

**March 5, 2021 League of Women Voters Information Session
Running for and Serving in Office
Chimacum and Port Townsend School Boards**

This is a lightly edited transcript of an Information Session recorded live on Zoom, March 5, 2021 at 11:00 a.m. Angela Gyurko of the League of Women Voters of Jefferson County interviewed Kristina Mayer of the Chimacum School Board and Nathanael O’Hara of the Port Townsend School Board regarding their experiences and lessons learned while running for and serving in office in Jefferson County, Washington. The document has been edited for clarity and grammar, not the substance of the conversations.

AG: The recording of this meeting and a transcript of it will be available on the Jefferson County League of Women Voters website and the Jefferson County League of Women Voters YouTube channel within a week or so of the event. Greetings everyone. I’m Angela Gyurko. I’d like to extend a welcome, on behalf of the Jefferson County League of Women Voters, to Kristina Mayer from the Chimacum School Board and Nathanael O’Hara from the Port Townsend School Board. Neither Kristina nor Nathanael are running for election this year, which is why they are appearing here today for this election-focused information session. As part of the League’s non-partisan policy, we cannot be seen as giving extra air time to candidates in an election year. But we want to talk about the election process. Kristina, can you share how many years you’ve served on the Chimacum School Board, and why you initially decided to run for office?

KM: Certainly. I’m currently serving in my second year of a four-year term on the Chimacum School Board. I originally decided to run for office because I saw some things in the district that I thought I could lend some leadership and some knowledge to, to help advance the performance of the school district.

AG: And Nathanael.

NO: Hi. I am in my 6th year, actually I’m entering my 7th year. I was appointed to the position in the middle of a term, and I served out the rest of that term and then I ran for election two years later. I got interested in this, and was approached to think about it, by a fellow board member at the time. It was not something that I had really thought about pursuing, but I definitely felt at the time that I was fully invested in the school system and in our community, and I had a perspective as a parent, which was pretty unique on the school board at the time. Part of it was that I didn’t have to run. I could apply and be appointed. That was definitely a factor in the decision at the time to do it. I’m really glad that I did, and I enjoyed running for election the following cycle.

AG: Nathanael, would you share your thoughts on campaigning? How did you initially plan to campaign, how did you actually end up campaigning, and how much money did it cost?

NO: I ran unopposed in my election, so the cost was minimal. I was prepared to have an opponent, and probably would have campaigned as much, but would have stayed below a

small campaign size, so I did not incur many expenses at all. I did participate, I believe, in one or two forums that were open to candidates just to bring the schools out into the public, and I tried to take those opportunities as much as possible.

AG: And Kristina, how did you approach your campaign and how much did you end up spending?

KM: Well, I started attending board meetings well before I decided to actually run for office. I had previously applied to be appointed to an open seat and was not selected for that opportunity. When the election came around again, I decided that I would run. I had three opponents initially in the race, so I started attending meetings and doing a lot of background research on the things that were challenging the district and what was being done or not done about them. I have a unique perspective. Although I'm not a parent, I am a lifetime educator. I spent many years teaching. I was a Principal. I worked in the central office. I did nine years of service on the State Board of Education, so I have a deep policy background as well as practical knowledge. I quickly deciphered a campaign platform from the material that was presented at the board meetings and discussions I was having in the community with community members. I made that platform my mantra throughout the campaign and talked quite a bit about declining enrollment, and the need to increase our expectations about student performance to go beyond feeling like meeting the state average was good enough, and talking about what we could do to further some initiatives that were beginning to bloom in the district. It seems like there were a lot of voter guides to fill out, so I filled out many of those for the newspapers, and one for the league, and others. I attended the forums when invited and certainly talked to the press as they came forward and were curious about the election in Chimacum because it was unique to have four people vying for one seat. I chose the option of spending less than \$5,000 on the campaign. I saw no need to make this a high-cost item. I did buy yard signs and a few ads for the newspaper, but I kept it pretty low cost and relied primarily on the opportunities that were of no cost.

AG: Thank you very much for that. Kristina, can you give our viewers an idea of how much time you typically spend each week on School Board duties? Please be sure to mention whether this is more time or less time than you thought, and comment on the duties that typically take the most time.

KM: I have served as the Board Chair for the first year of my term and I am Board Chair also for this year. I spend some portion of every day doing something related to the School Board. There's always emails. There's conversations to have. There's something always going on. Uniquely, this year, Port Townsend and Chimacum, as you've probably read in the paper, were both searching for superintendents. Through conversations with the prior Chair in Port Townsend, Jennifer James Wilson, and then Nathanael, we decided to embark on a collaborative process. As you know, collaborating on things takes a little extra effort, and time, so this year has been completely time intensive. I would say we began thinking about this late last summer, and today we are welcoming for the first time Dr. Scott Mauk to our district for his initial visit with faculty and our directors and Acting Superintendent David Engel. So this has

been a particularly busy time. I would say generally that we have two board meetings a month, and as the Chair, I am asked to participate in a collaborative meeting with another board member and the superintendent to plan those agendas. That generally takes about an hour. Then we have the board meetings, which are two hours. Some weeks it's 3-5 hours, and some weeks it's a lot more than that. It really depends on what's happening. Some of the typical duties besides planning are forecasting ahead for setting board goals, making sure the board takes part in a self-evaluation annually and that we work with those results, working with the superintendent on any major initiatives that are happening in the district, and deciphering what role the board can play to advance those initiatives. We sign a lot of documents; we have to sign virtually every voucher for payment that goes by, and after every board meeting there's a packet of materials to come in and sign, so we have that duty as well. It's budget process coming up, so that'll be an interesting, and potentially bigger time investment, given covid and the strain that responding to covid has put on our school budgets.

AG: Thank you. And Nathanael, what has been your experience with the Port Townsend School Board regarding the time spent and the duties that take the most time?

NO: Very similar to Kristina's experience, I think. As Board Chair (I'm currently the Board Chair, and I did a two-year cycle of that a few years ago as well) there are meetings directly with the superintendent that are a little bit more time intensive, and you're just dealing with more in the public in that position. There are also standing committees that the district has, and each board member usually participates in one or two of those committees. They meet usually twice a month for about an hour or hour-and-a-half. Those meetings are pretty standard; the calendar is set so you know what to expect from those. The process of hiring a superintendent, which is ultimately our biggest responsibility, is very time intensive. Ideally, you won't be doing that many times on your term, but if that comes up, it is definitely a substantial time commitment. And then, we also do two retreats a year. Usually they're half a day, and a lot of that is checking in at the beginning of the budget process, checking in with the different levels of the district as far as the directors, the school staff. And the other one is typically the board planning for the year and a renewal of our strategic plan, and for Port Townsend, that is going to be more of a time commitment for this year coming up. As far as what I expected, I didn't know what to expect. Overall, it's more than I expected, but on the other hand, I believe it's exciting work. Being involved in the meetings is gratifying and they are very planned out, so scheduling for someone who works full-time can be a challenge at times, but it's also flexible and very rewarding.

AG: Continuing on that theme, Nathanael, now that we've talked about the hard parts of the job, what is the most rewarding part of the job? Why do you love being on School Board?

NO: For me, it's the connection that I'm able to facilitate with the community, particularly the parent population. I have tried to relay information, and I think I can, almost as an interpreter in some respects, facilitate those conversations. Working with the superintendent is very rewarding directly. We typically tried to have lunch (before covid) and it's just an opportunity to provide them with information on what we're hearing out in the community. The other

rewarding aspect of my entire time on the board is, starting with the Maritime Discovery School Initiative, really focusing on making Port Townsend School District an interwoven part of the community and bringing in resources that our community has to offer. Finding ways to maximize those connections has been really rewarding.

AG: Thank you. And Kristina, what do you love most about your time serving on the Chimacum School Board?

KM: Much like Nathanael, it's fun to be in the mix of things that are happening. It's been very rewarding to support the superintendent and our school leaders in advancing initiatives. We have taken on the farm-to-school initiative wholeheartedly, we have great community non-profit partners. I feel like my role really is to enable and to create the conditions for those things to flourish and to succeed, all the while keeping what students need and student success at the forefront. That's been my primary focus. Because I have that education background, I do enjoy my conversations with the superintendent a great deal, and value the way that he magically makes everything happen. It's been a delight to work with Dr. Engle in this interim period, and I look forward to working with Dr. Mauk in much the same way. It's been really rewarding to see so many positive things happening in Chimacum. A lot of them were already happening, but weren't being talked about quite enough, so we've done a lot to advance positive stories about what's happening in Chimacum. And certainly, joining Port Townsend has been a joy, and we continue to look forward to continuing our partnership, expanding and continuing to evolve it over time. We also all participate in the Jefferson County Education Partnership, which is all four districts in the county. I particularly enjoy those conversations because as a small county, with four small rural school districts, I think there's a lot of interesting and useful things we can do together.

AG: Thank you. I know we're all aware of how much extra our school boards, school superintendents, teachers, staff, students, and parents have had to shift in this past year. This has been a trying time, so with this in mind, what additional advice do you have for people considering a run for a local school board? Kristina?

KM: I would say, flexibility and agility. I had no idea, of course, when I ran, that we would suddenly be in a pandemic situation, or that we'd have to make some of the difficult decisions that we've had to make. Closing our schools was not an easy choice for us to make, and I want to thank our teachers and our staff for being so willing when it was time to come back to jumping in and coming back. There's been a lot of tough decisions to make, so we pretty much have to be adaptive, and ready to take on the challenges as they show up. Because they certainly have. Those choices around covid, around feeding our families during the early part of the pandemic, because it was really important for us to be delivering food on our school buses, to use our school transportation systems to deliver technology to families, all kinds of things that I never dreamed we would be doing, and at the same time working with our elected officials to let them know how our budgets for things like transportation and food were being dramatically affected by the pandemic and advocating for additional resources.

AG: And Nathanael, what advice do you have for anyone running for School Board this year?

NO: Agility was actually the term that I had thought of as I was thinking about this before, and I think that is very appropriate. Schools are always changing and there's always uncertainty. That's one certainty that I really realized in my time on the School Board. Being able to synthesize information and communicate between the district and the public, being able to communicate those decisions, why they were made, then also communicate questions from the public to ultimately the superintendent is an important part of the job. Then I think a big part of it is learning the roles and responsibilities of a director. It is a very policy and vision-driven position, not getting down into the day-to-day operations of the district. As a member of the public, and as a parent, walking that line becomes a challenge, and that's a challenge I've seen with other school board members. What's your role and how can you best enhance the district through that role without stepping over the lines that are pretty clear when they're established.

AG: Thank you. I want to thank you both for taking time out of your busy days to share your expertise. And as a reminder for everyone watching or listening, Jefferson County's 2021 candidate filing period opens May 17 at 8:30 a.m. and closes May 21 at 4:30 p.m. Complete information on filing as a candidate will be available on the Jefferson County Elections website: <https://www.co.jefferson.wa.us/1266/Elections>. On behalf of the Jefferson County League of Women Voters, thank you very much for joining us today.