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Trustee offers basic training for candidates

November 23, 2009
JENNIFER YANG

STAFF REPORTER

It was the big pink elephant in the room no one could ignore – and it was swigging mini-bar booze while wearing taxpayer-funded lingerie.

The scandals plaguing Toronto's Catholic school board were front and centre for attendees at Saturday's trustee "boot camp," held at the Catholic board centre near Yonge St. and Sheppard Ave. E.

Billed as a crash course for anyone hoping to run for trusteeship in next November's municipal election, the event included everything from campaign tricks to a history lesson on the origins of the Catholic school board.

But for the 30-odd people in attendance, there was really just one reason many of them were there.

"Frankly, I'm here because of the situation with expenses," said Paulo Martins, who has two children attending St. Robert Catholic School. "It's shameful."

Retired high school administrator Maryann Mulveney had much the same reasons for attending boot camp. "I read the paper and I was appalled at what I read," she said as she introduced herself to the room. "(The trustees) obviously started with honourable intentions. What happened to them?"

It's a question many would like to see answered. Over the past few years, the Catholic school board has been tainted by a long trail of scandals, with conflict-of-interest allegations, unauthorized benefits and lavish expenditures that include everything from lingerie, mini-bar booze and Caribbean vacations, all bought on the taxpayer's dime.

In June 2008, the province seized control of the board after it failed to balance its budget, effectively rendering trustees powerless. And this month, two long-serving trustees were slapped with conflict-of-interest allegations, barely a year after former trustee Oliver Carroll was booted



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Trustee Rob Davis addresses the Toronto Catholic District School Board's "boot camp" session Nov. 21, 2009.

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for contravening the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act.

Ward 6 trustee Rob Davis, who joined the board shortly after the spending scandals, blames the problems on those who were "wilfully blind to their responsibilities."

Davis spearheaded Saturday's trustee boot camp and paid for the event himself. He said the idea came to him a few months ago, after realizing how little people understand what trustees do.

It is a job that's much harder then people realize, he says.

"To be honest, I hope (boot camp) is frightening people away from running because I want people who are truly committed to put their name forward. This is a job unlike any other."

Davis also wanted to attract a more diverse cast of candidates.

"No disrespect to the current trustees, but we're not reflective of the students we serve," he explained. "I like the ethnic diversity here (at boot camp)."

Indeed, many of Saturday's attendees were immigrants hailing from such far-flung places as Burundi, Guatemala and Guyana. Participants asked questions and took careful notes, listening attentively to the handful of speakers, including trustees John Del Grande and Catherine LeBlanc-Miller and lawyer Stephen D'Agostino, who gave a quickie primer on the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act.

Shortly before the session ended, Davis led his would-be trustees on a brief tour through the boardroom chamber. He directed everyone to stand behind the row of tables – where the trustees normally sit – and they gazed out at the room, taking in the cavernous ceiling and rows of seating in the gallery.

For Juan Vasquez, it was an inspiring moment. The Guatemalan immigrant said he'd been contemplating a run for school board trustee and participating in boot camp has convinced him to go for it.

"Hearing about what happened with the Catholic school board, I thought that (boot camp) was a great idea," he said. "It was very inspiring just to look and picture myself there (as a trustee). Hopefully, one day I can be sitting there."

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