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Mill Valley school board candidates detail priorities



Candidates for Mill Valley School Board, top row from left, Elli Abdoli, Michele Hodge; bottom row from left, Joan Hottenstein, Bob Jacobs. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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Mill Valley School District voters will decide Nov. 3 among four candidates to fill two seats on the board of trustees.

Incumbent Bob Jacobs, a trustee since 2011, is facing challengers Elli Abdoli, Michele Crncich Hodge and Joan Hottenstein in his bid for re-election to another four-year term. The other seat is being vacated by incumbent Leslie Wachtel, who declined to seek re-election.

“I have been involved in education for 52 years,” Jacobs, 77, said in an email. “Education is my passion — and as long as I have the energy and enthusiasm, which I do, I would like to continue to have a positive influence in this field.”

Jacobs, who is retired, was a science teacher at Mill Valley Middle School for 19 years. He also taught at high schools in South San Francisco and Zuni Reservation, New Mexico.

Abdoli, 38, an attorney, emphasized her background as a mother of three young children in the district.

“Our remote learning experience last spring demonstrated the importance of having a current parent on the board, someone who is personally impacted by district programs and decisions on a daily basis,” Abdoli said in an email. “Despite our district having five elementary schools and one junior high, there are no other candidates or board members who have elementary school-aged children.”

Hodge, 59, who has been a teacher, principal, administrator and parent to a student in Mill Valley schools, said her decades of experience in education would serve the district well. Hodge has a doctorate in education and is a product of Mill Valley schools

“In these historically challenging times for our public schools, I can bring all of these perspectives to our school board, to deliver the best possible public education for our kids,” Hodge said in an email.

She added she wants to “preserve the best of our public school education during the COVID pandemic and beyond.”

Hottenstein, 58, who has daughters in seventh and 10th grades, has been a volunteer with the district for the past 10 years.

“As my two daughters have gone through the schools, we have experienced a lot of change,” she said. That included “many different teachers, a new principal, changes in curriculum, expanding and contracting enrollment.”



Those situations, combined with emergencies such as two school lockdowns and a bomb scare, “have prepared me for handling district challenges with the calm and confidence that come with experience,” Hottenstein said in an email.

All four candidates said their main priorities are to help the district navigate the coronavirus pandemic. Other themes include adapting to changing times in culture and social justice, upgrading curriculum and maintaining financial stability.

“The Mill Valley School District has the highest rating possible by Moody’s and S&P and I would like to see that continued,” Jacobs said. He said he supports a “badly needed” bond measure in 2022 to build a new middle school.

He also is in favor of “starting a discussion on social justice, which possibly will lead to a new curriculum.”

Abdoli said her legal training would make her a “fierce advocate for our children and would ensure we are representing their best interests.”

“I am not afraid to have tough conversations to help us move forward,” she said.

She added her background as an immigrant and English-learner “would bring a different perspective when evaluating our programs and policies to ensure they are inclusive of all our families.”

Hodge, who is working as a facilitator in a micro-school pod to help families with distance learning, said she wants to “serve every student equitably to prepare them for high school and college, with tools to compete in a global job market.”

Hodge said she also aims to “create positive school memories and experiences for our youth, and support parents during this difficult time.”

Hottenstein said her priorities are to “help students and teachers ‘recover’ from the stresses and shifts in learning and teaching as we go through Covid and get back to classrooms.”

She said she also wants to help manage the 10-year facilities plan to repair and upgrade all sites, and to work on “introducing more anti-racism education into our schools.”

Mill Valley School District serves 2,662 students at five elementary schools and one middle school. The 2020-21 district budget adopted in June was about \$48.1 million.

THE CANDIDATES

Elli Abdoli



Age: 38

Occupation: Government ethics attorney

Education: Bachelor's degree, University of California at Berkeley, 2004; law degree, Santa Clara University, 2007.

Prior experience: Parent volunteer at Strawberry Point School; member of MVSD transition task force.

Michele Crncich Hodge

Age: 59

Occupation: Educator

Education: Tamalpais High School; double major in economics and French, University of California at Berkeley; master's degree in education, Southern Oregon University; doctoral degree in education and organizational leadership, University of La Verne.

Prior experience: Teacher, 19 years; principal, five years; district administrator, one year; educational researcher; micro-pod facilitator; Miller Creek Teachers Association president, three years; Marin Promise Partnership, committee member.

Joan Hottenstein

Age: 58

Occupation: Parent, community volunteer and advocate

Education: Bachelor's degree, Rutgers, communication, journalism, English.

Prior experience: Mill Valley schools volunteer, 10 years; Parent Teacher Association executive board member for Old Mill Elementary School, Mill Valley Middle School and Tamalpais High School; board member, Mill Valley Council of PTAs.

Bob Jacobs

Age: 77



Occupation: Retired teacher

Education: Bachelor's degree in zoology, University of California at Berkeley; teaching credential, San Francisco State University.

Prior experience: Mill Valley school board trustee, 2011 to present; high school biology and environmental science teacher, South San Francisco High School, 10 years; high school biology and physiology teacher, Zuni High, Zuni Reservation, New Mexico, 10 years; middle school life science teacher, Mill Valley Middle School, 19 years.

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