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Board gets candidate petition objections

By Steve Lord
Aurora Beacon-News

An Aurora electoral board's decision to keep a mayoral candidate on the ballot in the upcoming election could hinge on the candidate's economic interest statement.

That is one of the main questions about the nominating petitions filed by Karina Garcia for the April 2025 mayoral election.

Garcia, the CEO of the Aurora Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, was one of six candidates who filed petitions in October to run for mayor in the city election. Because six candidates filed, as it stands now, there would be a primary in February.

The candidates are: Mayor Richard Irvin, the incumbent; Ald. Ted Mesiacos, 3rd; Ald. John Laesch, at large; Judd Lofchie; Karina Garcia; and Jazmine Garcia.

A campaign worker for Irvin filed objections to petitions from Laesch, Karina Garcia and Jazmine Garcia.

The city electoral board, made up of City Clerk Jennifer Stallings, Ald. Michael Saville, 6th, who is the alderman with the most seniority, and Ald. Juany Garza, 2nd, who has the second most seniority, heard the petition objections regarding Laesch and Jazmine Garcia on Monday.

On Wednesday, they heard the objections to Karina Garcia's petitions.

The common objection to all three candidates' petitions is that they each circulated each other's petitions. John Fogarty, attorney for the objector, said by cooperating like that, they created a de facto political party, which would be against election law for a non-partisan election.

"It's an unusual situation, and it eases the spectre of a straw candidate, someone put on the ballot for reasons other than to be elected, for some other purpose," Fogarty said.

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AnnMarie Sniegowski, left, of Aurora, and Dana Jones, of Ottawa, shop at Fox Valley Mall in Aurora recently and said they both plan to spend more money this holiday season than they did a year ago. DAVID SHAROS/FOR BEACON-NEWS

Holiday shopping season in Aurora off to an early start

'This year, holiday shopping started as early as September'

By David Sharos
Chicago Tribune

The Christmas holiday may still be more than a month away, but more and more Aurora area shoppers are already hitting the malls in order to grab deals.

"I already started shopping," Dana Jones, of Ottawa, said recently at Fox Valley Mall in Aurora. "I got clothes and shoes

for someone in the family and for me, this was a little earlier than usual.

"I'm doing this because I feel good about where our country is headed and I feel more financially secure looking toward the future," Jones said. "Because of that, I feel like I can spend a little more money."

Area retailers are set for what some economic forecasters say will be a strong Christmas shopping season despite the fact that some consumers continue to be concerned about the economy.

"Consumer spending during

the winter holidays is expected to reach a record \$902 per person on average across gifts, food, decorations and other seasonal items ... the amount is about \$25 per person more than last year's figure and \$16 higher than the previous record set in 2019," officials with the National Retail Federation said in a news release.

"The winter holidays are a treasured time for Americans, and they are prioritizing spending on family this holiday season," said National Retail Federation Vice President of Industry and Consumer Insights Katherine

Cullen.

Kristina Arias, senior marketing director at Fox Valley Mall, agreed that no matter what the status of the economy, "people are still going to come out and purchase for their family and friends and for themselves and even for their pets."

"Their own economic issues aren't going to slow down any gift giving this year," Arias predicted. "We saw people shopping earlier and earlier. This year, holiday shopping started as early as

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Some Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy students read their "My Aurora" poems in front of a crowd of their classmates, chaperones, some parents and city officials in early October at Aurora City Hall as a part of the Aurora Project. CYNTHIA MARTINEZ

Eighth graders explore all things Aurora during yearlong project

By R. Christian Smith
Aurora Beacon-News

Through a yearlong project centered around making podcasts, eighth grade students at Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy are learning about all things Aurora, from its history to being involved in the present day.

Students explore Aurora through their own family and heritage, historical research, statistics and their own ideas on making the city a better place, then present this knowledge through four podcasts that they

share with their peers.

The project, which is split into four parts across the school year's four quarters, has helped students connect to and feel pride in their city, teachers involved in the project told The Beacon-News.

"The everyday things that they experience kind of have come to life," Laura Krueger, eighth grade language arts teacher at Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy, said about her students. "They have shared with me that sometimes they didn't really realize how special the City of Lights is."

The Aurora Project connects to the four core classes taught in eighth grade at Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy, which is in East Aurora School District 131. Those classes are language arts, social studies, math and history, which each incorporate the project into its curriculum in a different way.

Throughout the research and the recording process for each of the podcasts, students are guided by a "digital notecard" that explains what they need

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INDIAN PRAIRIE SCHOOL DISTRICT 204

Board of Education OKs first use of bond funds

By R. Christian Smith
Beacon-News

Two weeks after voters approved a proposal by Indian Prairie School District 204 to issue up to \$420 million in bonds, the district's Board of Education has voted on the first use of those bond funds.

Board members voted unanimously at Monday night's meeting to approve contracts with the district's architect, Wight and Company, to design new secure entrances for 11 elementary schools and a new auditorium for Waubonsie Valley High School.

"This is an exciting evening for the district," District 204 Chief School Business Official Matt Shipley said.

These projects are set to be constructed by the end of summer 2025, according to Shipley. He said that district staff will come back to the Board of Education with construction contracts for the projects at a later meeting, likely in January or February.

The first contract with Wight and Company is to design modern and secure front entrances at 11 elementary schools, as well as a full replacement of the schools' exterior doors and door hardware, improvements to access controls and other related work, Shipley said.

The other contract will have Wight and Company designing renovations for the auditorium at Waubonsie Valley High School, according to Shipley. He said the renovations will include upgraded theater seating, lighting, sound and acoustics along with improvements to the auditorium's rigging, bandshell and backstage area.

This work will be the first step toward the comprehensive renovations planned for the high school, he said.

In an email on Tuesday, Shipley said the contracts are structured to pay a percentage of the total construction cost. That percentage is 8.75% for the auditorium project, with a budgeted construction cost of \$4 million, and is 8% for the security project, with a budgeted construction cost of \$8 million, he said.

In total, the district is planning to do around \$40 million in projects during summer 2025. Shipley said district staff are already busy planning and preparing for this work.

Several other contracts are expected to be presented to the board for approval over the next few months, according to Shipley. He said those contracts will be for projects to improve flooring, lighting, mechanical systems, HVAC systems, parking lots and playgrounds across the district.

Although voters approved the issue of \$420 million in bonds, projects using those funds still need to come before the board, Shipley said.

The district is not planning to issue all of the \$420 million in bonds up front, staff members have previously said. The first round of bond sales would likely take place before the end of the year and give the district about \$14.5 million, according to past reporting.

The next round of bond sales would likely be for \$156.5 million and take place in July 2025, Shipley previously said. Another sale is planned for July 2027 at an amount

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TODAY'S
WEATHER



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Lake Michigan levels are lowest in 10 years

Experts cite warmer temperatures and low precipitation

By Vivian La

Lake Michigan's water levels have dropped below long-term averages for the first time in 10 years. Experts said factors like this fall's warmer temperatures and low precipitation have affected lake levels — the same factors that make it tricky to predict this winter's lake outlook.

In addition to seasonal variables, lake levels and ice formation will depend on how the cooling pattern from an emerging La Nina will play out in the Midwest.

"It's a complicated picture," said Lauren Fry, a scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory.

Lakes Michigan and Huron, which are considered one lake because they are connected at the Straits of Mackinac, were about 2 inches below their historical monthly average in October, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. On all lakes, average water levels since the start of October range from 3 to 7 inches below what they were at the same time last year.

A few inches might not seem like a lot, but Fry said "it's noteworthy" that October was the first time since 2014 that the monthly average was below the long-term average for any month. The lake's all-time record low was in January 2013.

Great Lakes' water levels are determined by the net basin supply. It's the sum of precipitation and runoff, minus lake evaporation. When there's more evaporation than inflow, lake levels drop.

Evaporation drives the annual declines during the fall, Fry said. Cold air mixing with the warm surface water temperatures on the lakes leads to energy transfer, resulting in evaporation.



Lake levels are low near Diversey Harbor in Chicago on Tuesday. TESS CROWLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

That process has been enhanced this fall because warmer weather makes surface water temperatures higher. Combined with the season's very little rainfall, evaporation only increases. Swaths of the Midwest are experiencing moderate to severe drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

"It's just been really dry, and the warm conditions don't help. And you get just less moisture in the basin as a whole," Fry said.

Low lake levels can affect shoreline ecosystems, access to docks and shipping routes. Some research suggests that ships can lose up to \$30,000 a trip because of the lighter loads they're forced to carry in low water conditions.

The drought conditions are expected to last through the winter, according to NOAA's winter outlook

issued last month. This could translate to a late start to the ice season on the Great Lakes, said Bryan Mroczka, a scientist with the NOAA Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory who studies atmospheric conditions.

Similar to lake levels, ice formation on the Great Lakes depends on the amount of cold and warm air.

And the emerging La Nina will influence a lot of those patterns this year. Mroczka said it's still too early to say what that means for temperatures.

In projections, Illinois and much of the Midwest sit squarely in an area that has an equal chance of experiencing either above or below average temperatures. However, there's a high chance of more precipitation than normal later in

the winter.

There aren't clear indications of how strong this La Nina might be, Mroczka said. "We're on that battleground this year."

Ice is a natural part of the Great Lakes ecosystem. Some of the largest storms occur during the winter and fall, resulting in waves that naturally occurring ice can break up. Without it, there's no protective barrier.

"The shoreline infrastructure, roads, piers, jetties, docks, whatever, are at the full mercy of those raging lakes," Mroczka said. There's also more erosion during the years with lower ice.

Recent trends point to more of these years, as warmer winters become more common due to climate change.

Last winter, Lake Michigan saw a maximum ice

cover of 20%, which is about half the typical amount. Data from NOAA showed historic lows across all the Great Lakes, too.

Winters aren't completely gone, Mroczka said. But we'll likely see shorter bursts of cold air instead of the long durations that ice needs to form.

"(Lake) ice doesn't form overnight, like it does on a pond in your backyard," he said.

Water levels are also projected to increase under climate change. A 2022 paper estimated a 1.5-foot increase in the average levels of lakes Michigan and Huron by 2040 due to increased precipitation and runoff in the spring.

There might be an increase in average levels over the decades, but within those years there will always be seasonal fluctua-

tions, said Miraj Kayastha, a doctoral candidate at Michigan Technological University and co-author of the 2022 paper.

It's exemplified in the current downward trend of lake levels, which followed historic highs in 2019 and 2020, he said.

With any projection, there's a degree of uncertainty as researchers work with the current data available.

But that's not to say they're inaccurate, or that they aren't good gauges for where things are trending toward under climate change, Kayastha said.

"Our models are good, but future greenhouse gas emissions, you know, that is something that we don't know," he said.

Kayastha points to one certainty, though. "The only constant thing is change."

Project

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to research, how to write a podcast script and how to record the podcast.

The project starts in the first quarter of the school year during language arts in a unit now called "rites of passage" but formerly called "voices of the city," Krueger said.

During this first portion of the project, which is called "My Aurora," students research their own family's heritage, traditions, culture and history to write a poem about where they come from.

Students share the stories of where their parents and grandparents have come from, along with the struggles of those who came before them to get them where they are today, according to Krueger.

"I think, then, they appreciate a little bit more of where they go to school, where they live and that they can persevere through many different challenges and have joy in the end," she said.

After crafting the poem by going through the writing process and rounds of peer review, students read their poems, along with a short introduction, on podcasts they record themselves and later share with their classmates. But the poems, and the students' stories, make their way far beyond their classroom walls.

At the end of the school year, Krueger puts together books of all the students' "My Aurora" poems, along with poems from the teachers, that students can take with them for the memories. She said students often sign each other's poetry books, treating them like year-books.

The community also gets a chance to see or hear these poems. They have been showcased physically at the downtown Santori branch of the Aurora Public Library, along with some at the Eola Road Branch, and have been showcased digitally, according to Krueger.

"The students realize that their stories don't have to



Eighth grade students from Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy in East Aurora School District 131 went on a field trip downtown in early October as a part of a yearlong project that explores all things Aurora over the course of a year. CYNTHIA MARTINEZ

just live here," she said. "It goes beyond our building."

Students also get the chance to share their poems live in front of an audience of their classmates, chaperones, some parents and even city officials, such as Deputy Mayor Guillermo Trujillo and in previous years Mayor Richard Irvin, at City Hall. Around eight students typically read their poems each year, Krueger said.

That trip to City Hall is just one part of a larger walking field trip to downtown Aurora that helps to teach eighth grade students at Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy about the city's history. Students also visit the downtown library, Grand Army of the Republic Military Museum, Aurora Historical Society and Aurora Regional Fire Museum on the trip, along with a tour of Aurora's historic buildings.

The field trip is the kickoff to the next part of the project, "Past Aurora," which takes place in social studies. Around this time, eighth grade social studies teacher Cynthia Martinez does a unit on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, which is the same time period that the city of Aurora was built up, she said.

For this part of the project, students form a group and pick a single location in Aurora, whether it is downtown or not, and research its history.

Sometimes, that research involves sources they can't easily find online, so they turn to the public library for help, according to Martinez. She said part of the field trip to downtown is to show students the resources, like

the public library, that are available to them.

Once students' research is complete, they record a podcast about the location and its history. After all the podcasts are complete, students take time in class to listen to each of them, which this year took place on Oct. 15, according to Martinez.

The third part of the project, called "Their Aurora," takes place in math class typically after winter break and during a section on statistics and data. This time, students look ahead to the future by studying data related to a specific topic and making predictions about that topic across 30 years.

Eighth grade mathematics teacher Bethany Morton said she tries to encourage students to pick a topic that they somehow have a connection to. For example, if a student's aunt works at Rush Copley Medical Center, the student may want to look into the salaries of those types of workers over time.

Like the history research, the data may not necessarily be online, though that is where the research begins, according to Morton. She said one student even reached out to a local Humane Society to get data on the number of pets adopted each month.

The students then graph the data, connect it to them personally and discuss their 30-year predictions, including if they make sense or not, in their podcast, Morton said.

The last portion of the project, called "Our Aurora," takes place in science class during a unit on human

impact around spring break. After learning all about their city over the course of the project, science teacher Lisa Pena asks students to think of something that could be improved or a need within the city.

After researching and designing a way to address that need, students are then taught how to reach out to their city aldermen to advocate for their solution.

"If they're going to come up with these ideas, it has to go beyond themselves," Pena said.

There are no restraints on what a need or improvement may be, she said.

In a previous year, students decided that more lighting was needed for a skate park, and an alderman received enough emails from students that he came to speak to the children about the issue, according to Martinez. Now, that skate park has more lighting, she said.

Throughout the year, students' podcasts get better and better as they become more confident and skilled in their podcasting, the four teachers said. But the content students learn throughout the year also builds on itself, according to Martinez.

At first, students identify what Aurora is to them, she said. Then, students learn the city has a rich history that they should care about, and they learn about where the city is going, she said.

By the end of the school year, when it comes time for the final part of the project, the students hopefully care enough to want to be proactive and take care of their community,

Martinez said.

The project was first started the year students came back from the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as a way to ease anxiety. Morton said the project really helped that first group of students because, although they weren't anti-social, they didn't know how to be social anymore.

The field trip portion of the project, which they could do even that first year back because they were walking and had masks, showed students that school was supposed to be fun and not scary, Martinez said.

Even the first portion of the project helped students reconnect after the lockdown. Krueger said she remembers students being shy when reading their poems at first, but soon the volume started to rise as they remembered all their stories and all the things they had in common across their families.

"There was just like a happy buzz in the room," she said.

The project came from the district's push to create "nostalgia" among students after the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers said. East Aurora School District Superintendent Jennifer Norrell said in an interview that the district's push for nostalgia projects was a way for the district to be prepared for students who were returning from a year away from school and social emotional interactions with others, and the concept was born from a book on the topic by Dr. Badia Ahad-Legardy, a friend of Norrell's.

After reading that book, titled "Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture," Norrell reached out to Ahad to create a professional learning guide using the book for East Aurora School District, according to Norrell. She said the district partnered with Ahad and Loyola University that summer before students came back full-time to provide professional development to teachers, teaching assistants and administrators.

The district also partnered with University of Illinois Chicago, Northwestern University and Dominican University to bring in teams of graduate students or professors in language studies or culture studies to do a series of training sessions.

"As a part of preparing for the next school year, we really wanted to give our teachers the tools needed in every classroom to promote resilience," Norrell said.

The district knew it couldn't hire enough social workers for all of the children who were affected by the pandemic-era, so it brought nostalgia projects into classrooms as a way to make students feel safe and a sense of belonging but also to help mitigate trauma through resilience, she said.

The goal was to inspire and promote more positive feelings to help them get over any of the trauma they might have experienced during the pandemic, and the data shows that it paid off, according to Norrell. She said the district saw lower levels of physical altercations and lower numbers of disruptive behavior.

In fact, the district has seen an 80% reduction in physical altercations at its high school since pre-pandemic levels, Norrell said.

The district is continuing to invest in nostalgia, with professional development units every quarter, and the project in Fred Rodgers Magnet Academy's eighth grade is a "good example" of what a nostalgia project can be, she said.

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