

## Press Clippings 10/03/2017

---Courier News--- 10/03/17

### Controversial statement about American flag prompts huge crowd at U46 school board meeting

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

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District U46 board of education members Tracy O'Neal Ellis (left) and Melissa Owens stand during the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of Monday evening's meeting. (Brian O'Mahoney/Courier-News)

Comments from an [Elgin](#) school board member prompted a capacity turnout at Monday evening's School District U46 board meeting.

The board meeting was the first after a Facebook comment from school board member Traci O'Neal Ellis went viral. In the post on her personal page, O'Neal Ellis stated her support for NFL players protesting during the national anthem, and wrote that the flag was "nothing more than toilet paper to me."

The board member defended her comments on a separate Facebook post on her school board member page, stating how the flag was a symbol of the various atrocities the African-American community has dealt with for centuries. People supportive and against her comments have responded passionately to her remarks in the past week.

---Courier News--- 10/03/17

## 'You have friends and allies,' residents tell U46 school board member after flag comments go viral

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

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Elgin-area School District U56 board members Melissa Owens, right, and Traci O'Neal Ellis hug following supportive comments during Monday's school board meeting. (Brian O'Mahoney/The Courier-News)

An [Elgin](#)-area School District U46 board member made her first public comments Monday over the "distraction" and fallout over comments about the American flag she made on social media last week.

The evening school board meeting, which included the presence of Elgin Police officers, was the first after a Facebook comment from school board member Traci O'Neal Ellis equated the American flag and toilet paper.

"I completely own that as an elected official and as your colleague, I could have been more circumspect in my criticism" and more careful with what was written, she said. "Please accept my apology for this distraction from the great work happening in this district."

In a post on her personal page Sept. 24, O'Neal Ellis stated her support for NFL players protesting the national anthem, and wrote that the flag was "nothing more than toilet paper to me."

O'Neal Ellis did not apologize for her social media posts — she noted that her first post was in a private page — as she stood by her argument the flag is a symbol of the struggle and atrocities the African-American community has dealt with for centuries. O'Neal Ellis similarly defended her comments Sept. 26 on a separate Facebook post on her school board member page.

O'Neal Ellis said she has received hundreds of offensive comments from others online, but at Monday's meeting the majority of people in attendance were supportive of her.

"Please do not be discouraged, you have friends and allies in this community," said Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford, an Elgin parent.

However, some in attendance spoke out against the board member.

"I'm appalled at the support she is getting for her heinous comments," said Laura Prowicz, a resident from Hampshire. "I think she should step down."

Board member Melissa Owens broke down talking about O'Neal Ellis, thanking her for her friendship as she dealt with racially charged conversations within her family over non-related matter in her past.

"When I asked Traci for help, she was very gracious," she said. "We had long conversations, she didn't have to do that. We need to have those conversations."

---Daily Herald--- 10/03/17

## U-46 board member who made controversial flag comment apologizes for 'distraction'

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

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U-46 board members, including Traci O'Neal Ellis third from right in black jacket, stand for the Pledge of Allegiance at Monday night's meeting.

Elgin Area School District U-46 board member Traci O'Neal Ellis offered an emotional apology Monday to her fellow board members, district employees and the community for the "distraction" caused by her Facebook post likening the American flag to toilet paper. Yet she stood by her original comments about the flag.

"I am sorry," she said. "I make no apologies for my comment about the flag. I made them as a private citizen, as a taxpayer in this country on my personal Facebook page on a matter of import in the current national discourse based upon my personal experiences.

"I could have been much more circumspect in my criticism and more elegant in my language," she continued. "There is a huge gap between the America that we say we are and the America that we actually are, and it is that gap that my comments are addressing."

More than a dozen people voiced their support for Ellis, whose controversial Sept. 24 post about the American flag resulted in death threats. Ellis, expressing support for NFL players who are

kneeling this football season during the national anthem, posted that the flag "means nothing more than toilet paper to me."

Many at Monday's meeting called the backlash against athletes and others who kneel during the national anthem and Ellis' flag comment a teachable moment.

"It's just another proof that racism is alive and well among us," said Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford of Elgin. "Frank expressions from black leaders about how they really feel and what they really think is important, if we are going to move forward."

Ellis' post prompted more than a 1,000 Facebook replies -- public and private, Many responses were from people condemning her statement while using racial epithets and other disparaging terms. Others expressed support.

There was extra police presence during Monday's meeting as officers kept control over people entering and leaving the board room, whose capacity of 85 occupants was not surpassed.

Kneeling during the national anthem has become a national symbol of protest against the shooting of unarmed black people by police and how minorities are treated by law enforcement.

Elgin resident Mary Shesgreen said patriotism for some people is observing rituals and upholding certain symbols of what it means to be American.

"A deeper sense of patriotism, in my heart, is love for all the people in this country ... respect for the amended Constitution and all the ways that freedom has been expanded," she said.

"Patriotism means constantly trying to perfect this country and caring with sensitivity and understanding about the variety of backgrounds from which people come."

A couple of commenters Monday sought Ellis' resignation from the board for disparaging the flag.

Linda Rusenovich of Elgin said Ellis should be held accountable for her words as an elected official.

"All of us value the freedom, individual rights, and rule of law which we enjoy as citizens," she said. "Your disrespectful words only alienate potential allies. I ask you to apologize, then as a community we can try to move on."

School board member Jeanette Ward strongly condemned Ellis' flag comment and also denounced those who attacked her with racial slurs.

The Elgin Police Department is investigating the most serious online threats made against Ellis, including someone writing "One bullet" on her public, school board Facebook page. Police Chief Jeff Swoboda said Monday there have been no developments in the investigation.

A few people urged school board members to use this controversy to start a conversation about race relations, and possibly host classes or forums.

"There's been a history of segregation, a history of violence against blacks and other minorities in this country," said Greg Addy of Elgin. "There needs to be some soul searching, if anything is going to happen in this country. ... Maybe we can come together and begin to talk to each other because that's the only way things are going to be done."