

## **How to Hold a Candidates Forum**

With the spring election just months away, how will your voters get to know the school board candidates? One common form of voter education is a candidates' forum.

Here are some tips for holding an effective forum. Plan now! Begin now!

The essential elements of your plan are:

- Find an organization to work with the school district to sponsor the forum, i.e., League of Women Voters, PTA, etc. This is especially important if the election is likely to be contentious.
- The IRS prohibits non-profits from engaging in “political activity,” which is defined as “participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.” Non-partisan forums are a permissible activity for tax exempt organizations because such forums are considered voter education.

THEN, work with the organization to:

- Identify the purpose of the forum. Emphasize the nonpartisan nature of the forum.
- Set the date, time and place. Try to estimate attendance, so you have a room large enough to accommodate those interested. Consider parking and accessibility needs. Confirm the date with candidates.
- Establish criteria for which candidates will be included. Ask: Will unopposed candidates be asked to participate? Write-in candidates? Decide this in advance.
- Invite the candidates. The letter of invitation should be on letterhead, identifying the sponsoring organization(s) and explaining the format for the forum. Provide a deadline for candidates to confirm their attendance at the forum.
- Consider what you will do if all candidates are not able to attend the forum. Can you provide an audio or video hookup from a remote location to allow participation of someone who cannot be physically present?

In Wauwatosa, the Candidate Forum sponsored by the PTA Council combines the first two styles. Each candidate gives a two-minute opening statement, following by questions which each candidate answers. The questions are developed by PTA Council members. There is also a limited opportunity for audience members to submit questions that evening. Then candidates each have an opportunity to make a two-minute closing statement. Once you determine the time parameters for the forum and the number of candidates participating, you can adjust your time limitations and the number of questions accordingly.

Choose a moderator who will treat all candidates fairly and who is not publicly allied with any candidate. Consider using someone from outside the school district.

### **Set the Ground Rules**

Develop a simple list of rules for the event itself. Following are some suggestions.

- The order of speakers will be determined by choosing numbers out of a hat. With each new question, a different candidate will be the first to respond. Consider whether you want candidates for the same seat to speak consecutively.
- Candidates will (or will not) know the questions in advance.
- Responses will (or will not) be timed.
- Signs and campaign literature will (or will not) be allowed in the room.
- The Candidate Forum will (or will not) be broadcast. Determine and announce the times.
- The sponsor and/or moderator reserve the right to ask disruptive audience members to leave.
- Members and board members of the sponsoring organization can support any candidate as private citizens, but should not associate their political activity with the non-profit organization.

### **Make Sure You've Covered the Logistics**

Gather the supplies you will need:

- Indent bullets
- Signage directing the public to the forum location.
- Nameplates for each participant and moderator.
- Stop watches for the timers.
- Signs for the timers to use indicating how much time remains, i.e., If speakers have been allotted two minutes, timers should show one minute, 30-second and STOP cards.
- Microphones for the candidates and, if the public is allowed to ask questions, for the audience.
- Skirted tables with comfortable chairs for the participants.
- Lectern for the moderator, with mike.