing our best as a school board and as a school to support these students."

Board clerk Leah Matchey has a high school student at home, and she said she is in favor of the group because it's an opportunity to create a safe space for kids who are struggling but also gives other kids a chance to be there for their friends.

Superintendent Barry Schmitt said the decision to form such a group is still in the air, but the district would work to ensure students have as much privacy and protection as possible. Eventual board approval would be needed as it is for all co-curricular groups and clubs, he said.

"We are a little bit worried about the structure of it and how we can ensure confidentiality, because it's sad to say, but we do have some students in school who maybe would try to find out who's in this club and then do some maybe harassment or bullying because of it," Schmitt said, saying focusing on the confidentiality piece would help things run smoother and help to protect students from possible negative side effects from being part of the group.

And as she fought tears Wednesday, Bultman told the board near the end of the conversation that the creation of such a group is about the safety of all kids and the way the district promises to provide that safety.

"The kids are already here," she said. "If we want to keep them here and we want to keep them safe and we want to make sure that they feel included — which has always been my goal — I became a teacher to teach kids. I do it through Spanish, I do it through English Arts. But I care for them."



The Hometown Holiday Fair will be hosted by the Rainbow Community Club on Nov. 21 at Independence Public School. Pictured are Tracy Halama, president, Patti Klimek, vice president, Sue Wozney, secretary and Kira Klimek, the club's newest member. (Submitted photo)

# Hometown Holiday Fair in Independence returns Nov. 21

After pausing for a year, the Rainbow Community Club will host its 43rd annual Hometown Holiday Fair on Sunday, Nov. 21, at the Independence High School, Highway 93.

In its return the event that typically fills the gymnasium and hallways of the school will be requiring masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The theme for this year's event, which runs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., is "Through the Woods." Wintry forest decor will welcome visitors and be especially highlighted in the cafeterium where visitors can socialize and enjoy a tasty meal. Hot pork will be the featured sandwich along with barbecues, chili dogs and hot dogs, topped off with the club's ever-popular refriger-

erator desserts.

Crafters will offer a wide variety of arts, crafts, decorations and gifts. From the tried-and-true to the very latest trends, there will be something to please everyone's taste and pocketbook for great autumn and Christmas shopping. A raffle and club cookbooks will also be available.

Admission to the fair is \$1 for adults, 12 and under are admitted at no charge, with free parking. The club annually uses its proceeds to benefit many worthy causes.

The past two years' donations have included: Benefit fundraisers, books for Halloween party, flowers for City Hall park, "Christmas is for Kids," "Elves for Elders" Christmas gifts; Independence High School

Junior Achievement, scholarships and tech education; Miss Independence Pageant, "Neighbors Helping Neighbors," Trempealeau County Health Care Center Christmas gifts, "Wreaths Across America," and other community endeavors.

As well, club members support the Western Dairyland Economic Opportunity Council RSVP volunteer program's "Birthday Box Project" by wrapping and filling a substantial number of boxes for youngsters throughout the year.

Over the years, the fair has served as an anchor for other holiday events in Independence the same day. More information on other events is available in advertisements that are running in either this issue of the Times or next week's.

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