

## School board hopefuls showcase their personalities

By Tanner Kent

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**NORTH MANKATO** — During a forum that featured little disagreement on the issues, a crowded field of candidates for the Mankato Area School Board was distinguished more by individual personalities.

In the first of two such forums hosted by Greater Mankato Growth on Tuesday at Dakota Meadows Middle School, seven of the eight candidates on the ballot were in attendance. Only newcomer Jason Toupenca was absent.

On Nov. 3, voters will elect four candidates to serve four-year terms on the board. In the interest of providing insight into each candidate, a paragraph on each will follow in the space below.

Candidates will be listed alphabetically.

■ **Judi Brandon (incumbent):** Brandon is a longtime Mankato teacher and principal finishing her 11th year on the School Board. She said education has been “in her blood” since she was 6-yearsold.

She talked often of the need to reform education funding at the state level and the difficulty in balancing teacher contracts and student needs when “schools are not funded adequately.”

■ **Jodie Forrey:** A Mankato native and special education teacher, Forrey said her candidacy is motivated by a “desire to find out how things work.” She was lightly critical of the most recent teacher contract that included a pay freeze (a fellow candidate reminded the audience that the contract was decided by a state arbitrator) and iterated her support for music and art programs, saying they “make the whole town more enriched.”

■ **Sara Hansen (incumbent):** Hansen stressed her interest in early childhood issues and her variety of involvements in the district.

On questions concerning lowering class sizes and supporting four years of required science for high school students, she discussed the complexity behind seemingly

Please see FORUM, Page **B3**

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Pat Christman

Seven of the eight candidates for the Mankato Area School Board attended a forum on Tuesday at Dakota Meadows Middle School. The forum was hosted by Greater Mankato Growth.

## Article Continued Below

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[See FORUM on Page B03](#)

### FORUM: Elections on Nov. 3

Continued from Page B1

simple decisions. Providing the best opportunities for students, she said, sometimes necessitates higher class sizes elsewhere; before supporting four years of high school science, Hansen said she would need input from teachers and administrators.

■ Ann Hendricks (incumbent): The current chairwoman and a 15-year member of the School Board, Hendricks said the job of the board is not to “micro-manage” the district. On the topic of requiring four years of high school science, Hendricks cautioned against losing focus on other content areas, such as the humanities: “Is (science) the only thing we want our students to be interested in?”

■ Tom Rekstein (incumbent): With a career in the insurance industry, Rekstein was candid about his interest in district finances and long-term planning. On the topic of referendums, Rekstein reminded that Mankato returned \$1.5 million of its \$33 million bond referendum in 2008 to taxpayers. On the topic of teacher contracts, Rekstein said that pay raises are financially challenging and said the School Board can try to increase job satisfaction by providing other forms of support.

■ Abdi Sabrie: Born in Somalia, Sabrie has lived in the United States for nearly 30 years — the last two in Mankato after living in several large cities on the East Coast. Sabrie talked often of the need for partnerships with private business in order to provide complementary funding for programs and expand services. Sabrie spoke highly of the Mankato community and its schools, but expressed a desire for continued improvement.

■ Thad Shunkwiler: A 10-year military veteran who served an 18-month overseas deployment, Shunkwiler stressed his leadership skills. Now working as an adjunct professor at Minnesota State University, he also referenced his concern about a growing number of college entrants who are “coming in without basic skills.”

Shunkwiler said he is motivated by the idea of public service: “I, for one, have never backed down from a challenge.”