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Ellis resigns from U-46 board

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Elgin Area School District U-46 board member Traci O'Neal Ellis announced her immediate resignation from the board Monday night.

Referencing what she affectionately calls "flaggate," Ellis said the controversy last fall over her comments about the American flag have opened new doors of opportunity for her.

In her Sept. 24 Facebook post, Ellis likened the American flag to "toilet paper" while expressing support for NFL players who were kneeling during the national anthem last season. It prompted more than a 1,000 Facebook replies -- public and private -- and resulted in death threats against Ellis. Though she stood by her original comments about the flag, Ellis later apologized to fellow board members, district employees and the community for the "distraction" caused by the controversy.

"The intentionally stoked ensuing uproar caused quite a distraction to this district and to my life," she said Monday night. "There is no doubt that the vicious campaign of hate and the racist and white supremacist vitriol that followed was intended to destroy me. But, as it turns out, it worked for my good. Flaggate has created numerous opportunities for me to take my social justice activism to the national level."

Ellis said that after much consideration and prayer she reluctantly decided to step down from the board and pursue those opportunities.

"I am a fierce advocate for social justice particularly as it relates to racism, police reforms and equity. And it is those issues that I will continue to focus on," Ellis said. "It is not possible for me to work full time and continue all of my volunteer endeavors."

Fellow U-46 school board members and CEO Tony Sanders thanked Ellis for her seven years of service on the board.

"You are going to be missed in so many ways," school board President Donna Smith said.

While several board members gave Ellis a standing ovation, Phil Costello and Jeanette Ward, her most vocal opponent, did not stand.

Ward and Ellis butted heads numerous times on various issues, including over Ellis' flag comment, which Ward strongly condemned.

"I do wish you the best," Ward said Monday. "I hope you can learn as you go forward that disagreement is not hate."

Sanders acknowledged Ellis' contributions to U-46's roughly 40,000 students, especially the 6 percent who are black.

Ellis said while she is proud of the work U-46 has done, "based on our data we have a long way to go when it comes to black children."

Smith said the school board has 45 days to fill the vacancy and officials will begin accepting applications from interested candidates soon.

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U46 board member who equated American flag with toilet paper resigns

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO



District U46 school board member Traci O'Neal Ellis hugs a well wisher after the April 23, 2018 board meeting at the district's central office in Elgin. (Rafael Guerrero / The Courier-News)

District U46 school board member Traci O'Neal Ellis resigned from the school board Monday night, effective immediately.

The surprise announcement came at the end of Monday's board meeting. O'Neal Ellis, in the final year of a second four-year term, said the decision was "very difficult" but that she wanted to get more deeply involved in social justice activism.

"I love this role, I love serving this community, but I have a very strong passion for social justice," she said following the board meeting. "I just need to pursue the opportunity for me to go deeper with the issues that I'm passionate about."

O'Neal Ellis [made a controversial remark on social media last fall](#), when she posted what some saw as an offensive comment about the American flag. "That flag means nothing more than toilet paper to me," she wrote.

The controversy provoked comments both in support and opposition. O'Neal Ellis defended her remarks in the aftermath, saying she made that comparison to prove her point that while many view the flag and anthem as symbols of freedom and justice, it is not seen as such by many in the black community. She said her remark was not meant to be an attack on the military for whom she has the "deepest respect."

The incident — "flag gate," she called it — opened opportunities for her to become more involved in social justice but it would make it impossible to be an activist and serve on the board. O'Neal Ellis said she will get involved in helping craft policy briefs on social issues, primarily ones benefiting the African-American community.

The search for O'Neal Ellis' replacement will begin immediately, board President Donna Smith said.

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Trampoline park a bust, but U-46 looks to buy Elgin site

BY ELENA FERRARIN

Plans to open an indoor amusement center on Chicago Street in Elgin fell through, but **Elgin Area School District U-46** is interested in turning the property into a Family Welcome Center and remote bus lot.

Texas-based Urban Air Trampoline Park previously said it planned to open sometime in spring 2017 on the 10-acre site at 1019 E. Chicago St., which includes a large parking lot and a 95,521-square-foot building that housed Sherman Health Resource Center until 2011.

It appears no work was done by Urban Air on the property, which was listed for auction by [SVN AuctionWorks](#) with a minimum bid of \$2.5 million plus 4 percent buyer's premium. The auction scheduled to end last week was canceled because a prebid offer was accepted, and there is a sale contract pending, SVN President Diana Peterson said.

She declined to name the prospective buyer, but U-46 CEO Tony Sanders said in a Facebook post Friday that district officials placed a bid on the property and will ask the board to approve it.

The school board Monday night discussed spending \$4 million to buy the property, which the district has been leasing for 10 years to park bus drivers' personal vehicles. Officials plan to move the district's fleet of buses there as early as this fall, which is expected to save \$1 million yearly.

"Not only will this be better for our bus drivers, the savings from not having to run the shuttles every day will cover the investment in the building within the next few years," Sanders said in a Facebook post.

A vote on the sale is pending.

The building can be turned into a Family Welcome Center that would consolidate language testing, early childhood screening and student registration, Sanders said. There are also opportunities to use the building for pre-K classrooms in the long term, he said.

The city council's committee of the whole approved zoning for the indoor amusement center plans in December 2016. Urban Air had planned to lease it to a franchisee listed as the David P. Frayer and Kendal L. Frayer Revocable Trust. An attorney for the trust didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Monday.

Advocate Sherman Hospital sold the property in late 2016 or early 2017, spokeswoman Jennifer Benson confirmed.

Urban Air CEO Michael Browning did not respond to requests for comment.

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Former Sherman site may be purchased for a U46 welcome center, bus parking

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO



An empty building along Chicago Street in Elgin may be purchased by School District U46 this spring so it can be used as a family welcome center and bus depot. (Mike Danahey / The Courier-News)

School District U46 officials and board members will discuss purchasing a long-vacant building on [Elgin](#)'s east side at Monday night's school board meeting.

The property was once home to the Sherman Health Resource Center, 1019 E. Chicago St.. Since its closure earlier in the decade, U46 has leased parking space there to accommodate parking for its employees working at the nearby bus depot near Elgin High School.

Board members will discuss in a workshop meeting whether it makes sense to buy the property — which includes the 95,512-square-foot building and the 10-acre parking lot — for \$4 million. A contract is contingent upon a majority of board members approving the purchase before May 22.

U46 CEO Tony Sanders, writing in a weekly message to staff, parents and others, said the plan is to convert the building into a family welcome center, where they could conduct language testing, registration, early childhood screenings and other services in a consolidated location.

The district would also house its fleet of smaller school buses at the site, according to board documents. The move would save the district about \$1 million annually because it would no longer have to shuttle small school bus drivers from the Chicago Street lot to the bus depot, according to documents.

The former Sherman Health Resource Center property was once proposed to be an Urban Air amusement park site, which would have included a trampoline park, an indoor go-kart racing track, a warrior obstacle course, black-light laser tag, arcade games, miniature golf and a black-light bowling alley. Although the company received Elgin City Council approval in 2016, the renovation was never completed.

The U46 school board meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Monday at the district's central offices, 355 E. Chicago St.

SPORTS SECTION

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Baseball: North Stars, Larson tops South Elgin

BY KEVIN MCGAVIN

Erik Larson was the epitome of a crafty southpaw for the St. Charles North baseball team on Monday afternoon.

Throwing strikes with regularity, Larson needed a mere 80 pitches to author a 6-1 complete-game victory over South Elgin in an Upstate Eight Conference crossover in St. Charles.

"We talk about 67 percent (of pitches for strikes) being a winning formula," St. Charles North coach Todd Genke said. "(Larson) was like the perfect tonic. He was phenomenal. I think he missed two spots all day."

Nearly three-fourths of the Larson first-pitch offerings went for strikes as the North Stars remained unbeaten against in-state competition in improving to 10-1 overall, 6-0 in the league.

"I noticed at the beginning of the game they weren't squaring the ball up much," said Larson, who is 2-0 as a starter. "If I can get ahead in the count, I can throw more off-speed."

St. Charles North provided Larson all the runs he would need in its half of the first.

South Elgin starter Joe Teschke deserved a better fate.

Pat Bellock, aboard after a one-out single, motored around the bases on a three-base throwing error.

Teschke was soon in a 2-0 hole when Steven Hamer followed with a single.

"We didn't come out sharp," said South Elgin coach Jim Kating. "We took a sloppy infield (pregame), and it carried over. St. Charles North put a lot of balls in play. We have to make those plays."

After Thomas Nelsen scored on the Hamer single, the North Stars' Justin Dunne hit a shot -- into the teeth of the wind -- to complete the 3-run first.

"I just tried to hit it hard," Dunne said of his run-scoring double. "We always want to score first. That's like our motto."

South Elgin (2-3, 0-1) was never able to get on track against Larson, who supplemented his off-speed pitches with precision fastballs.

Larson lost his chance at a shutout in the Storm third; Austin Doty plated Pat Keaty after the latter reached second on a muffed fly.

But St. Charles North padded its lead back to 5-1 in the bottom of the third as Egon Hein and Sean Nemetz were credited with RBI.

"I love the run support," Larson said. "We're getting better offensively."

Larson scattered 4 singles on the afternoon; Storm junior Ben Hetelle drew the lone bases on balls.

"(Larson) is not going to strike out a lot of guys," Genke said. "He's a pitch-to-contact guy."

St. Charles North finished with 8 hits.

The North Stars open a critical three-game River series with Batavia on Tuesday.