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Kathleen Sebelius to fundraise for Topeka school board members

Fundraiser this week at home of Topeka senator

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By Jonathan Shorman

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A former Kansas governor and federal cabinet secretary is stepping into Topeka school politics this week — hosting a fundraiser for school board members in an effort to solicit donations of up to \$250 per person.

Kathleen Sebelius — the former U.S. health and human services secretary under President Barack Obama and Kansas' governor from 2003-09 — will host a fundraiser on Wednesday at the home of Topeka Democratic Sen. Laura Kelly for Topeka Unified School District 501 board members Patrick Woods and Peg McCarthy. The decision by Sebelius, a Democrat, to fundraise for the board members comes as each are engaged in competitive re-election bids this spring.

Woods, a Westar Energy employee who works in the company's human resources department, faces Michael Boyer, a retired Topeka West High School teacher, and Lloyd Fleming, a retired Midway Wholesale executive who volunteers at Bishop Elementary. Woods has previously served as the board's president.

McCarthy, the board's current vice president, works as a psychologist. Scott Holloman, a certified public accountant at Driver and Holloman, is seeking her seat.

According to an invitation, Sebelius asks invitees to join her at Kelly's home from 5:30 to 7 p.m. in supporting Woods and McCarthy in their re-election campaigns. Three donation levels are listed: a \$250 "sponsor" level, a \$100 "supporter" level, and a \$50 "friend" level.

Woods and Sebelius have a connection that dates back at least a decade. Woods served as an education policy advisor and legislative liaison in the Sebelius administration, beginning in 2005 through 2007. He then served as director of government affairs at the agency now known as the Department for Children and Families until early 2011.

And McCarthy said she has been neighbors with Sebelius.

"The deal is, we have personal relationships with those individuals," McCarthy said.

McCarthy and Woods rejected the idea fundraising could indicate a desire for higher office.

"I can say for myself, absolutely not," McCarthy said.

A copy of the invitation from Sebelius, along with a short message, is posted on Woods' campaign Facebook page.

"I hope you all can join me and former Gov. Sebelius on Wednesday at Sen. Kelly's house. I look forward to continuing the progress that we've enjoyed since I began serving. Our educators and students are second to none, so we have so many great opportunities! Thanks in advance for your support!" the post reads.

Woods said Sebelius has fundraised for him before.

McCarthy and Woods both are campaigning on the need to keep current board members during the state's fiscal crisis, which has resulted in a funding cut to schools.

"I can't imagine being a brand-new board member and facing that kind of situation," McCarthy said.

USD 501 is expected to lose about \$818,287 after Republican Gov. Sam Brownback ordered a 1.5 percent cut to K-12 general state aid.

"There's always some measure of being reactionary, the state is going to do what the state is going to do," Woods said, adding board members can advocate on behalf of their districts.

Holloman, McCarthy's opponent, said his campaign would rely on door-to-door, meet the voter efforts. He also said as a CPA he would be better qualified to deal with the tough financial environment.

"What it looks like, and I don't know my opponent personally, but it kind of looks like if you can't connect with the teachers and students and parents here in the district you kind of do what Pat Roberts did and you reach on the outside and get people to drum up support for you," Holloman said.

Boyer, Woods' opponent, said he didn't have a reaction to the fundraiser. He said he is running because he doesn't believe the current school board does enough to support students and teachers.

Fleming said the fundraiser actually could help all the candidates.

"What this tells me: We have these heavy hitters in here — we could have a very serious race," Fleming said. "And I think that will give all three candidates an excellent opportunity to get all three of our messages out."

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